

LARINS SAHIB: MIRRORING CULTURE THROUGH HISTORY

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Gurcharan Das's *Larins Sahib* has been performed in major Indian cities and at the Edinburgh Festival. The play won the Sultan Padamshree Prize in 1968, offered by the Theatre Group Bombay. It was first produced by Deryck Jefferies at the Bhulabhai Theatre, Bombay in July 1969. *Larins Sahib* competed among eighty entries, many of them from established authors and won this prize. This play depicts the confrontation of two cultures represented by Ranjit Singh's widow, Rani Jindan, Sher Singh Attariwala and Henry Lawrence. The action of the play takes place mostly in and around Lahore and briefly in Calcutta, in the year 1846. It is a fascinating reconstruction of the rise to power and influence of the British in the state of Punjab in the years 1846-47.

The play focuses on the period of confusion in the history of Punjab after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It deals with the crisis that overtook the state when the East India Company routed the Sikhs, seven years after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839. The death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was followed by political instability and rapid change of government in the then state of Punjab. Selfish and corrupt leaders came to the front. The brave and patriotic but utterly undisciplined army took over the reigns of the kingdom. The British, capitalizing on the situation began to eye the land of the five rivers. Ranjit Singh had built an empire in the north-west India after Mughal Empire was ruined. It was a very large empire between the river Sutlej and Himalayan mountain ranges of Laddakh, Karakoram, Hindukush, and Sulaiman. The Sikh monarchy was "Napoleonic in the suddenness of its rise, the brilliance of its success and the completeness of its overthrow" (Griffin 9-10).

The fascination for the history of Punjab led Gurcharan Das to explore the events of 1846. The period after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh forms the backdrop of the play. That was when the British first arrived in the Punjab, and the first reaction of the Punjabis to the English, and vice-versa, determined how the history of the nation would be shaped thereafter. *Larins Sahib: The Tale of a Fallen Man* revolves around Henry Lawrence. Das notes how during his travels in the bazaar of Punjab, marketing Vicks Vaporub, he began to delve in the history of Punjab. It was then that he came across the unusual Lawrence brothers; out of whom Henry Lawrence was the most interesting and the least imperial. His brother George was a soldier in north-west and John was an empire builder, who went on to become Lord John Lawrence, Governor-General and Viceroy of India. Henry was unusual because he formed easy friendship with the Sikh noble families. He shared a warm and affectionate relationship with Sher Singh, the scion of the Attari family ; the fiery Rani Jindan, the widow of Ranjit Singh; and her son Dalip, who was taken away from her when he was young and who became the tragic ‘black prince’ at Queen Victoria’s court. There are ‘the three avatars of Henry Lawrence.’ These are the: enlightened empire-builder, would be ‘Lion of the Punjab’ and the cog in the wheel of the East India Company (Naik 2-3).

After the death of Ranjit Singh, the Sikh kingdom was plunged in chaos. The British, having avoided a head on clash with Sikhs, till Ranjit Singh was alive, for they knew of his capabilities, saw their chance now. In 1845 the first Sikh war began. With the help of traitors, who included some Sikh courtiers and commanders, the English gained victory from the clutches of defeat at Sobraon and the Lahore treaty was signed. As per the treaty of Lahore, the Sikh kingdom not only offered surrender but also agreed to pay one and a half crores of rupees indemnity as expenses of the war. They agreed to reduce their military strength and surrender guns to the East India Company, among other things.

The writing of this play according to Gurcharan Das was, in a sense, search for his own identity because he himself hails from the state of Punjab. In this context exploring the cultural background of the play assumes great significance because it draws attention to the larger issue of Panjabi identity. The play not only takes into account the history of Punjab but also certain aspects which refer to the clash of the Indian and the western cultures.

The cultural and moral codes of the British and the native population were inherently in conflict with each other. British, being rulers of a large empire certainly had an edge over the Indians, who though educated, lacked the cunning which the rulers of the one half of the world had. The Indians were naive and could be taken in easily. The British considered it an advantage and succeeded in splitting them. Certain factors such as presence of different cultures, traditions, castes, colours, and creeds sometimes resulted in conflicts. Superstitions also did not allow progress in various spheres. The British were well acquainted with all these facts and found it easy to rule them. They were dominating, harsh, prude, and clever whereas most Indians were submissive, subservient, and self-sacrificing.

With the emergence of cultural studies in twentieth century, it has been observed that between cultures and classes, to a great extent, boundaries have melted away. But the times in which the play has been set, culture was only associated with aristocratic class. It signified exploring artistic and literary activities and was seldom associated with the ordinary people. Distinction existed between the high and the low classes. The whites always referred to their race and everything associated with them as superior, whereas the natives as well their possessions were termed inferior:

Hardinge : Oh!

Damn these bloody tribes! Damn this
bloody country! Damn the whole world...
This brandy's no good.

