

## Researching and Documenting the Theatrical Journey of Gurcharan Das' *Larins Sahib*

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### Abstract

Theatre is a kaleidoscopic venture which nestles itself in the present moment that sparks the fresh remembrance of the past and the anticipation of the future. To live our present effectually, an understanding of the social, political, cultural and economic milieu of the past is required. Since theatre is a way of life, by revisiting the past performances and tracing the knowledge it transmits, we can understand the traditions and influences of the past and improvise our present. Indian English dramatic texts have been extensively analysed but the performance of the plays, its different contexts, script, dramaturgy, audience and its significance has hardly been spoken about. The other hindrance is the absence of appropriate methodology. This paper endeavours to document the theatrical journey of Gurcharan Das' play, '*Larins Sahib*' through an appropriate methodology.

**Keywords:** Documentation, Gurcharan Das, Indian English Plays, *Larins Sahib*, Performance Research, Theatre history, Theatre Group, Punjab, Neeta Mohindra. Rangtoli, Rahul Da Cunha, Tom Alter, Rajit Kapur, Madras players

### Introduction

Theatre is a living social discourse. It is a potent tool to promote ideas, debates, energise communities, attack institutions from a safe fictional arena, employ humour, spectacle, ridicule, emotion and to engage spectators in social affairs. It is truly a community art form which is immediate and elusive. Art forms like painting, sculpture, novel, and poem leave the authors hand as finished products. But Theatre art on the other hand, gives a new lease of life to the printed pages in the form of performance. A play is never really finished, it really happens in the theatre. It takes many *avatars* in the hands of the directors and production houses. It can never permanently become a private statement in the way a poem can be. Even films reach the audience as end products with no room for further changes. Due to this irreversible nature of films, the audience-actor interaction and its dynamic life gets lost, and so is the immediacy of the stage. But theatre consists of the explosive 'there'.

It is often assumed that reading of a play can assimilate the theatrical experience. But the text of a play is as vague and incomplete in relation to a fully realized performance as is a musical score to a concert. It is only through performance; a text will reveal its meanings and intentions. Writing is only one aspect of theatre, the other predominant one is the performance. As Bert O. believes:

“From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior document; it is the animating current to which the actor submits his body and refines himself into an illusionary being...it is by virtue of the absent text that the actor becomes a real living person...” (States,1985,128)

The apparently permanent printed text is just an approximation to what might occur when the piece goes for a performance. Decades ago, writings on plays were invariably on the literary aspects of the text rather than the particularities of staging. Performance being ephemeral, writers found it difficult to capture the dynamic moments on stage in the printed volumes. Despite the trial of ephemerality, performance research also suffered hold-ups due to lack of an appropriate methodology to guide the research through.

In India, theatre existed as a way of life and has a strong tradition over 5000 years. Ancient Thamizhl texts abound in references on the existence of drama or *Naadaham* or *kuuththu* in the Thamizhl land. We have texts like *Natyashastra* and *Tholkaappiyam* that has documented the grammar for the histrionic art. But the scenario of documentation of performances after the ancient era has been bleak. There are several treatises on western play productions, but unfortunately, the records on Indian plays in performance, particularly, Indian English plays in performance have been very meagre. Waman Kendre, the Director of National School of Drama, regrets that:

“We are a careless society when it comes to documenting and reading our own history. We speak of Bal Gandharva and his success, but when it comes to actual documentation, the picture is rather grim...There are few good centers and individuals who have documented research on theatre, but that is all in pockets, but no integrated effort. There is no advanced studies in this stream of academics...Such research and studies are the need of the hour...” (Kolhatkar,2013)

This paper hence, is an attempt at filling that void in Indian English theatre’s performance documentation and at finding an appropriate methodology to document such performances. As an illustration for this performance research, the play that has the distinction of being the first Indian English play to have performed at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Gurcharan Das’ *Larins Sahib*, has been considered.

## Documentation of Play Performances

“There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft, no device, no action, that is not found in the drama (*natya*)” (Ghosh, 1959,15)

The dramatic art is all inclusive, it reflects, imparts and prompts the ways for better living in its own unique way. It has references to the past and inferences to the present with which the future can be chiselled. By revisiting the past performances and tracing the knowledge it transmits, we can understand the social, political, cultural and economic milieu of the past and improvise our present. The drive for documentation characteristically is to provide access to that transient experience over time for the benefit of posterity.

But it is not an effortless task to accomplish, as the live and transient art has to be documented before they enter the mnemonic field of embodied memory. It is both an act of documentation as well as a challenge to disappearance. Besides, it has its inherent conceptual and evidentiary limitations as well. It is a demanding endeavour of creative possibilities to arrive at an appropriate methodology to document performances. Old research methods have to be readopted and fresh ones needs to be invented. After a bumpy ride with positivist, scientific, objective and relativist procedures, the search

for a proper methodology for reviving theatre finally knocked at the doors of historiography and realized its destination. Historiography, is

“the kind of historical report that not only places events in a descriptive sequence but also explains and interprets them; that is besides providing *who, what, where, and when*, the report covers *how, why*, it may even attempt to explain the significance of the events and analyse their developmental causes...” (Postlewait,2009,3)

The first step in this method is to choose the subject for analysis and documentation. The second step involves the collection of evidences related to the play performance under study. The third proceeds towards the exploration of the evidences collected to establish its authenticity. The fourth step leads to the interpretation, narration and documentation of the materials gathered to be preserved. As one administers historiographic method to draft theatre history, Patrice Pavis ‘Questionnaire’ also aids theatre research and has been adopted as a charter for the analysis of live performance. It is structured into fourteen Main pointers with subsidiary questions to answer. The main pointers include, general discussion of performance, scenography, lighting system, stage properties, costumes, actors performances, function of music and sound effects, pace of performance, interpretation of storyline in the performance, text in performance, audience, how to notate this performance, what cannot be put into signs, and the fourteenth is a ‘metaquestion’ about the questionnaire itself.

