Gita Mehta entered the literary scene with the publication of *Karma Kola*. This book is about the inflow of thousands of Westerners who rushed the Indian subcontinent with their quest; with their ‘clashing cymbals and ringing bells’. With their preconceived notion of India as a land of mysticism, these Westerners sought instant remedies for their existential issues. They thought, however naively or foolishly, that they could gulp down the Indian philosophy and could revel in the esoteric realms. They were disillusioned by the rampant materialism in their native lands. They escaped from there to get rid of monotony and boredom of consumer oriented life. Places like Haridwar, Banaras, Manali and Goa, otherwise pristine, were flooded with these Moksha seekers who perceived Karma as a panacea for their all sorts of problem. Thus, willingly or unwillingly, they commodified Indian aspects of Karma, Moksha, Maya and Nirvana.

In her introduction to the work, Gita Mehta narrates a letter she received from a young American woman who had undergone traumatic experiences of drug peddling, sexual abuse and later on realized the hollowness of those Indian gurus. She concludes her letter thus: ‘after reading your book I realized I should never have trusted Gurus who wore Adidas running shoes’ (*Karma Cola*, p. 9-10). The reference to Adidas, a global mercantile item, hints at the consumerism and buying and selling. But in the real sense it symbolizes the commodification of Indian spirituality. A few pages later on in the book, a German seeker comments that there should be a quality control on gurus as many of his friends had gone mad in India. Here, quality control is also a term from
commerce and refers to lower quality of gurus—a substandard quality—harming the consumers—the Nirvana seekers. Such invasion of lakhs of Westerners, ready to believe and blindly follow the gurus, was bound to have its effects on the locals. The unscrupulous Indians took disadvantage of their faith, however blind, and exploited these seekers in every possible way. This phenomenon resulted in trauma and mental imbalance for many of these visitors and Indian was put on the international canvas for wrong reasons. Gita Mehta explores this situation brilliantly and brings out a lively yet hard hitting book that takes to task the instant Nirvan seekers and their instant ‘fake gurus’.

The story behind the genesis of Karma Kola is very interesting. It was triggered by Mehta’s annoyance at being seen as an automatic Indian expert. It was at a publisher’s party that informal discussion was going on about the Karma philosophy when Gita Mehta entered the room. Seeing her in sari, someone just grabbed her arm and said, ‘here is a girl who is going to tell us what Karma is all about.’ Taking her for granted as an Indian expert just because she was wearing an Indian sari irritated her and she retorted, ‘Karma isn’t what it is cracked up to be’. Marc Jaffe of Bantam Books, listening to this conversation, suggested her that she should write a book on the theme of Karma. Resultantly, she wrote Karma Kola in just three weeks and when it came out it received a warm response. Its sub title, ‘Marketing the Mystic East’ is self-explanatory. Thus, the book is the outcome of Git Mehta’s annoyance-annoyance at the Westerners’ limited knowledge of Indian thought system as they think that the concepts of Karma, Maya or Moksha can be explained by anybody, anywhere and to anyone. She has successfully channelized her anger and exposed the triviality of all the elements involved in this phenomenon. The book is a satire on both, the Indian fake mystics and Western naïve seekers.
Karma Kola, published in 1979, carries with it an explicit viewpoint that when philosophy is turned into pseudo-spirituality and sold by mediocre sellers to mediocre buyers, it yields dangerous results. The desire of these buyers to attain self-realization in instant ways is childish. Not only these immature seekers but also the black mailing gurus tarnished the image of the country abroad. Karma Kola examines the stories of the foreigners who were exploited in a bizarre manner and resultant trauma had devastated their lives miserably. Thereby it implies that cheap popularity and vulgar patronization had put Indian culture in market for sale. This implication is justified by the subtitle, ‘Marketing the mystic East’.

The chaos that the author is talking about took place because of the invasion of the Hippies from the USA, closely followed by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. This band of young Nirvana seekers could easily be identified by these characteristics: use of drugs, shabby lifestyle and irreverence for the authority. Since we have to discuss about these three groups and their experiences in India, an insight into their nature and psychology will be helpful.

