Chapter-6

Snakes and Ladders

Glimpses of Modern India

After works like Karma Cola, Raj and A river Sutra, readers of Gita Mehta get accustomed to reading things Indian; Indian culture, Indian metaphysics, Indian religions, mythology and so on. Though her tone in these works is neutral, it seems that she makes efforts to uphold Indian culture. Then in 1997 comes Snakes and Ladders. A common reader will find himself in a state of surprise, not because of any significant breakthrough in her prose style, but because of her representation of corrupt Indian scenario. The earlier effort to explain Indian culture is completely missing till the end of this collection of essays. It is obviously not a work in which she has depicted collective past to fit into present. In these essays the narration seems to be of a foreign visitor looking at the scenario in a confused state; someone who is familiar with India does not find even rampant corruption surprising or agitating. The essays talk about numerous aspects: history of the nation and individuals, political leaders, Indian villagers, poverty, literature, culture, art, life style, voters, elections, communism and some other minor aspects. As a keen observer Gita Mehta revisits fifty years of independence and does not miss significant points. The contemporary scenario in 1997 is in contrast with the cultural archetypes. As a diasporic writer, she depicts this situation with sharpness but she is not able to resolve the issues. The sarcasm continues till part three. As the author reaches towards the end, there is sudden stroke of sentimentalization. In a romantic fervor, she depicts the paradoxes of a culture which is complex yet simple. Observations and remarks in the fourth part are devoid of sarcasm or irony.
Snakes and Ladders, along with earlier works, make it clear that Gita Mehta’s knowledge of her culture is sound and unquestionable. But from the point of view of a literary work, it seems that this collection of essays stands last. Karma Cola was also a non-fiction but it almost read like a fiction. Interconnectedness of the chapters was never an issue in it. But among many weak points of Snakes and Ladders, interconnectedness emerges first. Because of Gita Mehta’s diasporic consciousness, she looks for redemption of her homeland or community. Literary creation has this power. But to assert these redemptions, the author has to be a conscious and rational mediator between the ways out and the changing socio-cultural, political and economic changes. Decolonization is also an important factor.

The critical cannon has not held Snakes and Ladders as a poor work of art, but it has surprised the readers, both Indian and western. The reason behind this surprise is not the depiction of discouraging picture of contemporary India. It is the week presentation that surprised all. Apart from this, her diasporic status makes her situation vulnerable as she has to deal with two cultures. It seems that she is suspended in a limbo. When the work was published, the Indians thought that she wrote for westerners; the western block thought it was a critique meant for the natives. Some critics have been harsh to say that Gita Mehta hurriedly completed the manuscript to get it published on the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence.

There are many reviewers who have almost discarded Snakes and Ladders as a weak work. Let us quote a sarcastic remark:

The formula is simple. You go away. You write a book. The book is about India, the specific India of your childhood... or an imaginatively recreated India. Or any kind of India. You give an interview in which you claim that distance has
lent you objectivity. In Mehta’s case it gave her courage-
some might say 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.

Though we come across such acidic remarks of reviewers, there are
critic, both Indian and western who have praised Gita Mehta for her wit
and frankness in portraying modern India. Barbara Crossettee mentions
that Gita Mehta has written with directness. She adds that Mehta’s stay
in London and New York has added interesting dimension to what India
has become in fifty years. C. J. S Wallia notes that public reading at
Black Oak Bookstore was very well received.

In the ‘Forward’, the author describes the title which is a
traditional Indian game. It is played with rolling dice. The board has
number one as a starting point and number hundred as an end. By
rolling the dice, it is decided how many squares a player can go ahead.
What makes this game interesting is the presence of snakes and adders.
Getting at the base of a ladder means one can climb it and move many
numbers ahead. But the presence of snakes is a threat. If caught by one
of these serpents, one has to slide down to the tale of the serpent. Thus
the game is dominated by the only factor of chance which is decided by
the throw of the dice. She describes India’s journey of fifty years of
independence in the terms of the game of snakes and ladders. There
have been many moments of progress, like the sudden uplift through a
ladder. At certain times, political blunders have led us down the ride
suspending progressive steps in vain. What is most striking here is the
element of chance. It seems that the fate of the nation is at the mercy of
the factor of chance; there is total absence of will. We will return to this
topic in later part of the discussion.
As the starting point of the game is number one, independence is the starting point for India. It is beginning of social, political, economic and cultural changes. The title meaningfully signifies that many steps of national progress ahead have been dragged backward. Amidst the lack of ‘political will’ most of political assertions have been distorted by vested interests and corruption. In this situation of ‘functioning anarchy’ a common man lives in a state of willed ignorance to make the situation tolerable. For India and Indians, there has always been a dichotomy between western rational approach and traditional meditation. Because of age old traditions we cannot totally get rid of the cultural inheritance; on the other hand, after being colonized for a prolonged period we cannot get rid of western craze. Gita Mehta evaluates this situation as an anxious spectator and as a pained and confused insider. Her confusion is clearly expressed in the last paragraph of the ‘forward’:

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 in them facets of an extraordinary world spinning through an extraordinary time. (Snakes and Ladders, p.vii)

The opening chapter establishes her roots in Indian soil. From chapter three till the end, there are scathes of India and her struggle through fifty years of independence. India has had a dual effect on the west; bewilderment as well as attraction. The epigraph to the book overtly exhibits how people of different generation, different countries and different times have tried to explain India in their own terms. This epigraph by Goethe reminds us of the western tendency to romanticize India in the terms of their individual perceptions. As we discussed in
Karma Cola, many times these descriptions are misleading. This is exactly what Mehta does in these essays—viewing India in her own terms. However, her birth and stay in India imparts her some authenticity. What baffles us is the views of Mark Twain and Goethe. Goethe remarked about India in the later part of the eighteenth century (1787) while Mark Twain wrote about India in the later part of the nineteenth century (1897). After one hundred years, in 1997, again Gita Mehta is writing about India. A significant question arises here: can India be the same as she was in 1787 and 1897? During a period of three long centuries, India cannot be the same. An obvious answer to this question is affirmative. Since the element of time is always on flux, nothing can remain the same for a longer period of time.

The opening chapter of *Snakes and Ladders* is significant from various points of view. It establishes Mehta’s family as the one totally involved in the freedom movement. Some events of independence struggle have been interwoven in the narration. An implication is clear: she belongs to a family of freedom fighters and her parents had sacrificed a lot. Because of her birth in such a family, it is obvious that the degraded situation of India pains her immensely. We come across certain important points in this chapter; the freedom struggle from 1943 to 1947, the involvement of her family in this struggle, exploitation of the natives by colonizers and social change brought about by the freedom movement. Gita Mehta’s mother was born and brought up in traditional Indian way. She was kept behind *purdah*, educated in a separate women’s quarter and taught the arts required of a woman. But Mehta’s father, in the true spirit of the nationalists, liberated her mother from traditional bonds. He taught her ballroom dance. Later he taught her to play bridge. He made her learn cycling. This is how Indian men involved in the freedom movement were coming out of their patriarchal shelves and giving women equal role in all walks of life.
Gita Mehta was born in 1943. Her father was arrested and jailed several times. Because of his involvement in the fight against the British, many times he had to remain underground. Gita Mehta mentions that her mother along with children followed her father from jail to jail.