Yet another historiographic tool that assists theatre research in the interpretation segment is Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretations and understanding of texts and utterances. As a methodological discipline, it offers a toolbox for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material. It is intuitive and different from truth-oriented and discursively based theory. It is built upon the foundation of multiple perspectives, intertextuality and contextuality. Hermeneutics may imply differences in its perspectives, but one should consider the many perspectives to provide the most accurate frame of understanding for the object under study. It aids such a research that needs the methodology to be flexible, adaptable to particular needs, and justifiable in the evidence-based contexts. Theatre scholars like Jim Davis identifies hermeneutics not just as theory and practice of interpretation but as the interpretation of interpretation. Since theatre history involves multiple perspectives and is open to further probe, hermeneutics perfectly suits in its interpretive phase.

The sum and substance of this historiographic method is that, after the play performance has been selected, Patrice Pavis Questionnaire has been used for evidence collection, Postlewait’s methods have been used for the exploration of the evidences, hermeneutics has been used for the interpretation of the evidences and finally, narratology assists in the narration and documentation of the play performances.

### **Gurcharan Das as a Playwright**

In the modern era, legends like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo , Kedar Nath Das Gupta, Bharathi Sarabhai, Utpal Dutt, Partap Sharma, Asif Currimbhoy, T.P.Kailasam, Joseph Mathias Lobo Prabhu, Henry Satyanathan, Dina Mehta, Gurcharan Das, Cyrus Mistry, Manjula Padmanabhan, Gieve Patel, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, K.N. Panikkar, Indira Parthasarathi, Santha Rama Rau, Ebrahim Alkazi, Satyadev Dubey, Gopal Sharman, Jalabala Vaidya, Pearl Padamsee, Jatinder Verma, Alyque Padamsee and several others have nurtured

Indian English plays. Gurcharan Das in particular occupies a distinctive position of being the first playwright to win the Sultan Padamsee award for Playwriting in 1968.

Born in the greener, tree lined, orderly town of Lyallpur (now Faisalabad in Pakistan) which was planned and built during the rule of British Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, Sir James Lyall, Gurcharan Das went on to become a world-renowned author, commentator, public intellectual, a corporate, a liberal and a humane persona. Though the business world embraced him with success, his passion for the humanities, history and philosophy, together with his liberal temperament led him to seek ‘intellectual stimulation’ through writing. Writing for him is a stratagem for survival and he sought to write in English. He states in his introduction to *Three English Plays* that:

“I am comfortable and happy writing in English. If my business discourse can be in English, Why not my literary discourse? For me not unlike others in the Indian middle-class, English did not come as a matter of choice. We inherited from the British Raj. We were sent to English speaking schools, and as we grew up we found that our command of English was sometimes better than our Hindi or Bengali or any of our mother tongues. Thus, English became one of our many Indian languages... It is no longer imitative-nostalgic of ‘London fogs’ and ‘Surrey dews’-as it used to be before independence. It is a nice sounding idiom that has emerged under the bright Indian sun. It is virile and self-confident.” (Das,2001,3-4)

Guided by Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*, Gurcharan Das started writing plays soon after his college in his twenties. Knowing very well that writing a play requires certain amount of ‘audacity’ and knowledge of theatre, Gurcharan Das ventured into playwriting following the path of Dryden and Shaw. He has written *Three English Plays- Larins Sahib, Mira and 9 Jakhoo Hill*. *Larins Sahib* deals with the history of India after the death of Maharaja Ranjith Singh, *Mira* is a poetic play that sings the life of the Bhakti saint Mira Bai, and *9 Jakhoo Hill* presents the life after partition of India. It is more contemporary in its concerns. All the three plays, states Uma Mahadevan Das Gupta:

“are not merely platforms for the views of the writer: they tell their stories grippingly... His skill lies in creating believable, complex characters and letting them tell their stories in several layers of the plot. Each of these plays is well-crafted and offers definite possibilities for performance.” (Dasgupta,2001,)

Gurcharan Das’s versatility avows him as a dramatist of great significance. In a matter of three plays, he used history, myth and realism to enthrall the audience with variety. To Das, the response of the audience is vital, so he skilfully used Indian English in its regional flavours to ease the audience. His plays continue to resonate even in the stages of the twenty first century. The stage worthiness of his plays and given how they constitute an important cultural legacy concerned with India’s past, they are essential materials to be documented and archived. Of the three plays, *Larins Sahib* has been well-thought-out in this paper, for the analysis and documentation of its theatrical journey.

### ***Larins Sahib: Story and its History***

“The collection of pieces of evidence must always be one of the fundamental purposes of theatre history.” (Stern,2004,151)

As per the methodological implications and as pointed out by Tiffany Stern, the crucial step in the historiographic study is the collection of evidences. Evidences can be in the form of documents-series of letters, notes, pamphlets, newspaper reviews and diaries, Visual records-videos, photos,

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paintings and even buildings, Audio records-of play readings, rehearsals, productions, interviews, sound tracks etc. The first step towards the search for reliable sources of evidences began in Delhi, at the residence of the playwright, Gurcharan Das, a friendly, amicable gentle man beyond measure, a treasure trove of knowledge. The genesis of his first play *Larins Sahib*, goes back to his twenties. He notes in his introduction to the play that:

“I began to think of *Larins Sahib* in the bazaars of the Punjab when I was learning to sell Vicks Vaporub at the age of twenty-four. I was reading at the time a history of the Punjab, in which I came across the unusual Lawrence brothers. Henry Lawrence was the most interesting and the least imperial...Henry was unusual because he formed easy friendships with the Sikh noble families. I was particularly fascinated by his 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 Duleep, who was taken away from her when he was young and who became the tragic ‘black prince’ at Queen Victoria's court. ... it was fun doing research over the next twelve months. Reading the history of the Punjab was for me a search for identity. I was drawn to the events in 1846...” (Das,2001,7)

History of Lawrence fascinated him as, much had been spoken about Lawrence’s’ heroism and his rule of justice and generosity. Being a Punjabi, it had also aided him in his quest for identity. In *Larins Sahib*, Gurcharan Das captures an important time in the history of India which saw the British overpowering the once so powerful Sikh army of Ranjith Singh.