Elliot : It's recently come in from London, Sir

Hardinge : It's the devilish air then. Everything in
India is second-rate. Even travellers' best
becomes second-rate in India. (27)

Now a days cultural studies take into account all aspects of living such as dress, food, means of entertainment etc. But in the British era when India was colonized, culture was only associated with the ways and values of the upper crust of society. *Larins Sahib* foregrounds the contrast between the aristocracy and the lower class people. The aristocratic class is represented by the British and the lower class by the natives. The play also highlights the way the British humiliated the natives. In the first Act, Henry Lawrence is portrayed as a strong advocate of the principles of natural justice, a lover of the natives, and a just and efficient administrator. There is a suggestion of subtle irony in the reference that his face has been sun-tanned in the heat of the subcontinent and that he can easily be mistaken for a native. Lawrence's appearance at the Governor General's Darbar makes the white occupants of the room look suspiciously as if they are about to receive a stranger from another land and not one of their own race. Their snobbery and prejudices against the Indians are apparent in the observations, they make about Lawrence.

The play highlights the sensitivity and devotion of the people of those times to customs and traditions. The Indians have traditionally worshipped the cow as mother. An incident in the play suggests how callous the British establishment was towards the sensibility of the natives. While crossing the Shah' Alami Gate, the English soldiers find their way blocked by a couple of cows. They go out of their way to kill the cows, knowing all the time that this brutal act would hurt the feelings of the people. After they butcher the cows, the citizens of the area react as expected and the soldiers are barely able to make it alive to the barracks. The play, thus, makes a powerful comment on the racial prejudices of the whites which were evident in more than one way.

Das succeeds admirably in portraying the 19th century colonial India. After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh 'the Lion of Punjab', the British appointed Henry Lawrence as the resident of East India Company in the court of Ranjit Singh's twelve-year-old son Dalip Singh. He is preferred over others. As Elliot a member of British Company observes that the greatest achievement of *Larins Sahib* is that he is able to project himself to natives as being fully sensitive to their needs. In preferring Indian officers to British in an attempt to restore Sikh self-respect and to root out corruption in the Court, Lawrence alienates his superiors. However, everyone knows that he is familiar with the pulse of the natives. Hence, he is given important

positions. His rise from a mere clerk to the resident of the East India Company is meteoric. He appears to be totally free from the original sin of the white man's burden. He is not only generous to the conquered Indians but admires them as well. Despite Elliot telling him to restrain himself and to keep the natives at a distance, he chooses Sher Singh his officer because of his lineage. He shows fairness, justice, sympathy and understanding towards the natives.

Despite the attitude of the fellow white officers towards Indians, Lawrence shows great respect for Ranjit Singh whom he considers 'the greatest ruler of Hindustan.' He does not want to show any disrespect to Ranjit Singh. His loyalty to India seems to be total, even though Currie may hold that every pagan power no matter how formidable in appearance must succumb to the civilizing mission of the white races. Very often Lawrence convinces the British officers that the Indians can manage without them. He also says that the Indians do not need anyone's shoulder to lean upon. He does not hesitate in telling the British officers, that a good administrator must know that the contented people will give far greater returns. History shows that arbitrary governments never last for very long. He makes a public apology on behalf of the entire English community, on the killing of the 'sacred cow' and assures that it would never happen again. As an act of goodness he waives off one month's land revenue for the citizens of the district and promises justice for all. He also promises to build canals, bridges, roads for the welfare of the people. His apparent sense of 'natural justice' and fair play, his efforts to bring about social reforms makes him different from other colonizers. When he finds that the whole village is after a woman—forcing her to become a 'sati' since her husband is dead, he is outraged: "If it is the Indian custom. My nation also has a custom. When men burn women alive, we hang them," and he makes a proclamation:

Sati is with immediate effect abolished in all provinces and districts of Punjab. And the Hindu Reform Bill is with immediate effect extended to all parts of Punjab... (72)

The attitude of Henry Lawrence is totally different from that of the other Europeans. He shows full sympathy for the Indians and does every possible thing to help them. He is able to impress the people, who in turn glorify him. Maharaja Dalip Singh treats him as a good friend,

so does Rani Jindan who gives him the Kohinoor for safe keeping which she values greatly as it belonged to her late husband, as a mark of trust and friendship. Thus, on the surface he always appears to be a friend of the Indians, at least in the first half of the play. He seems to know the psychology of the Indians and the ways they can be ruled.

Act 1 effectively presents, Henry Lawrence pitted against his benighted compatriots, as an enlightened empire-builder, but it also marks the beginning of Lawrence's role the 'Lion of Punjab'. This shift appears logical for Lawrence admires the Late Maharaja Ranjit Singh to a point of imitation; he gradually starts identifying himself with the Indian hero.

Matters are brought to a head when Rani entrusts the fabulous Kohinoor to him for its safe keeping. The act ends with Lawrence displaying the Kohinoor to an imaginary audience much to the bewilderment of the Rani. Lawrence is shown as the enlightened Englishman once again, making one feel as if the Kohinoor episode had not happened. He appears to be a philosopher—realizing the futility of vain glory and power and tells us how short-lived and transient they are.

