Chapter-6

Snakes and Ladders: A View of Social, Political and Cultural India

Snakes and Ladders came as a surprise to Mehta-fans, not because it marked any significant breakthrough in her prose writing art but because it was a big letting down. It failed to evoke the sense of a collective past coherent with the present. The vignettes of the nation in the making she subtitles her book: A View of Modern India – though recognizable, have something of the touch of a tourist viewing the country with a bemused gaze. The concerns are many – national/individual history, political leaders, the environment, Indian villages, literature, art, culture and life style, in fact, dozens of things a keen observer cannot miss. The present challenges vis-à-vis the inherent cultural paradigms create a sharp contrast and are portrayed from the point of view of a nostalgic romantic who reflects upon the situation without being able to communicate the constraints. Finally, there is a sentimentalized looking and uncritical acceptance of the paradoxes of a culture that is complex yet simple, pre-colonial in the postcolonial era and ‘meaninglessly meaningful.’ One cannot question the author’s knowledge of her culture and her cinematic vision but somehow, the interconnectedness between what of Lucas called the ‘quasi-time’ – the visible moment of a work of art – and ‘quasi-space,’ which gives spatial momentum to literature – is missing. A diasporic consciousness looks for redemption when with one’s own community or in home; creativity has the power to give that redemption; for achieving this author has to be a conscious mediator between his/her diasporic
view and the rapid socio-politico-cultural changes taking place as a consequence of decolonization and the current globalization.

In all fairness to Gita Mehta, *Snakes and Ladders* is not a poor book, but it did disillusion both the Indian and the Western readers, precisely because it is a weak presentation. Moreover, as a diasporic writer Gita Mehta has to juggle with two cultures and being astride two cultures makes one vulnerable; it is a position that Bhabha terms ‘third space’ and Sura P. Rath calls ‘trishanku.’ When the book came out, the Indian critics thought she wrote for the west; the western readers thought it was a ‘patch-work India’ that she was peddling. One critic in particular, using pun with peddle and paddle remarks that in *Snakes and Ladders*, Gita Mehta seems to be ‘frantically’ paddling around India¹ to finish the manuscript before the fiftieth anniversary of India’s freedom, so that she could peddle India for the west. The reviewer observes that she managed it because of the current inclination to believe that distance brings objectivity. The reviewer sounds bitter:

The formula is simple. You go away. You write a book. The book is about India, the specific India of your childhood filled with details about the rektakarobi that bloomed outside the window and the still-cherished taste of raw amla. Or an Imaginatively recreated India. Any kind of India. You become a minor celebrity. You give an interview in which you claim that distance has lent you objectivity, and you would never have been able to write about India inside the all-engulfing maw of the experience. This gives the interviewer a warm feeling because they were right to allow you to live there, and not slam the door on you… may be it works too
well. In Mehta’s case it gave her the courage – some might say the overweening arrogance – to think that she could pack it all into 225 pages. But it certainly hasn’t given her what it takes to sum up India for Indians. (www.indiatravelogue.com)

Such acerbic comments apart, there are critics, both Indian and Western who appreciate her ‘rapier wit,’ and staggering frankness in portraying modern India. Barbara Crossettee remarks that the essays in the book are written ‘with a frankness and incisiveness still in surprisingly short supply among many who write about India. Mehta’s years in London and New York add interesting dimensions to the sense of what India has become in the rest of the world’ (Crossettee, 1997:1). C. J. S. Wallia remarks that the public reading at Black Oak Bookstore, in Berkeley, California was ‘very well received’ by the audience. Interestingly, a few of the ‘customer reviews’ I found in some internet sites also choose to take both positive as well as negative view of the book.²

*Snakes and Ladders* opens with the description of Gita Mehta’s family background and woven within the fabric is the story of the freedom struggle from 1943 to 1947. From chapter two through chapter thirty five, there are sketches of India struggling all these fifty years to understand herself. It cannot be denied that India has both bewildered and attracted the west. The epigraph to the book eloquently shows how each generation, each individual has tried to understand India:
I should be surely tempted, if I were ten years younger, to make a journey to India – not for the purpose of discovering something new but in order to view in my own way what has been discovered. (Goethe, 1787)

That is exactly what Mehta is doing – viewing India in her own way, almost 210 years after Goethe’s statement. Another point worth taking note of is that the book is dedicated to ‘India’ via America, through Mark Twain’s words. Significantly, in 1897, Twain called it a unique land ‘all men desire to see.’ One wonders is it possible that India has remained the same? Has not the country changed in these three centuries 1787 to 1897 to 1997? The answer to these questions can be: yes and no! In the flux of time nothing can remain static but it is equally true that nothing changes in India.³

Independence has been the begging of a process of social and political transformation for us but somehow, there has always been a baffling mixture of western, rational approach and the traditional, ritualistic meditation. The title of the book is meaningful as the essays appropriately show how each step forward is forestalled by a couple of steps backward, how each political assertion is marred by vested interests and how the common man lives in blissful ignorance amid contradictions – the desire for order, freedom, status and privilege fortified by a tacit complicity and the pretext of ideology. The author looks at her country both as anxious onlooker and a bemused insider-outsider – distant, pained and confused. Gita Mehta sums up her confusion in the last paragraph of her foreword:
Perhaps historians can make sense of India’s early years of freedom. I find myself able only to see fragments of a country in which worlds and times are colliding with a velocity that defies comprehension. These essays are an attempt to explain something of modern India to myself. I hope others may also see in them facets of an extraordinary world spinning through an extraordinary time. (VII)