The Hippie movement began in the United States of America in 1960s and spread to other countries by mid-sixties. It declined in 1970s. The term Hippie or Hippy was coined in California in 1966-67 when alienated young generation started proliferating a philosophy of love and peace. These were mostly young men and women who dropped out of the society and developed their sub-culture, often called counter-culture. Originally, Hippies were part of a youth movement composed mostly of teenagers and young adults between the age of fifteen and twenty five years. They rejected established institutions, opposed middle-class values, rejected political and social authority, and criticized nuclear weapons and Vietnam War. In fact, the Hippies inherited the tradition of cultural dissent from Bohemians and the Beatniks. They considered the
dominant culture as a corrupt, monolithic entity that exercised undue power on them which they called ‘Big Brother’ or ‘The Man’.

In its early stages the movement had a positive tone in the sense that it rejected materialism and advocated universal brotherhood. Hippies became known as flower children and their influence as flower power. Their philosophy came to be epitomized by the Beatles’ song “All You Need is Love”. The hippie culture influenced the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and together their influence spread across the globe through a fusion of rock music and folk music. The Hippies ethos found a space in literature, films, dramatic arts and visual and performing arts. Hippies popularized a new life style exalting marijuana and LSD as instruments of pleasure. They were generally found in colourful clothes, beads, bells, long hair and shabby dressing up in peasant blousing and non-Western clothing. Some other aspects of their lifestyle were sexual libertarianism; communal living characterized by free and open love relationships, and extensive travel. These aspects quickly superseded the original philosophy of the movement. Finally it degenerated into widespread drug abuse, indulging into orgy and violence. The situation also got reflected in Dev Anand’s movie “Hare Rama Hare Krishna”. In present time the term refers to someone who is uncivilized or ill-mannered and does not fit into the society.

The Beatles were a music group that became a leader in pop revolution in 1960s. John Lennon, George Harrison, Paul McCartney and Ring Starr were the four young British youngsters who began the Beatles movement. Their first music performance was in Liverpool after which they evolved a Rock style of their own. Although these four founders were highly gifted songwriters who had innovative spirit and originality, their life style was considered outrageous. They kept long hair, put on shabby clothes, did not have reverence for the authorities and advocated drugs. In 1967, the Beatles met Maharishi Mahesh Yogi at Hilton, London. They
were influenced by the Maharishi’s philosophy and attended a weekend ‘initiation’ conference at Bangor in North Wales. The Maharishi gave each of them a personal mantra. The Beatles were at their height of their creativity during their stay at Maharishi’s Ashram in India. Their songs recorded for The White album and Abbey Road became a rage of the time. Since they had strong identification with the teenagers, they became popular with Westernized youth across the world. Their contribution to the society and music was recognized by the British Government when it gave them the MBE award. Ironically the situation became embarrassing as the award represented establishment while the Beatles were anti-establishment. The Beatles lasted only for a decade and the movement disintegrated in 1907.

Like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones were a globally popular rock group which sprung in England in 1960s. The band was formed by Brian Jones in 1962 and was later led by singer Mick Jaggar and guitarist Keith Richards. They were bolder and harsher both in their musical style and their use of drugs. Their songs known as Blues, R&B and Rock n’ Roll remained a craze over thirty years. Like the Hippies and Beatles, they immediately appealed to the young generation and began to be called a socio-cultural force. Their visit to the USA in 1969 memorized the society and it was recognized as the greatest Rock and Roll Band in the world. Like the other two movements, they were characterized by shabby clothes, use of drugs and unconventional life style. Thus, what started with a socio-cultural perspective degenerated into a contaminated existence, obsessed with Nirvana through Karma and Drugs. Karma lost its meaning and significance among these groups and came to known as an immediate remedy for any conceivable sickness.

In the midst of these three groups the atmosphere was charged with high sounding words like Karma, Nirvana and Maya. Because of the corruption of original philosophy of these groups, the Indian culture and
spiritual thought became a negotiable concept. Karma degenerated, at least for the Westerners, into a big joke. It is the self-deception, exploitation and mutual incomprehension that set Gita Mehta on the task of writing *Karma Kola*.

It is a common interpretation of *Karma Kola* that the book is about the influx of the Nirvana seekers—the Hippies, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones—who invaded the East in search of peace, gave into drug addiction and ended up in asylum. This interpretation stifles the potential of the book to look at the issues from different angles. The description of barter system among the gurus and the seekers—exchanging Nirvana for sex, money of gadgets—, marketing the myths, travel association, short tour organizers, international conferences etc. are laden with multiple interpretation.

