



Voices
from the
Gaps

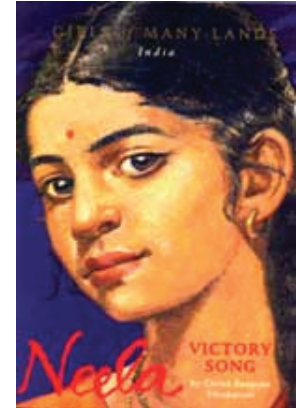
Neela

Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni

She watched her father's figure, small with distance, disappear around a bend in the road, feeling lonelier than she ever had in her life. (54)

Neela: Victory Song is the story of Neela, a girl of twelve who is faced with the most important decision of her life. Set in India in 1939 and written from the perspective of a young Indian girl, this children's story recalls India's fight for independence from British rule. A string of chance episodes spark Neela's curiosity about what is happening in her motherland, including an encounter with a young freedom fighter. But it is only when her father leaves for Calcutta to join Gandhi and his followers in peaceful protest that the real adventures begin for Neela. When her father fails to return on time, Neela senses that something terrible has happened and decides she must leave home to find him. In the process, this brave young girl finds herself immersed in India's struggle for independence. Then Neela learns more about her country and herself than she ever could have imagined.

Set against a dramatic historical background, *Victory Song* not only educates young readers about India's culture and past but also manages to entertain brilliantly with a likable main character and a suspenseful plot that keep young readers interested. The author brings Neela to life on paper with realistic dialogue and description, allowing young readers to feel a part of her world. The story follows Neela through both struggles and victories of her life as an Indian girl in 1939. *Victory Song* is rich with Indian culture, and includes the description of many Indian traditions and a portrayal of family and gender roles. Among many other inner struggles, Neela strives to understand these roles and her place within them. She wonders defiantly to herself, "Why does everyone feel they have to control girls even after they're married? Why are women expected to sit quietly and silently, embroidering and making pickles, while men get to make all the important decisions and go to all the exciting places? Why can't a girl be a freedom fighter?" (40). This vivacious curiosity and defiant attitude carry Neela through the plot of the story; Neela's curiosity also keeps the reader hanging on her every word, wanting to know the answers to her questions as well.



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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has two of her own young children who helped her in the writing of *Victory Song*. A native of India, Divakaruni has written other award-winning pieces of literature.

The back of the book contains an easy-to-read background of India entitled, “Then and Now: A Girl’s Life,” which compares the lifestyle of Neela with the lifestyle of girls in India today. The book also includes a helpful glossary of Bengali words and definitions used throughout the story. These features add to the book’s educational value, and yet remain simply written for young readers to understand.

I would recommend this book for children ages ten and older. The author writes in an informative manner that is easy for children to follow while keeping the story brilliantly entertaining and fun to read. *Victory Song* can bring a new understanding of Indian culture to any curious young reader, along with a feeling of closeness to Neela in her struggle to find her voice. That’s something we can all relate to.

Reviewed by Sarah Stone