In order to grasp the sense of being colonized and the feeling of being ruled by the British in a colonized world she asks her parents about their worst memory of that period. Thus she is asking for recreation of history by those who lived it. This recreation is done through use of memory. Here the concept of memory needs some attention. Memory is a selective process and it has its own truths. Since it depends on an individual’s perception, it is vulnerable to the individual preferences and prejudices. The process of recreation of past through memory is full of selection, elimination, alterations, glorification and exaggeration. In this process the resultant recreation of past is indigenous and thus not authentic. However, the involvement of her family in the freedom struggle and her stay in the subcontinent till young age endow her with some authenticity. She asked her mother to share the worst memory of colonial life. Her mother told her of an experience when she was sixteen and was boarding a train to Lahore. At railway station an old English lady pulled off the turban of her retainer. In her fury she yells at the English lady. This incident is an evidence of the inhuman approach of the British towards the natives. It hints at the air of superiority in which they used to dwell. The incident is reminiscent of Gandhiji's experience in South Africa. On the other hand, her father described an incident of different kind- an act of retaliation in a disguised manner. Once he was asked to fly a British official to North West frontier. While he was climbing into the cockpit, the British official called him a ‘bloody native’. They landed on a field almost hundred miles away from Quetta. It was an extremely hot summer day of the desert and her father flew away leaving the British official in the midst of a
disserted land. Here the author rightly remarks that people involved in freedom struggle who were almost persecuted by the British never talk about their own agony and suffering. While narrating these incidents there is a faint flavour of heroism. But it is the post-colonial situation which makes it heroic. At the real time of these incidents, these must have been tormenting, threatening and insulting experiences.

We come across one more incident of colonial persecution through the incident narrated by the author’s uncle. Under the British Raj, he was sent to Kala Pani – a cellular jail in port Blair. He was jailed at the tender age of fourteen years and the British trespassed all the limits of persecution. At this point we are reminded of Raj which narrates many incidents of this kind. The fictional incidents of Raj are vindicated by such real incidents of Snakes and Ladders.

The narrations of these experiences also make an important point that the freedom fighters were fearless and selfless individuals. Their sole motivation was a noble cause – independence. They did not have any self-importance, religious animosity and ideological dogmatism. The author laments the fact that though freedom came at the cost of thousands of lives and numerous sacrifices, the real freedom fighters are put into margin. The power politics has taken charge of the fate of the country and the so called powerful people used every possible means to wipe off these names. Decolonization has not produced the promised freedom; it has only been replaced by internal colonization. Absolute power has corrupted our leaders absolutely. In order to retain power, the leaders have created a vicious atmosphere where to speak against the authority is considered a blasphemy.

In Raj the author has explained the Bengal famine created by the British. In expectation of the Japanese attack, the British rulers got hold of grains and left Bengal in a state of famine. Suddenly the possibility of
Japanese attack was dismissed and the grains were pushed back. It went into the hands of black marketers. While people were dying of starvation, those black marketers were selling the grains at unimaginable prices. One may question the authenticity of this incident for Raj is a fictional work. But Snakes and Ladders authenticates the same incident by noting the facts in the first chapter.

An important question is asked: why should one long be an Indian. A general image of India among the westerners is that India is poor, dirty, backward and corrupt. Up to some extent the allegations are not totally wrong. The author explains that India has many issues to resolve. To name few we can say that over population, poverty and illiteracy have always haunted India and we have not been able to improve the situation. There is an agitation against the apathy of Indian citizens. The author notes that about fifty percent of voters do not exercise their power at all. In fact she uses the term impotence to describe our attitude towards elections and public affairs. The justification put forward by such apathy is that an individual cannot make any change in the system and it is so corrupt that no voices are heard.

We claim to have ‘unity in diversity’ in our country. In fact this phrase has become a cliché devoid of truth. It seems that we are blind to the realities while claiming unity in diversity. The element of diversity has proved too dominating to impart any unity to the nation. The author observes that India is divided in the terms of religions, sects, faith, states, communities and every other conceivable element causing difference. Every state has its own indigenous culture, language and identity. They differ so effectively from state to state that every state appears as an individual country. Certain states are well developed in all aspects while some are comparatively in primitive condition. The country had to establish a ‘National Integration Council’ but it has proved to be ineffective too. People of one state consider people of other states as
foreigners. Perhaps the genesis of this diversity lies in erstwhile princely states. There were more than five hundred independent states ruled by native kings. Each of them differed from others in the terms of geography, race, language and customs and thus the perception of other states as foreign land was born. A proof that this perception still exists is given by the author as a man from south India calls Delhi ‘abroad’. Even after sixty years of independence we have not been able to establish Hindi as national language. Half of India—north India— is radically different from the rest—south India. The government has officially accepted seventeen languages. These languages are not only used as a means of interaction but each of them has literature, newspapers, film industry and television channels of its own. Among these diversifying elements, the most powerful is religion. Every Indian citizen is first a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian or a Sikh or a Parsi or a Jain or a Buddhist or a Jew first; then a citizen of a state; and then if anything is left at all, one is an Indian. Every religion has its own places of worship; its own gods and preachers and therefore the rest of religions are considered ‘the other’.

One of the factors that generate the dominating energy of the book is its commentary on political affairs of India. Right from the inception till the fiftieth century (and even in present times) politics, power and governance have seldom been weapons for nation’s development. Though democracy is defined as a government ‘by the people, for the people, of the people’, it has never been so. Apart from this, the difference between the hereditary powers of kings and hereditary democracy is not discernible in India. It seems that the author does not have a sympathetic eye for the leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and V P Singh. She is not in a mood to spare any of these democratic leaders who have been Prime Ministers of India.
A clear tone of agitation and anger is discernible in the description of political affairs. Gandhiji had rightly remarked that real India lives in villages. If one wants to understand, India one must visit villages. At the time of independence over eighty per cent of population was living in villages. Regular electricity and water supply, health care and hygiene and education were not common phenomena in rural India. It goes without saying that the most of the people in villages depended on agriculture. So it will be rational and wise to think that irrigation, improvement in agriculture and scientific farming, and primary education should be the prime goals of the first government of India. But the author mentions with an ache that the concern of the first prime minister of India, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, was for industrial growth. He neglected the dire necessity of agricultural improvement. Perhaps he failed to notice that a significant portion of total population was starving and therefore self-dependency of food should be the major concern of the government. She notes:

...Nehru and his advisories came up with a bold new plan to take India’s bullock cart economy into a machine age of twentieth century. ...we would also build huge dams to provide power for our dream of mechanization. If every year we were importing food to stave of famine, then that was the price a poor country had to pay for progress. ((Snakes and Ladders, p.77)

Kerala was the state with the highest literacy rate in the country. In a free, peaceful and non-biased election people had voted for a communist state government. Nehru took an utterly undemocratic step and overruled the election. It is necessary to mention here that Indian constitution empowers people of the state to choose state government. People argue that Nehru’s dislike for the principles of communism was responsible for this action. In his book, Discovery of India, Nehru writes:
...but I know that in India, the Communist party is completely divorced from, and is ignorant of, the national traditions that fill the minds of the people. It believes that communism necessarily implies a contempt for past. So far as it is concerned, the history of the world began in November 1917……the Communist party…which finds no echo in the hearts of the people. ([Discovery of India, p.575].