The plot set in three acts opens with the unfolding of the scene in the Governor General’s camp on the banks of Sutlej on 20 March,1846. The play narrates the events that happened between the company officers, Henry Lawrence, Rani Jindan, Dulip Singh and Sher Singh. The gripping plot full of intrigues, love, hate, friendship, loyalty and despair, brings forth Lawrence as a fascinating protagonist. Lawrence in the first act emerges to be a friend of the natives and an advocate of natural justice who goes to the extent of condemning the Treaty of Lahore as unthinkable and too harsh. Act II portrays Lawrence as a tolerant English man who tries to become the Lion of Punjab. He claims that the Lion has returned and annoys Rani Jindan. He wears the Maharaja’s Chogah, sits on velvet covered divan, purple cushions, holds the *Koh-i-noor*, conducts darbars and loves to be called the ‘*Angrez Badshah*’. By the end of Act II, his transformation nears completion. Act III opens with General Hardinge and company accusing Lawrence for his transformation and affinity towards the natives. He receives orders to release the traitors Lal and Tej Singh, separate Dulip Singh from his mother, and *Koh-i-noor* to be handed to London. Dejected Lawrence broods over and behaves furiously, readying himself to take on the next transformation as that of a failed diplomat who dutifully delivers the company orders. From a man of noble ideas, he turns hypocrite and evil in the eyes of his close aids like Sher Singh. Sher Singh vows to fight the British out of Punjab and leaves Lawrence. Lawrence desires to remain in Punjab but soon receives a disappointing order of his termination of services as Resident of Punjab.

An understanding of the historical context of this story is a necessity for an analysis of casting, costume, setting and the action of the plot on stage. Further, Lawrence imagines himself to be Maharaja Ranjith Singh in the play. So, an understanding of Ranjith Singh and his men and matters will reveal how true the performances had been. Sir Lepel Griffin’s described him as *beau ideal* of a soldier, strong, spare, active, courageous, and enduring, though short of stature and cruelly disfigured by smallpox with the loss of an eye. Gardner exalts that:

“Ranjit Singh was indeed a great man, a king of men, cannot for a moment be doubted. He was a born ruler, with the natural genius of command. Men obeyed him by instinct and because they had no power to disobey... a man with these characteristics exercised an absolute control, even when paralysed and indeed half dead, over the turbulent Sikh people, testifies to his greatness.” (Gardner,1898,304)

He was enlisted as an ‘undefeated military commander’ as he never lost any significant engagement against the enemy as the ‘Commander-in-Chief’ of his military force. When he won the Afghans by 1838, Shah Shuja gifted him the *Koh-i-Noor*. No wonder, he was called *Sher-e-Punjab* or the lion of Punjab and Victor Jacquemont, a French traveller to Ranjit's court, described him as an extraordinary man—a Bonaparte in miniature.



**Fig-1:** Ranjith Singh **Fig-2:** Ranjith Singh’s Throne **Fig-3:** Ranjith Singh’s court in Lahore (Picture Courtesy: Fig-1:Rataul, 2011,Web, Fig-2:Victoria Web, Fig-3:Pasand, 7 Nov 2014, Web)

After the death of the Maharaja in 1839, his loyal army protected the royalty. Yet, for want of power and fame, one successor after the other got eliminated, leaving the throne to the last of Ranjith Singh’s son, Dulip Singh and his Queen mother, Rani Jindan Kaur. It is at this point in time that the play *Larins Sahib* germinates. Taking its seeds from an era marked by treachery, intrigue, betrayal and power politics, this play takes us to the very end of Henry Lawrence’s and Rani Jindan’s days in the court of Lahore. It was due to the torpidness of the commander-in-Chief, Lal Singh at a critical moment and the betrayal of the General Tej Singh who left the battle field all of a sudden, that the Sikh’s were defeated in the first Anglo-Sikh War, and the treaty of Lahore was signed. In 1843 Dalip Singh, was acknowledged as king with his mother, Rani Jindan, as Regent and Henry Lawrence watched over both the royal dignitaries as a Resident.

Rani Jindan Kaur was the daughter of the Royal Kennel Keeper at the Sikh court in Lahore. She was captivatingly beautiful with alluring eyes. The British considered her as a serious threat to their aspirations towards the Sikh kingdom and tried to malign her image by portraying her as a manipulative woman. Sir Henry Lawrence called her Messalina of the Punjab. Even in the play, the British officials refer her in no good terms:

“Hardinge: That tart” (Das,2001,33)

“Currie : I’ve heard she’s again involved in some intrigue against the other nobles. Things are much too unstable with her there....” (Das,2001,79)



**Fig-4: Rani Jindan Kaur Fig-5: Rani Jindan and Dulip Singh Fig-6: Rani Jindan Kaur (Picture Courtesy: Fig-4: Singh, Harbans.Web, Fig-5:Kaur, Sonia. Web, Fig-6: V&A collection, 10 Oct 2018, Web)**

In contrast to what the British officials thought of, the Sikhs considered her as a Queen Mother:

“Sher Singh: A traitor is hardly in a position to judge others. (Pause) You dogs, don’t you think I know our Rani? Whatever the world may say, whatever her weaknesses, she’s the only Rani we have, and her son the only Maharaja. And Punjab hasn’t a better friend than she. ...” (Das,2001,62)

