

Celebration of Liberal Values in Gurcharan Das' Works of Drama and Fiction

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Abstract:

Gurcharan Das is a regular columnist for *The Times of India* and other national and international Newspapers and magazines. He is a versatile personality which has shown his remarkable talents in different genres of literature. Along with his maiden novel *A Fine Family* (1990), he has published three plays *Larins Sahib* (1968), *Mira* (1970) and *9 Jakhoo Hill* (1996) and many non-fictional works such as *India Unbound: From Independence to the Global Information Age* (2000), *The Elephant Paradigm: India Wrestles with Change* (2002), *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (2009) and *India Grows at Night: A liberal case for a Strong State* (2012).

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Introduction:

To call a writer as a liberal and his ideas as votary of moral values give us no new impression about a writer of literary works because throughout the history of English literature each and every writer has been a votary of liberalism and his writings have been full of liberal values. Literature itself connotes liberal values but what is new in the treatment of Gurucharan Das as a liberal writer and that of his works as votary of liberal values is that Gurucharan Das's way of presenting liberal values in his works is somewhat revolutionary what attract is the attention is his showing the liberalization as the pivot for each and every liberal values. For him , it seems that all the social, legal, political and economic values come forward only after the socio-economic and political liberalization. Liberalization in general, refers to a relaxation in such areas of social, political and economic policies. It sometimes refers as deregulation or democratization. In social policy it may refer to relaxation rigid laws

related to civil rights. In economic and trade it stands for privatization, liberalization and globalization.

For Gurucharan Das liberal values have no meaning if there is no liberalization and they are even not possible. His focus in his non-fiction as well as fiction of work has been on economic liberalization but his target is to reach to the formation of such a society which like a utopian state cherishes liberal val

Gurcharan Das is a great votary of liberal ideas like pluralism, tolerance and freedom in his works. While these ideas find an explicit expression in his non-fictional works wherein he constantly emphasizes the importance of civil rights, political and economic freedom, lesser role for government and bureaucracy in a democracy and caring of the downtrodden; his dramatic and fictional works celebrate these values through frequent discussions as well as through their imaginative portrayal of characters in the course of the story. Gurcharan Das' belief in liberal side of humanism makes him vouch for women empowerment and the role of private sector in providing human dignity and enterprise to poor people who need basic health and educational services. His imaginative and critical world has significant similarities with the great tradition of liberal thought exemplified in John Lock, Adam Smith, John Milton, Raja Ram Mohan Roy etc.

Strongly advocating his liberal credentials, it is his liberal ideas and philosophy for which Gurcharan Das is known best both in literary and non-literary world. As in one of his books he himself accepts

“I am at heart an old fashioned liberal.” (Das, “Introduction” XV)

One of the important things about Gurcharan Das is that he creates the incident of economic liberalization of 1991 in India as a metaphor for onset of human freedom which is not limited by its economic implications. Most of the titles of the chapters in his books put the writer's belief in liberal values at the forefront. For instance subtitle like ‘A liberal case for a strong state’, ‘On the Subtle Art of Dharma,’ and chapters like ‘A Quest for a Strong Liberal State’, ‘Middle Class Dignity’, ‘The Golden Summer of 1990s’, ‘Our Liberating Nineties’ etc. reveal liberalism as the central credo of Gurcharan Das' work. Though economic liberalism stands at the heart of the vision of Gurcharan Das, yet he advocates political, social and religious liberalism as vehemently as the economic one. Further, his idea of economic liberalism is not that of an exclusive and restrictive one, he links it with the problems of human search for a better and meaningful life. For him, to concentrate

exclusively on the economic freedom would be useless and self-defeating endeavour without the liberal values which provide an essential foothold to it. As the Economist writes

“Mr. Das insists that liberal ideas offer the clearest answer to many of India’s woes.....(his) celebration of liberalism is admirable” (Praise for the book quoted in Das’s Introduction)