The first person narratives of ex-Hippies who were fortunate enough to have escaped the drugged deaths and later on wrote about their experiences are quite revealing. Cleo Odzer wrote a poignant account of her traumatic experiences in India with the title *Goa Freaks: My Hippie Years in India*. Cleo, a model from New York heard about the Hippies living a glamorous life of rebellion and excitement, on Goa beaches and got attracted to India. She joined this tightly knit community and very soon became a hard core drug addict and a smuggler. In 1980 she returned to the USA and underwent a treatment at a rehabilitation center. She also completed her doctorate degree in Anthropology. But she went back to Goa, gave into her old habit of drugs and died in 2002. The book reveals clearly the secretive silence held by the local government and the social apathy of the local public who tolerated the ‘freaks’ because they brought money. The locals knew very well that smuggling, thefts and other unethical activities were happening right under their noses but their greed conquered over morals.
Karma Kola is divided into twelve chapters. Though this work belongs to the category of non-fictional work, the content and narration do not lose hold over the readers even once. Sarcasm disguised in light comments performs dual functions: to bring smile on the faces of the readers and give a pang at the same time. In the introduction to the work, Gita Mehta has put a convincing argument for the chaotic atmosphere and resultant casualties-both physical and psychological. She describes an Indian myth of *Kaliyug* and the Western myth of Devil. The Indian myth describes the contemporary time as *Kaliyug* which precedes the annihilation of the world. Such time is characterized by speed. Speed, being the opponent of reflection will spread fantasy with such velocity that the human beings will destroy themselves in their pursuit of escape. The Western myth depicts the Devil as a puddle. He is initially harmless and amusing until it reveals itself completely. It gradually turns into merciless and ruthless element. At every incident of suffering, torture, pain, deceit and humiliation, the reader gets reminded of these myths.

The book opens with the chapter titled as *Reinventing the Wheel*. It is a satirical comment on the deterioration of the term Karma. Anyone uses this word anywhere to describe anything. The Brazilian man invites the narrator as ‘Karma is right’. Section three has a comment on the socio-cultural situation of the time. The Americans had succeeded in penetrating the interior India, and therefore the government invited them to popularize contraceptives: “While population control and pop culture raced hand in hand through the Indian countryside, we of the cities and universities were getting restless, too.” (*Karma Cola*, p. 6) We come across another sarcastic remark when the boy who used to listen to rock and roll interacts with this guru. The watch he gets back is more sophisticated gadget than his own and on the back side of the watch it is written: Guru Industries Ltd.
The second chapter, Karma Crackers, sets the tone for the entire book. The author has portrayed a number of events happening simultaneously in Delhi. But these events, their titles and agendas are quite suggestive. To an untrained reader it looks like a simple narration of various seminars and conferences; but a conscious reader easily feels the pulse of the narration i.e. sarcasm. For example the narrator considers her sober reflection an orgy. The narrator observes that the Indians are now talking about test tube babies, black holes and silicon chips. It shows the influence of the westerners which changed the mindsets of the locals. The beginning of the chapter where the first person narrator (by implication the author herself) indulges in an imaginative interaction with a parrot is symbolic. It suggests that Hippies have gone back but their place is taken by far more serious barterers who are marketing India at higher rate and with more dangerous speed:

The Hippies are gone. This is all supposed to be over. Under my mango tree I indulge into an orgy of sober reflection.

Can it be, I inquire of a parrot who has just evacuated on my head, that this is just the beginning? Do these fantasies go beyond the market place, beyond your simple buying and selling of shoddy Gods?

The parrot is swinging upside down on a mango branch in an exaggerated carefree manner.