“Sher Singh: She is the mother of the Punjab” (Das,2001,92)

The entire Sikh army considered her as ‘the mother of the *Khalsa* or the *Raj Matha*’ and bowed to her sheer dominance. So great was her impact, that the British brought in the Treaty of Lahore in 1846 and reduced the powers of Rani Jindan. When the British learnt of the Preyma plot to kill Henry Lawrence and Tej Singh, the traitor, they made use of the opportunity and accused Jindan for having master minded it. They dragged her by her hair out of Lahore darbar and seperated her from her son to be imprisoned under the cover of night to Benaras and then to Sheikhpura in 1848. Gurcharan Das closes the curtains on Rani Jindan at this very emotional juncture. It’s in the afterword, that he narrates the tale of her dramatic escape from her imprisonment from Chunar fort in 1849, her asylum in Nepal, her union with her son in 1861 and her death in 1863 in Kensington townhouse, Britain.

Sher Singh of Attariwala is yet another character of prominence in the play. He believed in the Rani and Lawrence and served them dutifully as he had for his Sher-e-Punjab. Sher Singh was an able and spirited man who ruled that difficult district of Peshawar to the satisfaction of Lahore Government from 1844. He was moved to Lahore and made a Member of the State Council. Even in the play we



**Fig-7: Raja Sher Singh Atariwala Fig-8: Raja Sher Singh Atariwala (Picture Courtesy: Fig-7: Grant, 19 Jan, 2017 Web, Fig-8: Bagha, Web)**

see him being referred for the post by Lawrence in Act I:

“Lawrence: His name is Sher Singh, the son of Chattar Singh of Attari, who was the governor of the North-West frontier districts under His late Highness. He comes from one of the leading Sikh families. I’ve known him for five years, and he’s a capable young man.” (Das,2001,34)

Gurcharan has rendered the text as closely as possible to history. He has depicted Sher Singh as a close aid of Lawrence, who in the end leaves him to show his loyalties to his mother land as Lawrence did to his Company. He accuses him as a hypocrite and vows to avenge him:

“Sher Singh: “You hypocrite!...” (Das,2001,93)  
“It’s a matter of choice. You’ve chosen. ... Larins Sahib, 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” (Das,2001,94)  
“Before I leave, let me tell you: I shall return. When I do, I Shall be on the other side. I shall come to avenge my Queen. I shall be armed and the whole Punjab army will be behind me. The angrez will be thrown out of the Punjab or I shall die...I shall shout (*and he shouts*) ‘come on men. Take your swords. Remember the Lion, and save Your land...’ (Das,2001,95)

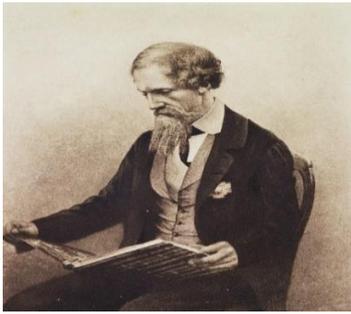
It is at this point that Gurcharan ends the role of Sher Singh in the play. In the afterword we learn of his loyalties to the *Sarkar-i-Khalsa*.

Gurcharan Das has presented Lawrence with sympathy and understanding. History also reveals the fact that Lawrence had been very sincere to his service and the erring officials frowned at him for his attempts to curb corruption. Frederick. P. Gibbon vouches that:

“Though abnormally sympathetic he was never weak. He discouraged cheating and the taking of bribes in a very practical way, and his punishments, if not legal, were made to fit the crime.” (Gibbon, 1908,43)

This quality of Lawrence has been evidently captured in the play as well. He was hard eyed at the company officer Lumsden, who erred by killing a cow. Henry Lawrence ruled the land in the name of Dulip Singh as, well and compassionate as Ranjith Singh. He differed from Ranjith Singh in the way he dressed, but the pictures and photos of both reveal certain similarities in their physique, temper and aspect. Their compassion towards the poor and the oppressed is also on the same lines. With all these commonalities between them, Gurcharan Das has been justified in every way in portraying Lawrence as trying to be an *Angrez Badhsha*. He managed to bring the boisterous situation under control except for the dealings with Rani Jindan Kaur. Even Lawrence in reality considered her as a threat to the British interests inspite of having sympathies with her. He wrote the proclamation to be issued against the Rani to be separated from her son:

“the Maharajah is now a child and he will grow up in the way that he is trained, his mother would instil into him her own bitter feelings of hostility to the Chiefs ;” because “every seditious intriguer who was displeased with the present order of things looked up to the Queen-Mother as the head of the State.” (Gibbon, 1908,43)



**Fig-9:** Henry Lawrence      **Fig-10:** Henry Lawrence and Edwards      **Fig-11:**High Cross, Sir Henry Lawrence Memorial in the Residency of Lucknow (Picture Courtesy:Fig-9:Walker, Web, Fig-10: Gettyimages, Web, Fig-11: Abidi, 2013,Web)

Gurcharan on the other hand portrayed Lawrence as unwillingly executing the order to separate the mother and the son. He is presented as unwilling to execute the orders of Hardinge and Currie:

“Lawrence: “Separate a mother from her son?...  
 One doesn’t do these things in India...  
 How will you convince the people? She is the wife of the late Maharaja, who was God to his people. She’s the only symbol, besides her son, of legitimate authority...  
 That will not be possible, sir. We will undo all that we have achieved at a stroke...” (Das,2001,78-79)

The good human in him was willing to keep them together, but being in service to the Queen of England, his loyalties has to be to his home land. Hence he ordered Rani to be taken away. Later, the very Henry Lawrence who issued the Proclamation against Rani Jindan was the first to oppose the British policy of annexation. He wanted Punjab to be ruled by Punjabies with the guidance of Britain. He was touched by the plight of Dulip Singh. Owing to the difference of opinion against the Governor General and the Resident, Lawrence was called back to Calcutta. Lights fade out on *Larins Sahib* in the play as he hears the termination of his services in Punjab. It is only in the afterword, that Gurcharan details the rest of the incidents that happened in the life of Henry Lawrence. With the understanding of the historical context of the play and the ideologies and intensions of the playwright and the characters, it becomes a piece of cake to analyse and narrate some of the important productions of the play.