In the opening chapter, the author portrays with expert strokes, the period between 1943 and 1947. It is not a chronological view of the history of our freedom struggle, but it is history all the same and it is connected with her personal life. Born in 1943 to parents active in India’s struggle for freedom, she defines herself in relation to the history of the nation. History was recounted and recreated for her by those who lived it, and they reconstructed the time through memory. Memory is a selective process, and as Rushdie says in *Midnight’s Children*, it has its own truth and everyone likes to trust his/her own version of that truth. ‘Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events…’ (Rushdie, 1982: 211). Gita Mehta notes that once she asked her mother and later her father about their ‘worst memory during the British rule.’ To her surprise each recounted events that had nothing to do with personal sense of humiliation or pain. On the contrary, both in their peculiar way created the reality that minimized the hurt and poured scorn on the colonizers. Gita asked her mother, ‘What is your worst memory… your absolutely worst … of living under the British rule?’ Her mother told her of an incident when she was sixteen and was boarding a train to Lahore. At the railway station old English woman pulled
off the turban of her old retainer. Furious at the insult to the venerated old man, Gita’s mother shouted at the English woman, ‘How dare you? You old hag?’ At this the woman looked out of the carriage window and said, ‘My dear, one day you will be an old hag too’ (8). That was her worst memory of the Raj. Here a kind of relationship evolves between individual memory and collective history. The incident reminds us of Gandhiji’s experience in South Africa which changed his life and brought him into the freedom struggle. For that matter, one can also recall Khushwant Singh’s short story “Karma” in which two drunken British soldiers throw out a renowned advocate from a first class compartment, just because he happens to be an Indian. Gita Mehta’s mother probably did not have to undergo this kind of humiliation or may be memory did the work of shifting.

Gita’s father had something more challenging to relate. ‘Once I was asked to fly a British colonel and his adjutant to the North-West Frontier. As I was climbing into the cockpit he said, very loudly, ‘My God! I’m not going up in an airplane flown by a bloody native!’ Of course, he didn’t have any option.’ So they flew and Gita’s father landed the plane in a field a hundred miles from Quetta, on one of the hottest summer days and left the officers sweating and cursing while he coolly told the colonel to find someone who was not ‘a bloody native to fly him,’ and getting into the plane Gita’s father took off, ‘leaving him to walk to Quetta’ (9).

In retrospect, and more so in a postcolonial situation, the narrators of these experiences seem to have dyed the two incidents with due heroism but what appears potentially liberating in the new historical setting must have been threatening and insulting in the colonial context when the events took place.
Gita Mehta’s third narrator to tell his personal history under the British Raj is her uncle who was sent to Kala Pani (the cellular jail in Port Blair) at the tender age of 14. This uncle, now in his seventies, was incarcerated for 17 years. When asked if he wasn’t frightened, the septuagenarian admitted that it really was a frightening experience to be tortured and flogged ‘by British jailors in knee socks and starched white shorts cracking their whips on the sand, shouting, “this is where we tame the Bengal tigers’” (11-12).

Freedom fighters like Gita Mehta’s parents and her uncle were fearless and selfless individuals motivated by a noble vision. They had no ‘self-aggrandizement, or ideological dogma or religious fervor’ (11). Mehta has an obvious regret that though freedom came with the sacrifices of numerous people, the real freedom fighters have been pushed into oblivion and power politics has taken every care to wipe off the names of those who ‘genuinely fought for freedom’ (12). Decolonization, instead of bringing freedom in the real sense has landed the country into colonization – the internal colonization with despotic and dynastic rule in the offing.

The hint is clear – Mrs Indira Gandhi’s political tactics had created a vicious atmosphere, particularly during the National Emergency. ‘Wholesale imprisonment’ of all those who dared to go against her views were fearless enough to defy her or raise their voice against her ‘intense obsession’ to induct her son to ‘imaginary inheritance’ of power came as a shock to the right-minded people. India was evolving, not as a nation of fearless citizens, the likes of her parents and myriad others, who faced the British ire stoically, but as a nation of sycophants and fawning coteries all out to please those in power. It would not be out of place to mention Arun Joshi’s *The City and the River* in this context. Written in 1997, the novel is allegorical: the
story of the Grand Master and his obsession to perpetuate dynastic rule. In his ‘monstrous egoism’ (65) the Grand Master orders that the entire city should ‘own allegiance’ him. The scenario is one of mass imprisonment and civil strife and the ruthless silencing of those who resent the orders. Finally the deluge comes washing away the entire civilization. That, however, is not the end. It is indicative of a new beginning as the Great Yogeshwara prepares the Little One for another evolution and cautions him that recurrence of such events will be the law till man learns to purify himself of his greed and egoism. As T. Vijay Kumar observes, *The City and the River* is a ‘collocation of the strange and the familiar,’ of the ancient and the modern, the old and the new (Vijay Kumar, 1996:146).

On the same analogy, the colonial and the postcolonial, the old and the new remain side by side in the psyche of modern India. At the political level, the public ethics has gone down the drains. Within less than fifty years of freedom, the regime of ‘fear’, sycophancy, nepotism and shenanigan has surfaced. But, there is always the game of “Snakes and Ladders” to remind us that if moving up implies sliding down, there is also the possibility of moving up the ladder again. Despite the curb imposed on freedom of expression during the National Emergency, Gita Mehta is surprised to come across a senior bureaucrat sitting in his office a couple of rooms away from the Prime Minister’s office and openly criticizing the Prime Minister. He also has the courage to assert, ‘She doesn’t bloody employ me… The people of India employ me. Don’t you ever forget it. This is my damned soil’ (13). This astounds the author and makes her brood over the paradoxes and contradictions ingrained in the Indian soil that makes India endearing. The author puts it thus, ‘Such bad humor is enough to make you want to cling to your Indian passport for another fifty years of freedom.’ (13).
Despite substantial changes in the political and economic concerns between the colonial and postcolonial situations, there are important and obvious threads of continuity in the two conditions. Discussing the continued impact of colonialism in the field of economy in India, Ashis Nandy points out that ‘the colonial political economy began to operate seventy-five years before the full-blown ideology of British imperialism became dominant,’ and ‘the ideology of colonialism is still triumphant in many sectors of life,’ thirty five years of after the formal ending of the Raj (Nandy, 1983:2).

