

Is Kama a Duty to Oneself?

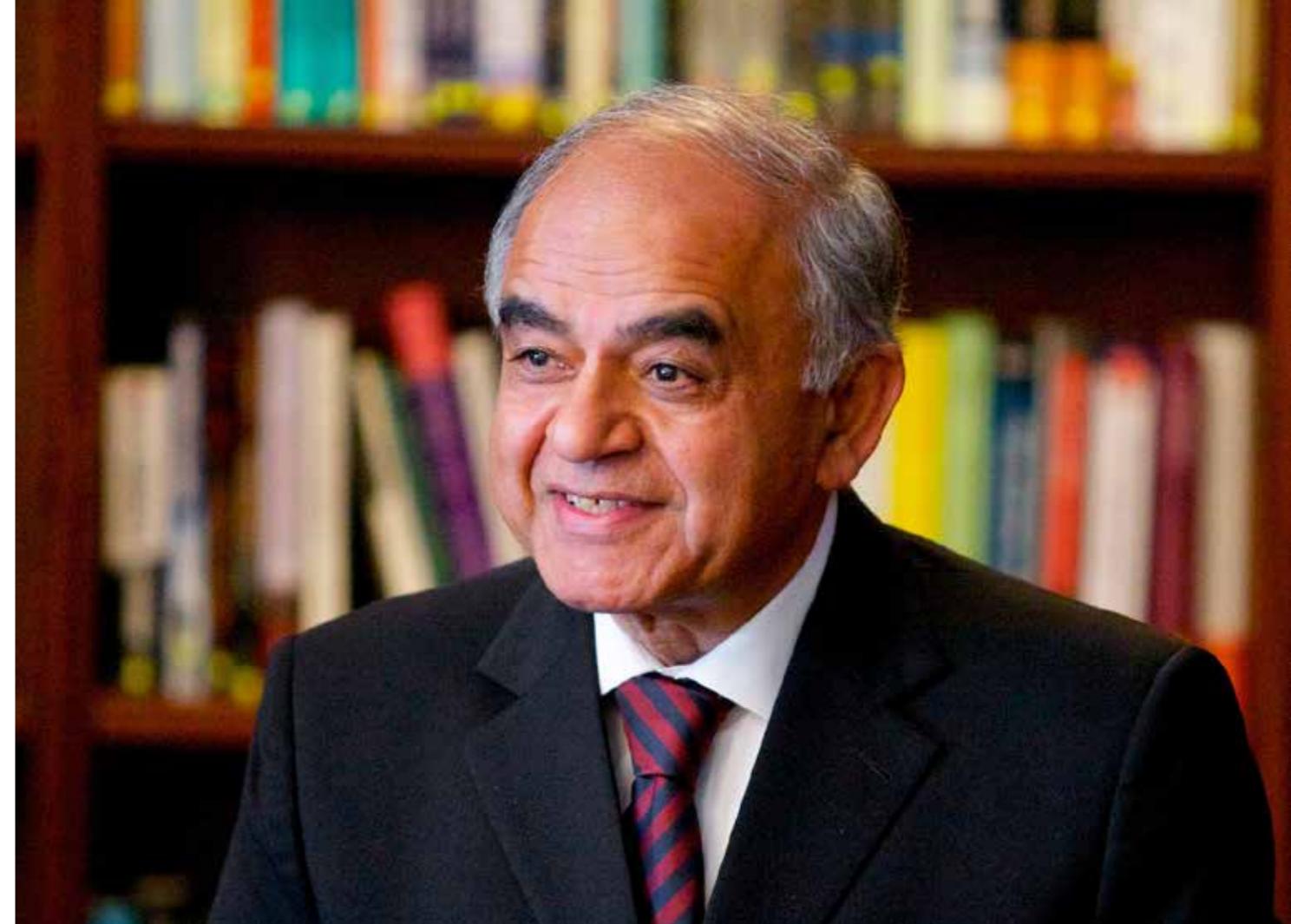
Gurcharan Das' latest book may not give you answers or solutions on kama (desire), but it definitely opens up a dialogue on the existence of kama optimists and kama pessimists