### ***Larins Sahib* by Theatre Group Bombay**

An analysis and narration of the different productions involves an understanding of the ideologies and contexts within which the theatre group operates, the kind of playhouses it chooses, the casting and staging techniques it employs. Robert Hume asserts that:

“Both production choices and the impact of performance are inextricably entangled with the explicit and implicit socio-political and cultural values contained in every play... the theatre historian cannot evade from the responsibility for correlating the contents of the plays with the contexts in which they were written and produced.” (Hume,2007,32)

This prize-winning play, written in 1967 was first directed by Deryck Jefferies for the Theatre Group Bombay, at the Bhulabhai Theatre, in July 1969. Theatre Group was founded by Sultan Bobby Padamsee in 1941. His excitement & enthusiasm for the theater attracted Derek Jeffries, Ebrahim Alkazi and Hamid Sayani into his orbit. Its first production Macbeth in 1941 attracted fair amount of interest among the young minds. In the early years, their focus remained on the western masters of drama. But in 1966, it instituted Sultan Padamsee award for playwriting to recognize playwrights of Indian origin and to encourage Indian English theatre. In an interview, Alyque Padamsee explains the Theatre Group's 'intentions' behind choosing *Larins Sahib*:

“We must turn inwards to our own roots. We must put ourselves on the stage, our dreams, desires and problems...Our English writers shouldn't be overawed by the talent abroad. They should be encouraged to write plays about us. They should realise the fantastic potentialities of the sophisticated in an unsophisticated society.... From my point of view *Larins Sahib* is a very well-constructed play. Surprisingly well-constructed for a beginner. Here was an exciting play about an Englishman who identified with the Indians. Henry Lawrence was even more of a Punjabi than Lawrence of Arabia was Arab.” (Patel,1969)

The Indianness of the play is what attracted the Theatre Group and the jury to make the play win and then later to produce it.

In a performance, casting eats up major time before they venture into rehearsals. An understanding of the casting will reveal the age, its preferences and ideologies. By analysing casting pattern, one can cull out the political or cultural registers that the actor directly or indirectly exhibits. The play involved 13 characters that brought out the story of the land of five rivers in 100 minutes. Zul Vellani acted as Lawrence, Farida Sonavala as Rani Jindan and Roger Pereira as Sher Singh. In the review of the play published by Bhaichand Patel for *The Times of India*, on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1969, Farida Sonavala was asked about the reason for signing for the play. Being a ward from Alkazi's school, and the product of drama school of the Bristol Old Vic, she commented that “I was attracted by the Indianness of the play” (Patel,1969). It is again the 'Indianness' that wielded its power. The review also revealed the racial and socio-cultural pressures that existed in India, even after decades of its independence. The introductory passage details the directors struggle in casting the play especially for the British characters:

“When Deryck Jeffereis began gathering the cast for Gurcharan Das's *Larins Sahib* he approached some members of the English community in Bombay to play the half a dozen British roles. In declining, one B. W. A. actor wrote back, 'It will not be possible for me to speak the lines you wish me to.' One supposes that our British friend took objection not to the quality of the words in the play but rather to their tone.” (Patel,1969)

This reaction of the English man reiterates the imperial inclinations that continued to thrive amongst the English communities even after independence. In the end, Mr. Jeffereis had to settle with the services of a lone Britisher, half Irish. Bhaichand Patel reports that even the sale of tickets had not been brisk among the staff of the British Deputy High Commission.

Theatre actor, Dolly Thakore was in the audience when *Larins Sahib* was played in Bombay, and she confirms in a telephonic interview that:

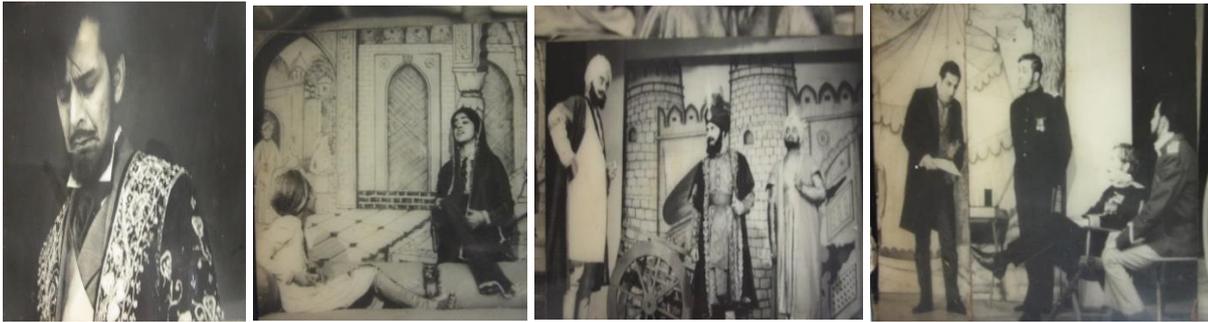
“The play was very well received, Lawrence was a handsome person and Zul Vellani fitted that role very accurately, his was a terrific acting, there is no denying of that...” (Thakore,2013)

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**Fig-12:** Theatre Group’s *Larins Sahib*-Lawrence Dulip Singh, **Fig-13:** Theatre Group’s *Larins Sahib*-Rani Jindan, **Fig-14:** Theatre Group’s *Larins Sahib*-Sher Singh, Lal Singh and Tej Singh, **Fig-15:** Theatre Group’s *Larins Sahib*-Lawrence and other Company officers (Picture Courtesy: Fig-12,13,14,15: Das, Gurcharan. Personal photo collection.)