Liberalism as a material philosophy of society has its roots in enlightenment legacy of industrial revolution, though as a way of life and a set of values it has been part of human civilization since antiquity. Liberalism is viewed as a panacea to the quintessential human problem by Rousseau in his declaration that man is in chains everywhere despite being born free. Liberalism posits its belief in progress, science, democracy and international cooperation. The multifaceted aspects of liberalism—as an intellectual tradition, as an awareness of variousness and complexity, as a counter radical movement—are the legacies of modern civilization in its onward march for equal opportunity and fairness of competition. Liberalism, in its broadest sense, is a philosophy that emphasizes and advocates the freedom in every walk of life, be it political, economic or socio-religious. It generally supports change and progress, reforms and growth, transparency and efficiency in the social, economic and political systems to make life of people truly democratic. It holds an intermediate position between conservatism and radicalism wherein the ideas such as democratic elections, civil rights, freedom of press, freedom of religion, free trade and private property are championed.

“Liberals espouses a wide array of views depending on their understanding of these principles, but generally they support ideas such as democratic elections, civil rights, freedom of press, freedom of religion, free trade and private property.” (Encyclopaedia)

The allegation that liberalism is based exclusively upon possessive market economy or that it expounds a superstructure of a capitalistic type economy is to see only trees and miss the forest. Liberalism cannot be merely reduced to economic premises. It stands for the protection of individual rights along with his/her right to have a security in his property. It is this right to have security in property which is one of the key features of liberalism. It is also a theory and practice of the juridical defense of individual liberty. Though liberalism can be said to have been a product of a particular culture within certain social and economic factors, yet it is universal in the sense that the values it espouses are universal which can be located in most of the cultures of the world. Its core value of freedom has been a backbone of all progressive culture—eastern as well as western. Its values are also class universals in the

sense that they are not tied with only one class in a social economic matrix. Liberalism champions equality of rights and equality of laws but it suspects state sponsored socialist vision of equality which attempts to remove human element and its claim for diversity. One of the basic traits of the paradigm of liberalism is that it limits the role of Government to a referee between capital and labour for protecting and assisting those who are adversely affected by economic and social conditions of capitalism. It wants the Government not to play the role of a business house, but to concentrate on the fields like education, health and infrastructure. It thus respects equality of opportunity which is a reflection of preciousness of human element. Liberal individualism hankers after equal respect for all despite differences in their status, position and ethnicity.

“Economic liberalization has greatly affected Indian attitudes towards money, business, development and politics and opened doors for the ambitions of millions of young people.” (Bloomberg View, 1).

The word liberalism like liberty traces its history to Latin word *liber* which means free, making it the central credo of liberalism. Liberal civilization bases its model on certain aspects of Greek civilization wherein *libertas* is seen as a worthwhile option against *licentia* connoting anarchy. A liberal civilization puts its customs, laws and belief system under constant scrutiny and regards the capacity to imagine alternatives and think hypothetically as signs of a healthy society. The protection of individual rights and rationality made liberalism a distinct creed in American society in its historical development. Outside the West and America, liberalism revealed itself as an alternative against authoritarianism, protection of individual rights and freedom. In one sense all the liberal values are derived and dependent upon its advocacy of the sanctity of the individual. Due to the historical struggle between the Church and liberalism, liberalism developed as a rational, skeptical creed.

Liberal connotes an active interest in diversity and a faculty to empathize with others. It allows a person to see things from multiple perspectives and as a result to see limitations and advantages from a comparative perspective. Thus it keeps its faith in human reason and advocates tolerance as a key virtue. A liberal person is open to new and different as a worthwhile possibility. He celebrates diversity and singularity in experiences and believes in human capacity to judge, examine and take decisions on the basis of empirical evidences. Gurcharan Das repeatedly calls himself an old fashioned liberal and a classical liberal who staunchly defends values such as liberty, democracy, tolerance and equality. In his non-fictional works, he presents his ideas through anecdotes of his life wherein his emphasis lies