Gita Mehta’s attention is drawn to the subhuman conditions of the poor in the country. In the chapters entitled “Banish Poverty” and “Banish Charity” she provides a gruesome picture of the poor – the jetsam and flotsam of the society – living in bondage and in dismal conditions. The rag-pickers’ tales are of displacement, impoverished existence and fear – the fear of being displaced again. For them freedom means the slogan from “Garibi Hatao” to “Garib Hatao”, and broadly, their problem lies in their economic exploitation by the contractors, the paper tycoons, the apathetic government officials and the government itself – all those who take charge of their lives and their livelihood. The selfishness and superficiality of their attitude is obvious in their approach to the problems faced by these poor people. While speaking to Gita Mehta, one paper tycoon appreciates the ‘faceless, nameless’ rag-pickers for making ‘a valuable contribution to the recycling industry’ (41), but the spuriousness of his sympathy is revealed by his condescending observation that the rag-pickers are in a way ‘used to’ such living conditions because they are all scavengers and are engaged in a work which was ‘only an extension of the kind of work they have always done.’ In other words it means they are not worth a thought nor do they deserve any betterment. A telling image in this chapter is that of
puppies nesting for warmth in a bundle of rags, probably better off than the human beings. (40). It may be argued that by equating the rag-pickers to animals and perceiving them as emotionally deficient and lacking in intellectual development, Gita Mehta is playing the game of the ‘Orientalist’ looking at them from the position of authority and superiority. However, that would be stretching it too far because Gita Mehta aim here is to expose the ‘new colonizers’. But, the irony of the situation is that colonizers’ lobby is so strong that there are no chances of the despicable rag-pickers being heard.

It would be of academic interest to refer to Leonard Woolf’s short story “Pearls and Swines” set in colonial Sri Lanka. The imperialist logic of controlling the economy is simple: ‘We rule India and the sea, so the belongs to us and the oysters are in the sea and the pearls are in the oysters. Therefore of course the pearls belong to us…” (Woolf, 1983: 269-70).

Likewise, the economic advantage of the rag-pickers’ labor goes to those who employ them. Further, the irony of the situation is that these unnamed, unrecognized beings – children and women – are not the flotsam and jetsam of the earth as the paper tycoon conveniently believes. Some of them are from the Bhat clan, others from the Bhumihar tribe of Rajasthan. They are the displaced and the dispossessed who try in their own to keep alive their traditions. As the mother of the Bhat child laments, ‘Once our recitation began a royal coronation… Now look at my child’s fate. We teach him the historical poems, otherwise they will be forgotten. And he shouts them aloud to frighten the vultures away while he looks for rags’ (37-38). The humor intended here is too grim even to smile. Here one may recall the ballad-singers in Gita Mehta’s Raj who come to the Maharajah’s Durbars on every significant occasion to sing of Queen Pushpavati’s valor and get handsome rewards. After the independence when these singers are
told that they are as important as the kings now, one senior bard pushes it aside lightly, feeling self-important in the fact that they have always had a voice. One realizes soon how unrewarding has been independence for the poor like these Bhats-turned-rag-pickers.

One more picture of human cruelty is provided in chapter five “Banish Charity.” But in this case, the efforts of organizations like SEWA and Dastakar have given hope to the women textile workers. Earlier, these women were working as bonded labor, in the grip of the money-lenders who purchased their product at negligible price earning enormous profits for themselves. SEVA and Dastakar did considerable work to help these women. These organizations introduced and engineered substantial profits for them thus improving their high quality, the textile women workers’ erstwhile employers changed their strategies. They were now ready to buy their products at export rates. The economic exploration in the neo-colonial period reminds us of the veracity of Edward Said’s words:

Even though India gained independence … in 1947, the question of how to interpret Indian British history in the period after decolonization is still, like all such dense and highly conflicting encounters, a matter of strenuous, if not always edifying, debate. There is the view, for example, that imperialism permanently scarred and distorted Indian life, so that even after decades of independence, the India economy, bled by British needs and practices continued to suffer. Conversely, there are British intellectuals, political figures, and historians who believe that giving up the empire … was bad for Britain and bad for ‘the natives’, who both have declined in all sorts of ways ever since. (Said, 1993: 163)
In India some Non-Government Organizations are working for the betterment of the subalterns and Gita Mehta extols their efforts. At the same time, she subtly pokes fun at the superficialities and the overbearing attitude of the high-brow men and women associated with voluntary works whom she meets at the party. The atmosphere at the grand party was charged with energy: men engaged in discussing economy and profits and the women busy hovering round the buffet table. Gita Mehta’s friend was more interested in stuffing her plate with the gourmet delicacies than in discussing the real issues pertaining to the weaver women. And when she talked about them, her tone was rather patronizing as if she was the only one responsible for the amelioration of the poor. Mehta felt hurt at her dismissive attitude. ‘I was rather hurt, I felt she could at least have acknowledged my gift as being helpful. I didn’t know that her organization was into self-reliance, not gratitude’ (48). Thus again the contradictions in India continue to exist.