The Rani is shocked when Lawrence finally lapses into Ranjit Singh's role. She cannot bear to see him wear her late husband's 'chogah'; it was sad to see her old Larins changing, not the same soldier with the purpose she liked. He dreams of bringing Punjab, just as it was in the days of the lion, so that people would say "The Lion has returned, The Lion has returned" and he even kisses the Rani, perhaps as the Lion would.

This is the turning point in Lawrence's demeanour. He acts like an imperialist when he orders to arrest Tej Singh and Lal Singh for they were behind the firing at the Shah Alami Gate, attempting to kidnap Maharaja Dalip Singh. He openly exults in the fact that the people have called him 'Angrez Badshah'. As people shout 'Angrez Badshah Zindabad' he tells Sher Singh 'I'm a hero'. He imagines that he is 'the Lion of Punjab' – Ranjit Singh reincarnate. The play juxtaposes the cunning of the whites against the gullibility and naiveté of the Indians.

Changes in a character's personality are to be deduced from his reaction to particular problems, events, and situations. The dramatist has to be ingenious enough to suggest such

changes plausibly through dialogue. Das often proves strikingly successful in this task. The Rani shifting her affection from Lal Singh to Lawrence is a case in point. We know that she is soft towards Wazir by her son's reference to him as her 'lal' as also by her taking offence to Lawrence's remarks that Lal Singh was a traitor: 'I think that was a vulgar remark.' But the very first time the Rani and Lawrence together, she is won over by his flattering allusion: 'Begging is only coarse before a beautiful woman,' and by his dignity and sincerity. When she spies Tej Singh eavesdropping, we know that soon she is going to lean on Lawrence rather heavily.

The tracing of the development of the Lawrence from a sensible, self-respecting, and conscientious officer with a firm faith in 'natural justice' to a power-and-glory obsessed 'Angrez Badshah' is the central purpose of the play. Through his development Das foregrounds the ambivalence inherent in his relationship with the natives and vice-versa. Lawrence's character is transformed as he begins to dream of becoming as great as Ranjit Singh himself. There is in him a deep desire to promote the self-interest that finally results in his complete dissociation from the welfare of the natives. The playwright drops many a hint that this change is to come. Almost from the very beginning he seems to be obsessed with Ranjit Singh, the one-eyed Lion and it foreshadows perhaps his own as-yet-latent-ambition when he says, 'Ranjit Singh is not dead...It only needs a leader to conjure his memory.' His insistence on an answer from the Rani to his question, 'Was he a good man?,' and his subsequent attachment to the Kohinoor and Ranjit Singh's royal robes resulting in his total mental transformation—he refers to the Rani as 'My Rani,' and kisses her passionately while under the spell of his imagined greatness—trace the change fully. Unfortunately, this image of Lawrence, which is now embedded firmly in the audience's imagination, suddenly gets blurred towards the end of the play with Lawrence meekly letting down everyone who had such faith in him. After Rani is banished and Sher Singh deserts him, with the already unsympathetic British officers being distant from him, he begins to glow once more as he displays the jewel to himself before a mirror. But now he only cuts a ridiculous figure.

Lawrence incurs the wrath of the white rulers as well as the displeasure of the natives because he is inherently a very shrewd person. His cunning is boundless but subtle. Initially he seems to the natives as their protector. With the white rulers too, he adopts a strategy to convey

the message that he is well-versed in handling the natives. However, more than anything it is his personal interest that reigns supreme in his mind. The last act opens with Lawrence having been called to reply to the charges levelled against him. He enters to hear to the strategy that was going to be adopted to annex Punjab. His presence is totally ignored and he is snubbed and told to voice his opinion only when asked. The charges are read out, and his silence is taken to mean that he is guilty. He is asked to release and apologize to Lal Singh and Tej Singh. Maharaja Dalip Singh is to be separated from his mother, the Rani for she is a bad influence, the new Regent would be Lal Singh. Lawrence suddenly appears in his third role as ‘the little cog’ in the wheels of the huge East India Company. The transformation takes place while he is still dressed in Ranjit Singh’s splendour. He meekly apologizes to Lal Singh, the Wazir, calling his arrest an unfortunate accident. It has been a gross betrayal of trust, faith, friendship and Rani’s love for him. Sher Singh too voices the same pain saying that Punjab had now become another pawn in the Angrez game. He tells Lawrence that he has not only hurt the sentiments of the Indians by separating a son and his mother, a sacred relationship, and by banishing the Queen, who is the mother of Punjab but insulted the state itself. He tells Lawrence, that if he was to make a choice he could have listened to his heart, for he cannot deny that he loved the Rani, but he preferred to obey the order of his countrymen:

Your duty to her or your duty to your Queen. You’ve chosen. In my terms Larins, it’s a choice between the Punjab and England, your Queen and my Queen. That’s where we part. I won’t have anything to do with the Company Raj Farewell. (94)

Larins Sahib is a well-crafted piece of colourful dramatic entertainment rather than a mere attempt to relate the past to the present. The racial angle brings into prominence the burning contemporary issue. Hence, the cultural constructs become even more significant and the play ultimately can be seen as representing two different cultures, their clash as well as synthesis.

Work Cited

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