on failure of Fabian socialism advocated by Jawaharlal Nehru after Independence. He praises Nehru for establishing democratic institutions in the country but chides him for being a dreamer and thus failing to understand the economic challenges before India. In his leanings towards socialism, Nehru failed to see that his vision of mixed economy is nothing but a chimera which would give rise to corruption, nepotism and stagnation. In his zeal for a socialist heaven, Nehru stifled the industrial revolution and competitiveness making a path clear for sub standard and non functional public delivery system. Even Gandhi, with his emphasis on rural economy, is not spared by the writer whose influence on Indian politics and masses made them separate ways from the ethos of capitalism. The greatest ire of Gurcharan Das is reserved for Indira Gandhi not only for imposing emergency in 1975 but also for subverting whatever economic activity was there in 1970s with her nationalization programme. While she ushered India into a period of blatant sycophancy and mis-governance, her son Sanjay led Indian nation into depths of chaos with his tyrannical tendencies. Rajiv Gandhi attempted to introduce some breathing space, but was unable to carry out economic reforms at their full pace. The turning point came in 1991, which is seen by Gurcharan Das as a watershed moment in Indian history after 1947 when Indian Government decided to introduce economic liberalization as a policy. A critic named Kiran Mathew also talks about the importance of economic-liberalization in Gurcharan Das's overall pattern of his liberal philosophy :

“They (Gurcharan Das and Arvind Adiga) celebrate Globalization as a revolution that has helped unshackle what has long been euphemistically called the third world from deprivation and poverty.” This shift in Indian economy from a socialist one to a liberal one is hailed by the writer as second freedom, now a political one. The result of liberalization was instantaneous with Indian economy growing at the rate of 7-9 percent during the first few years of 21st century.

“Indians are slowly realizing that economic reforms (of 1991) are not only about tariff levels, deregulation and structural adjustment. They are about a revolution in ideas, which is changing the mind set of the people and leading to the commercialization of Indian society. ” (Das, XVIII).

The fictional and dramatic works of Gurcharan Das exemplify liberal values as a part of narrative schemata, characterization, and thematic thrust and become topic of frequent discussions during the course of the action. The actualization of the philosophy of liberalism

in Gurcharan Das is achieved both through the characterization as well as implicit motives. For example characters like Arjun in *A Fine Family*, Deepak in *9 Jakhoo Hill*, Mira in *Mira*, Larins Sahib in *Larins Sahib* reveal diverse liberal values in their life and belief. It is essential to point out here that the paradigm of liberalism in Gurcharan Das's works gives a unity and coherence to characters and themes and transcends the limitations of space and time. Every work, be it a historical play, an autobiographic novel or non-fictional work, has a unique characteristic of celebrating a distinct liberal value. Most of his works bring out diverse potentialities of liberalism such as economic growth, progress, humanism, pluralism, tolerance, importance of education and health services, equality of opportunity, transparency etc. While his Non-fictional works focus on economic liberalization, his novel and dramas emphasize virtues of tolerance, pluralism, and individual freedom of choice.

Gurcharan Das' novel *A Fine Family* (1990) celebrates the values of tolerance and liberty against bigotry propagated by communal forces during partition. Bauji, as a pragmatic realist, presents a viable path between the abstract religious position presented by traditionalists such as Seva Ram and Guruji and the fanatics of both communities. His robust reliance on senses to present him an aim in life as well his suspicion of religion makes him a champion of liberal values in life which seeks to emphasize the importance of this world as real and livable as against the promises of after-life. The novel which is based upon Gurcharan Das' own life and career presents many characters such as Tara, Bauji, and Karan who present various liberal ideas in contradistinction to religious characters such as Seva Ram. The novel is a rich chronicle of passion and incidents of a Punjabi family. Bauji, who is a successful lawyer in Lyallpur, is forced to flee to India by the violence and instability unleashed by partition. The novel is a saga of a family striving for building a new future in difficult circumstances. In its search for a new life, the different characters find answers to their problems in a vision of life which advocates the importance of liberal values such as freedom, tolerance and avoidance of extremes. The narrative explores the impact of bigotry and fanaticism in the context of individual as well as country wherein false religiosity of Hindus and Muslims creates havoc in the lives of innumerable people. The novel reveals its suspicion of religion wherein the religious impulses lead to narrow-mindedness. Arjun, the eponymous hero of the novel is seen as a representative of liberal values whose rise in life has been possible only due to his cultivation of a liberal attitude.