This statement earmarks the fact that casting was efficiently done to match with the period and the characters. It also reveals the truth that the audience were aware of the situations and the characters presented on stage to the extent of knowing their demeanour. The images of Real Lawrence, Ranjith Singh and that of Zul Vellani as Lawrence, highlights the suitable casting choice. The setting as it appears in the image above, brings out the difference in the background when the action happens in Lahore and in Calcutta with the British officers. The costumes also corresponds to the period it represents. In the field of acting, a page 6 review published by the *Economic Times* on 21<sup>st</sup> July,1969 about Roger Pereira as Sher Singh is worth considering:

“The actor who unexpectedly towered above all was Roger Pereira as Sher Singh. He imparted a sense of historic maturity from the very beginning and in his last outburst against Lawrence, has full control of voice, movement and passion. He was one of the most genuine features of a make-believe masquerade (The scene of Lawrence’s darbar was typical of this).” (Economic Times,1969)

The same review also appreciated the acting abilities of those who played the role of the company officers:

“It is a big irony that the most convincing characterisation within the space of a few minutes, came from a Britisher who obviously lacked the technical training of the other actors. Antony Dale stood cautiously away from a caricature in portraying the British Governor-General. I also liked Keith Stevenson immensely in the role of another bureaucrat. He had adopted the peculiar diction of dyed-in-wool servant of her Majesty and was consistently ‘in character’ in his gestures, especially his manner of standing on his toes every now and then and clicking his heels.” (Economic Times,1969)

The review surprisingly dismisses the casting of, Zul Vellani and Farida Sonavala as ‘miscast’, though comparatively rest other reviews speak otherwise. Reviews in newspapers and magazines are sometimes controlled by certain biases related to ideologies and preferences. They are also restricted by the word limit. As a result, the reviews have been approached with caution as guided by Postlewait:

“As should be apparent, the job of historical investigation requires not only some good detective skills but also a discerning eye for analysing what one finds because the sources are loaded with the perspectives, values, judgements and motives of each person who provides any

kind of source...” He continues to hint that, “The sources need to be tested for credibility and reliability. They need to be compared to and contrasted with other potential sources.” (Postlewait,2009,142-144)

A wholesome look at the production, reveals the fact that the play managed to transmit the intentions of the playwright to the director and the audience through the scenography and actors. At an age when Indian English plays were just evolving, *Larins Sahib* by Theatre Group has clearly achieved that quintessential feat.

### ***Larins Sahib* by Akademeia Repertory Theatre**

It is Akademeia Repertory Theatre’s production of *Larins Sahib* that has created history by being the chosen one, the first Indian English play to be performed at the Edinburgh Fringe theatre festival in 1991. They had 21 shows of *Larins Sahib* in 21 days and also performed in Glasgow and London. Directed by Rahul Da Cunha, Tom Alter played Lawrence; Rajit Kapur acted as Sher Singh, and Nisha Singh as Rani Jindan.

It was first performed at the magnificent Darbar Hall at Asiatic Library in Horniman Circle, Mumbai in 1990. Complementing the grandeur of the architecture at the Town Hall, was the set. It represented the Residency, Durbar Hall, Shah Alami Gate and Viceroy’s camp. Planes and arches were used to create the period. Batliboi designed the lighting for the production, which aimed at a chiaroscuro effect. They used only white light and played with tones- hard and soft light, lots of shadows cutting through characters, patterns on stage created by oddly spaced light. Since it was not possible to use overhead spots at the venue, the limitation was turned to advantage, with side lighting and special lights on the stage, behind curtains, screens and the wings. Kamala Ramachandani exalts at the lighting effect in the review of the production published in *Independent* on 15<sup>th</sup> Oct, 1990:

“One striking image was the sight of a carved wooden chair silhouetted in front of the arch by the deep blue light from behind; another was the focusing of a bright white spot on Lawrence face, creating a play of shadow and light that represented the state of his mind as the charges were read out against him.” (Ramachandani,1990)

Ramachandani wonders at Tarn Tahiliani’s elaborate and glitzy costumes that beautifully captured the dash and colour of the age, and the regal splendour of the durbar. Taufiq Qureshi and Piyush Kanojia composed the ‘Lawrence’s Theme’ music to evoke the transition in Lawrence using violins, heavy drums, organ, tambura and tabla. Nisha Singh was authentic as Rani Jindan, regal yet vulnerable. Rex Baker of the British Council as Lord Hardinge, among others. It has also been performed in major Indian cities.

Gurcharan Das credits ART’s show as his favourite production and attaches its instant success to the director who allowed the actors to improvise and turn some of the lines of the Sikhs into Punjabi. As in those days to create dramatic imagination in English among non-native speakers of English in India was a challenge that the most playwrights in English encountered. A dialogue in English between Indians will not sound convincing except when the characters are drawn from an urban, sophisticated milieu. But both Gurcharan Das as well as Rahul, coped this with a kind of hybrid English, interspersed with Indian expressions. They imbibed the English of their Indian Characters with unmistakable regional tones. They used phrases like, ‘my *lal*’, ‘my sparrow’, ‘son of an owl’, ‘the one-eyed lion’, ‘*Angrez Badshah*’, ‘*wah, wah*’, ‘*shabash*’, ‘your curries and shurries’. An amorous scene between

Lawrence and Rani Jindan, was in Urdu. Rahul da Cunha states the reason for taking-up *Larins Sahib* in an article for *India Today*:

