



**Y**ou would think he is mad. Tell him this and he will probably grin disarmingly and quote Shakespeare: "Though this be madness there is a method to it!" Indeed. Yet it takes guts to throw everything to the winds and pursue a dream.

"A dream?" he asks incredulously, and then dismisses the statement with a wave of his hand. "My girl, I knew I was going to write a book as soon as I graduated!" He beams at you, his short stature by no means a disadvantage, and hustles you into his library. The ambience is classically English and these confines couldn't possibly house anybody else but a writer.

But there is more to Gurucharan Das than just

writing. Born in 1946 at Lyallpur (now Faisalabad in Pakistan), Gurucharan Das spent the better half of his childhood in New York where his father Barkat Ram, who worked for the Punjab government, was posted. A graduate in philosophy from the University of New York, Gurucharan was offered the prestigious Harvard Scholarship to pursue his masters in philosophy. "But I did not want to become a philosopher," he informs, "and although I did go to Harvard for a while, I eventually left and came to India where I joined Procter and Gamble as a trainee. I loved the rough and tumble of business," and adds, grinning, "like the man who came to dinner, I stayed on."

He went on to become the managing director

BY KAMNA DATTA



of the company and later was appointed manager, world wide strategic planning. And now at the peak of his career as vice president and managing director, (health care), Procter & Gamble International, he has decided to quit. "I'd promised myself that when I turned fifty, I'd retire and concentrate on another career — writing. I have worked for thirty years and am financially independent. I don't need to work for anybody and I feel that this is the right time to concentrate full time on writing." Now that's what we mean by methodical madness!

However, the tremendous success of his recently staged play '9 Jakhoo Hill' confirms that his experimentation with words has been

frustrations of a woman. Vindicating this insight is the fact that the woman plays the pivotal role in almost all his plays and solo novel.

"The woman," he confirms, "according to me, is the focal point of existence." Ask him why and he goes into a deep trance, emerges a while later, tiredly rubs his face as if still baffled by something and finally exclaims, "I don't know. Frankly, I just don't know. It's just the way it is." Then attempting an explanation he tells you about the women in his works.

"Tara, the mother, plays the most important role in 'A Fine Family'. She is the binding force between two generations." Pointing to a life-sized painting of the cover of the novel that adorns his library wall, he continues, "If you look at that painting, the woman has her back towards us, yet it is she who gives a certain completeness and congruity to the whole picture." '9 Jakhoo Hill' also centres around Anusya, a girl who is trying to grapple with not just the conflicts of a generation gap caused essentially by a change

Writing sustained him through his corporate years and now at fifty, he's turned it into a full time job. Meet Gurucharan Das, the enigmatic ex-bigwig of P&G-cum-novelist-cum-playwright.

# Of Words And Worth

worth everything. "But I have always been writing, so a switch over was, I guess, only natural. In fact, I have survived in business because of my writing. Besides, I feel that we all have different facets to ourselves and we must explore and look for that sort of richness in our lives. Also, I firmly believe that in life, action is more important than thought. Thought too is important but it must be preceded by action. I always wanted to write and I did, so what if I did it at fifty?"

Experimentation, exploration and the quest for answers has characterised Das making him a man of many dimensions. For a corporate whiz turned playwright and author, he displays tremendous and often startling insight into the needs, aspirations and

in the social order but also with upheavals in her private life.

His play 'Meera' which was first dramatised off Broadway and then later brought to India by Alyque Padamsee, is one of the few works of literature that talk of Meera not as a saint but as a woman. "We must understand," emphasises Das, "that Meera was a play about a woman who had tremendous energy. She was simply a woman too much for her husband. She was so full of life and energy that her husband could not satisfy her. So she turned to God. It was a play about a woman who belonged to the royal family. She was a Rajput and was married to the Raja of Mewar who was the most distinguished prince of his time. She had all the trappings but then she was a woman who was full of this vivacious







GAUTAM SHARMA

■ Poddar: leaning towards the occult  
**Balancing Act**

NO ONE can say she's out of touch with the latest trends. Last year, at the height of the 'green' revolution, **Smita Poddar** introduced the Tree range of eco-friendly shirts from her company — Bruno Sante International. Now her eyes are trained on more mysterious subjects. *Vaani Shastira*, psychic healing, alternative medicine, palmistry... the works. "I have a leaning toward the occult," admits the 32-year-old executive director of the Rs 7 crore shirt manufacturing company.