■ Neeharika Satyavada

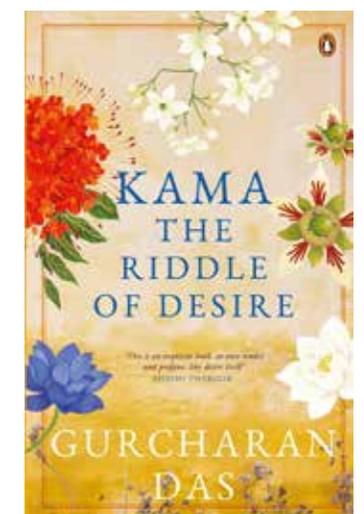
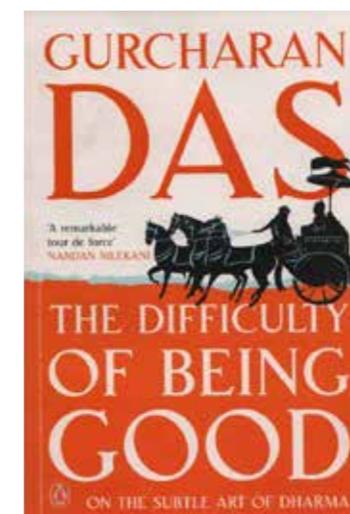
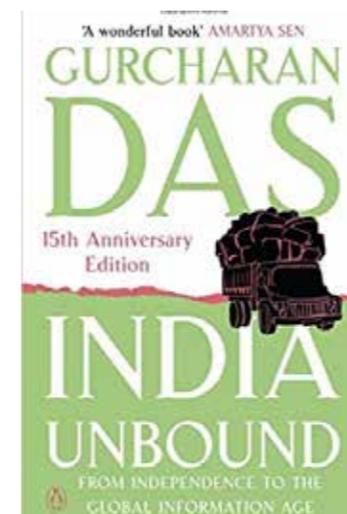
Gurcharan Das needs no introduction. An author, commentator and columnist, he is best known for his widely acclaimed book *India Unbound*. Having studied Sanskrit and Philosophy at Harvard and then led one of the world's most reputed conglomerates, Proctor and Gamble as Managing Director, he brings to his writings a unique yet completely logical synthesis of ideas – one that draws on ancient Hindu ideology just as much as it does on modern management principles. We caught up with him to discuss his latest book, *Kama - The Riddle of Desire*.

The book is a fictional memoir of sorts that more often than not wanders off into a philosophical soliloquy to explore the emotion, *kama*. Or rather, it is largely a discussion on *kama* through the voice of a fictional protagonist. It is a narrative that runs on drawing par-

allels from classical French and Russian literature, before being examined using Jungian ideas and Freudian theories. The author deep dives into *kama*, all the while tracing a path through the evolution of thought on it, using ancient Indian texts like the epic *Mahabharata* and Sanskrit love poetry to sustain the plot. This curious amalgamation of fiction and non-fiction bolstered by the numerous references does get overwhelming in parts, given that it takes time to get used to the sudden shift in voice, from Amar's to the author's and back. Also, it offers no easy answers or ready solutions to the riddle of desire. But, the book does fully achieve its objective of bringing *kama* out of the shadows – from being an often taboo negative emotion to beginning to be accepted as the very essence of life.



Gurcharan Das



Gurcharan Das' first book, *India Unbound* talks about *artha* - material wellbeing; the second book, *The Difficulty of Being Good* touches upon moral wellbeing; and the third in the trilogy *Kama - The Riddle of Desire* emphasizes that *kama* is a duty to oneself just as *dharma* is to others.

In the Western Christian civilization, desire is associated with original sin, with guilt and shame. But in classical Indian context, desire is elevated to the goal of life because it is the source of all action: the source of creation and procreation

You say a good book ought to confine itself to one of the four goals of life — dharma, artha, kama and moksha. You have written a trilogy of sorts based on this ancient Indian trivarga with *India Unbound*, *The Difficulty of Being Good* and now *Kama, The Riddle of Desire*, your latest. Could you introduce our readers to your books that are based on these purusharthas — the Hindu goals of life that were first written about in our post Vedic texts?

I have always believed that happiness lies in loving the work you do and loving the person you are with. Reading classical Sanskrit literature, I have now come to believe that happiness is in a flourishing life that consists in fulfilling all the four goals — *artha*, *dharma*, *kama* and *moksha*; also having them in harmony because they conflict with each other very often.

In the trilogy, first comes *India Unbound* that was about *artha*, which means material wellbeing. Then I wrote *The Difficulty of Being Good*, which was about *dharma*, meaning moral wellbeing. The third vol-

ume of the trilogy is called *Kama, The Riddle of Desire*. *Kama* means desire and pleasure, both. Of course, it can mean all kinds of desire – desire for money, for your children, for god; but generally, in the Sanskrit literature, it refers to sexual desire.

India is the only civilization that has elevated desire to a goal of life. Compare it with the western Christian civilization, where desire is associated with original sin, with guilt and shame. But in the classical Indian context, desire is the source of all action — of creation and procreation. In a way, my book is a biography of an emotion, *kama*.

In this biography, as you call it, you muse on *kama*, the emotion, in an essentially philosophical vein. Quoting often from the *Mahabharata* and other Sanskrit poetry, even referring to French philosophers and Russian literature. But you have also added another dimension to this conversation through the narrative of Amar's story. Why did you choose this unusual juxtaposition of genres?