The concept of “Food for Work” leads Mehta to title her chapter “Food for Thought.” In 1973, Maharashtra faced acute drought conditions bringing untold misery to the farmers, their children, livestock and crops. There was mass exodus from villages to the cities, particularly to Bombay. The government sprang into action and floated the “Food for Work” scheme whereby the farmers were employed to dig canals or build roads for which they were paid in kind. Imported grain from the USA was distributed to them but unfortunately, the wheat was mixed with Dhatura, and was fit for ‘animal consumption, poisonous to human beings’ (59). The farmer women sifting assiduously wheat grains from the poisonous Dhatura grains make a pathetic picture of poverty and want.
The contrast become more prominent when Mehta tells how she, a member of the foreign Media team was over-fed while here were the children of the soil dying of hunger. ‘I on the other hand, was being given more than I could possibly consume. Enough to keep ten families fed at every meal. Enough liquor to keep ten men intoxicated for a week. A private plane to fly me around the state. Cars to drive me to the worst sites of the drought. I was working for a British television company, you see … Because of our foreign journalists. So we shared in all the luxuries by which we in the Third World seduce the First World into paying attention to our problems’ (59-60) Mehta laments that the exploitation continues; earlier it was the British colonizer, now the USA is the new colonizer. The condition of the Third World poor has not improved over the years.

Gita Mehta has discussed three famines in her works: the famine of 1898 in Rajasthan, 1943 famine of Bengal and 1973 drought in Maharashtra. In Raj, it was the 1898 famine in Rajasthan when the kingdom of Balmer was affected and the Maharajah took quick measures to set up relief camps. At that time the vested interest groups sold arable land to the British for railways and factories. The Maharajah expresses his impotent rage at his greedy ministers:‘Dead cattle little the country-side, yet my ministers want to lease land to British companies to build Railways and factories. They say it is for Balmer’s progress, but the ministers will become partners with the Englishmen, fattening on the misery of Balmer’s starving farmers’ (Raj: 29). In Snakes and Ladders, Mehta first refers to the Bengal famine of 1943 and British villainy in withholding the supply of food-grains. “That winter of 1942, while tons of food rotted away, nearly three million people starved to death, most of them on the streets of Calcutta’ (9-10). Mehta is crisp and brief in her description because of the
requirement of a prose piece. We know from Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels the grimness of the situation.

Gita Mehta too holds the complex structure of colonial power politics responsible for the suffering of the masses. In Balmer, the ministers, playing into the colonizer’s hands were at fault; in Bengal, British injustice was responsible and in free India, the purblind officialdom. By looking back to the past, the author tries to explain the present in relation to the past. The problems of draughts and deaths cannot be simply reduced to the formula that since there were no rains there was famine. It is a more complex issue and it required futuristic planning. The author is not very sanguine about the policies of Nehru who placed his faith in industrialization at the cost of agriculture.

Industrialization of a predominantly agricultural country and rapid urbanization has been a grave mistake of our leaders. Pandit Nehru wanted India to be progressive and rich on the lines of the west. From his writings and speeches it is clear that Nehru was emulating the west that had become wealthy through industry. Mehta comments, ‘Prime Minister Nehru and his advisors came up with a bold new plan to take India’s bullock-cart economy into the machine age of the twentieth century’ (60), which resulted in the neglect of agriculture. It was Lal Bahadur Shastri who brought back the focus to agriculture and within a few years the Green Revolution made it possible for us to export food grain. But, Mehta regrets that the policies of the successive governments have been detrimental to the welfare of the farmers and the benefits of the new laws always went to the rich landholders, leaving the middle –level and small farmers in dept. She quotes the instance of the Land-sealing Act whereby the prosperous farmers became money-lenders and the poor farmers, ‘instead of being exploited by large
landlords, our landless laborers were being exploited by small landlords, their condition deteriorating as the price of farming increased’ (63). Once again in the game of snakes and ladders, the country and its economy went sliding down the mouth of a huge snake.

But the snakes and ladders board has its bright moments too. In our socio-political setting everything is not gloomy, the author seems to say in her tongue-in-the-cheek style as she narrates how because of unchecked urbanization agricultural land was sold and the landowners living near metropolises and big towns became rich overnight. This is how a landholding farmer sums up the situation: “…isn’t it wonderful? I worked so hard for so many years but the land gave me so little. Now I get up every morning and just smile at my field. And each day I get richer” (64).

Gita Mehta is pleasantly surprised to see rapid urbanization in India by 1996. Small and medium towns sprung up to life and there was mushroom growth of shops; the bazaar looked unruly and congested as the purchasing power of the buyers increased. Mehta looks at a typical Indian Bazaar – crowded, filthy, loud and disorderly. Coming from the neat western Shopping Malls, the vibrant bazaars attract her yet jar on her senses. Mehta’s description is vivid, ‘The stench of badly cured leather competed with the smell of food being fried in corner cafes where customers had stopped for snacks after renting their evening’s entertainment from video shops. Racks of garments collected dust in crowded corridors next to rows of shoes piled in precarious pyramids that could not be crammed into the tiny shops. Loud film music emanated from record stores, drowning civilized conversation, disturbing the students pounding away their rented keyboards in their Computer Course schools consisting of two tables, two chairs, two machines. (79-80).
Somehow, a discerning reader can feel that despite being evocative, the description of the bazaar lacks sense of locale. Both the town and the bazaar are nameless and thus devoid of personality. Conversely, some of the British travel-writings of the colonial era have given graphic description of our cities or towns. Travelling in India was by no means an easy proposition for them. They were often frustrated by Indian loudness and garish colors; despite that they managed to give authenticity to their portrayal by their use of suggestive language and gripping illustrative power.

