CHAPTER V

SNAKES AND LADDERS: A HOLISTIC VIEW OF INDIA

Gita Mehta’s Snakes and Ladders is subtitled as “A View of Modern India”. It is a collection of short essays on diverse features of independent India. The themes vary from politics to aesthetics, culture to the crafts, economy to ecology, traditions to the compelling forces of modernization. It is by means of a glimpse into these that the author tries to comprehend contemporary India. If Karma Cola is a wry account of the marketing of the mystic East, Raj is a rich historical saga of royal India, and A River Sutra, the hypnotic tales of the inner cognizance of man, Snakes and Ladders proves to be an unflinching assessment of post-colonial India – its society, politics, economy and culture. The book is written in an entertaining, informative and in a way a wholly personal style.

The unflinching assessment of India today which Gita Mehta gives in this collection reminds us of the commitment upheld by the African writer Chinua Achebe who once spoke these words about his novels in a lecture entitled ‘The Novelist as Teacher’:

I for one would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the one I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all
Its imperfections — was not one long night savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive."

It is with this sense of commitment that Gita Mehta proceeds with her critical examination of Indian culture in *Snakes and Ladders*.

Margaret Mead in her book *On Culture and Commitment* identifies three types of social culture which she categorizes in relation to the attitude each has to traditional wisdom. She calls the first category the post-figurative. It exists in a stable society where the wisdom of the past is of continuing relevance. The second category, which she calls co-figurative, describes a culture where the pace of change has speeded up and where men learn from their peers rather than from their ancestors. The third, the pre-figurative category, Margaret Mead identifies as a culture where the pace of change and the extension of men and powers are so great that all established patterns of teaching and of culture lose their relevance by the time they are established. In general, it is to the realm of co-figurative culture that the discussions of Gita Mehta in her *Snakes and Ladders* have their significance.
The essays in *Snakes and Ladders* demand that a comparison and contrast be drawn between Gita Mehta and Nirad Chaudhuri and V.S. Naipaul. Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England* and Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* offer a revelatory reading of India. They write a series of short essays analyzing what they see and accounting for their own reactions to it. Nirad Chaudhuri tells us that he celebrated the three thousandth week of his life at the end of his tour to Europe. Naipaul was only thirty when he traced his ancestral footsteps back to India. Both Nirad Chaudhuri and Naipaul are masters of the imperially endowed language. They share an abiding awareness of their cultural origins. Naipaul's thesis of colonial mimicry is something that very significantly emerges in his writing. Part of the trouble with Naipaul is that he sees in the pre-colonial India only a vast historic darkness. Nirad Chaudhuri, on the other hand, draws upon Indian history with every breath he takes. Indeed he makes what for him is the profound discovery that only in England have the scars of earlier colonizations been effectively eradicated. He has seen evidence of conquest everywhere he looks in India. In England a massive fusion of cultures has taken place which results in an aesthetic and temperamental unity he had never experienced on a national scale before. But that does not make him see his own people as philistine or imitative. He could never share Naipaul's epithet, "a sense of history, which is a sense of loss."
If Naipaul claims in *An Area of Darkness* that it is still through European eyes that India looks at her ruins and at her art (222), Chaudhuri only half agrees and says much in the spirit, if not in the tone of Naipaul, that he indicts the Hindu view of art not for the weakness of its influence but for its strength. In Nirad Chaudhuri’s and V.S. Naipaul’s works one encounters the central fact of empire. Whereas Naipaul sees this as a further evidence of a decomposing civilization, Chaudhuri sees it as a proof of British resilience and even British grace. For both Naipaul and Chaudhuri their journeys are essential stages in self-knowledge. Naipaul’s *India: A Million Mutinies Now* shows how his visit to India confirmed him in his awareness of commitment and further reveals how India might have been the cause he at once craves for and condemns in his writing. Both Naipaul and Chaudhuri reveal in their masterly prose and their cynicism their enduring inheritance of the Empire.

*Snakes and Ladders* frees itself from colonial inheritance. It attempts to show what contemporary India is all about. In the “Foreword” to this collection Gita Mehta says:

India gained self-government in 1947, living through our first half century of nationhood has been a roller-coaster ride, the highs so sudden we have become light-headed with exhilaration, the lows too deep to even contemplate solution, as if the game of Snakes
and Ladders had been invented to illustrate our attempts to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment without jettisoning from our past that which is valuable or unique.

