

# Mr. India Speaks...

From sleepy, pre-partition lyallpur to the newly-minted capital of independent India, Delhi, to the exciting shores of a brave new world, U.S.A. then back to the terra firma of Bharat, Gurcharan Das's life is an amazing story of eventful close-up's & long shots that unfailingly entertains, enlightens & empowers in one fell swoops. A Harvard graduate, the youngest ever CEO of Procter & Gamble, Author, Novelist, Playwright & Columnist of repute, Das however maintain the hotline with business & industry through his Management Consultancy. In this engaging one-on-one with STRATEGIC INNOVATORS, the multi-dimensional maverick, forever championing the cause of a resurgent India with all the passion, conviction & erudition at his command, traces the significant signposts of his life, as only a rivetting, true-blue raconteur can.

**T**o Gurcharan Das's grandfather, the English language was a treasured possession. As a child he was initially confused by his grandfather's strange attachment to a foreign language but later realised, it was his window to the world-the many-coloured kaleidoscope through which he read & heard about events that unfolded in the world he lived in. Gurcharan's father was in the deathless

phrase of the author of the *Punjabi Century*, Prakash Tandon – a “cultural commuter.” During the day, his father was an engineer who wore western clothes, spoke in English & followed the rational, individualistic life of a responsible & committed official of the British raj.

In the evening however he wore a loose-fitting kurta, spoke in Punjabi, ate Indian food, listened to Indian music & meditated like a good hindu. While

Gurcharan's mother made sure that the children worked hard at their studies & got good marks, especially in English & Mathematics. As Gurcharan Das recounts, "...after homework every evening before dinner, she would sit with us & regale us with stories from the Ramayana & Mahabharata. Her narration was deeply coloured by her middle class values which emphasized the virtues of thrift, hard work, integrity, courage & respect for elders. My father, for his turn, fostered in us the love of god, respect for the Guru, the value of meditation & spiritual enlightenment."

After partition, Gurcharan's family shifted to Simla where his schooling began. Soon after the family moved to Delhi where he was admitted to Modern School (Barakhamba Road) as his mother (whose relentless determination was totally responsible in getting the children admitted against all odds) was convinced that the school provided the perfect blend of modern & traditional values necessary for a good, solid education. After the stint in Delhi, the family now moved, this time, to a brave new world - the United States of America, where they were located in Washington D.C. America in the fifties, (under Eisenhower) was on a roll & enjoying unprecedented levels of prosperity. The American middle-class appeared singly-mindedly committed to both, live the American dream & pursue the slogan 'big is beautiful' in every facet touching their life-homes, automobiles, gadgets the works! It was truly a sort of a culture shock for people like the newly moved in family of Gurcharan Das. In time, Gurcharan Das was admitted to a typical American school where interestingly when he joined, the school had eighty percent "white" but when he left three years later, it had become eighty percent "black"! Right in front, he witnessed a demographic revolution with the destruction of the American city & the birth of a flourishing suburbia.

Like many American kids, Gurcharan soon got a job delivering newspapers before school. Each morning, he would walk his route from house-to-house starting five in the morning-come hail, rain, snow, anything! Frequently it was bitterly cold & it required real will power, but since he knew his customers depended on him, he couldn't let them down-even if they didn't always pay on time! This small job taught him the biggest secret of business as he explains, "...my paper boy stint taught me on crucial lesson- 'Customer is the King'. No matter how big & hot you are, the customer is always central to all your activity. If you don't satisfy him, there is no customer. Without a customer there

is no business- & no job! The other major thing I learnt was not to fear technology. At school, we all had to attend a class called 'SHOP'. The classroom would be filled with lathes, tools & machines. We were taught to work with our hands. Very soon we learnt to repair a window, make a table or unclog a sink. Suddenly tackling, coping or working with machines was not such a big deal! We understood what Bronowski meant when he declared that the world is understood through the hand not the mind & that the hand is the real cutting-edge of the mind." Three years later, the family was due to return back home- India, but since Gurcharan was in his final year, his parents agreed to let him stay behind. Six months later as he was getting ready to head for India, he was happily surprised to learn that he had won a scholarship to Harvard University.

While remembering his Harvard days, he says, "Today when I look back, my most vivid memories of Harvard remain ones that deal with ideas, Persons - even the eminent ones- come second. One of the first ideas I encountered there was that the 'Nation' was a relatively new concept in human history although countries had existed for a long, long time. I soon realized that the U.S.A. was the first truly modern nation, the country where the notion of modernity had originated. For the first time, a people had, consciously, in collective fashion, decided to build a nation without the baggage of history, because America 'did not have a past'. The Americans were also unique because they only lived for the future. He continues, "We may have got our idea of founding a nation via England but the inspiration was clearly American. The other thing that I was caught up in a big way at Harvard was the future of poor countries, something even the grim-faced, grimy economists seemed hopeful about.

There was a course called *Development Economics*, which tried to capture their hopes. Paul Rosenstein-Rodan & Ragnar Nurke was the gurus of this new mantra. One of our liberal heroes



He was provocative, sharp & drew large audiences for his lectures. He taught the pursuit of national self-interest & emphasized it was the only legitimate course for a nation in its relation with other countries. There was no room for morality or idealism. He would repeat over and over that it was dangerous to put idealism in power.