Consider the possibility, I elaborate, that this business should be traced not to the bazar but to the brothel. A half-eaten mango drops on my head. (Karma Cola, p. 12)

Sociologists agree that no movement like the one of Hippies can vanish without leaving its long lasting effects on socio-cultural aspects of the local place. As Gita Mehta’s imagery conversation with the parrot suggests, and the social history of the period substantiates, Hippies and the others messed up the environment of pristine places like Goa,
Manali, Shimla and religious towns like Haridwar and Banaras. They turned these places into the hub of drug dealing, smuggling and all other anti-social rackets that became a headache for the local authorities and the government. The deliberations of the organizers and the participants are extremely shallow and their ideas are vague. The author looks at this scenario in a bewildered manner and wonders whether these fantasies would ever go beyond the market place. Her question is answered by the parrot moving rapidly on the mango branch first by evacuating on her head and then by dropping a half-eaten mango oh her lap. These actions symbolize the hiked up optimism and the frivolity of buying and selling. It seems that Gita Mehta implies that the Western utopia and Eastern mysticism have been messed up and this yielded chaos- a situation with no possibility of return.

The world Conference on the Future of Mankind hilariously brings out the incompetence of those who claim to have profound knowledge of the Oriental philosophy. The reconciliation of skepticism and mysticism suggested by them is superficial. An American student’s question whether the science and nuclear development is not leading to the annihilation of the human race, brings a vague answer which baffles the readers whether it means anything, nothing or everything. The speaker, the American meteorologist, answers the American student’s question thus:

‘Don’t live in the shadow of the death, young man’, he warned. ‘Let us say there is nuclear holocaust. What will it do? I shall tell you what it will do. It will cleanse the world. Don’t you understand? We are going towards a post-nuclear, post-Armageddon Golden Age!’ (Karma Cola, p. 17)
The speaker, expected to be scientific in his outlook and supposed to be conscious about the hazards of nuclear weapon, is answering in very irresponsible manner. If a scientist neglects the potential annihilation of human race and indulges into some mystical or hypothetical ‘Golden Age’, where would the world go? Gita Mehta describes the American student grasping the ‘moral’ significance of the nuclear war. But the final blow to both- the eastern speaker and the western seeker- comes with the last line, ‘And India acquired another willing convert to the philosophy of meaningfully meaningless’ (Karma Cola, p 17). In order to keep pace with the emerging trend of globalization and marketing, the contemporary culture which was a combination of various religious systems took over the Karma awareness that the Hippies popularized. While the Hippies got engrossed with drug abuse, drug peddling, smuggling and sexual degeneration, the up-market hoteliers had different interests. They used conferences and seminars as a means to do ‘marketing’ of India. The World Conference on the Future of Mankind is organized in Vigyan Bhavan. The venue gives them a seal of authenticity and ‘establishment seriousness’. The same venue has another conference in the afternoon on tourism prospects. This is hosted by the Pacific Area Travel Association and their agenda contains, among other topics, ‘the problem of selling India to the world’. Few kilometers away from there, Swami Muktananda is busy in his seven week seminar on Kundalini. His audience consists of respectable foreigners who are eager to receive Swami’s Shakti- the direct transmission of cosmic energy from guru to the devotees. Overall effect of this description is of consuming and getting consumed. It is described as the age of ‘mass appropriation’. The ‘otherness’ is not considered inaccessible anymore, but at the same time it has not become comprehensible. Graham Haggan, studying the impact of consumer culture on India in his essay ‘Consuming India’, describes that in the era of present consumerism, India is emerging as an exhibition item. As a global mercantile tool India
finds herself as an object of other’s consumption. This point has been brilliantly brought out by Gita Mehta’s tongue-in-cheek description of the aims of various conferences.