Sometimes in our glacial progress towards liberation from the injustices that make a mockery of political freedoms, it seems we Indians have vaulted over the painful stages experienced by other countries, lifted by ladders we had no right to expect. At other times we have been swallowed by the snakes of past nightmares, finding ourselves after half a century of independence back at square one.

Perhaps historians will 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 extra-ordinary world spinning through an extra-ordinary time.5

In an attempt to understand India, Nirad Chaudhari in his essay *The Continent of Circe* which is subtitled "an essay on the peoples of India" says that it is "an essay in the primary meaning of the word, a trial in exposition which cannot but be sketchy and tentative".6

In the essay "My Damned Soil" Gita Mehta in order to find a definition for India refers to an inscription which defines India as a
"land of hoary antiquity and fabulous contrast" and remembers a story from the days of 'hoary antiquity.' She says that it is a cliché to say that India is not really a nation, a nation with the diamond-hard convictions of national identity. It is not even a single civilization but several civilizations in separate stages coexisting despite their contradictions:

For me, this lack of homogeneity, which so threatens the assembly line sensibilities of the end of the twentieth century, is the essence of India's genius, her greatest strength. You may not be able to control what you can't grasp - but you can't destroy it either.

To take the obvious contradictions first. Most Indians view most other Indians as foreigners, and with considerable justification. The British only governed two thirds of India. The other third was made up of over five hundred independent kingdoms, so the geography, the races, the languages, the customs of India have less in common with each other than do their equivalents among the actually separate nations of Europe or the Americans. (20)

Referring to the physical features of the capital of India, Delhi, which has been the centre of at least seven empires, Gita Mehta says that "even a casual drive through the city forces one to brood on the transience of Gloria mundi" (21):
Behind the huge elephant gates of a fortress known simply as the Old Fort because no one can quite remember who built it, archeologists are excavating the ruins of what they believe to be the sacred empire of the Hindu religious epic, *The Mahabharata*. Down the road is the vast sandstone showpiece built to house the viceroy of what was once the most powerful empire on earth, the British Empire. Further on is the mighty Red Fort that housed the Viceroy’s predecessors, the Moghul emperors, who called themselves ‘the Shadow of God on Earth’ and gave audience from a Peacock Throne in gem-encrusted chambers the same fortress from whose battlements the flag of an independent nation was first unfurled when a truncated India finally kept, in the words of India’s first Prime Minister, her ‘tryst with destiny.’

That destiny was political freedom, an assurance of birthright. Only this defines the contemporary India.

Other definitions fall before the evidence. We are not of a single racial origin. The Aryans of the northern plains are distinct from the Dravidians of the south, and both have little in common with the Mongol inhabitants of the east. Not even language. (21-22)
Further Gita Mehta gives an account of the various languages spoken in India contributing to the diversity of the country. The Indian government officially recognizes seventeen major Indian languages, each with an individual script, in which state business can be conducted. Apart from these, there is the classical language of Sanskrit and four hundred other languages, some written, others oral. English has become the joint language of administration, "a language which Indians have made uniquely their own in more than two centuries of usage" (22). Gita Mehta says thus:

If speaking in tongues is a mark of divine inspiration then surely India can claim to be the most divinely inspired place on the planet... To impose a common national language, with its implications of a common culture, on a country as richly diverse as India would tragically diminish us. (22)

As far as religion is concerned, Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jain, Parsi, Jew, Buddhist, Sikh, and so on have found a safe refuge in the country. In India there is no escape from religion. Of all the elements that have contributed to India's diversity, "nothing has so enriched the 'land of fabulous contrast' as religion." (22) Each river or lake or monument is endowed with some tale of divine mythology and each jungle shows how India's tribals have worshipped nature:
We have the tree under which the Buddha reached enlightenment. Hindu temples built under the guidance of the gods, mosques so vast that 70,000 faithful can kneel together on their prayer mats to say *namaaz*. The stupas and monasteries of the Buddhist faith are carved into our mountains. The stone colossi of the Jain religion dominate our hillsides. The parsis have their marble and gold Gurudwaras. There are the cathedrals of Armanians who fled the pogroms of the Ottoman Empire, the synagogues of the Jews. And there are the countless shrines which commemorate the countless holy men of India. (23)