After graduating from Harvard, these things happened to Gurcharan Das. First, he was insanely homesick, reluctant to pursue academics despite several scholarships & completely confused about the future. However, he couldn't return empty handed home. He started to desperately send out letters to American companies for an opening in their Indian subsidiaries. He had sent dozens but only one replied. It was VICKS, the makers of vapourub. After several interviews in New York, the General Manager of the Indian subsidiary Richardson Hindustan (who was on a trip to the big apple) offered Gurcharan a job as an Executive-trainee. He explained that the company was comparatively new in India, so this was his chance to get in on the ground floor. Soon, he found himself in Mumbai. From being accused of being a Smart Alec "who asks too many unnecessary questions & should go" to harbouring a complex because he was working for a company that was both miniscule & unknown (compared to other towering multinational banners) to slowly finding his feet, discovering the complex & fascinating world of "Bazar Power" in the little known alleys of Bharat through the native genius of unsung traders & shop-keepers, to swinging deals, breaking barriers, building bridge & learning each day with humility & hunger - was truly an eye-opener on several levels for this Harvard graduated executive. Ultimately it dealt with

## Chronology

Gurcharan Das is an author and a management consultant. He advises a number of companies on global corporate strategy.

- He was Chairman and Managing Director of Richardson Hindustan Limited from 1981 to 1985, the company where he started as a trainee.
- He was CEO, Procter & Gamble India from 1985 to 1992.
- Between 1989-1992, he was Vice President, Procter & Gamble Far East.
- In 1992, he was promoted to Vice President & Managing Director, Procter & Gamble World wide, responsible for strategic planning.
- In 1995, after a 30-year career in 6 countries, he took early retirement to become an author.
- Author of the international bestseller, India Unbound, which have been published in many languages and filmed by the BBC. He regularly writes column for the Times of India and occasionally for Wall Street Journal.
- His noted novel, A Fine Family which was published by Penguin being made into a film by Sham Benegal.

## Harvard for me was as much a celebration of new & exciting ideas as an introduction to some unique thought leaders

human relations through the transaction of goods & services spanning the entire gamut of creating a desire & fulfilling it, with total customer satisfaction, bringing into play lessons learnt in those yearly years as a paperwallah in Washington DC. At the end of the day, Gurcharan realized that the real key to success is the sum total of a tremendous amount of local passion for the brand & a feeling of local pride & ownership. As he states, "Real Globalization is about having a global vision & strategy but also cultivating roots & individual identities, nourishing local insights and re-employing communicable idea in new geographies around the world. Re-enforced by a relentless one-pointedness towards a goal. The best managers do very few things but they make sure they do the right things, execute them brilliantly & most importantly have fun doing it."

### At age 20, I knew I was going to write...

Gurcharan Das from the beginning knew that he is going to write as he tells, "The day I left college, I knew I was going to write. Maybe there was no big picture in terms of what for whom, powered by what kind of an agenda & with what desired impact, but at age twenty, only the stirrings happen, only the symptoms are visible. The disease comes later! I remember investing in a Diary & diligently noting the happenings of each given day. Later In my working life at Procter & Gamble, there was a huge amount of traveling that I had to do frequently criss-crossing across the length & breadth of the land. Many small towns featured where there was not very much to do in the evenings. I read voraciously all through those years. At one point, I recroned-gathering courage, It was playback time. I wrote three plays in my twenties, a novel in my thirties & the last one in my fifties. All my plays have been performed & appreciated at home & abroad. I am presently onto my new book (which takes most of my time) which deals with moral philosophy & how it is hugely relevant & can meaning-

fully impact today's public & corporate governance.

At Age fifty, Gurcharn sought voluntary retirement from Procter & Gamble & persuaded his wife to accompany him for an Academic holiday in Chicago to re-learn, in depth, the ancient Indian scriptures. As he explains, "Over the years, we seemed to have given too much importance to Meaulay & too little to Manu. That needed to be rectified. Also, I believed that lessons learnt from the Mahabharata, Upanishads & Geeta were relevant to our life and times in no uncertain terms, apart from the inherent beauty of depth & dimension they offered." After writing books, plays, columns, today Gurcharan Das's routine is simple. He comes to his study at six-thirty in the morning, write till around twelve-thirty in the afternoon, after which he goes for a swim. He returns home, have his lunch, read the papers & attend to his other non-literary work, then includes be in touch with companies where he is on the board, consult with some companies, do lectures & talks for Corporates, write a column for a mainline publication & so on. Gurcharan Das is a perfect time manager as he tells us, "I have discovered that time management is of critical importance if you wish to do all that you wish to do. Also imporant is a high degree of passion & conviction. All my books & articles (for example) primarily deal with issues that affect India because India is my prime passion." Gurcharan Das is sometimes referred to as a muckraker. But he does not feel that journalist is the best term for him because a good professional journalist is someone who is informed, objective, analytical & dispassionate. He thinks of himself as more of an Advocate, championing a cause with passion, purpose & resolve beyond the call of legitimate duty & certainly very hot 'n' heavy on opinions! "People often comment on the lack of cynicism in my articles & books- a leit motif in a lot of prevalent journalism - & an ever-shining sign of positivism & optimism. That comes largely from my business background. You cannot hope to be a significant player or leader of any organization in business or industry if you are constantly moaning, groaning & complaining about how the glass is always half empty. The dynamic personality as he is, loves to be a mover & shaker, forward looking & a chronic optimist, ever celebrating infectiousy, the joy of the half full glass. Life is about hope. It is heavens greatest gift to us mortals. The 'Page of Excellence' salutes Gurcharn Das for his approach and hopes that some day the whole of India can realize the flamboyance and the joy associated with the half full glass. Cheers! ■