GURCHARAN DAS: THE MAKING OF NEW DRAMA

Gurcharan Das born on October 3, 1943 is an Indian author commentator and public intellectual. He hails from Lyallpur, India (now in Pakistan) from a Punjabi family. After independence, Das’ family fled to India as refugee. His father was an engineer and he spent his childhood in Shimla and Delhi. He went to high school in Washington D.C. where in the mid – 1950s, he attended Harvard University and graduated with honour in Philosophy. He wrote his thesis under John Rowls. Later he attended Harvard business School for advanced management programme, where he featured in three case studies. He was CEO of Procter & Gamble, India and later MD, Procter and Gamble world wide (Strategic planning) in 1995. He took early retirement to become a full time writer. He is currently on the boards of a number of companies and is a regular speaker to the top management of the world’s largest corporation. He writes a regular column on Sunday for the The-Times of India, Dainik Bhaskar, Enadu-Sakal and other papers and periodic guest columns for the Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, Foreign Affairs and Newsweek.

Das’ bestseller The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle art of Dharma interrogates the epic, Mahabharata, in order to answer the question “why be good?”. His another international bestseller Indian Unbounded is a narrative account of India from independence to global information age, and has been published in 17 languages and filmed by BBC. His other literary works include a novel, A Fine family, a book of essays- The Elephant Paradigm and an anthology – Three English Plays consisting of Larins Sahib, a prize – winning play about the British in India, which has been presented at the Edinburg Festival; Mira which was produced by Broadway
to critical acclaim from Newyork critic; and \textit{9 Jakhoo Hill} which has been produced in major Indian cities. Gurcharan Das is married and lives with his wife in New Delhi. He has two children who work.

\textit{Indian Unbound} is part memoir, part history and part polemic. The book is a rich canvas of the new idea and its central argument is India’s market reforms. As a brilliantly written book, it seeks to give a reader a complete perspective to the economic history of India, beginning with the colonial inheritance. It is apparent that Das has done considerable research for the book this has been enriched with his personal experiences, travels and interactions with top economists politicians and academics.

It is to Das’s credit that he is among the first few to attempt an analysis of the last decade. Ideally this kind of a book should have been written by either Manmohan Singh and Montek Singh Ahluwalia. In the final analysis, it should be said that the book entails easy reading.

\textit{The Elephant Paradigm: Indian Wrestles with Change, 2002} is evaluated by Kanika Datta as “Reading this book is a bit like attending one of those innumerable seminars that industry chambers like CII or FICCI organize once the weather turns cooler.”  \textit{(Biblio: A Review of Books. 8, 9 & 10, Sept.- Oct. 2003)}). Gurucharan Das is enthusiastically \textit{proglobalisation} and this outlook informs much of the book. His central theme is that India will become a great country if only it can unleash its potential. Thus he tells

\begin{quote}
India is an elephant which has stirred from its slumber and has finally begun to move ahead with a degree of
\end{quote}
determination. However, unlike the sprinting tiger that runs out of stream, the elephant has stamina. (165)

Das divides the book into 3 parts – the first deals with the temper of the prevailing days, the second with our private spaces and the final one with public issues. In the first part he painstakingly delineates the virtues of democratic capitalism, emphasizing the common place comparisons between East and West Germany and North and South Koreas to emphasize the superiority of capitalism. He then passes discreetly to the new age of globalization which promises a great deal for the poor countries who adopt the free market regime, which is the best we can hope for. Free markets have helped all countries to develop and prosper and India has every reason to hope for richness. Here he also enlists shortcomings like the crumbling intuitions, the managerial failures of the bureaucracy, the sorry state of the judicial administration, and of course corruption.

In the second part he narrates in graphic details about the time he spends at the Radhasaomy Ashram on the banks of the Beas River Here he mediates an the Bhakti movement in India during his stay in the ashram. He again and again emphasizes on the theory of non-attachment, or nishkam Karma and applies it to the business environment.

Finally he deals with issues in relation to education, democratic decentralization, drastic reduction in Government’s role in the economy and privatization of most economic sections including water. The message is the same; liberalize deregulate decentralize, attract more-foreign investment and all will be well.
Das’s animal imagery conveys the impression of a state’s progression towards the goal of a dynamic and prosperous India. He starts from where he left off in his *India Unbound* which celebrated the beginning of his revolutionary change in the decade of the 90s. He naturally praises what the silent revolution has wrought, but is clearly disappointed it hasn’t wrought enough. The elephant metaphor goes some way but not for enough. The Indian elephant is slow and ponderous, as all elephants indeed are. But is it majestic?