In writing this book, I realized very early that you cannot write about desire in a completely philosophical historical tract; it needs a story to carry it and hence, I created a fictional narrator, Amar. As the story progresses, the narrator keeps commenting on all that is going on, based on his education in *kama*. He says his first memory of desire was when he was four years old. It was cold in the morning, he woke up at dawn and felt lonely. He rushed to his mother's bed, nestled beside her and fell blissfully asleep. Then he stops the story and says, well desire can strike early in life, but it can also strike early in a civilization. Like in our Hindu civilization, the *Rig Veda* says that in the beginning was desire; and that the cosmos was created by the seed of *kama* in the mind of the One. Amar then asks the question — what does that say about

a civilization where in the beginning was desire? In doing so, he has set the aim right at the start of the book. He is going to explore a civilization that had desire as its beginning.

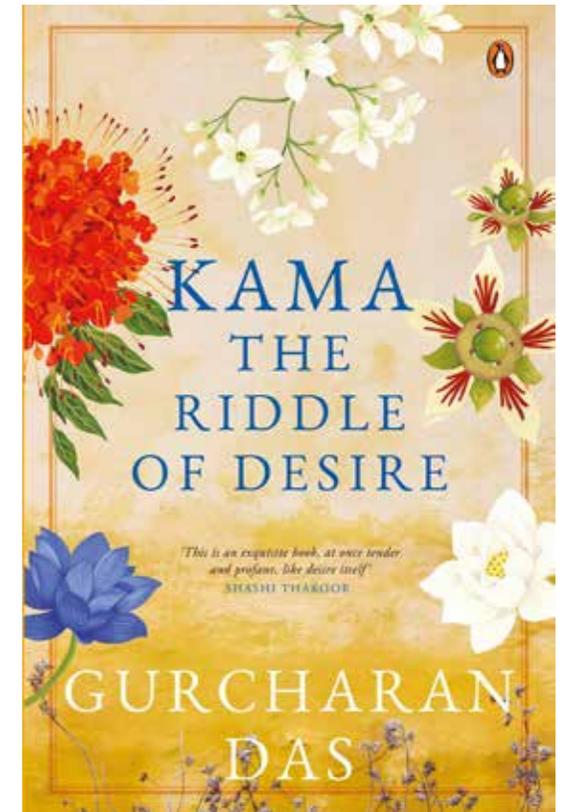
The book's cover is striking. Is there a story behind it?

The classical ancient Hindus created a god called *Kama*. He, the God *Kama*, has a bow made of sugarcane whose string is made of honeybees. On the cover of my book are these flowers that he shoots at his victims during various stages.

The first flower is white lotus, signifying the meeting of two people and the fascination between them. The second — red flower of the Ashoka Tree, signifies a phase when they decide to act upon their fascination. Next comes jasmine flower, when there is intimacy between them, and usually a marriage. But after years of marriage, desire gradually wanes. Now comes the most difficult stage, probably when you are in your forties, after you have done the hard work, bringing up children and running after a career, when you feel discontented. The challenge then is how to keep desire alive. This last stage is of sandalwood flower, signifying death of desire. Now, if you don't want desire to die, you have to work hard and learn to keep it alive. And that is one of the themes of this book.

While this book is dedicated to the subject of *kama* as a way of living life to the fullest, you also say one has to take into account the importance of *dharma*. How does one find that balance between the two — *dharma*, the duty to others and *kama*, the duty to oneself?

We are always reminded of our duty to others, that is *dharma*, but we never realize we also have a duty to ourselves and that is *kama*.



The cover of *Kama, The Riddle of Desire* is symbolic of different stages of life

Let me explain the conflict between *dharma* and *kama* through an example. So here is Amar, who has had a good marriage, two young children he adores. He is happy at home, but he walks into his office one day and feels discontent and begins to question: 'Is this what life is all about?' At work, he has reached the top, but he is not happy, his desire has waned. A mid-life crisis, you may say. In a few weeks, he has to go to Pune. He takes the Deccan Queen from VT Station in Bombay, and in walks a beautiful woman! They have a nice impersonal conversation about the weather and so on. But slowly, the conversation becomes intimate. There is, by the end of the journey, a kind of electricity between them; it is quite clear that they might have an affair. He now wonders what should he do. If he has an affair, it will break his marriage. He loves his wife, his family. He thinks about his children, they will be hurt.

But then he says, children grow up and go away, so he is not so bothered. He thinks if keeping the affair a secret is a possibility, but fears the consequences nevertheless. He will have to lie and that will lead to more lies, which is not a pleasant prospect. He wonders if he should decide not to have an affair. But what will be the consequence of that? He may lose the one chance he has of experiencing a thrill, a happy state before he dies! He may end up resenting himself, his wife and his family for not having done what was a duty to himself. That is not a happy prospect either.