The seminars and conferences are organized with only aim of selling India to the West. Their titles are formidable: ‘Truth Justice and Spirituality’, ‘Moral Values and the Future of Mankind’, ‘Meditation and Dedication’ and many more like these. A few pages later we are surprised by the declaration of Maharishi who has an ashram in Switzerland that he is going to organize an international conference. These conferences have intellectual participants across the globe: supreme court judges, heads of philosophy departments, journalists, film directors, income-tax officers, scientists, nuclear physicists, cabinet ministers, meteorologists etc. But the reader is not allowed to be wonder struck at these participation as the aims of these gatherings are quite shallow and their discussion are vague. The arithmetic of the organizers is very simple: we sell, you buy; we buy, you sell; we have Karma, you have Cola. They want to sell the metaphysics of the East in return of dollars. Swami Muktananda is selling his Shakti, the World Conference is vending Karma and the hoteliers are marketing India. The Indians themselves have their culture for sale. At Swami Muktananda’s ashram an evening treat is the video of Swami’s birthday celebration. Many people among the audience can only see the visual but cannot listen to the voice. Some other can listen to the voice but cannot see the visual. The others can neither see nor hear anything but they stretch their hands to pull out the energy of the guru. The description here is symbolic of myopic reception of the audience who is not able to comprehend in totality. On the other hand, the upmarket hoteliers arranged one day tours called ‘slice of the real India’. During these tours deliberate arrangements create a glamorous and flamboyant image of India and thus reinforce the romanticized perception of the westerners, “It’s how I always dreamed
India would be” (Karma Cola, p.16). A diplomat at French embassy informs the author that there are about two lakh and fifty thousand French citizens in India. Apart from the French, there were citizens from the USA, England, Germany, Australia, Brazil and so on. It was an atmosphere of total chaos and it became a headache for the local administration, government and the respective embassies. Big cities and nearing villages infested with these intruders and their every conceivable anti-social activity had to face resultant effects of psychological stress and mental imbalance:

The Association’s (Indian Mental Health association) surveys reveal that a large population of villagers living around major Indian cities suffer from high anxiety. To combat the nervous tension, many villagers in the environs of cities such as Bombay, Agra, Benares, with their high proportion of international travellers, have become dependent on drugs. The same villagers who fifteen years ago couldn’t be induced to take smallpox vaccinations because of their distrust of chemicals. (Karma Cola p. 22)

The life of Indian gurus and their devotees, both Indians and foreigners, in the ashrams is portrayed in the third chapter. While description is comic, rather hilarious, the serious undertone of sarcasm never vanishes. In one of the ashrams the guru is addressed as God. It seems that the author is laughing at the nativity or foolishness of the followers and self-complacency of the guru. The boy from Switzerland claimed that the guru of that ashram was his real father and came to India. He is christened Buddha by the guru. When this Buddha asks the narrator whether she can buy him some guns and soldiers and considers his comment ‘beautiful’, it seems that the Nirvana seekers do not know
what it means to be Buddha. With least knowledge of the Oriental philosophy they have rushed to India in herds. Lack of knowledge can be compensated by intense study, but from where would they bring the Oriental frame of mind and frame of reference. The narrator easily identifies the guru –God- as an intellectual snob. The utopia of the followers in which they feel the transmission of energy baffles her. What the followers perceive in reality – reality of their own – appears to be fantasy to the narrator and the readers.

They can hear with their hearts. There are no words to stand in between them and God’s pure energy. They can be one with him.”

“Did you feel God’s aura? Did you get a hit off the energy?” (Karma Cola, p. 30)

They have changed their names by adopting names from Hindu mythology. Though they name themselves as Abhimanyu, Yudhishtira andMa Sarswati, they have scanty knowledge of their religious connotations and references. They talk in the terms of to be, to exist, energy transmission, energy overlapping, being silent but when asked about the meanings of these terms either they are found dumb struck or reply in vague manner. A conversation between two Californians is loaded with meaning:

“Where are you from?”
“California” she replied.
“oh yeah?”
“And you?”
“California, babe. Just like you. Tell me more. Remind me.”
“Okay. Popcorn? Jacuzzis? Redwoods?” (Karma Cola p. 31)
It should be a question rather than an assertion: Are they revealing homesickness? They evoke the sense of familiarity and oneness; the two Californians easily build a bond. To be precise, these were the followers who had escaped from their own places and landed here. It was not their genuine desire for Nirvana nor were they sincere in their efforts for enlightenment. The gurus come up with different therapies and the followers blindly accept them. The ashram which uses Californian therapy allows violence. The argument that the guru puts forward is if the devotees are obsessed with anger, they will not be able to concentrate in meditation and salvation. The ashram gives freedom to the inhabitants to let loose the violent instinct and beat up one another. The meditation sessions of beating up one another end with someone’s broken shoulders and limbs. Such violent ejaculations in an ashram where a boy is considered to be the incarnation of Buddha is suggestive of the superficial level at which the whole band of Swamis and devotees operate. Wondering about the reason behind this superficiality, the narrator says that the foreigners do not have the profound Indian consolation that everything, every perception is a con. Moreover, it is self-induced con, a view enshrined in the Hindu concept of Maya. The foreigners mistake this disguise as a fact. On the other hand, the Gurus do not take pains to enlighten the disciples with real Oriental philosophy.