Usually a diasporic writer in his/her attempt to forge links with a distinctive cultural heritage and to place his/her experience within an acceptable historical framework is often careful with the description of the place. Perhaps, Mehta’s objective in keeping the location of the town or the city flexible is to make it ubiquitous. Landscape always plays a significant role not only in evoking the mood but also in reaching beyond the creation of a setting. In India each city or town has an unmistakable local flavor but when it becomes the centre of the author’s preoccupation it becomes a part of the direct experience of being in India. The local appeal of the landscape helps the reader in connecting it with the broader national consciousness.

In some of her pieces, however, Gita Mehta describes the topography and the rich flavor of the states she visited during her journalistic assignments. Such passages display her powerful observations and descriptive skills. For example, she visited Assam in 1975 to do a piece on the non-violent agitation there to check the inflow of Bangladesh refugees. She writes, ‘Its rice fields stretching to Bangladesh on one side, its wooded hills rising to China’s border on the other. Assam is connected to India only by a narrow corridor of land’ (114). Later standing on the hill in the courtyard of the temple she looks down at the Brahmaputra River and writes, ‘In
the temple courtyard a frangipani tree was dropping white blossoms on the black stones, the slender petals spinning like hexagons against the darkening sky. Below the temple, the setting sun was throwing the islands in the vast sweep of water into red relief. River streamers from the days of the British Empire, still bearing their battered old Jardine Henderson signs, crossed the crimson water of the great river as mist closed over fishing villages on the distant banks. Inside the temple the priest had begun the evening devotions, chanting a melancholy melody that seemed to evoke Assam’s separation from the rest of India.’ (115).

The passage catches attention for its three distinct characteristics: first, its descriptions of nature that have the unmistakable English Romantics’ fervor; second, it juxtaposes the immutable with the present flux; and third, it hints at the Government’s failure not only to give a sympathetic ear to the problem of the land but also their failure to bring the province at par with progress seen in their parts of the country. The poverty and the blockage of development are obvious from the example of the old-time dilapidated streamers still running. It is foreboding to think of the disintegrating trends but then by the end of the chapter the message is reassuring that people do understand that safety lies in being a part of India than being cut off from her. What a teacher tells his students is important to be recorded here, ‘I tell my students, once you think you belong only to a particular part of the country you deprive yourselves of the wealth of the whole country’ (118). Misplaced emotionalism is fuelling provincialism and it has to stop if we wish to enjoy safety, security and the rich national wealth.
Her continual exploration of the paradoxes of India and her confusion on finding it both traditional and modern is postcolonial and diasporic in essence. The decolonized India is fast competing with the consumer-oriented societies of the west. She observes the changes in life patterns with accuracy. The India of 1996 baffles her – it has modernized rapidly. Cars, telephones, computers and air-conditioners are no longer considered luxury items, they are the necessities and they have found their way even in villages. This can be contrasted with what M. V. Kamath observed in the 1970s when he came back to India to take over the charge of *The Illustrated Weekly* as its Chief Editor. After his stay in the US for over two decades he was confused to find the slow movement of things in India. For example, even to get telephone connection one had to wait for years; and getting a car was out of question, you had to wait any length of time from two years to five years. Not so now, in the last decade of the twentieth century; change within this twenty year is tremendous. The Indian youth are no longer interested in the security of government jobs but are looking westward for high-profile placements; Indian universities are churning out computer, management and engineering graduates; India has its silicon valley in Bangalore; and people have become aware of the need to educate their children. And within this milieu of the old and the new, Indians still preserve a way of life in which man does not become a machine (85); this is probably a gift from India’s ancient pragmatism.

Gita Mehta begins Chapter Ten on an amused note. Her French companion shouts, “It’s a scandal!” when she observes people worshiping gadgets. Gita’s response is rather blatant, “What’s the big deal? I thought to myself. Worshipping videos? Get a grip. This is India. We worship air-conditioners and computers and cash registers and bullock carts – in an annual
ritual called Weapon Worship” (80). These thoughts are not as innocuous as they appear. The author is adopting a satirical posture while describing the progress India has made. Modernization and ritualistic attitude stay cheek by jowl in India and that is probably her beauty or let us say her postmodernism – displaying panache for ethnicity. Mehta’s view is clearly of an outsider looking in; she swears by the colonial’s standard and decries everything native. As Fanon avers, “… in the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the Whiteman’s values” (Fanon, 1990: 33).

From gadgets, Mehta’s attention now shifts to the trends of ‘marketing India’. 1997 was the silver jubilee year of our Independence. The celebrations provided a platform to the vested interest groups to market India. Not only do the Hippies and the Rolling Stones come and go with their ‘Hare Rama, Hare Krishna’ chants but more harmful and persistent marketing strategy comes from the Government tourism promotion programs. We can quote here Graham Huggan’s observation at some length. He discusses the western trend, supported by India, of ‘marketing’ India not only with regard to its culture, tourism and mysticism but also its academic and literary products.

The India of 1990s is influenced by the wave of the globalization. Our notions of freedom, money, and energy have continued to develop as per our decolonized, postcolonial setting and these are now supported by free economy and other changes in the wake of globalization to which the country has responded with enthusiasm. Gita Mehta is baffled by the ‘other-worldly’ approach of the Indian culture and ‘this worldly greed’ of the individuals. In Chapter Ten, the boom of the new-era gadgets and an ever-expanding commercialization of the country leave
her wondering at the readiness of Indians to seize the first opportunity to grab the new advances of science and technology.