And yet the diversities of India's past are more than matched by the immense complexities of her present. In the essay "Who is Afraid of being Indian?" Gita Mehta says that to be an Indian today is to be assaulted by the enormity of the tasks inherited with freedom. And a sense of impotence differentiates the present generation from the generation that fought for India's independence. And she sees India's continued existence as a democracy as one of the miracles of this war-weary century:

A concept invented in Greece two thousand years ago for a tiny city-state has been expanded in India to include nine hundred million people in a gigantic debate on the future.
One out of six people on the planet is an Indian—engaged in creating a mutually acceptable world. Reality, no matter how unpalatable, cannot be denied in such a massive public forum. With each election comes a greater demand for accountability, a greater insistence that problems be addressed. With each increase in accountability comes an increased sense of individual power, or refusal to settle for the injustices of the past. Such effrontery has already carried half our population, many who once lived below the poverty line, into the light of possibility. This has been achieved in the first fifty years of our freedom.

So when I am asked today, why bother to be an Indian, I cannot confess to any very noble reason. Just an avid curiosity about the future.

Malcolm Muggeridge, a British humanitarian, observes that people whose stomachs are empty have no idea what democracy means. Still India is surviving as a democracy.

In the essay, “The Greatest Show on Earth,” Gita Mehta describes how for fifty years those dangerous freedoms have been maintained by millions of people with empty bellies who knew each election is a poker game being played for the highest stakes. She mentions how the physical enormities of putting such a huge electoral machine into operation make it “the greatest show on earth” says:
Ironically, there is no problem that has arisen in other democracies - many of them older and richer than India - which India has not struggled to surmount. Sectarianism, affirmative action, political assassination, civil war, unstable coalitions, the electronic marketing of political aspirants, separatism, corruption.

The wonder is that India still exists to surmount them. And not only Indians think so. Commenting on the Indian general election of 1996, an editorial in the Financial Times of London noted. 'The democracy of India is a wonder of the world'.

And its guardian is not the politician so beloved of feature writers but the faceless, nameless all-enduring Indian voter. (159)

In the essay "Banish Poverty" Gita Mehta describes the tales of displacement of the rag-pickers who, according to a medical officer, are making a valuable contribution to the recycling industry. The rag-pickers foraging through the huge garbage dump on the outskirts of Delhi are, according to the paper tycoon's casual observation, neither untouchables nor local sweepers but are from different parts of India - Bhoomiyas from Rajputana, Bhats who once held mythic power over kings, fishermen from Eastern India, tribals from central India and craftsmen from Southern India who migrated to the capital in search
of their livelihood. Gita Mehta brings out the irony of their present plight by describing the gray urban landscape:

The handkerchief covering my face did little to protect me from the fetid quicksand under my feet. Why hadn’t I realized this garbage dump would not be solid ground? That I would be sinking into the effluvia from the deaths, marriages, examination papers, hospital refuse of a giant metropolis of nine million people?

Beyond the dump flowed the holy Jumna River. On the far bank I could see the stone battlements of the Red Fort, where languid Moghul emperors had once enjoyed the evening breeze in their marbled wind pavilions while their subjects promenaded on the river bank below. One emperor had even famously sighed, ‘If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this.’

Today, to the left of the battlements a power-station belched grey smoke into the air, colouring the mile of garbage a uniform grey like filthy flannel. (36)

And she further says:

Beyond the discards from an urban world stretched fields of young wheat, the green of manicured lawns. I could see veiled women in brightly coloured long skirts with brass pots
balanced on their heads walking towards a well. Picturesque peasants in turbans tended their oxen or piled hay into high wooden carts. This serene rural landscape was the sleight of hand by which India could make even poverty acceptable. But the truth was, a few bad breaks and the picturesque peasants could join the faceless transients across the highway trying to make a living from the streaming grey garbage dump. (41)

Gita Mehta says that the sanitation official in the Delhi Municipal Corporation was more honest in his observation:

'Ve great Indians! It has become second nature in us to tolerate what is beneath human dignity in others, just so long as we ourselves remain untouched by it. These people would not be collecting and selling dirt if the Government could create other jobs for them. But the Government is happy spending fortunes to make sure that only slogans are heard by every Indian.' (42)