“Hope lay in the private individual (like Arjun) who was liberal and educated, reaching out to the silent and the suffering and showing

through his example how the liberal institutions could work.” (Das. 346)

He represents the meeting point of liberal economic ambience represented by Bombay and liberal values of open-mindedness and receptivity.

“Ah Bombay! It is truly a free city. Arujun built with patience and hard work by men of trade.” (Das, 249)

The novel presents the incidents, characters, institutions, middle class values, ‘dharma’ etc. in such a manner that it supports the liberal ideals of Gurcharan Das. Gurcharan Das draws the picture of contemporary India with its fault lines such as untouchability, dowry system, and patriarchal set up of the society and puts them against liberal world of Arjun and Mumbai. Gurcharan Das celebrates pluralism and patience which are the two main tenets of liberalism through his sympathetic portrayal of characters personifying these values as well as through the frequent discussions about the contemporary situation and incidents in the novel.

Although his three plays *Larins Sahib* (1968), *Mira* (1970) and *9 Jakhoo Hill* (1996) do not voice Gurcharan Das’s economic liberalism, they present his admiration of liberal values on the human ethical, religious and social planes. While *Larins Sahib* stands for humanistic ideas of liberalism, *Mira* depicts social liberalism. *9 Jakhoo Hill*, through its presentation of rising middle class, brings to fore a conflict between traditional and new in which values such as faithfulness, love and integrity are lost. Gurcharan Das dramatizes need for liberal values as against the rise of fanaticism, traditional outlook and pitches for a need to reevaluate the those conservative values which stunt the growth and progress of an individual and nation. *Larins Sahib* (1967) which is set in mid 19th century Punjab gives a crystal clear account of the socio-political realities of the time. The action of the play unfolds against the backdrop of political chaos and intrigue prevalent after the demise of King Ranjit Singh. History and power politics constitute the central theme in *Larins Sahib* which offers a comprehensive study of the period under review. The playwright tries to maintain fidelity to history and presents the historical events and complexities of the time in an objective manner. At the same time the dramatist makes the play reminiscent of the political and social situation of the sixties when the country was passing through a phase of disillusionment after the death of India’s first Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. *Larins Sahib* thus becomes an imaginative reconstruction of history in the modern context wherein the dramatist conveys his censure of politics misused by narrow minded politician to promote their self interests.

The play successfully secures its place as a play of contemporary relevance wherein Larins typifies a liberal conscience which goes to ruins due to its excessive indulgence in power. Larins, particularly in his early stages, stands distinguished as a liberal who poses a contrast to other Englishmen in their rejection of India and Indians. He poses a contrast to other Englishmen in the play who believe in racial stereotypes and are not able to come out of ethnic prejudices. Larins rejects these classifications on the basis of his experiences and finds them abhorrent and chauvinistic. He is a libertine who remains free from all types of religious and cultural biasness.

The plot of *Mira* (1970) is woven around the story of a famous Indian saint poet Mira of 16th Century and illuminates some of the universal themes like liberalism, love, jealousy, women empowerment and loneliness. Unlike *Larins Sahib*, in *Mira*, Gurcharan Das views history in terms of religion, devotion and gender. The play dramatizes Indian philosophy and tradition with its focus on liberal ideas. Through the story of Mira, the playwright successfully explores sainthood, tolerance, freedom and their importance in Indian way of life. With his the exploration of multiple dimensions of theatricality, theme, style and form, a pattern of liberalism advocated by Gurcharan Das emerges. As against the Victorian theatre, the play explores the style of 'Total Theatre' which was an experimental theatre in the West, though it is also close to Indian traditional theatre such as Tamasha.

