
Contemporizing Indian History: A Study of GurcharanDas' *Larins Sahib*

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History is a significant channel maintaining a connection between past, present and future wherein parallel currents between different epochs can be observed. Due to an abiding principle of continuity inherent in historical change, bits and pieces of the past always walk into the present. History is indeed, as Allen Nerins puts it, “a bridge connecting the past with the present and pointing the road to the future.” (Nerins 12). The treatment of history in its multiple dimensions makes Gurcharan Das one of the most relevant contemporary writers in the present scenario. His literary world portrays contours of a nation which is undergoing transformation in the post-independence era. Regarding his consciously chosen role of a historian of contemporary India, Gurcharan Das himself accepts: “Now I feel that each blade of grass has its spot on earth from where it draws its life, its strength and so is man rooted to the land from where his life begins” (Das, Harvard Business, 1).

For Gurcharan Das history is essential to human species as it invariably leads to a greater understanding of humanity and the

mistakes and misjudgments committed by it. It is for this reason that his literary world is replete with historical references, myths and legends. But the distinguishing quality of GurcharanDas's use of history is that it often correlates past and present and sheds important light on the events of the present while simultaneously predicting a distinctive course for the future. All his books, non-fiction as well as fiction, subscribe to his focus on socio-economic and political mapping of contemporary India. Along with his maiden novel *A Fine Family* (1990) his plays viz. *Larins Sahib* (1968), *Mira* (1970) and *9Jakhoo Hill* (1996) also dwell on historical past to seek solutions to contemporary situations. Along with these, his 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) chart out important landmarks in the trajectory of Independent India. Almost all of

these works of Gurcharan Das are situated in the contemporary milieu wherein the writer dissects social and economic challenges faced by contemporary India. While his essays deal with historical epochs directly, his dramatic works exemplify important changes in Indian life under contemporary social political and economic conditions as a part of characterization and thematic thrust.

Larins Sahib, written in 1968, is a significant dramatic creation of Gurcharan Das. The play is much more than merely records of historical facts of Punjab in mid nineteenth century. It recreates history by using history itself as a part of narrative structure. Arundhati Ray rightly points out in this connection: “Set in mid 19th century Punjab the action of *Larins Sahib* unfolds against the backdrop of political chaos and murky intrigue” (Ray 1). The view that our past determines our present and in turn our future also, makes *Larins Sahib* contemporary and relevant to the present times. The dimension of historicity of the play is linked with other contemporary related themes which shed an important light on change and continuance of culture, human greed for power and role of religion in human affairs. Thus the theme of history exists within the contours of power-politics, conflicts of emotions, rise and fall of an individual or a nation and strife between one's duty and humanity. Within these

interpenetrations and mutuality of relevance in the historical set up, *Larins Sahib* offers a post colonial reading of history.

The whole plot of the play moves around a particular incident in the colonial history of India. The play is set in the 1840s of Punjab when two main incidents viz. the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a famous king of Punjab in 1839 and the first Sikh War between the English and Khalsa of Punjab in 1845, determined the future of Punjab. These particular incidents in history charted out future of the whole of India in terms of unchallenged sway of colonialism in Indian sub-continent. After the victory of the English in the Sikh War of 1845, the economic and political deterioration of Punjab began and consequently the British East India company was able to conquer the whole of Punjab through their political intrigues. Writing about the background of the play, Gurcharan Das comments:

I don't quite know why I thought of it as a play. It could have been a novel. But it was great fun doing research over the next twelve months. Reading the history of Punjab was for me also a research for identity. I was drawn to the events in 1846 because that is when the British first arrived in the Punjab, and the first reactions of the Punjab to the English and vice-versa, determined how we

would behave for a hundred years thereafter.
(Das7)

The man who made a mark in this period of political upheaval was Henry Lawrence, who is still famous in India after its Indian name, Larins Sahib and Gurcharan Das names his play after him, thus signaling his prominent position in this period. As its title suggests, the play moves around the rise and fall of Larins, who life history became an indivisible part of political history of events during the annexation of Punjab.