The author is not hesitant to praise the policy of the new Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. He immediately realized the primary requirement of self-dependency of food. We are endowed with one of the largest fertile plain of the Ganga and fertile volcanic soil of the south. This factor was to be extensively exploited to become independent to fulfill food demands. He turned the focus back on agriculture. Better irrigation, soil conservation, primary education and health facilities—these were the policies. The invention of hybrid seeds with higher capacity of production came as an added advantage. Though Indian farmers were illiterate, backward and superstitious, they picked up this idea with unexpected fervor. It brought about the Green Revolution and within decades we were exporting one fourth of our agricultural produce.

The field of agriculture demanded the land from the hands of money lenders be released and redistributed among the poor farmers at lower price. This Land Reform Bill succeeded in taking away land from money lenders but it was not the poor farmers who purchased it. Moderately prosperous farmers and disguised money landers purchased the land. Thus it could not serve the purpose. The author hints at incompetence and lack of vision of our top leaders. In order to give tax concession to the farmers, our leaders borrowed money from abroad. Then to keep the prices low of common man’s requirement more money was borrowed. Thus the debt was so high that the payment of interest was also burdensome.
Among all the political leaders the one who receives the severest sarcasm and criticism is Mrs. Indira Gandhi. There may be two reasons; Mrs. Gandhi’s autocratic manner of governance; and Gita Mehta’s firsthand experience of that turbulent time. Here we shall discuss about the governance of two prime ministers in particular: Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Mr. Rajiv Gandhi. We do not come across even a single remark praising her governance. During her tenure as a prime minister, she had taken certain steps which amounted to devouring the very concept of democracy. Banks and insurance companies were nationalized. It was almost difficult for any private industry to obtain license for functioning. There was such a scarcity that if one could obtain the license, one could enjoy monopoly. Even successful industries were not allowed to produce to their capacity. They were abide by the limited government quota. This policy created a gap between huge demands and inadequate supply. It brought the supply of goods as ‘black marketing’. A black market produced huge amount of back money, not useful for a nation’s development. Permit License Raj had become a common term those days. Though the population of India at that time was four times higher than that of the USA, she could produce the same as Holland. Lack of vision for development; political misuse of power; nepotism; self complacency; whatever may be the reason, a country capable of becoming a production tiger was domesticated by its own rulers.

It rarely happens in the history of a democratic country that army is sent to curb the voice of the nation’s own citizens. Mrs. Indira Gandhi had done it more than once. In Assam people protested against the refuges and infiltration of the border. As a gesture of protest they had stopped the oil refinery. Then Indian Army was sent to Assam to curb their protest and reopen the refinery. Gita Mehta’s description of the land is subtle as it suggests more than one point. The acute depiction of the land and place around reminds us of an English Romantic’s flavour. The
serene land offers a refuge from the present day flux. Most importantly it shows the failure of the government in two respects; it could not bring the progress in this region and left it underdeveloped; secondly, it is not able to lend a sympathetic ear to the problems of such neglected region.

A man from Gujarat, Raj Narayan, accused Indira Gandhi of using her political powers, government funds and officials for winning election. He had petitioned in a court of law for justice. Initially he was not noticed. But within a short period of time certain revelations put Mrs. Gandhi in peril. She had given a government license to her elder son, Sanjay Gandhi, to make cars for his company. Three villages were evacuated and four hundred acres of land were given for this company. Banks were pressurized to give his company unsecured loans. Another company owned by his younger brother and their wives was discovered to be acting as an agent of government contract. In 1973 the whole opposition walked out of the House to express agitation. Throwing away elected members, she empowered her son to a powerful position. Simultaneously, housewives in Gujarat were out in the streets with ‘Thali Revolution’. The reason of this agitation was soaring prices of day to day requirements. They were not able to meet two ends. So at the time of sunset when they should be busy preparing dinner, they came out to streets striking thalis. It was a non-violent and peaceful protest against the gloomy living condition. Mrs. Gandhi called this protest a CIA plot and also suspected foreign instigation. Calling this non-violent show a threat to the nation, she sent Indian Arm to settle the matter. The author records the fact:

At her command the officers of the Indian Army ordered their troops to do something that had happened only once before, when nationalists were making illegal salt in defiance of British laws. ...once again Indian troops
reserved arms informing Delhi that Indian Army did not shoot at Indian citizens. (Snakes and Ladders, p.162)

In 1975, Mrs. Gandhi was found guilty by the court of law. She was given time of 20 days to appeal to the Supreme Court. However, she had been removed from the post of prime minister. She did not leave the office. On the contrary, in order to escape any threat to her power and position, she declared a state of emergency. No citizen had any right. Political opponents were handcuffed at midnight and jailed. That night power was cut off to the printing press. After power supply was resumed, the newspapers published blank pages signifying death of democracy. In the absence of opposition she amended Indian constitution and four amendments were made. One of the most poignant among them was life time immunity to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister of India could not be prosecuted during his or her position as the one. What made it poignant was immunity even before joining and after leaving the office as well. However, the Supreme Court overruled Mrs. Gandhi’s sentence. The reason behind this verdict was that the Supreme Court was made powerless. The lawyers expressed their displeasure by a silent rally. In response, offices of two hundred lawyers were destroyed by bulldozers. Innocent villagers were sterilized. National radio and television were under the guidance and supervision of the Prime Minister Office. In haste, she declared election in the bare minimum time. The leaders of the opposition were jailed. Those who were released were not allowed to leave the city. But people in India had realized the fact and this realization was strongly reflected in the following election. Not only Congress lost the power, Mrs. Gandhi herself lost her seat. New Prime Minister, Morarji Desai held a public inquiry into the cause of emergency. Unfortunately, Janata Party disintegrated very soon and in the following election Mrs. Gandhi was voted back to power.
The first half of her rule could not teach her the lessons of democracy. Along with her son, she used an obscure Sikh priest to overturn the state government of Punjab. Bhindranwala, the priest entered the Golden Temple with men armed with machine guns and declared that only Sikhs should live in Punjab. Those Sikhs who raised their voices against him were beaten up. A Sikh Inspector General of Police was shot dead. Non-Sikhs within Punjab and Sikhs outside Punjab were being terrorized. For the first time there was antagonism and hatred between Hindu and Sikh communities. But the support of Sikh community within the state corrupted Bhindranwala and he grew out of proportions. As expected, Mrs. Gandhi again called Indian Army and ordered to finish this monster. The army entered the Golden Temple and in an oblique shoot out he was killed. But in this firing, the sacred library containing ancient religious books was destroyed. Innocent worshipers were killed. As an unexpected consequence, Mrs. Gandhi was shot dead by a Sikh body guard. It triggered riots throughout the country once again. Sikhs were butchered across the country. Gurudwaras were set alight and priests were burnt alive. The Indian Army could have stopped these killings in a day but suspiciously it was ordered to remain within the barracks.