*A Fine Family* (1990) traces the lives and fortunes of three generations of a Punjabi – Hindu family. The novel presents a dramatic and tragic backdrop of the struggle for India’s independence, the partition the Indo-China War and the declaration of the emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975. The novelist here portrays the three generations of a Punjabi family which has suffered the onslaught of the terrible blow of partition in 1947. The novel is divided into three parts which relate to three different places in India. Part one revolves round Lyallpur in Punjab. The second part is about the incidents taking place in Shimla. The last part has Bombay as its locale. The three span of the novel is about sixty years beginning in the 20s of the Non-cooperation Movement and ending in the 80s when Gandhi retrieves power.

The protagonist of the novel Diwan Chand, often referred to in the novel as Bauji is an advocate. To find out a suitable husband for his daughter Tara, he goes to a Gauri’s Ashram where the would-be son-in-law Seva Ram, an engineer by profession, lives. When he reaches the Ashram, he hears the Guru teaching his disciples to “… look upon this world as a passenger on a train looks at a way side shop” (28) He succeeds
in marrying his daughter to Seva Ram. His ruminations, at the time of his daughter’s marriage is that of a typical Indian father who is worried about the journey of the daughter’s married life –

Did he give her all his love and care for the past twenty years so that she should go away from his just like that? It did not seem right yet it was the way of nature. Birds did it. Animals, too. So why not people? Perhaps it did make sense to live like a passenger in a train (67).

Meanwhile India gains freedom and before that Bauji has to leave his place of birth as it is also divided in the historic event. So he leaves Lyallpur on August 12, 1947 and the unwanted journey commences. Unable to decide what to do Bauji’s family join the escaping Hindus who form into a Kafila and are heading out by the only road leading east towards Lahore.

The partition does not affect Tara and Seva Ram in the way it had affected Bauji since Seva Ram is a government employee, he is transferred from Lahore to Shimla- the new capital of Punjab. Tara feels elated at the thought because a visit to the Himalayan capital of the British Raj was considered to be an unbelievable stroke of good luck. The life of Tara and Seva Ram passes without much furore and from the 18th section of the second part of the novel, Arun, now eighteen takes over the novel as its central character. He gets a job in Mumbai where he meets his beloved Preeti who he marries and lives with many ups and downs which open up unknown territories for him.

Bauji in A Fine Family is a perceptive man of world whose ultimate aim is to attain material prosperity. He instinctively knows when to make a
move and take advantage of a situation. Circumstances and social relations govern his actions. Skeptical by nature and shy of religion, he is convinced that the world with all its sorrows and failures is better and preferable. It is his firm belief that a man should live a virtuous life, to do good to others, avoid causing pain to fellow men and earn an honest living. The bloodshed during partition makes him realize that a man does not know his strength until he has met with adversity. His loss of material wealth and fall from prosperity thus result in self-knowledge, on the other hand Seva Ram is a quester in his own right, who is filled with a sense of transience of life. He attributes the killings and hate to the imperfection of the phenomenological world. He is aloof but not irresponsible passive but never myopic. He never attempts to impose his religious views on his family. However, Seva Ram and Bauji, represent the spiritual and the material sides of life respectively, remain pole apart.

_Larins Sahib_: This play was written during Das’ travels in the bazaars of the Punjab when he was learning to sell Vicks Vaporub at the age of 24. He was reading at that time a history of the Punjab, in which he came across the unusual Lawrence brothers. Harry Lawrence was the most interesting and the least imperial whereas his brother George was a soldier in the North-West and John was an empire builder who went on to become Lord Lawrence the Governor-General and Viceroy of India. Das called him “Tunda Lut” because living in Lahore lacked one arm. His brother Henry – on whom the play is based – was unusual because he formed easy friendships with the Sikh noble families. He was particular fascinated by his gentle relationship with Sher Singh, the scion of the Attari family; the fiery Rani Jindan- the widow of Ranjit Singh and her Dalip, who was taken away
from her when he was young and who became the tragic ‘black prince’ at Queen Victoria’s cost.