In the earlier two chapters namely, “New Money” and “An Embarrassment of Riches” she throws a glance at the affluent urban middle-class and the entry of the western entrepreneurs on the Indian soil bringing riches to the land of detachment and renunciation. The change from the austerity of the past decade to the vulgar show of wealth in the present decades leaves the author wondering at the new sense of identity the nation has acquired. She compares the ethos of the 1950s and 1960s with the changed perceptions of the 1990s. In the years following the independence of the country there was a conscientious display of austerity and a glorification of everything Indian. A decade or two later more austere measures like state control over industries, nationalization of banks and insurance and ban on ‘imported goods’ landed the economy in conflicting situation. Some critics called it ‘the Land of Permit Raj’ while others thought that it was making the country self-reliant and independent from western commercial imperialism.

The older generation of nationalists who accepted with dignity the usable past and traditions to asset the culture identity of India against the colonizers’ notion of superiority was fast vanishing. Probably, as a reaction to the humiliation of clinging to the past, the new generation leaders, Rajiv Gandhi in particular, opened the economy and further accelerated the process of decolonization by ousting the ‘Homespun’ and welcoming the Luxury Goods of the West. Assessing the trends of India’s economy during Rajiv Gandhi’s tenure Gita Mehta says, ‘For the first time in independent India it was politically correct to be rich’ (69). This opening up brought in the sudden spurt of flashy neo-rich who reveled in pretentiousness. They linked to
make an exhibition of their ‘gold watches, German cars, Italian clothes, yachts and airplanes, Crystals and Dom Perignon champagnes, reserved tables for sprawling families in the most expensive restaurants and discotheques. An awful lot of caviar congealing uneaten in an awful lot of Lalique bowls signals the new Indian attitude: if you’ve got it, flaunt it’ (65). This is contrasted with the older attitude, ‘if you have it, you hid it.’

To appreciate the significance of Gita Mehta’s observation, let us make a passing reference to Nayantara Sahgal. In A Time to be Happy Sahgal hits at the double standards of the high society women who discard all Indian furnishings and household items in ‘shame’ during the colonial period because the Indian things were not what the British approved of. Immediately after the Independence the same elite society replace all their furnishings with handloom curtains, and shift their attention to ethnic brass items like lamps, and Natrajand Buddhas. But then, this urge to parade their affluence and taste was limited to the rich; it has now percolated to the middle-classes. This is the demonstrative use of consumer goods and is associated with the nouveau riche. In consumer society the consumption of material goods is a dominant drive. The term also carries an undercurrent of criticism as it stifles the higher values and creativity.

The description of the lavish party Gita Mehta attended is one of the examples of the vulgar display of wealth. It was a high-level dinner where the representatives of the Third World countries had assembled. Mehta observes that not only India, but almost all the Third World countries are guilty of excesses when their poor population is living below poverty line. The dinner she describes is the ultimate in consumer greed, ‘Over dinner our silver platters were constantly replenished with kewabs, curries, Indian breads, vegetables, our glasses filled to the brim with wines, champagnes, liquors to keep us busy until the band came on’ (77-78). This
crudeness appears more offensive and unpardonable when we remember our hungry millions, particularly the farmers hit by droughts. To cap it all, Mehta refers to a repulsive turn the conversation takes during the dinner. One cabinet minister from Thailand sitting next to her, who had earlier that day addressed the gathering on Population Control in Third World, showed her a key ring he possessed which had an electric blue condom inside the glass case. This is not only offensive to her sense of propriety, but it also shows the callous approach to the most significant problem of population control.

Mehta is unable to understand how in the land of spirituality, so much of greed and extravagance could stay cheek by jowl. ‘The new enlightenment is money,’ says Mehta in one of her interviews (Neelakanthan, 1997. forbes.com.interview). And she is right. The avarice of the contractors who are thriving on the labor of the rag-pickers, the employers of the weavers who treat them as bonded labor are uncouth examples of blackmailing.

Indian democracy draws Gita Mehta’s attention several times: a multi-colored affair consisting of the big show called elections, colorful and wasteful displays to please a leader, the dark years of the emergency, the demonstrations and strikes over issues like cow-slaughter and price-rise and the current waves of violence over non-issues. These things are happening in a country founded on the principles of simplicity and on the dreams of non-violence. Mehta narrates how Prime Minister Nehru’s reception arranged in the North-East turned into a fiasco. It goes back to 1957 when Pandit Nehru visited the North–East. An impressive gathering of tribals was arranged to welcome him but when the Prime Minister arrived, instead of the ‘colorful guard of the honor’ the tribals all turned ‘with regimental precision and lifted their
colorful sarongs. The Prime Minister of India found himself taking the salute of hundreds of naked tribal behind’ (96).

We Indians have an idiosyncratic panache for pageants and strikes and demonstrations. Our democracy, says the writer, is one of the funniest spectacles of the world. Consider thousands of naked sadhus, all armed with iron tridents, marching to the Parliament; hermaphrodites dressed in brilliant saris staging a demonstration against family planning, the hue and cry over cow slaughter and the Thali Revolution of Gujarat against rising prices. The price index rose to an alarming height in 1975. To attract attention of the government, thousands of women armed with thalis came out on the streets and created ‘such a din that the state echoed with their displeasure’ (121). This was necessitated because of the inaction of the government. Prices were rising rapidly and ‘finding it impossible to make ends meet and feed their families, the housewives waited until street lamps came on. Then they beat their metal platters, their thalis, with wooden rolling-pins to express their dissatisfaction with rising prices’ (121). Gita Mehta laughs at this unique method to display women’s solidarity and to draw the attention of the dumb and deaf administrative to the real problems of the people. On the one hand, it is a residue of the colonial psychology; fifty years after we ceased to be a colony, ‘we still bristle with over-sensitive antenna of a colonized people’ (94); says Mehta.