It was not a long time since Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination that her younger son, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, became the Prime Minister. He did not prove to be as corrupt as Indira Gandhi but his many actions are not unquestionable. Expensive gadgets and extravagant life style started a new trend: it was for the first time to be politically true to be rich. He opened the doors of Indian economy to the world. In an essay the author has given detailed description of India’86, a propaganda to make India visible across the globe. This liberalization fetched foreign exchange and money was pouring into common lives. The erstwhile economic modesty was replaced by high life style. He brought in IT revolution. The
mediaeval culture was given access to dish and satellite communication. The villages which did not have water supply from the government were watching television. Mr. Gandhi decided to reenact Dandi March. But it was not a march but publicity propaganda. Video clippings and photographs were taken for television advertisements. It indicated a change showing degradation in Indian politics. Earlier works done for the public welfare were being projected as election propaganda; now it is the cheap advertisements highlighting individuals.

As if continuing the earlier decedent tendency of Prime Ministers, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi also dismissed a legally elected state government in Kashmir and replaced it with a puppet government. It triggered another severe and long lasting, perhaps everlasting hatred among communities. The people of Kashmir felt that they would never get justice from autocratic central government. The mysticism of Kashmir was replaced by fanaticism of Islam. The Muslim priests prevailed upon the community and non-Muslims were terrorized. Kashmiri Pandits were compelled to leave the valley immediately. Finally Indian Army was sent to handle the situation. Soon hundred thousand Hindus were out of Kashmir, staying in refugee camps. About twenty thousand Muslims were killed in police and army actions. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi was accused of costing the nation fortunes in the purchase of Bofors Gun. In an another incident it came to surface that Mrs. Gandhi was training and financing Tamil rebels (Tamil Tigers) in order to gain support of thirty million Tamil voters. As an obedient son, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi intensified this training. Shri Lankan guerrilla leaders were received as the guests of Indian government. India often violated Shri Lankan airspace to drop supply to the Tamil militants. On Shri Lanka’s request, India sent her army to fight against the militants. In this fight, fifteen hundred soldiers were killed. As a result Mr. Rajiv Gandhi was blown away by a woman who worked as a human bomb.
The worst incident was yet to come. In order to win support of fundamentalist Muslim voters, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi misused his majority and passed a bill in the parliament stating that the Muslim women were to be subjected to the medieval interpretations of shariat. It agitated the other communities, the Hindu in particular. Realizing the enormous majority of Hindus, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi permitted Hindu fundamentalists to lay a foundation for a temple in Ayodhya. Later in December 1992, a vast gathering of Hindu fanatics, in the presence of BJP leaders, demolished Babri Mosque. It was followed by Hindu-Muslim riots of colossal size. People were slaughtered across the nation. The killings of Muslims were reverberated in Mumbai serial blasts only after a month.

It may appear that the above pages long description of two Prime Ministers, their governance, policies and corrupt practices is out of proportion. But it can be justified with two arguments; first, the author herself has given detailed description of these aspects; second, if one wants to see India and her representation, one must look at these aspects in detail. The author does not appear least hesitant to make it clear that Indian politicians have made India what she is today. The West looks at us as a ‘functioning anarchy’ and as a completely corrupt system. Hindu-Muslim antagonism and animosity is criticized across the globe. But it is necessary to bring to the world how it was created and how the politicians, generation by generation, made it sure that it was proliferated. Gita Mehta seems to be showing to the world that Indian democracy has severely failed. Such corrupt scenario reminds us of the ‘forward’ of this book where the author mentions the factor of chance in the game of snakes and ladders. Unfortunately, the destiny of India has been at the mercy of ‘chance’ and there have been few incidents when she could climb the ladder. With reference to the above description of Mrs. Gandhi and Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, it can be stated that there is not much difference between the British rulers and the leaders of
independent India in the terms of principles. The concept of democracy is to send the publically elected members to the governance machinery. In fact they are the custodians of the country. Their duty is to see the welfare of people, annihilate animosity among the people, to protect the country from threats within and without, and to set the nation on the path of progress. Perhaps these principles have remained within books and reality in the life is contrary. Leaders were and are intoxicated by the power; the absolute power always corrupts them absolutely. As we have noted in Raj, the kings had to flatter the British in order to gain their favour. If anyone raised voice, it was curbed heavily. So is the situation even after fifty years of independence. The lower category of politicians have to flatter the higher category; the higher category to the supreme authority. There is no question of raising one’s voice; it is curbed with the same force of the British. When the Hon Supreme Court can be stripped off its power, how can a common citizen think of anything like this? We can also say that there is not much difference between monarchy and the democratic system of our country. The erstwhile princely states were at the mercy of an individual’s caprice. But do we see any change while the system is democratic in nature? Nehru ignores agriculture and prefers industrial growth. Because of his personal distrust, he dismisses a legally elected state government; he even overrules the very constitution of India. Lal Bahadur Shastri put agriculture in top priority. It can be argued that the democracy rests on the constitution of India. But this constitution can be amended at your will if you have the majority in the parliament. The whole machinery is under the control of the ruling party. The acts like enforced sterilization of people are completely devoid of human rights. Nepotism and hereditary democracy has become a way of life. Nehru was nominated by his father in Indian National Congress. Nehru brought his daughter; she brought her son; at present it is her daughter in law. The kings had divine rights and these democrats have hereditary rights; in principle
there is not much difference. When Indian Army is sent to open fire on non-violent protest of housewives, we immediately get reminded of Jalliyawala Baugh massacre. However, it was our good fortune that Army’s discretion made it reserve its arms against innocent citizens. On the other hand, instead of protecting the citizens of India, Army was withdrawn from Assam.

It will be not be an exaggeration to compare the democrats of independent Indian with the colonizers- the British; both share the inhuman, savage and brutal side of human mind. In order to retain power, the politicians manipulate the religions and communities. Castes have become vote banks. Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Sikh riots were propelled for political reasons. Army could have stopped butchering of Sikhs but it was restricted to barricades. Instead of protecting people, one makes it sure that people from one particular community get butchered, molested and destroyed. As a sensitive reader, we are literally shocked when a lady informs the author that during Hindu-Sikh riots Hindus were given a list of addresses of Sikh residences. Such systematic arrangement must have been observed by a powerful leader’s pressure. Indian constitution endows every citizen with basic rights and assures safety at least within Indian Territory. Well, what we see is cruel killings. While every human life is important, thousands of people are killed in communal riots propelled by political strategies of vote banks. The animosity among Hindu and Muslim communities is so much embedded that there is ‘rarest of the rare’ possibility of communal harmony.