“Das has attempted to combine the Indian legend of Mira with the sophistication western Total Theatre in his play *Mira*” (1970),
(Chatterjee, Madhuri, 237)

The action of the play takes place in the early sixteenth century Mewar, a princely state in North Western India, and the action is replete with songs and dances. Mira, as a bhakti saint, is connected with the liberal period of Indian history wherein the values such as compassion, love, freedom of human soul and tolerance advocated by different saints under Bhakti movement flourished. Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Namdev and Guru Nanak championed the preciousness of human soul in its freedom from religious bigotry and thus presented a humanitarian ideal against the intolerance of times. At the same time they advocated freedom of worship from the ritual based religious mysteries of the organized religions and thus championed a middle path of individual choice against the dogmatic paths championed by their more rigid co-religionists.

“Saints come naturally to Indians, and one of the reasons certainly is the influence of Bhakti poets like Mira. I grew up in bhakti-filled

atmosphere.... In my twenties I began to question what it meant to be a saint and this led me to write Mira.” (Das, 10)

The play also focuses on the larger questions of women rights and subjectivity against the patriarchal control of their bodies which is again a liberal position. This championing of the cause of the women in patriarchal set up of the society may be taken as an important aspect of the play through which the interest of Gurcharan Das in liberal ideas is shown. As a woman, Mira spurns her familial life and obligations in order to uphold her individuality. Mira, who was a princess of the Rathore clan of Merta in Rajasthan, openly flouts the norms of patriarchal society that demands chastity and obedience in women.

Actress I : He has to love me, for me to give him a son. A single lamp, no matter how bright, always casts a shadow. Put another one beside it and the darkness of both disappears. (Das, 107)

By portraying Mira as a woman who subverts the traditional ideals of Indian womanhood, Gurcharan Das seems to be advocating feminists’ search for equal rights and status in the contemporary Indian society.

9 Jakhoo Hill, which is set in Shimla during the Diwali of 1962, exhibits onset of economic liberalism in Indian society through its portrayal of rising middle class of India.

“The political turmoil and disillusionment of the outside world, India’s demoralizing war with china, the gradual decline of Nehruvian ideals and optimism are echoed in the sitting room of *9 Jadhoo Hill* where once well to do family watches in incomprehension as its genteel world disintegrates in the face of a brash new social climbing middle class”. (The Hindu)

The play is about changing social order which affects the Indian society socially and economically in the aftermath of freedom of India. In the play Ansuya and her family belong to the old aristocratic class while Deepak and her mother Chitra represent new ethos of industrial society. Though, historically, the liberal era on Indian political and economic landscape picked up momentum after 1990’s, it had its root in the first inkling of industrialization during 1960s and 70s in which the play is set. The play depicts the story of the two migrated families from Lahore to India after partition and the colonial hangover in its decadence and narrowness. This vision of a lost world is pitted against the ambition and greed of a new class of entrepreneurs, which with all its faults is forward looking and optimistic of opportunities. Deepak, a successful executive in a company in Bombay,

represents Indian middle class youth which believes in doing things practically and with great enthusiasm. He echoes certain beliefs of the writer himself in his faith in liberal ideas of modern economy. Deepak of *9 Jakhoo Hill*, along with Arjun of *A Fine Family*, constitutes vision of Gurcharan Das's economic liberalization. The play, which is a study of effects of changing economy on human relationships and presents declining social and moral values in Indian society, poses some relevant liberal ideas about economic and society. It emphasizes a critical balance between economic upliftment and maintenance of social and moral values which is one of the basic liberal value advocated by Gurcharan Das

In a nutshell we can say that though critics have largely noticed the interplay of different themes revolving around liberalism as championed by the writer, there seems to be lacking a thorough study which may link his concept of liberalism with values which are fictionalised and dramatized in his novel, dramas as well as essays. The interrelationship between his fictional work, comprising novel and dramas, and non-fictional work consisting of essays needs to be critically scrutinized. Further, even in his essays Gurcharan Das is never overtly didactic; he peppers his concept of liberalism with anecdotes and incidents from real life which illustrate the liberal values he champions in life.

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