With the new crop of political leaders more interested in personal economics than in the welfare of the people who elected them and the bureaucrats engaged more in sycophancy and less in governance, the public scenario is one of corruption, indolence and other harmful practices. The vision of the makers of our constitution is shattered in the political muddle that we have created for ourselves. ‘The chaos is enough to intimidate anyone. Rather than
undertake the duties of their office, our leaders have too often settled for redefining the privileges of office, making political corruption so endemic that winning an election in India today is tantamount to winning a lottery for the family’ (98). Gita Mehta alludes to Nirad Chaudhari’s writing and feels that he has chosen an apt title for his book *The Continent of Circle* describing India. There are so many baffling happenings, weird ideas floated by politicians and so many magic cures found for the ills of governance that we all seem to be under the thrall. It would be relevant to refer to V. S. Naipaul at this point because he too is a sever critic of India’s political, administrative and democratic failings. Naipaul feels humiliated and defended by the weakness and the exploitation of the system. In *An Area of Darkness*, he resists the traditional Indian passivity and fatalism and feels splintered when instead of finding the signs of a ‘great culture’ that he had expected as a diasporic visitor to his native land, he encounters corruption, incompetence, self-centeredness, lack of concern for others and the existence of the dehumanizing customs like the feudal-system and economic exploitation. He is rather critical of the socio-cultural-religious ostentations he encountered during his pilgrimage to Amarnath. His ‘discovery’ of India was disillusioning for him and he records that ‘It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life into two’ (Naipaul, 1965: 266).

Like Nirad Chaudhari and Naipaul, Mehta too is disenchanted by the land of her birth turned into a dirty and decayed land, not the paradise of her dream. But Mehta is less acerbic than both Nirad Chaudhari and Naipaul. Probably because she does not see her country from an immeasurable distance in time as the first generation diaspora searching for a home, do. For her the ‘home’ is always there, but the return every year is marked by the sights of further deterioration; and herein lies her anger and dejection. Whereas Naipaul is critical of
colonialism and he refuses to sentimentalize England, Gita Mehta has no such stipulations. She sees India as she is, half a century after independence, and she spots India’s weaknesses which are the creation of her own politicians and political system. Throughout her travel, Mehta is saddened by the spectacles she sees but she has the knack of deriving fun out of the idiosyncrasies of people and the absurdities of situations. Like Naipual, she too is ashamed and angry at the filth, greed, decay and passivity and she wants her country to be rational, efficient and progressive like the west without losing her cultural authenticity, her base of rich heritage and healthy traditions. This aspect can be substantiated by the vision she gives of the culture in A River Sutra. Just as Naipaul says in A Way in the World, ‘we cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves’ (Naipaul, 1994:9).

Appearance and reality existent in the present system are contracted in Snakes and Ladders at several places. The first causality in modern India is the concept of non-violence. Mehta remembers her visit to Assam to collect material for her write-up about the agitation against the infiltration of Bangladeshis in the state. When Mehta talked to one young engineer he was rather bitter, ‘We are fighting another invasion and Nehru’s daughter sends the Army to fire on us! Is she made? Is it our fault that millions of foreigners who are over-running us today don’t speak Chinese?’ (115). Such comments are searching pointers towards the mishandling of the North-East problems by the central leadership. What Gita Mehta records is authentic and it can be validated by M. V. Kamath’s editorials in The Illustrated Weekly of India way back in the 1970s. The Assam problem took an ugly turn and violence has become a frequent feature now. Mehta expresses her concern succinctly, ‘Non-violence may have expelled the British from India but our first lesson in freedom was the violence of partition, and in Assam I discovered
that we have not learned our lesson well’ (114). She laments further when she learns that twenty-eight villages were put to torch, ‘Why indeed? Whatever happened to India’s proud pluralism? Whatever happened to non-violence?’ (119). Unfortunately, pluralism, non-violence and such like terms have only become concepts with their original connotation gone berserk in the maze of self-centeredness, separatist tendencies and continued in-fighting. At every level – social, cultural, ideological and political – the inherent idealism of the pre-independence days has been subverted by violence, nepotism and shenanigans.

It would be relevant to give some space to Sashti Brata, who in his *India: The Perpetual Paradox* looks at India ‘from two sharply opposed perspectives’ (Brata, 1986: 18). Sashti Brata was a journalist who stayed for twenty-five years in London and New York and his views are totally contrary to those of Naipaul or Chaudhari or even Gita Mehta. In reassessing India, he finds it refreshingly open which allows an assimilation of all religions, where there is no beggary in villages and where there is ‘new self-confidence’ in the people. He has, in fact, full-throated praise for the multifaceted India. While Gita Mehta finds the political scene one of utter disgust, he finds Indian political system unique. He particularly, speaks of the election of 1984 when Rajiv Gandhi was voted to power. Mehta calls it “The Greatest Show on Earth” and misses no opportunities to see the chinks in its armor. “The sheer force of the Indian electoral process has introduced a new word into the dictionary of democracy – Wave –to decide such furious display of voter preference that sweeps all calculations before it’ (151). She gives a resume of the various elections held since the inception of democracy in India, the emergence of various political parties particularly the party meant for the lower casters. Everything is a big joke, a gimmick in India – secularism, religion in politics, division of the country on caste
basis, sectarianism and a whole gamut of activities that pass for democracy. The author laughs at the stunts and recollects the line that had appeared in the Financial Times of London, ‘The democracy of India is a wonder of the world’ (159). Mehta concludes her chapter with a mock-serious remark, ‘And its guardian is not the politician so beloved of feature writers but the faceless, nameless, all-ending Indian voter’ (159). Interestingly, while Sashti Barta appreciates the voter for his political acumen in voting, Gita Mehta has her doubts.