The colonial and postcolonial, the old and the new have always remained side by side in the psyche of modern India. At the political level, ethics have gone down the drains. Within a short period of fifty years nepotism, absolute corruption, flattery to the ones who are in power and deceitful actions have become ways of political life. The title
is significant here as it reminds us that along with falls through snakes, there are always prospects to climb the ladder. Despite of severe limitations on freedom of expression during emergency, Gita Mehta is surprised to come across a bureaucrat sitting in the very building of the Prime Minister’s office and criticizing the Prime Minister herself, “She doesn’t bloody employ me… .The people of India employ me. Don’t you ever forget it. This is my damned soil.” (Snakes and Ladders, p.17). One cannot doubt about the substantial changes in the political and economic fields. But unfortunately there some threads of continuity as well. But the author has a ray of hope as well:

Today the Supreme Court is sentencing leaders across the political spectrum on corruption charges-Prime Ministers, members of the cabinet, leaders of all the largest political parties. Today, the Election Commission has finally banned the passing of populist bills on the eve of an election, and government media can no longer be used for political propaganda. Today...the rhetoric of religious hatred is an illegal use of the political power. (Snakes and Ladders, p.207)

Gita Mehta’s attention is also drawn towards another grave aspect of India-poverty and the poor. The problem is so persistent that the present day election agendas do not have any space for the slogan ‘GaribiHatao’. But in 1960 and 1970 it used to be a trump card. In fact, the central governments had launched such campaigns in past but all the efforts, at all made, were in vain. The chapter entitled “Banish Poverty” deals with the subhuman condition of the poor people like rag pickers. The condition of these people is horrible. The tales of the rag pickers are of impoverished living condition, displacement and fear. Though their present living condition is dreadful, they are afraid of another displacement. Playing with the words, from GaribiHatao to GaribHatao, the author shows the casual approach of the government. It
does not hurt much if it is only casual; it is inhuman as well. For the beautification of the cities, the poor are displaced in the extreme outskirts of the city. Rather than their first displacement, the second one is more dreadful. Allured by the fake promises of the leaders, the poor voted them. When those very leaders came into power, they did nothing for them. On the contrary they thought that those poor were marring the beauty of the city. As a remedy, their huts made of wastage were bulldozed along with all the items within. They were put in a bus and left thirty miles away from the city. At the new place they have neither work nor food and water.

The problem is in the economic exploitation by the contractors, professionals like that ‘paper tycoon’ and in the apathy of the government. By forming central government, the authority is abide by the duty to take their charge and their livelihood. The author has mentioned a grave issue here; the bonded labour. Poor people who did not have land or employment had to take loans for their survival and certain inevitable expenses. Since they had nothing that could work as a security against their loans, they got themselves bonded to the money lenders. Since the return of the money was not possible in the form of cash, they paid it back by their labour. Never are these repayments healthy. Often they are told that they are just paying the interest and the principle amount still remains unreduced. This debt is passed from generation to generation and never gets paid back. In reality, the bonded labourers repay the loans along with interest many times over. The central government has charted out laws prohibiting bonded labour practice but the results are not optimistic. Today the International LabourOrganization estimates a minimum 11.7 million are in forced labour in the Asia-Pacific region, majority of whom were in debt bondage.

The rich people who take the service of these poor are casual and selfish in their approach. While speaking to the author, a newspaper
tycoon tells her that those ‘nameless and faceless’ rag pickers contribute a lot to the recycling industry. But this sympathetic outlook soon evaporates as it is mentioned by him that the rag pickers are used to living in such degraded conditions. For the aristocrats, like the newspaper tycoon, the poor are scavengers and rag picking is one of their common professions. In a way they dismiss the idea that their existence demands some attention or they deserve any betterment. A powerful image to convey the message comes in the form of puppies. In order to get some warmth puppies get some rags but the rag pickers are not allowed this much also. It seems the world of metropolitan cities is devoid of humane aspects. Some critics have interpreted the author’s remarks here in this chapter as a powerful Oriental looking down to the unprivileged. It will be stretching too far to accept this claim. Her clear intention here is to unearth the subhuman condition of such people. It will not be an exaggeration to say that colonization still persists as the lobby of the rich is enormously powerful and there are no chances that the poor will be herd. They are rendered powerless and they have to live a life ‘given’ in charity.

A remark by the newspaper tycoon that they are all untouchables by caste is very suggestive. Now the constitution does not approve of any untouchability. There cannot be any discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and economic status. But the caste system is deeply embedded in the Indian psychology. Though there are certain laws to protect the rights of low caste people, the erstwhile untouchables, but the hatred in the minds of upper caste has not been cleansed. In fact Indian citizens have failed to be sensible and sensitive to these people. On the other hand, certain political parties claim to be a messiah of lower castes and pretend that they are trying to elevate their status in the society. But in doing so they are deliberately increasing the gap between the two halves of our society. One more fact should be mentioned here. We blame the
politicians and the political parties that they are using the castes as vote banks. But it is an acknowledged fact that voters have a tendency to vote for candidates of their respective castes and thus it is we, the people, who allow the politicians to exploit our fanaticism.

Coming back to the rag pickers, the advantage of their ‘dirty job’ goes to the rich like the newspaper tycoon. When the author talks to them, she finds that they are originally not the flotsam. Here comes the issue of displacement and changing scenario. One lady says that they were originally Bhoomiya- the path finders. Their traditional profession was to guide travelers through deserts and jungles of Rajputana. They were given land as a reward. So they depended on the produce. With the arrival of buses, trains, planes and telephones, these people became irrelevant to the society. Another rag picker informs the author that they belong to the Bhat community. In earlier time, they had influence over the kings. Only the Bhat community had the royal rights to recite the royal genealogy. Her account of their displaced and dispossessed life is moving:

Once our recitations commenced a royal coronation. Now look at my child’s face. 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. (Snakes and Ladders, p.49).

The agony resulting out of contrast between influential past and penurious present is unimaginable. It reminds us of the ballad singers of Gita Mehta’s Raj who visited the Maharajah’s Durbar on every important occasion. They were rewarded with handsome awards. After assimilation of the princely states, they were rendered jobless; having no significance in the modern context. Much celebrated Indian independence has been an unrewarding experience for such people. It is surprising that they
have to spend one third of their income to reach the site. Their daily wages status leaves them unpaid on holidays. The author rightly calls these lives as stories of wasted human lives. She painfully remarks that Indian citizens have put themselves in a frozen state and they are apathetic towards these lives which are below human dignity.