The narrator provides a vivid description of the tricks and miracles performed by the gurus. The tricks suggested by them often result into horrifying experiences, mental imbalance and trauma. Following one of these tricks, a girl stood in front of a mirror for half an hour without blinking. She goes back to her past life and sees that she was the mother of her husband of present life. Shocked by such vision of incestuous relationship, she loses her equilibrium. In another incident, an American visitor visits a guru called Master. On the demand of a dead person’s family, the Master agrees to raise the dead man. At the morgue, the dead
body is missing and the atmosphere is chaotic. The Master himself finds out the dead body and performs miraculous act of reviving a dead person. But what hints at the stupidity and overwhelmed attitude is the American’s interpretation of a miracle. For him, raising the dead back to life is not a miracle, but how the Master finds out the missing dead body at the morgue is miraculous. But suddenly we come across the description of a true Sadhu. A guru or sadhu should have complete control over his bodily needs and desires. In addition, there should be a control over the ability to enjoy. More importantly, the aim of this control is not suppression but transcendence. In Hinduism control over sexual drive is not the only requirement. It is one of the minor aspects of sadhutva- the qualities of a sadhu. Perhaps it is not understood by the westerners and it is evident by an American’s visit to a sadhu to learn how to have control over sexual desires.

One of the persistent questions of the westerners was, “What is the Answer?” The fake gurus do not understand the query and answer in a vague manner, “What is the Question?” However, the genuine Eastern Master would have replied, “Who is asking?” The Eastern mind is not only concerned with intellectual improvement; the mind which even does not ask questions but just perceives them. In this rich tradition where a question asks itself and the answer replies itself, an Occidental mind would be baffled only. The Westerners do not understand a simple fact that Oriental philosophy is not simply accessible to them unless they unlearn the reasoning. They think that sitting for extended periods in the lotus position get them through with this problem of accessibility. Even these ordinary gurus are not competent enough to perceive this difference. Hinduism is often regarded as a way of life rather than a strictly institutionalized religion. There seems to be no specific segregating line between this religion and way of life. This fact appears
Hindu philosophy, religion, though, culture are rooted in the application of the laws of the universe to the human life. hence, any study of Hindu religion begins not with scriptures, but by observing the universe, from our home to stars. The Rig Veda says: enlightened sages first observe, then make a deep study of God’s creation. Then they repeatedly form their own versions filled with new vigour. (The Best of Speaking Tree, Volume 1, p.54)

The Westerners, totally void in this kind of psycho-socio-religious matrix, rushed to India with an expectation to grasp these intricacies in no time and sought instant Nirvana. Another striking misconception is one of Nirvana and immortality. The narrator describes that in spite of the death of one of the followers, the others still believe that their guru has endowed them with immortality. The Indian concept of immortality is perceived in different light. The sages observed that the universe was changing ceaselessly. What remained constant was infinity. This could be found in ourselves as well. Our body is not real, but it is apparent. What remains unchanged is your real Self. The name the sages gave to this Self was Brahma or Atma. This realization is a key to understanding the Indian philosophy. The sages undertook an endeavor to enhance their skills required to achieve this understanding. Six different methods were developed for this purpose and they are called Yoga. Yoga teaches that in order to reach atman, one has to tear apart the outer layers of body and mind. It is like the bottom of a lake. If the surface of a lake is muddy or there are waves, the bottom cannot be seen. So the mind must be calm, clear and steady. It is the prerequisite for perceiving the Brahma. When the consciousness of your being is detached from your body and focused on the atman, then the sensory perception of the body
does not matter. The detached mind thus remains steady, calm and undisturbed. Then the atman comes within reach. It will not be an exaggeration that a common Hindu person would know at East this much; however, he may not be able to practice this concept. But the instant Nirvana seekers were not even initiated into this understanding. As a result they started perceiving the concept of immortality and eternity in the terms of bodily existence and the fake gurus added to their miseries by misguiding them on the path of Brahm, self-realization and eternity.