The problem here is, there is no solution. Whether he has an affair or not, whether he keeps it a secret or not, he will be a loser. I have mentioned a quotation from the *Mahabharata* in my book, that states: 'Kama conveys the melancholic human condition'. This is what life is all about: conflict.

You have, in the book, said that the answer lies in finding a balance. Would you say the Indian society at this stage is mentally equipped to find that?

Indian society is changing. Young people are a lot more open now. That is what I wrote about in *India Unbound*, that the minds of the young are unbound. However, prudes still exist. But where does this prudishness come from is the question. We often blame the English for everything, but in this case, it is in fact true. It is partly the influence of the English, their Victorian middle-class morality, which was terrible! A woman who had a child out of wedlock was sent to a lunatic asylum in England till as late as the 1920s! But fortunately, in the last three to four months, there has been a real liberation in India, with the Supreme Court decriminalizing homosexuality and adultery, the triple *talaaq*, as well as the verdict on the entry of women into temples, and the #metoo movement of course. All these have brought a lot of

liberation into the emotional life of the country; but on a broader scale, as in to find a balance, things will take time.

You also introduced the concept of *kama* optimists and *kama* pessimists in your book. Who are they?

In the *Mahabharata*, Yudhisthira asks Bheeshma: 'Who gets more pleasure from sex — a man or a woman?' Bheeshma ponders, then says, 'You know you have to be a man and a woman to answer that question'. He then remembers that there was a king named Bhangashwana who lived half his life as a man and half as a woman. And because he was a good human being, he was given a choice at the end of his life to choose what he would like to be born as in his next life. He chose 'woman' and they asked him: 'Are you crazy? You could be an emperor and you want to be a woman!' He answered 'yes'. And, why? He said women enjoy sex more, and goes on to explain that it is not just sex, a woman has a much richer emotional life than a man and a rich emotional life is far more valuable than a rich public life.

In my book, I divide the world into *kama* optimists and *kama* pessimists. What I'm trying to illustrate is that earlier, we were very open to talk about sex and love, before middle-class morality got in the way. We were *kama* optimists. Our optimists flourished in the courts. You had Sanskrit love poetry written in the courts — Bhartihari, Amaru, etc, and then you also had the *Kama Sutra*. The *kama* pessimists, on the other hand, are like the Victorians. All these yogis, *rishis*, the Buddha and the Jains — they were very anti-desire because it interfered with their project of meditation and *moksha*. They believed in

celibacy, like Gandhi. Gandhi was a *kama* pessimist and Nehru, a *kama* optimist.

The history of *kama* is a history of conflict between the *kama* optimists and the *kama* pessimists. In the clash between the two, there is the *kama* realist. The average person was neither an ascetic nor an erotic and there was a compromise that basically said sex was all right as long as it was within marriage and every society achieved that goal.

The word *kama* itself has come to have a negative connotation. It is usually used to refer to unbridled lust or illicit love; nobody thinks of it as a desire for life, for creation. Would you say the *kama* pessimists have won?

You are perhaps referring to the mood of the nation right now. Of course, *kama* pessimists exist. They are the killjoys! They are pushing water uphill. But, I think the young people are going through a revolution of their own, and are not going to be stopped by the moral policing of such people.

In your book, you say that love, sex and marriage cannot be logically connected. But, that is the only way a society functions and you have said that too. And, today's generation that has grown up on an overdose of Bollywood romance, looks for love and more in a marriage. So is their pursuit of romantic love a doomed attempt? Where do you see the institution of marriage going?

Well, I think India is still the only society that has arranged marriages, though the rest of the Far East has changed. So, yes, Bollywood is having a big impact. Having said that, people have a lot of divorces here too, though unlike the West where one out of two marriages ends in a divorce. In my opinion, marriage is an enforced kind of monogamy on human beings who are essentially polygamous.

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Our evolutionary biology teaches us that, but then we need stability; especially stability for children. Look at the West, children are growing up in homes with single parents. A child needs two parents. In that perspective, the Indian family still is pretty much going strong.

Do you think these very family values contribute to the Indian economy being more stable than the West? Can we link *kama* and *artha* in the context of the Indian Economy?

One area that can certainly be looked into is the Indian business family. The Marwaris, Chettiyars, Kachichis, Sindhis, Jains — these are business communities that have great support system created by their community. But in joint families, there are also fights. It is said, the first generation makes the money, the second generation has the money but wants power, and the third generation has both money and power, but they mostly fritter it away. So, it is hard to answer your question, but by and large, certainly emotional wellbeing is the foundation for a good economic and political life.