In the essay "Re-inventing the wheel," the wheel referred to is the spinning wheel in the centre of the Indian flag, which acknowledges that textiles are a living Indian art form still producing masterpieces equal to the past. Gita Mehta here illustrates the debate between the traditional Indian weaver's function and the function of wide-scale industrial expansion of Indian textile industry due to which
India is today numbered among the ten most industrialized nations on earth. In this essay Gita Mehta picks two tales from Indian mythology in order to illustrate what a weaver means to India. In the first tale the Goddess of the subcontinent taking the form of cosmic spider enmeshes the Aryan god of mechanization and progress. This story is an uncanny foretelling of the European connection with India and its textiles. The wealth flowing from the trade of Indian textile turned a British trading company into the greatest empire on earth. The Empire in turn imported those gods of progress, the machines of Industrial Revolution, into India. Gita Mehta's use of the myth of the multiplying fabric of the queen from *The Mahabharata* seems to symbolize the rich and multifaceted culture of the Indian weaving tradition which is inexhaustible. And so the paradox that Indian textile industry is now facing:

This precise paradox – craft or machine, an ancient culture or contemporary progress – haunts India today. A large school of Indian thought believes the spinning-wheel in the centre of the Indian flag is symptomatic of all that is backward in India. Symbols once useful in expelling a foreign empire and its exploitations are now dangerous anachronisms in a country where – so the argument goes – wealth must come from increasing and more efficient mechanization.
But eighteen million Indians feed themselves from the profits of these handlooms. A further five million Indians each their livelihood as craftsmen of a specifically Indian culture. How are they to co-exist with the pressures of modern economics and life-styles? And if this avenue of employment is closed can India ever hope to create factory jobs for twenty-three million additional workers? (58)

In the tale of the spinning goddess, the goddess having enmeshed the foreign god of mechanization in her web becomes mother, wife, and daughter to progress.

Like the spinning goddess, Indian weavers have been the mother to Indian industry, the wife to Indian nationalism. The odds are that they will succeed in becoming heirs to modern India's progress. They have done so in the past. The scientific developments which dealt the death blow to so much Indian culture have constantly reinforced India's textiles. (54)

And so the paradoxical answer that Gita Mehta finds is:

The paradox is this. Global mass production may seem an answer to poverty, but only a living culture can generate sustained wealth. There is a further paradox. If twenty-three million craftsmen depend on India's
culture for their living. India's very culture depends on giving them a living.

Without our craftsmen we would be indistinguishable from any other country. Our unique multiplicities limited by the machine. In the end machines can only reproduce a culture, they can't invent one – and who is going to produce machines fast enough to reproduce the failures created by the encyclopaedic knowledge. the endlessly changing adaptations of eighteen million weavers? (55-56).

This essay contains some rich and elegant descriptions of Indian weaving culture and colour culture and how the knowledge of colours and cultures is preserved by the weaver in the fabric:

Waves of migrant weavers, displaced by industrialization, weave their homesickness into their fabrics, and those who buy them buy woven epics of dislocation. Tribal weavers use the brush and the loom to record the history of their travels, their work treasured by the anthropologist. (55)

In the essay "Trees" Gita Mehta draws the ecological significance of trees from their philosophical and cultural significance, thus inferring that by cutting down a true Indians will be quite literally cutting themselves off from their cultural and philosophical roots. The essay is filled with many references varying from mythology to tribal lore, from legend to literature in order to illustrate the diverse
significance of trees and forests and their life-giving principle. In India the devout believe "the tree is all that remains on earth of the sacred Soma plant which provides nourishment to the gods themselves" (190) and the forest "a tirth, a place of pilgrimage as holy as any temple" (190). To the artists of India the tree gifted art to mankind. According to a legend,

the gods had become quarrelsome and Vac, Sacred Speech, fled the profaning gods to hide in water. When the vengeful gods claimed her, the intimidated waters gave her up. So Sacred Speech fled the waters and took sanctuary in a forest. Again the gods claimed her, but the trees refused to surrender her to the spiteful gods. Instead the trees gave Vac to man in offerings made of wood: the flute, the drum, the lute, the pen. With these men were instructed to tell the creation. (190-191).