Poddar says that her interest goes back many years. "I was staying at the Hyatt in Singapore and someone mentioned how the doors in the hotel had been repositioned on the advice of a *feng shui* (the Chinese equivalent of a *Vaastu* expert). That's it: I was hooked," she recalls. Now Poddar has taken her interest beyond book knowledge. She instructs friends on where to place the pots and pans in their houses to maximise the "good energies" present there. Of course, all advice is strictly on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. "Right now, *Vaastu* is a fad. And it must be remembered that the influence of such practices is very localised," she notes.

That's not the only advice she offers. Says Poddar: "Our body is the perfect *Vaastu Mandala*. If we want to balance our lives, we should begin with that."

**The Write Stuff**

HE'S one corporate chieftain who doesn't need any ghost-writers for his AGM speeches and annual reports. Columnist with *The Times of India*, author of over 100 and three plays, Gurcharan Das is now at work on his second book which will be published by Penguin on completion next year. While his first book, the autobiographical *A Fine Family*, traced the fortunes and travails of a Punjabi family from pre-partition days to the late seventies, and is currently being made into a movie by Shyam Benegal, the 52-year-old Das's second has a more contemporary focus. In this he hopes to capture the zeitgeist or spirit of the country's economic reforms. In this he hopes to capture the zeitgeist or spirit of the country's economic reforms. In this he hopes to capture the zeitgeist or spirit of the country's economic reforms. In this he hopes to capture the zeitgeist or spirit of the country's economic reforms.

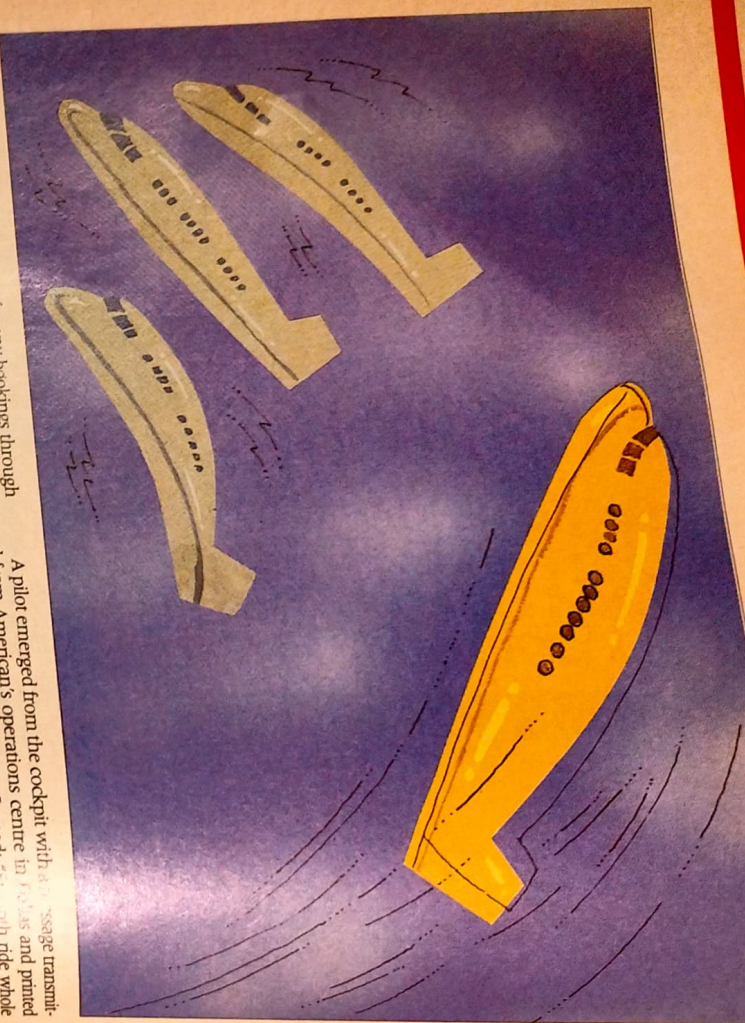
He has plenty to return. Managing director of world-renowned film studio (RHH) in 1980, at the age of 36, he became *Chief of Protocol* for the state when he was named director for worldwide strategic planning at the English hotel chain, the Ritz-Carlton, US, which he quit in 1995 to return to India. Says Das: "The 16 days my favourite pastime is to retreat to my All Bhag awake near Mumbai to write when I'm not busy venture-capital funding or doing media to my directorship."