Instead of such pathetic condition of the poor in India, the author does not have cynical view. She has some hope to improve the system and help the poor be independent. Giving certain amount does not help improve their subhuman condition. On the contrary, if they are given some means of earning, they can be lifted to a considerable level. It is the efforts of the organizations like SEWA and Dastakar who bring in rays of hope. SEWA stands for Self Employed Women’s Association. In Ahmadabad desperate housewives, just one step away from prostitution were suggested by Ilaben Bhatt to form a union. They started their own bank and it enables them to take loans. This money borrowed by group was invested in things like sewing machines to prepare garments for sale. As soon as one group returns the loan, another group turns up for loan for such other purposes. This is how a huge number of poor women have been able to be self-dependent and to live their lives with self-respect. When their products were acknowledged for their quality, the textile women workers’ erstwhile employers were ready to buy these products at double prize. The economic exploitation of these women was no better that the colonizers. Today SEWA has more than twenty five thousands savings accounts owned by its thirty thousand members. It has its branches across the nation helping women to resist the domestic violence by economic independence. Another example is of Dastkar. It was founded by six women working in the field of crafts. After agriculture, crafts industry is the second largest in the country. Its founders helped the crafts women to adapt to the demands of the
modern world. Their improved performance succeeded in the market and those women could earn their livelihood.

Thus, the author appreciates the efforts of non-government organizations which are working for the betterment of the poor and women. But she does not miss to depict her razor sharp observation. There are men and women who have overbearing attitude and who are superficial. She pokes fun at them. She meets such lady in a party. The atmosphere of the party was charged with enthusiasm. Men were busy discussing economy and profits and women were busy moving around the buffet table. Gita Mehta’s friend whom she had given dollars to help women was more interested in stuffing her mouth with delicious food than in discussing the real issues related to weaver women’s lives. While talking about those women her voice had a tone of superiority as if she was the only one doing these charitable deeds. The author is hurt as her help has not been acknowledged by the organization.

Draught has always remained a nightmare in Indian history. Because of geographical location, rain has always been a matter of speculation in India. Such situation makes us vulnerable to famine as well. Though more than fifty per cent of the population depends on agriculture, we have not been able to take significant steps for improvement. In 1973, Maharashtra had to face severe drought. The first community to suffer the effects was of farmers. Along with them their wives, children and livestock were also put into pathetic condition. Masses of people were moving to cities, to Mumbai in particular. The government was shaken up and it came up with a scheme- Food for Work. The farmers were digging canals and making roads and the payment was in the terms of food. America had donated wheat for the relief work. But unfortunately it was mixed with Dhatura. It is cattle food and for human beings it is poisonous. But they cannot afford to throw
away this food mixed with poison. The women were separating wheat from Dhatura. It is a dreadful picture of human predicament.

The pathetic condition of the draught stricken farmers is made graver while the author describes an altogether a different world. While the farmers’ families were dying of starvation, the members of the foreign media were overfed. She notes that she was given so much food in a single meal as was able to feed ten families. Her private plane and expensive wine proved to be an embarrassment for her. Perhaps it is the price the Third World has to pay for seeking attention of the First World. The colonization does persist; earlier it was the British, now it is reinforced by the local politicians and by superpowers like the USA. Gita Mehta has depicted the famine of 1898 in Balmer, Rajsthan in Raj. Though he was a monarch, Maharajah Jai Singh’s concern for the subject is quite superior when compared to the concern of the present day politicians. In Snakes and Ladders, she refers to the famine of Bengal in 1942. The British withheld the supply of food-grains. In the winter of 1942, while tons of food rotted away, nearly three million people starved to death in Calcutta. The depiction these famines is necessary because the author investigates as to who is responsible for such pathetic condition. During the British rule, it was the colonial power politics responsible for the suffering of the masses. In independent India, it is the bureaucracy, rivalry among political parties and lack of political will are responsible for the suffering of Indian citizens. It is understood that there cannot be any specific formula to remove famine. Inadequate rain brings famine. But futuristic planning can help us out. At least deaths because of starvation can be stopped. Perhaps this is the reason why the author critiqued Nehru’s neglect of agriculture.

In spite of India’s predominant agriculture, the attempt for industrialization and rapid urbanization have been grave mistakes of our leaders. It is clear from his speeches and writings that Nehru was
determined to follow the West that had become rich due to industry. The author has regret that policies of the successive governments have not been consistent. Farmers have most of the times been harmed by new policies; even farmer oriented policies like redistribution of land have benefitted the rich land lords; the poor farmers have always been in debt. After Land-sealing act, poor farmers continued to be exploited; if not by large land lords, then by small landlords. But the game of snakes and ladders is not always gleeful. Though our socio-cultural and political scenario is not promising, it has its bright side too. The unchecked growth of urbanization devours agricultural land and the owners of this land in the outskirts get rich overnight. A farmer explains to the author that his land has given him too little but because of urbanization he is becoming richer day by day. Urbanization is also a concern of the author. The growth of Indian cities by 1996 is quite surprising to her. Even towns have infested in large cities. Government’s liberal trade policies fetched foreign exchange and it increased the purchase power of people.

By writing these essays the author is continuously striving to ponder over the paradoxes prevailing in India. The more she ponders over the issues, the more confused she gets; she finds simultaneous claims of traditions and modernity on India. It is the essence of a postcolonial and diasporic writing. Decolonized India is swiftly competing with the West. Because of liberalization of trade policies and revolution in the economic structure of the society is rapidly changing. She has accurately noted these changes. Indian is becoming like the western consumer-oriented society. The India of 1996 is not comparable at all with the India of 1950s. The life of upper and middle class is characterized by telephones, cars, computers and air-conditioners. These items are not considered as luxury anymore. It is the requirement of the modern world. They have made their way to the villages also. Such an advanced scenario of the motherland baffles the author. It was not far
back in 1970s when one had to wait for years to get a telephone connection. Purchase of car was not even a dream of the middle class. Even for the rich it was not an easy affair; one had to wait for a period from two years to five years. The change in those twenty years from 1970s to 1990s is tremendous. The Indian youth is not attracted by a government job anymore. This attraction has been replaced by temptation for high profile and highly paid jobs in India as well as abroad. At the time of Independence India had only four major universities. In 1990s this number jumped to ninety. A large number of computer, management and engineering graduates are produced by them. Bengaluru has been called India’s Silicon Valley. People are now aware about the necessity of education. But yet, contrast does prevail. Too many Indians cannot still read or write. Fifty per cent of Indians were illiterate in 1996. In the field of education privatization had begun.

The chapter titled as “Typing” has interesting observations to offer. The author’s French friend is surprised to see the worship of videos. But for the author, it is not something new. She knows that Indians do worship computers, lockers, vehicles, air-conditioners and even bullock carts. Whenever something new is purchased, we mark it with vermilion in order to assure long life of the gadget and ward off evil eye. The tone seems to be more satirical than appreciative. Modernity and rituals live hand in hand in India. As an outsider she peeps into the social life and criticizes many aspects.