To the philosophers of India the forest is the symbol of an idealized cosmos, an idyllic world of contemplation. The puranas, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the epics of The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, the Yoga sutras and the medical studies of the Ayurveda have all come out of India's forests. The Buddha and Mahavira, the founders of Buddhism and Jainism, two of India's great religions, have attained enlightenment not on the road to some Damascus but while meditating under a tree. In Indian mythology, by providing sanctuary to the divine, trees have become sacred in themselves. Throughout
India, trees are worshipped as incarnations of the goddess and in tribal India the tree is venerated as the earth-mother. Thus the forest, for Gita Mehta, "is India's central metaphor for the Creation, venerated as a symbol of inexhaustible fertility, represented again and again in Indian art as the tree of life, referred to again and again in Indian literature as a paradigm of the cosmos" (193). By replacing the veneration of the tree with consumption of the tree "it is as if the subcontinent is no longer able to connect cause with effect" (194). In a tribal story, a king who plants plenty of trees in his kingdom, after his death, is taken to a palace built in heaven for him. And the saying in the story goes like this: "Because it is said by us Santals, the tree you have tended in this world will bring you honour in the next world and all the worlds beyond" (198). Gita Mehta not only agrees with the Santals but also believes that there is more than honour in the act:

For us the preservation of trees is as much a matter of cultural as of ecological survival. The forests of India have been the cradle, the university, the monastery, the library of Indian civilization. By exchanging our essential love of the tree – which gave us a view of the world in which man and nature were dependent on each other – for a Western culture which has made man the monarch and the consumer of nature, clearing forests first for agriculture and then for industry, we are exchanging our capacity to understand the
relationship between living things for a purely linear, purely project-orientated view of the world. (198-199)

In the legend the trees bear a fearful curse by gods for surrendering Sacred Speech to man: “Because through instruments of wood you have given what is sacred to mankind, so again with instruments made of your bodies, with axes with wooden handles, and thunderbolts will men cut you down” (194-195). Thus Gita Mehta combines in her presentation mythological accounts of the sacredness of plant life for the growth of humanity and modern concerns of ecology. Her account thus at once offers a blend of the past and the present and shows vividly a continuity between these two.

In the essays of *Snakes and Ladders* the technique of Gita Mehta in some way seems to be similar to that of V.S.Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* in which the protagonist, in his attempt to escape from the chaotic, hollow and disorderly experiences in his life which lead him to a sense of loneliness and identity crisis, tries to bridge the gap between his Aryan ancestors and the modern post-colonial West-Indian sensibility.

*Snakes and Ladders* is a traditional Indian game played by rolling dice to determine how many squares a player can move his marker up a board, starting at square one and finishing at square one hundred suggesting unpredictability. But more than that the actual
board is suggestive of danger, an austere geometry of squares broken by angled ladders and snakes with yawning jaws. From this ancient Indian game Gita Mehta picks the title for her essays which is subtitled as “A View of Modern India”. And the significance of the game supports it:

Of course, like all ancient Indian games Snakes and Ladders was devised for a purpose other than keeping children amused on rainy afternoons and I have seen sixteenth-century cloth depictions of the game which once hung in isolated Himalayan monasteries. Just as the board game of chess was designed to teach the strategies of war, so Snakes and Ladders was played ritually as Gyanbaji, the Game of Knowledge, a meditation on humanity’s progress towards liberation. (vii-viii).

And the work opens with the following epigraph:

I should be sorely 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 way what has been discovered.

(John Wolfgang Von Goethe, 1787), (V).

The title *Snakes and Ladders* signifies Indians’ “attempt to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment” (viii) without jettisoning
from their "past that which is valuable or unique" (viii). Sometimes they achieve and sometimes they fail.

In the essay "My Damned Soil" the author says,

    In India we are still forced to remember that people are individuals as well as anthropological or economic statistics. The world has lived so long under the yoke of Malthusian projections that Indian humanity has become a dirty word, meaning only population explosions, though nothing has proved so damaging to modern India as the patronization of master-race economics with its real fear of the poor and therefore its unsaid but unmistakable view of the poor as sub humans who must be forced to accommodate the logic of economics.

    The fact is that even if half of us dropped dead and the population ceased populating entirely we could not become some sanitized suburbia, never turn into Singapore. (29)

India is a continent, not a city. And what statistics state is something that seems to counter the prophecies of the pessimists, as the author points out:

    And if statistics have any magic, here are some to counter the prophesies of the pessimists. India is among the ten most industrialized nations on earth. We turn out five million
university graduates a year. We have a space programme in advance of many Western European countries. Most importantly, we are self-sufficient in food.

