

October 11, 2011

In Search of Virtue

Bhagwati on Gurcharan Das, The Difficulty of Being Good , Oxford University Press: 2010.

Gurcharan Das made his debut as a writer with India Unbound, a title that draws aptly on David Landes's celebrated and celebratory history of the Industrial Revolution, The Unbound Prometheus. He was writing about the "liberal" reforms, which had been comprehensively outlined and demanded as early as 1970 in my book on India with Padma Desai (also published by Oxford) , and which the current Prime Minister (then the Finance Minister) had initiated frontally during the balance of payments crisis in 1991. As predicted, these reforms would transform India which had been held back as if it were on a chafing leash. Not merely would growth rates break out of the rut in which they had fallen; exactly as I had argued, the accelerated growth would finally begin to rescue the poor, in many millions (an estimated 200 million in the span of approximately 15 years) , from extreme poverty in what I had described as a "pull up" process rather than the misleading phrasing "trickle down" that put a conservative cast on what was evidently a radical developmental strategy.

In The Economist magazine's colorful imagery, India had been like a tiger which had been crouched to leap but was being restrained by an extraordinarily counterproductive policy framework that it would have taken a perverse intelligence like Lex Luthor's to devise. With the reforms, which would gather strength since 1991, most of us (except the leftwing

diehards) were certain that India would turn from its pitiful performance over nearly three decades to an era of rapidly growing prosperity.

Gurcharan Das's splendid facility with writing and his rich experiences in the private sector gave him a lens which underlined afresh what we already knew.

But in this new work, Gurcharan Das does break out of the pack. He turns from economics to ethics, seeking to read in one of India's two great epics, the *Mahabharata*, lessons in how to be virtuous. Much of what he extracts from the epic's characters and the difficult moral choices they make underlines for him the dilemmas they face and address, so that he titles his book, The Difficulty of Being Good (though he could equally have called it The Difficulty of Being Bad since the complexity of the moral choices we face can also throw sand in a single-minded approach to vice).

Let me first say that Gurcharan Das is undoubtedly on the right track when he approaches *Mahabharata* as literature that can illuminate moral dilemmas that life continually poses and also how being virtuous often involves choosing between different ethical values (The topic was written by many over a period of nearly four centuries, as it happens, and therefore some of the moral dilemmas may be a matter of intransitivity of ethical preferences between different authors in different times). That literature can define our moral values and choices is a necessary corrective today to those who claim, after the current economic crisis, that markets determine morality: this is a quasi-Marxist vulgarism that seeks to define morals as being determined by where one works (i.e. in the market place) when in fact the moral sensibility that one typically acquires

from religion, cultural traditions, parental example and, often exposure to great literature determines how one will behave in the market place! My own compelling exposure to moral dilemmas came from reading Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment where Sonia (Sofya Semyonovna Marmeladov) faces the dilemma: to reject prostitution or to embrace it to feed her family.

Gurcharan Das is distressed that his effort to look into the *Mahabharata* in this way is often seen in India as a lapse from (benign) secularism into (malign) Hinduism instead. When he is invited to give a talk at a school, and offers to talk about the *Mahabharata*, he is rebuffed by the Principal: "I don't want controversy about religion". To which, he reacts by saying that "the *Mahabharata* is a *literary* epic...Where does religion come in?" And he adds: "I asked myself if Italian children can proudly read Dante's *Divine Comedy* in school or English children can read Milton, why 'secularist' Indians should be ambivalent about the *Mahabharata*.... Dante's great poem is a deeply religious work." But here Gurcharan betrays perhaps the chief flaw in an otherwise brilliant book: its occasional lack of cultural context. Surely, no one in Italy treats the *Divine Comedy*, nor do the English treat *Paradise Lost*, as sacred books; the *Mahabharata* is indeed a religious epic in the eyes of the Hindus, and indeed identified as such also by the non-Hindus in India. The epic's religious persona cannot be wished away.