It would be a mistake to see the play as a simple dramatic exercise in the well documented episode of pre-independence India. The play studies human character in times of conflict and reveals its progression towards debasement or nobility under such pressures. The interest of the play also lies in the fact that the historical events are used just for providing a solid base for the playwright so that he can concomitantly comment on the harsh politico-social reality of the contemporary Indian society. By doing this Gurcharan Das has been successful in raising some fundamental questions of socio-political relevance that need to be paid attention for the betterment of the Indian society. These questions are not raised directly by the playwright, rather they have their presence in the dominant themes of the play. For instance, the degradation of an idealistic man with

humanistic values under the pressure of power politics of the day is one of the major concerns of the play. Henry Lawrence, a representative of ruling British class, is presented in all his ambivalences in the play. His attachment to Punjab, his adoration of Ranjit Singh as well as his objective assessment of the situation of the state reveal his capacity to move beyond his identity as a British imperialistic agent:

LAWRENCE. Since his (Ranjit Singh's) death there's been chaos everywhere and fierce struggle for succession. The sardars have been quarrelling like dogs. And understandably, Sir. For he not only created the Punjab from a mass of petty states-in fact his personality united the kingdom. He established no institutions which could live after him. When he died, the Punjab died.
(Das 32)

The play deconstructs&reinterprets history of Punjab's annexation by the British and in the process reveals the complexity inherent in understanding history as a non-linear sequence of events. Since a literary text has always more than one thing to offer, the principle of dynamic approach in studying a literary text becomes relevant because a literary text is not

simply a factual record of events, rather it is a web of ideas. In this regard *Larins Sahib* is also not an exception. *Larins Sahib* is not only a fine example of historical play, but also shows how history of individuals is related to the understanding and interpretation of events. Further, history is not simply situated in its periodicity but is part of socio-historical and economic ambience of the time of its interpretation. Thus to understand the contemporary analysis of the history of Punjab, one has to look at the cultural factors contributing in the times of its analysis. Gurcharan Das's analysis of history of Punjab is determined by his outlook on the economic and political liberalism which he championed and advocated throughout his life. His critique of Punjab's history is related to his understanding of the age of 1960s and 70s in Indian politics which was infamous for its failure of idealist dreams of Nehruvian era. Amidst such circumstances, Gurcharan Das had something to share with the economists, politicians, social reformists and many others through his masterpiece work of *Larins Sahib*, which was first staged in 1968. In this regard Gurcharan Das admits: "We lived the innocence of the Nehruvian age when we still had strong ideas. We believed in socialism, democracy and the UN. We were filled with the excitement of building a nation. Even though the dreams soured, Nehru's idealism left a next permanent mark on us." (Das1)

The play *Larins Sahib* offers a diverse set of characters from real life. The life of Henry Lawrence is modeled on the life of a seasoned politician. His life, his experiences and his policies of reforms offer patterns to be followed by a modern politician. His appreciation of Ranjit Singh is genuine and offers insight into appreciation of this 'lion of Punjab' by common man as well as cultural revivalists. About the greatness of Raja Ranjit Singh, *Larins Sahib* says:

LAWRENCE. (Admonishing)
don't speak like that about his late highness. He was a great man. We should be lucky if we can continue his work. (Das 37)

Larins, with all his tumultuous nature, possesses a sympathetic heart for poor people of Punjab. In this manner he appears to be modeling himself on Ranjit Singh and wishes to emulate the respect and acceptability Ranjit Singh had attained among common masses. Gurcharan Das seems to be underlining the dictum that the politician of the day should follow the ideals of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Like Maharaja Ranjit Singh they should also take proper care of the marginal and poor farmers in making policies for them. If they are really serious about the betterment and upliftment of the poor people, they certainly have to uplift themselves in standard and keep themselves away from the evils of power

politics. For them, history offers a lot to learn and follow. About the poor and strong peasant community, Larins says:

LAWRENCE. Yes, the Punjab peasant will always be there. Isn't reasonable then, that we win him to our side. To win him, we must work for him, for his shake. (Das58)

Larins Sahib presents a picture of a true politician in his generous and kind heart as well as in his understanding of the nature of common people. His comments on the political conditions of Punjab before Hardings reveal his acumen as a keen observer of political events of the area:

LAWRENCE. Annexing the Punjab at this time will not be in our interest either.