The faith that some prose writers reposed in the emerging nation seems to have been splintered by the time Mehta looks at it. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru’s euphoria in The Discovery of India for India’s multiculturalism, her ‘unity in diversity’, secularism, and her tolerance turn out to be only catchwords in the scenario of the present day India. It can be argued though that Nehru was the first to use the terms indigenization and Indianization. Indigenization means the act of making something native. He uses it to denote the process whereby cultural artifacts are incorporated into an existing civilization. Thus the English language and the material culture, including machinery becomes indigenous. He uses the term Indianization to refer to cultural assimilation and lays much stress on synthesis. Thus we get a picture of the emerging Indian identity. Sunil Khilnani explicates that Nehru’s idea of Indian identity ‘could emerge only within the territorial and institutional frame of the state’ (Khilnani, 1997: 167). Gita Mehta looks at these facts from her position as a media person roaming India during the silver jubilee year -1997. She perceives the shattered dream and she does not hide her dissatisfaction at the way things work. India has traditionally described herself as Karma Bhoomi, the Land of Experience, with a hoary past, but Mehta laments that nothing of her previous experience has taught her any lesson. Referring to Alex Aoronson’s acerbic remarks that India was a
civilization and ‘civilization is always a process’ she observes, ‘half a century later that observation still proves astute. Somehow India has managed to stay a civilization, still unpredictable, still surprising, still defying definition. Maybe India’s indolence preserves her. Or her traditional fascination with unifying what appears fragmented. In any case, in a world of perpetual motion India remains a perpetual becoming, a vast and protean sea of human improvisations on the great dance of time’ (164).

All through the work, Mehta’s tone is one of the resentment camouflaged as sarcasm. As stated in The Discovery of India, Nehru wanted to create the right kind of modernized India by replacing the colonial power with the centralized national state. That ideological premise, however, appears spurious, simply a matter of rhetoric now because when power came in the hands of the Congress it soon turned into personal aggrandizement, communalism, corruption and nepotism. The notions of Indianization, unity in diversity, and what Aijaz Ahmad calls the ‘civilizational ethos’ got diluted in the fragmented psyche. Even Gyanendra Pandey in one of his articles on Hindu-Muslim riots recounts how the concepts such as ‘unity in diversity’ fail to stand as a national ethos. Yet India has successfully countered the divisive trends and remains, partially though, a peaceful, democratic nation.

Snakes and Ladders also focuses on Indian literature, art and cinema, the reading culture and the home décor. In dealing with topics such as these she seems to enjoy the simple pleasure of Indian life, like the pavement book stalls, she appreciates the simplicity of our homes because for an Indian ‘home is neither his castle nor a stage set by decorator. By necessity it is organic’ (173). But living in the west her personal sense of home décor differs from the Indian sense of aesthetics, which she finds lacking in imagination, with no artistic sense; only given to chaos
and decay. Mehta’s scribbling on Indian literature and cinema are unfortunately not thought
provoking and are rather trite like entries in the general knowledge books meant for students.

Despite its obvious drawbacks, *Snakes and Ladders* is considered an agreeable contribution to
India’s prose writing in English. It may not be organized and strong as Naipaul’s travelogues
or as acerbic as Nirad Chaudhari’s works but it has simple jottings on our postcolonial history
in everyday language. The observations have a grain of truth in them whether we like it or not.
On the flip side of it, the book has some factual errors that put a question mark on its
authenticity. As one reviewer points out, the book has more than its fair share of mistakes that
cannot be condoned, ‘the Bengal Famine is timed a year early, the annexation of Tibet nine
years later. Tashkent is located in Russia, the politician Rajmohan Gandhi is called Ram
Mohan Gandhi. Ashoka’s wheel at the centre of the Indian flag is mistaken for a spinning-
wheel’ (symbol that was dropped in 1947). Further, the review corrects another mistake. Mehta
says it was Mahatma Gandhi who ‘insisted’ that Mountbatten should remain as governor-
general of free India; ‘in fact, it was Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel who made the decision.
Gandhi played no part in it’ (*http://www.amazon.com*, customer review). The errors are
disconcerting and one does not expect such a perfunctory work from an author of Mehta’s
standing.

As a travelogue, *Snakes and Ladders* takes upon itself the onus to provide us the camera view
of our own recent history; as a memoir it gives the author’s viewpoint of her motherland which
she does with genuine concern. Both travelogue and memoirs are history in that they are based
on evidence. What she sees, she presents and in recording her anger and resentment she is not
deriding the culture but is certainly voicing her resistance to the present that has made a
mockery of the past, the vision of freedom and of the high ideals that motivated the freedom fighters. Scholars of postmodernism and postcolonialism would agree that a postmodernist work does not portray the past as past, but it portrays the present which includes the past; a postcolonial text resists the imperialist/colonialist tendencies of the political set up. *Snake and Ladders* performs both these functions. Maybe the links between the chapters are tenuous, but mixture of the factual and the personal and the ability of the author to maintain her distance as an onlooker, give the work its postmodern, postcolonial position. The book has history and it puts across the detrimental forces that have changed the ideas about the making of the nations, the ideas that motivated the early visionaries like Gandhi. But whatever the political crisis or disconcerting happenings, which she records in the course of her narration, it is the perennial India that holds. Mehta is mesmerized by the sound and smell of the land. She admits ‘God made India at his leisure,’ and we too agree with her notwithstanding the present scenario. This brings to mind the words of Ernest Renan:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (Renan, 1990:19)\(^5\)
References

   

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