“What is it that attracts a director like me to a play? A few things: the first is what I call dramatic atmosphere. Does the playwright give me an interesting premise? A locale or an environment that inspires me to create a directorial vision? ... *Larins Sahib* is a play which scales a large canvas. Set in 1846 Punjab, it’s the story of Henry Lawrence, the then Resident Agent of Punjab. His fatal obsession with Maharaja Ranjit Singh forms the crux of this epic drama. Das creates a brilliant sense of 70 mm Punjab in the era of the British Raj, moving rapidly from location to location. Palaces, battle scenes, durbars, courtyards, ramparts and forts are all a part of his painting. And he throws the challenge to all directors: create 1,000 miles of earth and soil on a 27-ft stage.” (Cunha, 2001)

He had taken up the challenge and had achieved tremendous success with the unflinching commitment and abilities of the cast and the entire crew. For the show at Edinburgh, they had cut down twenty minutes from the original, to fit into the new time slot. And to the director, the play turned better, tighter and crisper. They had ordered for a new set made of aluminium, which was easy to carry and put up. Advertisements for the play in India as well as abroad, used an unusually designed cap, Indian on one side and British on the other. It symbolically revealed Lawrence’s internal struggle.



**Fig-16:** ART’s *Larins Sahib*-Edinburgh, **Fig-17:** ART’s *Larins Sahib*-Edinburgh, **Fig-18:** ART’s *Larins Sahib*, Lawrence [Tom Alter] and Sher Singh [Rajit Kapur] (**Picture Courtesy:** Fig-16: **Rage**. 9 Jul 2015, Web, Fig-17: **Kapur**, Rajit. Personal photo collection, Fig-18: **Rage**, 2 Dec 2014, Web)

Rajit Kapur who performed the role of Sher Singh to high acclaim, started his career in theatre back in 1978 in the role of Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. His stellar performances has been duly rewarded with the National Award for Best Actor in 1995 for his role of Mahatma Gandhi in Shyam Benegal’s *The Making of the Mahatma*, Kerala State Award for Best Actor in 1998 for the Malayalam film *Agnisakshi*, Best Actor award at the Imagine India Film Festival, Spain for *Do Paise Ki Dhoop, Chaar Aane Ki Baarish* in 2010, and the Best Actor Award in Indian Film Festival, New York for *The Threshold* in 2016. An actor’s achievement can be measured by audience response. Their experience holds the key to analyse a performance. Patrice Pavis strongly advocates it by questioning:

“Is the average spectator’s experience of seeing a performance only once sufficient for analysis? In principle, yes, and this unique experience should be the golden rule when examining a performance, itself unique and organized in terms of the ephemeral and the singular.” (Pavis,1997,217)

When someone watches a painting or a performance, their eye and mind are not only recording but are also active in the act of perceiving. It explains the human phenomena of the capability to perceive as well as record. Narayanmoorthy Sundaresan, who watched the past performance of *Larins Sahib* registers his comment on Rajit Kapur's performance:

“Rajit Kapur's ‘*Angreza....*’ is still resonating in my ears!!” (Rage,2015)

This single line statement registered by Narayanmoorthy on 2 Dec 2015 in *Facebook*, so many years after the production, vouches for Rajit's abilities to transfer the emotions to the audience, a clear trademark of a successful actor. Torak Adi Pavri also remember's Rajit Kapur's impressive act and comments on 3rd Dec 2014 in *Facebook* that:

“There was this scene where Rajit used to sob his heart out on stage and I would do likewise sitting in that audience for 21 days nonstop. I have and always will admire that part of crying at the drop of a *paghri*.” (Rage,2014)

Another from the audience, Manju Sampat remembers seeing it in Asiatic Library on the 12th Oct 2017 post in *Facebook*. All these reactions for a play that happened in the distant past brings home the truth that performances that conform to the play text and the period it represents along with the characters, are sure to be resist the test of times. The golden rule as indicated by Patrice Pavis stands as a testimony.

Tom Alter who played the role of Henry Lawrence was born to American Christian missionary parents in Mussourie in 1950, he took acting lessons from Pune's Film and Television Institute of India and came out of it with a gold medal. Theatre was always part of his performing life. He co-founded Motley Productions with Naseeruddin Shah and Gilani in 1979. Government of India crowned his contribution to arts and cinema with a Padma Shri in 2008. Tom's fascination with history since his childhood becomes evident when one traces his portrayals in theatre. From Henry Lawrence, Mahatma Gandhi, Abul Kalam Azad, Bahadur Shah Zafar to Rabindranath Tagore, Tom has essayed many historical personalities with great ease and dedication. He confides in an interview:

“Yes, I think I've always been fascinated with history since childhood. Not only history, but how history affects people. More than when this king reigned, or which Mughal emperor came when, but how people were affected because of that. All these plays we are doing are about time in not just Indian history but the history of the world when great change was happening. Right from Mahabharata up to the Mughals, the partition, World War I and II, to today's India. All these very important times in the history of man are covered in these plays. I enjoyed doing these plays and I hope the audience enjoys them as well.” (Singh,2017)

Rahul Da Cunha remembers casting Tom for the role of Lawrence, in his article for *Mid-Day*:

“I first met Tom Alter in the early 1990s. I was casting for Gurcharan Das's British Raj play, *Larins Sahib*, set in 1846, about the life of Brigadier General Henry Lawrence... The crucial lead needed to be a foreigner who could also seamlessly be Indian. Only one man in India could play that part -- Thomas Beach Alter. I also realised that if he said no, I wouldn't be able to do the play... Tom absolutely wowed audiences, both, ‘*gora*’ and NRI...The thing about Tom, his greatest quality, was his humility. There was confidence in his craft but an absence of the ego.” (Cunha,2017)

Tom alter believed in internalising the character, empathising and interpreting them honestly. The production of *Larins Sahib* by ART, no doubt has crossed borders and touched the heart and mind of both the British as well as the Indian audience. Though the earlier production by the Theatre Group was not appreciated by the British community in India owing to the colonial hangover at that time, the British audience abroad, cherished their later shows as it kindled their past memories. Time heals the perturbed mind and corrects its follies. Time and space are the master markers of a performance, along with the type of audience.