*Larins Sahib* won the prize of 10000 announced by Theatre Group in Bombay for the best play in English. This was big money in 1968 and a cause to motivate Das to complete his play which had come to halt after two acts. *Larins Sahib* won from among eighty entries, many of them from established authors. The germination of this play is described as –

Business offered me a lot of action but it did not provide me enough intellectual stimulation. Hence, I began to keep a diary. Initially my job entailed a great deal of travel to small towns in India and I had much free time in the evenings in hotels like Sri Krishna at Ratlam. To pass the time I began to read history. But I was not content to read. I also began to write. Thus I wrote *Larins Sahib*, which is based on a moment in the history of the Punjab.

*(Three English Plays, 2-3)*

*Mira* (1970) is a telling of the story of the Rajput Princes who devoted her life to lord Krishna. The story of Mira is concocted with much newness. Gurcharan Das details his creative endeavor as –

… I imagined Mira as a high-spirited young bride, who comes and shatters the emotionally charged atmosphere of formality in sixteen century Mewar, a state much burdened by a sense of its historical destiny. I focused on the evolving relationship between a husband and a wife. Initially, there is novelty, the embarrassment of two young
people discovering each other in the typical Indian situation where physical touch proceeds emotional contact. As the novelty wears, the Rana becomes absorbed in the affairs of the state and the imminent war with the Mughal. And Mira feels the frustration of a wife whose husband is not available. Mira’s demands too, both sexual and emotional, seem to be greater. Her love is big. She naively runs after him, and he withdraws further. As she discovers that her husband is not equal to her love she becomes disillusioned with marriage.

*(Three English Plays, 14)*

*Mira* was put on stage as “Magic theatre by La Mama Productions. The director Martin Brenzell had set the entire play to music and dance. All the actors were on stage all the time and they made beautiful pictures with their bodies. There had been many productions since including Alyque Padmasee’s visuals enactment which was stylish but static. There was even a production in Spanish with a noteworthy translation by Enrique Hett and published by the Instito Nacional de Bellas Artes. Nevertheless the glory of the La Mama Production stands matchless.

*Mira* was first performed at the La Mama Theatre, Newyork in 1970, and then performed in Mexico city, in 1970, and then performed in Bombay in 1972.

9 *Jakoo Hill* is a more recent play. Das details the contemporaity of the play as –
After writing two plays based on historic personages, I thought that I would turn to contemporary concerns. Hence on one level *9 Jakhoo Hills* is about the changing order, the old middle class giving way to the new. Ansuya and her family belong to the old class and Deepak and Chitra to the new. Although this change had begun in the India of the 1960s, when the play is set, it accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s; hence the play resonated with audiences when it was performed in the mid-nineties and continues to be relevant today. (Three English Plays, 16-17)

If the earlier two plays are based on historic personages, *9 Jakhoo Hills* is all imbued with contemporary concerns. Das speaks about the play as

*9 Jakhoo Hills* is about many things. Aside from the changing order, it is about the hold of Indian mothers on their sons, about a fading class ageing uncles. But the main theme is the betrayal of sexual love—the old middle class giving way to the new. Ansuya and her family belong to the old order and Deepak and Chitra to the new. Although this change had begun in the India of the 1960s, when the play is set, it accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s; hence the play resonated with audiences when it was performed in the mid-nineties and continue to be relevant today. (Three English Plays, 17)
9 Jakhoo Hills is much more than this. Apart from the changing order it is also about Indian mothers hold on their sons, about a “fading class clinging uncles” (Three English Plays, 19). The play is set in Shimla, during the Diwali of 192 when the country was at war with China.

The play was put aside in a drawer for nearly two decades. When Das moved to Delhi in the mid-nineties, he gave it to Bhaskar Ghose who saw something in it and persuaded the Yatrik troupe to perform it. After a fair amount of readings, it was realized that the play needed some amount of work. The improvisation was a collaborative task and then the play improved. The play was first performed in 1996 in New Delhi, directed by Sumit Tandon with Bhaskar Ghose playing Karan Chand, in a Yatrik production designed by Anjolie ela Menon. The play illustrates the unhappy fact that Indian English plays have to wait long before they can be put on stage. “Perhaps that Das means by ‘audacity’ – writing a play. (Indian Reviews of Books, 62)