It is interesting to note Gita Mehta’s outlook in the terms of a diasporic writer. In the foreign land a diasporic writer exhibits his or her ‘otherness’ by looking back to the motherland. But when the same person comes to the motherland, he or she looks down to the natives and exhibits ‘otherness’ – here with a sense of superiority. It is an intricate psychology of the immigrants; on one hand they want to stick to their past, and on the other wants to disown the past. In the same fashion,
Gita Mehta poses herself as an advocate of the rational superiority of the West; it was missing in her earlier works. A K Ramanujan has given a concept to explain the intricacy of coexistence of modern materialism and traditional ritualism. It is the concept of ‘context sensitive’ and ‘context free’. He says that borrowing ideas from the West and vice versa and then accommodating it in local culture is a common and inevitable phenomenon in every culture. But when this adaptation occurs, the process of accommodation needs to be understood. When the westerners borrow some idea from the East, they turn into a highly individualized form and then accommodate it. On the contrary, when we accept any concept from the West, we convert it to fit into our ‘context sensitive’ pattern and make it our own. Ramanujan says that it has happened with regard to English language, in sciences and in many other fields. Generally speaking what we adopt from the West is often the new way of thinking, comparatively liberal thinking. While adopting such newness, we do not get rid of our older tradition, ritual and behaviour. Perhaps this is what makes us worship type writers, computers, vehicles and other gadgets.

The writer also talks about the silver jubilee celebration of Indian independence. This celebration brought along with it opportunities for marketing of India. It goes without saying that the people who had vested interest were involved in this marketing process. The description of India’86 is reminiscent of Karma Cola in which India is commoditized as a metaphysical drink. It is not only the Hippies and the Rolling Stones who come clashing their cymbals; in India’86 top CEOs of leading industries across the globe are invited by the tourism department of Indian Government. India of 1996 is marked with globalization. In a decolonized and postcolonial world our notions of freedom, money and energy have changed. We took part in globalization with enthusiasm and as a result our economy became a ‘free economy’. Austerity was replaced
by expenses and extravagance. On one hand India is renowned for its ‘other worldly’ approach, and on the other individuals are in grip of ‘this worldly’ greed.

The essays titled as “New Money” and “Embarrassment of Riches” shed some light on newly rich urban middle class and the entry of the western companies on Indian soil. With the western companies came dollars and pounds. The land renowned for renunciation and detachment was counting foreign exchange and converting it into rupees. The nation had acquired a new sense of identity; identity valued in the terms of money and materialistic possessions. Vulgar show of wealth became the way of the world. The author is wonderstruck at this change. She makes a comparison between the philosophy of 1960s and of 1990s. There was a tendency of austerity and it was appreciated everywhere. People used to glorify things Indian. A decade or two later more austerities were imposed. There was a state control over the industries, banks were nationalized and imported goods were banned. These actions were taken to make the country self-reliant and keep western commercial imperialism at a safe distance.

The generation of the nationalists believed in the indigenous traditions and used cultural identity as a means to assert themselves against the notion of colonizer’s superiority. But with disappearance of this generation, things degraded swiftly. For the new generation it was a humiliation to stick to the past. In order to get rid of this feeling, new generation leaders, Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in particular, opened up the economy of India to the world and accelerated the process of decolonization. But the homespun cotton was replaced by the luxury goods of the West. The sudden wealth formed a generation of neo-rich. Show off and pretentiousness was its nature. They liked to make exhibition of their gold watches, German cars, Italian clothes, yachts and air planes, reserved tables in most expensive restaurants. The earlier
philosophy of ‘if you have it, you hide it’ was replaced by ‘if you have it, flaunt it’.

Gita Mehta’s description of a high profile party shows the vulgarity in displaying one’s wealth. The representatives of the ‘Third World’ had assembled in a party. Most of the ‘Third World’ countries are under developed or developing nations and poverty is a common problem. Though their population is starving every day, these leaders indulge into excessively high profile meetings. The dinner was served in silver plates. The author mentions, ‘Our silver platters were constantly replenished with kewbas, curries, Indian breads, vegetables; our glasses filled to the brim with wines, champagnes, liquors to keep us busy… .’ (Snakes and Ladders, 102) With a background that about fifty per cent population lives below poverty line and draughts and famines starve the majority of the population, it seems unforgivable offense to spend money in this fashion. Again, whose money is this? It is the tax paid by the hard working people. There is no sense of accountability. What surprises us is the presence of greed and extravagance in the land of spirituality and austerity. It seems that to be rich is to be enlightened. The colonial exploitation is replaced by the local exploitation. The rag pickers are exploited by the contractors; the weaver women are treated as bonded labour.

Democracy grabs the author’s attention for more than once. She seems to have some disbelief in democracy; though she is not against democracy, she is surely against hereditary democracy. Accountability is the core idea behind democracy. But the author mentions that when one is received by a huge crowd of half a million people, one avoids thinking about accountability. The products of Indian democracy are; manipulation of election system; flattery to the leaders to gain favour; agitation against cow-slaughter and price rise; the dark period of emergency. These things are happening in a country whose foundations
rest on non-violence and simplicity. What is the use of democracy if people have to go on a strike or come out in the streets to protest? The status of Indian democracy has been reduced to comic level. Thousands of naked sadhus march to the parliament with their trident. The eunuchs dressed in brilliant saris demonstrate against family planning as reduced birth rate reduces the chances of their next birth. The necessity of such protests, marches and demonstrations reveal apathy on the part of the government machinery.

The tendency of the new generation of leaders is indicative of perversion. The leaders are not interested in development and welfare of people who elected them. Their concentration is in increasing their wealth. The bureaucrats are compelled to indulge into flattery and so they cannot concentrate on governance. Overall atmosphere is full of corruption, lethargy and apathy. The Indian constitution was formed with a specific vision. The leaders are more interested in their privileges than in their duties. As if it were not enough, there is always amendment in privileges to make the leaders consistently more immune to the corruption charges. Corrupt practices fetch such an enormous amount of wealth that winning an election in India is equivalent to winning a huge lottery. Gita Mehta refers to Nirad Chaudhari’s *The Continent of Circe* and considers it as an apt title to describe today’s India. The future of the nation is at the mercy of the politicians’ whims. We seem to be under complete domination.

The essays make it very clear that Gita Mehta is not happy with the current situation of the mother land. She finds her birth place turned into a decayed and dirty land. It does not have anything of her dream mother land. The first generation of diaspora viewed mother land from immeasurable distance. But for Gita Mehta, it is within her reach. But these visits are painful to her. Each yearly visit is marked by further decay and it is this consistent deterioration that produces anger and
dejection reflected in her work. Mehta tries to see India as she is after fifty years of independence. She boldly spots India’s weaknesses and criticizes her politicians and politics. Her visit throughout India is full of agony but she is endowed with an art to create fun from people’s eccentricities and absurdities of situations. Like other diasporic writers she is also ashamed of filth, greed, decay and passivity. She wants her country to be progressive, rational and efficient and does not want her to lose her cultural authenticity, heritage and healthy traditions. She has made certain efforts to make her native culture authentic in A River Sutra. At the same time she is equally aware that the Indus civilization is primordial and therefore it is not possible to understand it for an individual; nor can one explain it in totality.