HARDINGS. why not ?

LAWRENCE. Because the Punjab borders Afghanistan and is too close to Russia. I don't think we want to take on either... if we leave the Punjab alone, it is their problem, Thus, the Punjab serves as our cushions in India. (Das78)

The dimension of power and the transformation wrought by it in a person's character, is another important theme in the play which gives it a universal relevance. Power is often multifaceted and is revealed in more than one dimension. The problem of corruption in politics is not a new phenomenon, it has always been there since time immemorial. The connection between power and corruption is usually found to be inevitable and consequential. Gurcharan Das explores this theme through the central figure of the play, Larins and notes that the genesis of power in case of colonialists was rooted not in personal valor but in the economic and military advancement offered by Industrial Revolution in Europe. It made countries like Britain and France economically powerful, resulting into colonization so as to make more and more profits. The power represented by a White Man in colonies was unbound and unchecked, leading to corruption, not necessarily in its economic dimensions but in its freedom to intervene in affairs of a native society without any corresponding responsibility.

In *Larins Sahib* there are many major and minor characters who become corrupt, once they get power in any form. In this respect the protagonist of the play, Henry Lawrence, is paradigmatic. His character goes through a sea change with the passage of the

time since he becomes the Resident of the Punjab. Rani Jindan accuses him of being drunk with power:

RANI... (Pause) God, now I understand your robes, your Darbars and your "*AngrezBadshah*". It all fits. And your obsession with my late husband. You are drunk, my friend, and Power's gone to your head. (Das, 90)

Though Rani may be wrong in her assessment of Larins, there are certain occasions in the play when Larins behaves like a man who seems to be enjoying his powerful position as a Resident for the sake of power and prestige. He wears the *choga* of Late Ranjit Singh to make himself look like him and to further underline this similarity, he assembles *Darbar* where he acts like the deceased king. On another occasion, his obsession with power becomes apparent when he talks to Sher Singh and Sher Singh addresses him as '*AngrezBadshah*'.

LAWRENCE. (To Sher Singh)
Why are they shouting ?

SHER SINGH.(Smiling) They're happy !

LAWRENCE. What are they saying ?

SHER SINGH. 'Long Live Larins Sahib!'

LAWRENCE. What else ?

SHER SINGH. 'Long Live *AngrezBadshah!*

LAWRENCE.(Glowing) yes, yes, the *AngrezBadshah*. I'm hero, Sher Singh. (73)

The corrosive effect of power becomes visible when one finds that even the man like Henry Lawrence, who is otherwise famous for his idealism and humanism, surrenders himself against the lure of power. Larins behaves indifferently towards Sher Singh, Rani Jindan and the natives as is complained by Sher Singh :

SHER SINGH. Your *AngrezBadshah*, your *chogahs*, your jewels, purple cushions - they were signals I understand you now ! You're evil ... If you realized it, I'd call you ambitious. Not evil. But you don't know yourself and that terrifies me. (Das 93)

Along with Henry Lawrence, other characters in the play such as Lal Singh, Tez Singh, Hardings etc. are also negatively affected by power and its allurements. It is a temptation for gaining political power that makes Lal Singh and Tez Singh corrupt. They misuse their official power to meet their own

selfish ends. Lal Singh as Wazir and Tez Singh as Commander in Chief of the Khalsa hanker after more power and thus deviate from right path. They betray their own army in pursuit of their dreams to become the Maharaja of Punjab. It is their betrayal that costs Punjab heavily and as a consequence the Punjab army was defeated by the British in the first Sikh War.