The reverse side of these statistics is that self-sufficiency in food has not been matched by efficiency in getting food to the mouths of the hungry. The huge increase in university graduates has not been equaled by the creation of jobs to absorb them. The ability to launch satellites into space does not disguise the lack of irrigation and electrification on the ground. (30)

Living through such immensely complicated problems for five decades, India still retains the privileges of freedom – the secret ballot, a free press, an independent judiciary. Gita Mehta gives the reason for this:

We haven't set fire to the past on the spacious grounds that only the destruction of the past would allow us a future. We have not indulged in wholesale institutional savagery on the equally spacious grounds that only cruelty to present generations will ensure utopia for future ones. (30)

Still India progresses, and so Gita Mehta describes it as “a monumental juggernaut of contradictory realities”. (30)

Regarding the identity of India as a nation, Gita Mehta says that India is a country with no cohesive identity, thus failing to
achieve the dramatic upheavals of Western political theory like the Revolution or the Long March. Sunil Khilnani in his essay *The Idea of India* says:

The ideas of the state, nation, revolution, democracy, equality, racial purity, economic growth and many more have not only defined the West's own habitat: they have reconstituted the entire world, if invariably in localized accents... Twentieth century Indians for their part voluntarily adopted many of these ideas and welcomed the opportunities of regular contact with the world beyond their own country. They have voyaged widely in search of livelihood and ideas, and they have discovered themselves through the clarities, oversights and yearnings that distance induces. The exact character of the homelands they have journeyed from has proved elusive, and often imaginary. Where in the world is India? Historical precedent suggests that it is possible to be wildly – if profitably – wrong about its geographical location (remember Columbus). And there is a venerable tradition that has insisted on seeing India as a conceptual rather than a physical space. 'A country', as Rabindranath Tagore put it, 'is not territorial, but ideational'; or, in the more demotic cadence of the tourist board poster, 'India is a state of mind.'
The annoying absence of identity, which drove the bureaucrats of the British Raj crazy, turned the satraps of the Moghul Empire into opium addicts, is frustrating the present rulers of India who struggle to centralize a land that has no centre but is only a "Field of Experience" (20):

Those who believe in the dialectics of materialism or the authority of history wander through the ruins of glorious empires and tell us India has learned nothing from the past. Others play statistical roulette and tell us India has no future. Professor John Kenneth Galbraith, sent by President Kennedy as American Ambassador to India, came up with a catchy, even accurate phrase when he described India as a 'functioning anarchy' (20).

The essay "My Damned Soil" illustrates the inescapable and immense diversities and complexities of present India inherited from those of its past almost in every aspect. The principal of them is its geography. Gita Mehta describes it by saying:

India is the sum of a million worlds enclosed by oceans on three sides, the mighty Himalayas on the north. Within these boundaries are voluptuous eastern cultures circled by paddy fields and Western desert kingdoms locked in stone fortifications. Descendants of India's earliest inhabitants occupy the jungles sweeping through her heartland; three-thousand-year-old
sacred cities still flourish on the banks of her
immense rivers; merchant cultures still grow
rich from her ancient ports. (21)

And hence, the author says the people of India see themselves as belonging to an Indian universe defying the vagaries of history. The physical features of their capital support the logic of this view.

As for some comprehensible definition for India Gita Mehta broadly concludes that "definitions are hard to come by, but there are some great descriptions" (163). And some of them that the author picks go like this. Mark Twain at the end of the nineteenth century describes India as

... the land of dreams and romance, of fabulous wealth and fabulous poverty, of splendour and rags, of palaces and hovels, of famine and pestilence, of genii and giants and Aladdin lamps, of tigers and elephants, the cobra and the jungle, the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition, whose yesterdays bear date with the mouldering antiquities of the rest of the nations – the sole country under the sun that is endowed with imperishable interest for alien prince and alien peasant, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bond and free, the one land all men desire to see, and having seen once, by ever a glimpse, would not
In Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Continent of Circe*, the vast continent of India is identified with the demoness, Circe. Circe was an enchantress in Greek mythology. Any one who drank from her cup was turned into a pig. India is the Sorceress. Apart from this, Gita Mehta at some instances draws allusions to some Indian myth or legend in which India is identified with the Goddess. In the world of ordinary man Gita Mehta chooses the small fictitious town of Malgudi that appears in R.K. Narayan's novels which is in itself "half village and half contemporary urban India" (213). In Malgudi there is a continuous "collision between the two" (213) – village and urban India – and the lives of the characters chronicle the life of modern India.

The traditional description of India has always been as Karma Bhoomi, the land of experience. Referring to this description Gita Mehta observes that India is "the Land of Experience,"

Where everything has happened so often before that even history is reduced to troublesome echoes in an empty cave. But no experience in the Land of Experience, nothing in all her yesterdays, has equipped her for a world where her faith in the encompassing unity of life is in daily, even hourly collision with the explosion of fragmented information coming from outside.