Snakes and Ladders is an important work in the sense that it reveals the dichotomy of appearance and reality in Indian subcontinent. The principle on the basis of which we got independence, non-violence, proved to be ineffective soon after independence. During partition, people killed one another in a manner as if non-violence never existed on this land. Gandhiji had to start fast until death to stop these killings. Though Nehru proposed the principles of Panchshil, he could not prevent wars. India faced three wars; two with Pakistan and one with China. Mehta remembers her visit to Assam in order to collect material for her writing on agitation against infiltration of Bangladeshi. When she talked to a young engineer, he said that he had voiced against the central government which had sent army to control the protest. It shows how the central government has failed to handle the issue of Assam and took action with Army enforcement. Gita Mehta’s observations of that region are true and authentic. If we refer to those incidents we find that violence had become a frequent event in Assam. She is informed that twenty eight villagers were molested by a crowd. It is really a matter of shame and indignation for us that even today, in 2012, the problem persists and we
have witnessed violence in the form of killing recently. In fact pluralism, non-violence, self-discipline and communal harmony have been replaced by self-centeredness, separatist tendency and violence. Gita Mehta painfully shows that the inherent idealism in every field of life- social, economic, political or religious- has vanished. The subversion of idealism has appeared in the form of nepotism, violence and corruption. Thus she finds the scenario disgusting. She is surprised by the tendency of the voters. Indian voters do not vote on the bases of principles, performance and commitment of the candidates. They are taken in by the ‘waves’; a blind preference to a leader in so huge quantity that the votes of the genuine, educated and intelligent voters do not make any difference. The voters are deceived in the name of castes and religions; the poor are given money, food, liquor as a payment for buying votes. Here we cannot hold these poor voters responsible. For them to have a belly full meal is the greatest pleasure in the world. Thus the situation is so worst, so corrupt from top to bottom that chances are rare for significant change.

The possibilities and the potential of an emerging nation at the time of independence has vanished completely. In his book, The Discovery of India, Jawaharlal Nehru enthusiastically talks about India’s multiculturalism, unity in diversity and religious tolerance. The present day scenario dismisses Nehru’s enthusiasm completely. At this juncture, it will not be inappropriate to refer to Nehru’s two terms; Indigenization and Indianization. Indeginization means the process to convert a foreign idea into native understanding. He particularly talks about it for cultural artifacts and their incorporation in the existing civilization. Thus English language and mechanization have become indigenous. He uses the term Indianization to refer to cultural assimilation and considers this phenomenon important. It shows the picture of emerging Indian identity. After fifty years of independence, Gita Mehta looks at this process with an eye of a media person. The freedom fighters’ dream India is not
traceable anywhere. Perhaps her being a journalist endows her with a critical and more importantly a neutral eye. There seems to be only one consolation; India is a civilization and civilization is a process. But in this process of civilization India has not learnt from her past. But the hope for improvisation and the process of ‘becoming’ cannot be denied.

In *Snakes and Ladders*, particularly in first three parts, the tone is clearly of sarcasm. Reading in between the lines informs us that sarcasm carries hidden resentment. Nehru’s vision, as explained in *The Discovery of India*, was to remove the colonial power and set strong centralized state. When we assess what happened during initial twenty five years of independence, we realize that the above ideology is reduced to the state of mere rhetoric. Instead of its application, we find nepotism, corruption and communalism in practice. Much celebrated ‘unity in diversity’ has become a threat to the integration of the nation. Yet, India has successfully resisted the threats of divisive elements. Though not completely, she remains a peaceful democratic country.

In the fourth part of the book, the author focuses on Indian literature, art, cinema, reading culture and home decoration. In describing these aspects of life, she is not sarcastic anymore. On the contrary, she seems to be enjoying things Indian. Indian home decoration has never been as fussy as western. In Indian context, a home is not a castle nor a stage set by decorators. Because of her stay in the USA and in England, she has adopted western standard of home decoration. Therefore she finds Indian homes lacking in imagination and artistic sense. For her few homes have good aesthetic taste. A general sight of an average Indian home is given to chaos and decay. For the first time in all her works, she appears a non-Indian lady enjoying an aristocratic life. In Indian context, home is a necessity first. While millions of people are homeless, few million stay in slums, how we can expect aesthetic sense from the people. A considerable majority is too
engrossed in the battle to survive to decorate the homes as an expression of personality. While writing on cinema, she merely describes chronological development of the Indian cinema. There are few observations worth noting here. With the depiction of Satyajit Ray’s life and films, it becomes clear that the approach of ‘Art for Art’s sake’ cannot survive in India. Though his works are masterpieces and acknowledged at international level, he did not succeed in the box office. Indian audience has not matured yet, not even in the second decade of the twenty first century. If one has to succeed, one has to be popular and cheap. The target audience is the common masses which go to cinema for mere entertainment. Government recognized his talent only after the rest of the world had already awarded him. Other remarks on cinema, literature and reading are not thought provoking.

The book has been severely criticized for one thing: factual errors. There are so many of them that put a question mark on its authenticity. In her earlier works, she has described Indian with authenticity and understanding but Snakes and Ladders reduces her status. Some critics have even said that in order to complete the book on the silver jubilee of Indian independence, the author has made haste and knowingly or unwillingly compromised with the content. One reviewer notes that the Bengal famine is timed one year earlier. The capture of Tibet by China is nine years later. She has wrongly mentioned the location of Tashkent in Russia. She names a politician Ram Mohan Gandhi while the correct name is Rajmohan Gandhi. The wheel in the national flag has been mentioned as a spinning wheel. As a matter of fact, it was replaced in 1947 with Ashoka’s wheel. Another reviewer points out one more mistake. Mehta says that Mahatma Gandhi insisted that Mountbatten should remain as governor-general of free India while the fact is that it was Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel who made the decision. These
mistakes are discomforting and we do not expect such factual errors in a renowned writer like Gita Mehta.

Despite such errors, *Snakes and Ladders* has been ranked as a considerable contribution in Indian prose writing. It may not be strong and organized when compared to other writers like V S Naipaul or Nirad Chaudhari. But these essays contain commentary on our postcolonial life in day to day language. The observations have a strong flavour of truth in them. It works as roving camera critiquing our recent history. The depiction of recent history and incidents are based on evidence. She depicts what she has observed. But these observations are mixed with her own resentment. But her effort is not to bring discredit to India. It is her aversion at the present situation which has reduced India’s level and has almost nullified the vision of freedom movement and of the high ideals that stimulated it. Postmodernist and postcolonial theories suggest that writers do not portray past as past, but should portray present which incorporates past. A postcolonial text resists imperialist and colonialist tendencies of political set up. *Snakes and Ladders* has both these elements. The connectivity of the essays may not be appealing. The combination of factual and personal observations and remarks and her ability to maintain a safe distance as a diasporic writer put work in the category of postmodern and postcolonial work. Whatever political crisis she may be depicting in this work, it cannot be denied that she upholds the persistent image of India. She is mesmerized by the smell and sound of the motherland. In the last essay, she has described the elemental India created by God with perfection and uniqueness. As she mentions in the end, God made India in ‘leisure time’ and we also do agree in spite of present situation.