I find this cultural blindside elsewhere, especially in the chapter where Gurcharan Das considers Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers, and the episode surrounding her being gambled away by the

eldest husband, Yudhishtira, an embodiment of virtue, and then dragged into the assembly of the triumphant Kauravas. She raises the question: was she gambled away by Yudhishtira before or after he had gambled himself away? Presumably, this matters because if Yudhishtira had lost himself first, he possibly had no legal ability to gamble his wife away. But this “technicality”, to which Gurcharan Das attaches great significance, is just that; the fact is that Draupadi is a chattel, part of her husbands’ property, to be disposed of as they wish.

This is also manifest from the fact, totally unnoticed by Gurcharan Das and Western commentators, that Draupadi is menstruating when she is dragged away by the emissary of the Kauravas. Why? I suspect that this makes her vulnerability as a woman in a men’s world even more poignant and pointed. Women in most Hindu households except the upper classes are segregated and treated as “untouchable” during menstruation, presumably so as to protect them from sexual demands by their spouses; but the flip side is that their egalitarian treatment is further set back. Is the *Mahabharata* telling us then that women are not merely chattel but also in a lower pecking order within the household?

If so, the attempt by Gurcharan Das and some modern feminists to see feminist assertion in Draupadi, and indeed in many women who are considered to be “spirited” feminists because (faced with impotent or incapacitated husbands) they produce babies by intercourse with the gods instead of by the Immaculate Conception favoured by the Christians, seems far-fetched, to say the least. Besides, one must ask: what ever happened to this feminism over time? How did women get reduced to their

current situation when the common experience of many women is one of discrimination unless they have power, in which case gender no longer matters?

In fact, I am surprised that Gurcharan Das, who is focused on the *Mahabharata*, does not mention how the mythological beliefs of the Indian masses were used by Mahatma Gandhi to bring Indian women into public life in a way that went beyond assigning to them the envelope-licking role in leftwing political parties. By invoking powerful Goddesses, who battled and slew male demons, Mahatma Gandhi succeeded in doing more for women's rights than conventional feminism would likely have done. Thanks to him, Indians got used to seeing women in public roles; they marched alongside the men in the Independence movement. So, when I saw Betty Friedan in 1966, after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had taken office, she said that she had gone around with Mrs. Gandhi and had asked men how they felt that the Prime Minister was a woman, and had been astonished that, to a man, they had answered: "I did not think of Indira Gandhi as a woman Prime Minister"! A clever way to use Indian cultural-mythological tradition --- not implausible reflections on the role of women in *Mahabharata* ---- had helped the cause of feminism in modern times.

What I found particularly interesting, however, was his argument that the epic's central insight is that morals can be "subtle", i.e. complex, and that often there is no ready answer to a moral question. This leads also to tolerance, where others' choices, different from one's own, are respected. This is certainly a unique way to get to tolerance, different

from the tolerance in Andalusian Spain for nearly 500 years under the Umayyad Muslims: the former is universalist whereas the Anadalusians extended it mainly to the “people of the book”.

This defining characteristic of the epic , as far as tolerance is concerned, is reflected also in the well-known injunction in the Gita which says famously that, just as all rivers flow into the same ocean --- I hope that is true! ---, so do all religions lead to the same God. Ideally, this spirit should also lead to an E.M.Foster -type indulgence of human folly, which is the essence of a truly liberal mind, though Gurcharan Das does not seem to develop that theme.

The other compelling lesson that Gurcharan Das draws from contemplating the behavior of many of the principal characters in the epic, is the importance of empathy. This is best embodied in the famous *bhajan* (holy ballad) of the Vaishnav saint, Narsimha Mehta, a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi, which says that a Vaishnava is one who feels the pain of others which he seeks to alleviate but without ambition for recognition or surrendering to the false pride of virtue. Compassion suffuses Buddhist teachings as well. It has defined the lives of Calvinists, Jains and Jews as well and is not exclusive to the *Mahabharata*, of course.

All this is to the good. But I wish Gurcharan Das had more centrally linked up his first and his second books. The opponents of the liberal reforms have arrogated to themselves the high moral ground. In truth, by producing economic failure that accentuated poverty, they created a moral wasteland: for what is more moral in a poor country with extreme

poverty than the reduction of that poverty? There is little moral dilemma here: nothing subtle is required for us to reach out for a simply better choice. If only Gurcharan Das had said this with his remarkable eloquence!