(164)
Referring to a writer’s acerbic observation of India as a civilization, Gita Mehta says:

Dismissing the possibility of ever defining India, in 1945 the writer Alex Aronson noted acerbically that India was a civilization, and ‘civilization is always a process; not a being but a becoming.’

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)

In the essay “My Damned Soil” Gita Mehta refers to a tree in Bombay which has on one side a white plaster of the Christian Cross, on the another, a small image of the elephant-headed Ganesh, the Hindu god of protection, and on the third a small concrete altar on which the Koran is placed. This, according to the author, admirably illustrates civilization as the degree to which diversity is attained, unity retained:

At our best in India, we still have a civilized tolerance that can accommodate three faiths in one tree-trunk because at its best the
culture of India is like a massive sponge, absorbing everything while purists shake their zhead in despair. Other cultures have sought to expel all foreign-devil influences from their shores. India has always shown an appetite for foreign devils, matched only by her capacity to make them go native.

It is as though we are unable to conceive of a culture strong enough to destroy us. Unlike China and Japan, the gates of India have never been closed, and perhaps this has given us a special stamina. Japan was the secret kingdom, the impenetrable civilization – but where have all the Kinonos gone? In India we are still wearing our saris and our dhotis, not in defiant chauvinism but because quite simply that is how we dress, inspite of the fact that as late as the 1930s, when it was evident that the imperialist jig was up, an Indian official of the British Empire could still be fired if he turned up at his government office wearing native clothes.

So when I see painted on the walls of sixteenth century Rajput villas pictures of the god Krishna playing his flute not to a herd of cows in a meadow but from the back seat 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. (24).
In her concern with holism, Gita Mehta compares herself favourably with the later Naipaul of *India: A Million Mutinies Now*. Mutinies caused by factionalism, communalism, caste, and fanaticism are a reminder that the spirit of unity in diversity will now vanish if such a state of affairs continues. Naipaul's visualization of Indian culture here in a sense offers a condemnation of the savagery at the heart of Indian civilization as seen through the eyes of an anthropologist in *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*. Similarly Prafulla Mohanti's *Changing Village, Changing Life* picturises rural India's socio-cultural turmoils. Naipaul's book offers us mirror images of India. Helping one to come to grips with the Indian situation. The thesis that Naipaul seems to advance in *India: A Million Mutinies Now* is that in adherence to the particularities lies the strength of each group. Naipaul is careful enough to point out at the close of his carefully argued book that "the liberation of spirit that has come to India could not come as release alone". In India with its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbance. It has come as "rage and revolt." And hence India is a country of a million mutinies. If that is Naipaul's approach, Gita Mehta's follows the pattern of a discovery of the motherland in the mode of Jawaharlal Nehru whose insight into the fullness of forces that have gone to make up India is evident in *The Discovery of India*. In *The Discovery of India* we pass through a series of perspectives on India's history —
reaching back to Mohenjo-daro and then passing through the emerging global world of our own day with its intricate patterns of conflict and integration. In this book Nehru argues that Indian thought accords well with the scientific temper. He says,

In India in many obvious ways we have a greater distance to travel. And yet there may be fewer major obstructions on our way, for the essential basis of Indian thought for ages past, though not its later manifestations, fits in with the scientific temper and approach, as well as with internationalism. It is based on a fearless search for truth, on the solidarity of man, even on the divinity of everything living, and on the free and co-operative development of the individual and the species, ever to greater freedom and higher stages of human growth.9

It is this modern vision of India that Sunil Khilnani speaks about in his *The Idea of India*, which conveys the diversity of spirit, which characterizes modern India. What Khilnani tries to reconcile is Nehru’s desire to modernize India and insert it into what he understood as the movement of universal history. Yet the India created by this ambition has come increasingly to stand in an ironic relationship to the trajectories of Western modernity. The themes and conflicts that animate India’s politics today like the assertion of community and group have a wide resonance. What Sunil Khilnani sees is that modern Indian politics continues to plunder the nationalist
pantheon for its iconography. At the same time in its practical struggles it moves away from the nationalist world and its distinctive temperament. These struggles constitute the identity of India’s history since 1947. It is this spirit of encompassing diverse ideas of what India is that is evident in Gita Mehta’s *Snakes and Ladders*. 
REFERENCES