### ***Larins Sahib* by Madras Players**

The Madras Players is the oldest English Theatre Group in India, founded in 1955. They were focused on encouraging Indian dramatists in English. They produced *Larins Sahib*, directed by Yamuna in 1996 and 1997. Their shows were at British council courtyard and at the Pyramid in Yamuna's house at ECR. Yamuna states that, The Madras Players chose *Larins Sahib* as:

“We felt a new blood, a new enthusiasm. We were relating to a new context, our own context...” (Roy, 2004)

An interesting fact about this production was that actors like P.C Ramakrishna played multiple roles. He played a British general as well as the Baba, the mentor and guardian to the young Dulip Singh. The character of Lawrence was played by Ruby Vaduvu, a young Dutch man who worked for the UNESCO. Priya Madhu Sudan played Rani Jindan Kaur and was dressed in salwar kameez. Reihem Roy played Dalip Singh, dressed in Kurtha Pyjama with Kolapuri Shoes. T.M. Karthik played the role of Sher Singh. He recounts:

“I had this lovely opportunity, 18 years ago to play that role... Interestingly, when we performed at the Pyramid on the day 2, power went off before the last scene. The last scene is very powerful because of the confrontation between Lawrence and Sher Singh, where he vows, Yes! I remember one of the lines! ‘you have insulted the mother of the Punjab, we will meet again in the battlefield’. When there was no electricity at that crucial scene, one of our stage managers lit a candle in exactly 2 minutes, and we continued the scene. The last 20 minutes of the play happened in candle light and for that scene it looked brilliant. It's a very dark scene, a very intense scene and it's only the shadows. Even if we would have planned it, it wouldn't have come out so well. Everybody liked it and none of us stopped. I can never forget it. Sher Singh is a fabulous role. It's very close to my heart.” (Karthik,2015)

They had a month's rehearsal before the shows began. It was a very low-key production as the focus was more on bringing out the story and the text and not so much on the grandeur of the production. The audience for both the shows differed considerably. For the one at the Pyramid, it's the artistic community that adored the night and for the show at the British council, there were foreign as well as Indian members.

### ***Larins Sahib* by Rangtoli**

*Larins Sahib* was played by Rangtoli in Punjabi on the release of Gurcharan Das's *Three English Plays* by Oxford University Press on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2001 at 7pm and 3<sup>rd</sup> March at 3:30 pm and 7pm, at India Habitat centre, Delhi. The tickets ranged from Rs.200/-, Rs.100/- and Rs.50/-. It was translated into Punjabi by Prem Avtar Raina and directed by Neeta Mohindra, who founded Rangtoli,



**Fig-19:** *Larins Sahib* at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi **Fig-20:** *Larins Sahib* at India Habitat Centre (Picture Courtesy: Fig-19,20: Chawla, 5 Mar.2001. Web)

theatre group to promote the taste and flavour of theatre in a city like Chandigarh. To Neeta Mohindra, *Larins Sahib* is a tight historical play that represents the inner conflict of an honest, sincere and hardworking British officer who befriends Punjabis and yet abides by the norms of the Raj. She believes that it captivates the patriotism, egoism, subterfuges and the tenderness of the people. The costumes in the Rangtoli's production designed by Poonam Rampal, highlighted the period it represented. The colour and richness of the Sikh royalty clearly came through. The set designed by M.K. Raina, drew attention to the British presence that loomed large over the Punjab with huge curtains in the colour and symmetry of the British flag. The decorated arches revealed itself in saffron coloured silk curtains whenever the lights focused the presence of Sikh royalty in seclusion. A classic diwan in the midst of a raised platform added the touch of royalty to the set along with few other chairs for the Rani and the ministers. The same Diwan served both the transformed Lawrence who sits in the style of the Maharaja Ranjith Singh as well as Maharaja Dulip Singh, though with variations in the covering. When used by Dulip Singh, the Diwan gets enriched with a saffron coloured silk cloth covering whereas for Lawrence, it remained plain to highlight the hierarchy. The lights were done by Neeta Mohindra and make up that brought out the Punjab of the yesteryears by Balwinder Bharti. Manchpreet added music to the play. The sponsors for the play included Delhi Times and McDowell's Signature. Though there were problems with accents, Gurcharan Das, the playwright as well as an audience member, confirms that the play was well received at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.

## Conclusion

Researching and documenting the performance of Gurcharan's *Larins Sahib* lead us to the understanding of the past, its glory as well as its insignificance. Elin Diamond's affirmation that every performance embeds features of gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions, political and cultural pressures has been confirmed in these productions. The period piece of Das has defects in the motivational aspects of the character of Lawrence, about which Das was even ready to rework. However, due to its innate simplicity, lucid, dramatic dialogues, substance, and the ineffable thrill of tragedy as 'Enact' lauds it, *Larins Sahib* has become an indispensable part of Indian English theatre history.

This research was not unassuming because of the lack of different kinds of evidences. Even reception study became rudimentary. Documentation of a theatrical event depends heavily upon the statements made by those who created and attended the performances. Fortunately, to this research the support offered by the playwright and the production crew was immeasurable. They volunteered in all means possible to realize the desired outcome. What is presented here is only a part, the whole is yet

to be realized. This research could just be a drop in the vast ocean of hidden treasures that still needs to be unearthed, preserved and archived for the future to assimilate and marvel at. With the methodology proposed by Postlewait and Pavis along with more material availability, theatre history will become increasingly filled with new evidence and all the new possibilities that it implies. If theatre and its advantages are burgeoning, performers and productions houses are flourishing, theatre and its history should also be proportionately documented to maintain an organic balance for the benefit of the future. If performed and if documented, the dream of a humane society is not far cry from reality.

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