



India Unbound

By Gurcharan Das

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India today is a vibrant free-market democracy and has begun to flex its muscles in the global information economy and on the world stage. Now, acclaimed columnist Gurcharan Das traces India's recent social and economic transformations in an eminently readable, impassioned narrative.

Das tells the stories of the major players in a period of rapid and profound change—from schoolchildren inspired by Nehru's speeches in the early days of Independence to the current software impresarios—and makes comprehensible and compelling the economic and political development responsible for these changes. He weaves his personal story into the larger context of contemporary history: his family's move to America in the mid-1950s, his education at Harvard, his years in India as a young marketing executive wrestling with a socialist system he feared would undermine the country's vast potential. He also shows us the reasons behind his optimism for his nation's future, among which is the exciting landscape of information technology today.

Das argues that the changes of the past fifty years have, at last, amounted to a revolution—and it is one that has not been chronicled before. With *India Unbound*, he gives us a book that is at once vigorously analytical and vividly written—an essential insider's road map to India, then and now.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Since the start of the recent global boom in information technology, there's been much talk in economic circles of an India covered with bold stripes, the next Asian tiger. Gurcharan Das, however, sees a much larger but lumbering elephant rising out of the muggy history of a country in which one-sixth of the world's population resides. India, as he states in *India Unbound*, "will never have speed, but it will always have stamina." How that stamina has evidenced itself over the past half-century is the focus of Das's book, an intricate, personal account of the beginnings of India's ongoing economic and social transformation.

Das begins his story shortly before India gained its independence from the British in 1947. He was born into a middle-class Punjabi family well ensconced in the new British-educated professional class. Das's borrowed term of "cultural commuters" fits his father's generation well, and his description of life lived between the more philosophical and spiritual worlds of Indian tradition and the Western-influenced business world of the British Raj reveal both a versatility and disorientation that was to permeate succeeding generations of independent Indians. Though mindful of Jawaharlal Nehru's influence on India's embrace of democracy, Das takes to task the economic leadership of the man who, while beginning his democratic rule with ambitions to end "poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity" ultimately failed in this regard. With an ever-present eye on the economic plight of his fellow countrymen (and frequent use of anecdotes and statistics), Das examines the irony of the socialist governments of Nehru and Indira Gandhi, which were founded in the name of the poor but became inefficient, bureaucratic behemoths, sucking the economic lifeblood out of the country. His education at Harvard introduced him to a slew of influential theories, including those of economist John Kenneth Galbraith and philosopher John Rawls. But instead of remaining in academia, Das began his career in business, joining the Indian subsidiary of Vicks and rising to become head of its Indian company, Richardson Hindustan, in 1981, and eventually, a CEO at Proctor & Gamble. Soon after the economic reforms of the early 1990s, however, Das left to employ his keen observational skills as a journalist and writer, and the latter part of this book is crammed with his insights into the opportunities of present-day India. Das is obviously enthusiastic about the possibilities that the knowledge economy has opened up for India, but he thoughtfully examines these economic options within the framework of the cultural past and future of a country on the "brink of the biggest transformation in its history."

As an autobiography that touches on every area of life but focuses a keen eye on economic development, Das's account is jam-packed with detail. At every chance, he sets the personal story of his family and ancestors in the wider context of history (often for full chapters at a time), creating a broad and richly detailed picture of Indian life. Though he writes in colorful, descriptive prose, Das's succinct and matter-of-fact statements occasionally seem to belie the complexity and ambiguities of historical and cultural transitions. However, *India Unbound* is a vast undertaking, and Das's combination of historical account, economic analysis, cultural observation, and personal experience is often intriguing and always informative.

--S. Ketchum

From Publishers Weekly

Das, an Indian venture capitalist and columnist for the Times of India (and former CEO of Procter & Gamble India), uses his own experiences as a businessman as the context in which to comment on India's postcolonial economic policies. He begins with Nehru's mixed economy (which he argues achieved democracy but ignored entrepreneurship and competition, resulting in an absence of industrial development) and continues through to the economic reforms of 1991 under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (whom he

labels a "reluctant liberalizer"), demonstrating how India has abandoned state-directed industrialization and finally become a free-market democracy with a burgeoning middle class. He also points out how India's late (and incomplete) entry into the international economy continues to hamper its growth, as compared to other late entries, such as that of China, which had a lower per capita income than India did in the mid-'60s and today boasts one twice as large as India's. Nevertheless, Das remains optimistic that "the new India is increasingly one of competition and decentralization," particularly because of the Internet and the boom in software entrepreneurship. In explaining India's economic policies, he gives much credence to theories about high-caste Brahmins being averse to making money and the government's fears that capitalism would crush the poor; but Das only mentions in passing Russia's ideological sway at the time of India's independence and does not discuss the Cold War or the context for India's belief that import substitution was necessary to make India less dependent on the outside world for its survival. Business readers with an interest in Third World development will learn much from Das.

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From Library Journal

In 1991, four decades of Nehruvian socialism fell before the economic reforms of Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. In the subsequent decade of India's deregulation, the national debt has decreased, the middle class has doubled in size, inflation has declined, and the restraints of industrial licensing have been abolished. Das, a former CEO of Proctor & Gamble and presently a business consultant and journalist, exudes an evangelical zeal for India's entry into the world economy. Arguing that India never experienced an industrial revolution, he asserts that because of its conceptual nature, the information age his country is now embracing is a superior fit with its caste system. Das also envisions India's economic growth as paralleling that of China, Japan, Korea, and Indonesia. Told with verve and excitement, Das's tale is loosely organized around a chronology of his life. He eschews mention of worker exploitation, environmental pollution, and new forms of corruption, but his story is an exciting, hopeful account that can be read by all with profit, as long as discretion is exercised. DJohn F. Riddick, Central Michigan Univ. Lib., Mt. Pleasant

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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