



Voices from the Gaps

Gita Mehta

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At its best the culture of India is like a massive sponge, absorbing everything while purists shake their heads in despair. Other cultures have sought to expel all foreign-devil influences from their shores, but India has always shown an appetite for foreign devils matched only by her capacity to make them go native. In India we are still wearing our saris and our dhotis not in defiant chauvinism but because quite simply that is how we dress. So when I see painted on the walls of sixteenth-century Rajput villas pictures of the god Krishna playing his flute not next to a herd of cows in a meadow but from the backseat of a Rolls-Royce, I feel reassured that Indian culture is still in business, that Krishna will continue to play his flute whether he is in a field, a rolls, or a rocket.

— Snakes and Ladders

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1943
- * Educated in India and the United Kingdom
- * Novelist and journalist

Biography

Gita Mehta was born in Delhi in 1943 to a family extremely active in the struggles for Indian liberation from Britain. She is the daughter of Biju Patnaik, a famous Indian freedom fighter who later became the major political leader of the Eastern state of Orissa. At her birth, Mehta’s grandmother demanded that she be named Joan of Arc, as a child born into a community of freedom fighters who were often forced to go underground as a result of their political actions. But instead, she was named Gita (translated “song”), as in song of freedom.

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Gita Mehta

Biography continued

Only several weeks after Mehta's birth, her father was imprisoned for his political activity. Growing up, she was surrounded by her parent's active struggle for Indian liberation. At the age of three, she and her brother were sent to a boarding school while her mother followed her father from one jail to the next.

Mehta was educated in India and the United Kingdom. While attending Cambridge University, she met fellow student Ajai Singh Mehta. The two married and have one son. Mehta and her husband "Sonny," the president of Alfred A. Knopf publishing house, currently maintain residences in New York, London and Delhi, spending at least three months of every year in India. As a result of Sonny Mehta's prominent position in New York's publishing industry, the couple are a central figure in New York's literary publishing world.

In fact, Mehta's first book came about as a result of a publishing industry cocktail party one evening in 1979, where she was attired in her usual sari. As she explained in an interview with Wendy Smith, "somebody grabbed my arm and said, 'Here's the girl who's going to tell us what karma is all about.'" In response, Mehta replied that "Karma isn't what it's cracked up to be." Hearing her response, someone urged her to write about her ideas on the subject, and after only three weeks of work, Mehta had completed *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East*. This first book is a series of interconnected essays weaving Mehta's own impressions of India's mysticism with the impressions she reads through other people. Ultimately, it is a satire on the major wave of foreigners swarming into India in the '60s in search of India's karmic powers. She blends humor with witty observations, constructing a book that presents her own impressions through the experiences of many.

Raj, Mehta's first novel, is a thorough and colorful historical story that follows the progression of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Raj. Through young Jaya Singh's story, Mehta's readers are shown a portion of the passage of British India's early struggle for independence as it affected a slim segment of high-culture society. Through her story, Mehta not only weaves together elegant language and colorful pictures of Indian culture, but also paints a picture of Indian colonial life from an Indian perspective.



Gita Mehta

Biography continued

Mehta is able to offer a complete story without bias or bitterness and, like in her other books, leaves the reader to formulate an independent position from which to read the history she tells. While her intelligence is obvious and her opinions clear, she is ultimately not interested in pressing her political impressions onto her reader, but presents historical facts with gentle persuasion in a beautifully woven tapestry based upon her female protagonist's strength of character.

When Mehta wrote *Snakes and Ladders*, a collection of essays about India since independence, she did not expect it to be widely read, particularly by people outside India. But it has instead become her most widely read work, particularly among those unfamiliar with India. She explained in an interview that when she wrote *Snakes and Ladders*, her intention was "to make modern India accessible to Westerners and to a whole generation of Indians who have no idea what happened 25 years before they were born." After she wrote the book, she slimmed it down by taking out many of the essays that assumed too much prior knowledge of the subject, thereby giving many readers a glance of how she, as one woman, sees India. She defines her India through insightful, intelligent and often witty eyes with a smattering of personalized anecdotes that define it not so much as a set of essays, but a collection of lives. Her lively stories illustrate her analysis of what modern India is as seen through her eyes, while she explores India with her reader. While she uses her personality to define a set of ideas, places, smells and traditions that make up modern India, she never fashions herself an expert or authority, but recognizes her power as one storyteller without trying to draw the reader to her side.

In addition to writing, Mehta has also spent time as a journalist and directed several documentaries about India for BBC and NBC. She has made four films on the Bangladesh war, and for NBC she covered the Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. She has also made films on elections in the former Indian princely states. Because of this journalistic background, all of her books feature keen political insight founded in thorough investigation. Because of the intelligence and family history that follows Mehta into her writing, her books are smart investigations into the ideas, people, history and personalities that have determined what has shaped modern India and ultimately, who she is as a woman of Indian descent. She has the unique opportunity to collect the richness of living on three continents, and it is this rarity of perspective that gives her a uniquely witty and frank ability to define her vision of India through her work.



Gita Mehta

Selected Bibliography

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