That isn't as often as he'd like. Last month he's also taken over as chairman of the Indian advisory board of Citibank from Jagdish Sarna where he's "working on accelerating its credit cards business". Plus, he started his own consultancy last year to help Indian companies achieve high performance levels and to globalise. Even if he doesn't need help writing, Das could certainly use juggling skills.

■ Das: juggling his roles of writer, director, chairman and consultant successfully







Southwest had refused to pay fees for any bookings through the major computer reservations systems, other than certain slight fees to American's Sabre. The two other leading systems, Apollo and System One, finally announced that they were kicking Southwest out.

Kelleher said fine. Any lost sales, he estimated, would be trifling in comparison to the tens of millions of dollars that the traveling in companies wanted to preserve his visibility in the travel agency computers. The fact was, passengers didn't particularly want travel agents (and travel agents didn't particularly want clients) for \$19 flights. The computers were part of the full-service airline industry — the equivalent of cable television. Kelleher only needed rabbit ears.

One unwelcome effect of the computer fracas was a plunge in the price of Southwest stock, which hurt the company's employees and more among them more than Kelleher, whose holdings had ballooned to well over a million shares. Over the course of several months the price would tumble from \$40 to \$20, causing Kelleher's net worth to decline by better than \$40 million, and the price would soon plunge even further, as the bloody California price battle raged with Shuttle by United. Not to worry, Kelleher sighed. "Being a millionaire ain't what it was in the 1890s."

Kelleher asked a flight attendant for a glass of milk to go with his macadamia nut cookie. "I'm coating my stomach for this evening," he explained.

Kelleher was flying to New York for an industry conference, but he had arranged another piece of business while he was there. People had been telling him for years that he should meet Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic Airways. Kelleher spent a few minutes of the flight musing the lyrics of the Sex Pistols' *God Save the Queen* so he would be able to impress Branson.

A pilot emerged from the cockpit with a message transmitted from American's operations centre in Dallas and printed out by the on-board computer. It read: "Southwest ride whole way. Tell Herb we said hi."

Kelleher opened his briefcase and spent a few minutes reviewing traffic figures from the company's *Flight Deck* at Baltimore-Washington, opened a year earlier. "There was some expressed dubiety as to whether our coming to the East Coast would be successful," he said. The figures showed that in the fourth quarter of 1993, traffic to Chicago totalled 150,400, an increase of 1,052%. "Just a preliminary indication," he noted. As he stowed away the paperwork, his latest reading material slipped out, betraying Kelleher's plans for new service in Salt Lake City. It was a history of the Mormons.

As the plane turned into its final approach, one of the flight attendants leaned over to Kelleher with an extra macadamia nut cookie wrapped in a napkin. He lunged for the cookie but stopped short. "I'm not taking this from you, am I?" he asked her. When she said no, Kelleher practically inhaled the dessert. He left the plane and entered the gate area at LaGuardia, fantasising about his first cigarette in four hours. At the end of a long, uphill concourse, Kelleher approached a small throng of limousine drivers holding signs with the names of arriving passengers. Huffing and puffing like any four-pack-a-day man bearing a suitcase and briefcase, Kelleher angled past the drivers and walked outdoors to light up and stand in line for a cab into the city.

#### HARD LANDING

BY THOMAS PETZINGER JR  
Times Business

Distributed by IBD  
Pages: 320. Price: Rs 995