BABA, your commander in chief fled back across the Sutlej along with the Wazir and also broke the bridge over the river. The Sardar thus, not only betrayed their soldiers but also cut the retreat of the army

DALIP. Traitors! The dirty traitors! Lal Singh! Tez Singh! I'll kill them. (Das 39)

Another important aspect of the play is construction of nation and nationalism in response to the historical upheavals presented here. The discussions about what is India and Indianness play an important part in these formations. As *Larins Sahib* is set in a crucial period of Indian history, talks about the socio-political scenes of India under the British rule are part of thematic thrust of the play. Gurcharan Das, being a management guru and a columnist for *The Times of India*, takes much interest in such events and incidents where he can find something to talk about the people of

India and its great grand historical traditions. In *Larins Sahib* Maharaja Ranjit Singh is praised as an ideal king who had a genuine sympathy for poor people. *Larins Sahib* presents a lively and mosaic picture of Indian society of the 19th century which had an undying faith in kings like Ranjit Singh. Henry Lawrence praises the personality of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in words which show his obsession with the king: "He (Ranjit Singh) was the greatest ruler Hindustan has known" (31). The following discussion between Rani Jindan and her son, Raja Dalip Singh, resonate with the feelings of love and reverence in which Ranjit Singh has been presented in the play:

DALIP. I thought we were the strongest and the richest country in the whole world.

RANI. We were- in the days of your father. (Das 40)

The sense of possession and pride implicit in these comments is undercut through the comments of Larins Sahib who finds such sentimental reverence a symbol of Indian cultural psychology which seems incapable of critical scrutiny. His words present this eulogizing a cultural trait and thus subvert elements of romanticism inherent in such unqualified praise:

LAWRENCE. You Indians are the most touchy people in the world. Sometimes it is so difficult to talk to you. One's always afraid of hurting you. (Das50)

Through the figure of the protagonist of the play, the play writer highlights the positives of Indian religion when he makes Larins praise Indians for their religious tolerance. Henry Lawrence finds Indians more tolerant and peaceful people than other religionists. Commenting on the response of Indian people, after a cow is killed by an Englishman, Larins asserts: "Fortunately Indians are civilized people and don't resort to violence easily. In other land we would have been burnt alive. (Das49)

Though certain aspects of Indian life come for praise by the writer, Gurcharan Das never forgets to point out the weaknesses of Indian way of life also. For instance he brings to light many negative aspects of Indian political system and a lack of unity and credibility in Indian people on the political front. He criticizes orthodox Brahmins for spreading superstitions in the name of religion. To expose the inherited weaknesses of Indian social system, Gurcharan Das brings the incident of 'sati' into focus where an innocent woman is forced to kill herself in the name of

religion and thus raises questions about the very sanctity of religious impulses. At the same time he does not seem to conform to Abbot's idea of Christianity as the only true religion in the world and considers his views as representative of same kind of bigotry as those of conservative Hindus. His satire at the presumptuous nature of European claims to understand India through imitation of outer appearances is full of comic intent. The discussion between Henry Lawrence and Sher Singh about the questions of *pucca* Indian reveals the belief that India remains inscrutable to European mind despite its colonization and political subjugation: "a *pucca Indian* is an English man full of curry and bad Hindustani, with a fat, liver and no brains, but with a self sufficient idea that no can know India, except through a long experience of brandy, gin, gram-fed mutton and cheroot" (Das49). Here, Gurcharan Das seems to echo E.M. Forster who concurs that 'no one can know India.'

In nutshell, the play *Larins Sahib* is quite rich in its thematic implications regarding role of history in the life of a nation and an individual. Though the play has been often studied as a historical play, it is the contemporary relevance of its historicity that gives a universality to its theme. In its presentation of fight among political leaders, their narrow concerns and their obsession with

power, the play comes to depict many contemporary Indian concerns. Further history in the play is used to reinterpret contemporary reality and to project its message into the present. Though the play is afflicted with some obvious shortcomings such as its failure to capture the transformation of Henry Lawrence, which remains sudden and unacceptable, it gives us an understanding of the past through the lenses of the present concerns. Despite the scope of improvement in the play, which according to Gurcharan Das contains “a degree of diffidence” (-----), the play reveals a kaleidoscopic reading of history in its dynamic contours.

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