The narrator raises a serious issue about the commitment of the Westerners to learn. They come here not learn the Indian spirituality but to escape from there. Such escapists are not capable enough to unlearn their frame of reference. What happens in such situation is deterioration and perversion.

The eccentricities of the gurus are brought out by narration of various incidents. In one such case, the one of urine baba, produces nauseating effect. An Englishman goes to a distant and remote village to meet a sadhu whose morning urine turns into scented water every morning. To his surprise the Englishman finds the smell, colour and taste of the urine ordinary. Bringing the filthy side of common masses, the author comments on the unhygienic life and habits of people:

It is very well of those who live in cold climate to insist on Defecation for One. For us, that is rather like insisting that people dine alone. It is uncivilized. The communal cleansing is one of the more social moments in the Indian villager’s life, and such manners are not singular to the sons of soil.” (Karma Cola p.83).
A difference in perception of sex and sexuality, which perhaps exists even today, can be seen in the incident of Khajuraho temples. Elizabeth, a doctorate in Pali scriptures goes to these temples with her own understanding of art, culture and eroticism. But the way an Indian guide behaves with her is revealing of Indians’ attitude toward sexuality. It is essential to make it a point here that ancient culture and Hindu scriptures had altogether a different approach to these subjects. The erotic carvings on the walls of the Indian temples, such as in Khajuraho and Konarak, have always baffled the people of other religion. It seems to be an apparent answer that the human soul is essentially amorous. But then the question arises: If the act of sexual intercourse has found a place on the walls of the temples- the most sacred places-, then why a contemporary Hindu feels embarrassed by these sculptures or why do we try to explain them away in extremely religious metaphors? Is it an expression of human preoccupation with sex or it really has different interpretations to offer?

The Khajuraho temples contain some sexual or erotic art on outside walls. Multiple interpretations of these erotic carvings are prevailing. It is only the external walls that display sexual carvings. However, only 10% of the carvings contain sexual themes. In these carvings we do not find gods or deity but only human beings. It must be emphasized that that these temples do not contain sexual images inside the temple or near the deity. One of the symbolic interpretations is that for seeing the God, one must leave the libidinal self outside the Temple. It also hints at the traditional dichotomy of flesh and spirit. The inner deity is pure like soul which should remain unaffected by the sexual desires. The external carvings depict the bodily changes that take place in human beings. About 90% of the carvings on the external walls reflect the life of a common man. Hence the suggested point is that the human life should be centered around God though one is engaged in daily activities.
Perhaps it is in the artistic sense that the sculptors try to reveal the beauty and piety of man-woman union.

With reference to this discussion the Hippies misunderstood the concept. A poignant revelation of this wrong interpretation could be seen Calingute Beach where the Hippies, men and women, were found on the beach openly indulging into the sexual orgies. A common Indian analysis of this scene would be the degradation or perversion. In seventh chapter we come across a brilliant analysis of East-West encounter. The law of Karma seems to suggest that there is no heaven but only a series of life sentences is there. The salvation is not interpreted in the terms of going to heaven after life, but it has to be a permanent end to the life cycle. Thus if one keeps on being born a human after every death, it is meaningless. For the Westerners this cyclic process of birth, death and rebirth is eternity. This seems to be the basic paradox in Oriental and Occidental outlook. Though we celebrate every now and then various occasion, a consciousness always lurks beneath these colourful and lively celebrations that the aim of human life is Nirvana- not being born anymore but getting assimilated into the eternal truth- Parbrahma. The detachment taught by Hinduism explains that though you indulge in your life, celebrations, good and sad events, you should not let them colour your vision of Nirvana. The Oriental looks towards the West for its progress and inquiring spirit to free itself from the ever haunting dichotomy of finite and infinite; and it is this dichotomy of finite and infinite that attracts the Occidental. At such a juncture it is impossible that the Oriental and the Occidental have the stamina to survive the exchange of views. The narrator brilliantly remarks:

The Westerner is finding the dialectics of history less fascinating than the endless opportunities for narcissism provided by the wisdom of the East. Except that the prime concern of the wisdom of the East is the annihilation of
narcissism. (*Karma Cola*, p.102)

A popular view among the westerners is that the Oriental has the capacity to soothe the traumas of materialistic life in an industry oriented society: “India can turn nausea into serenity” (P. 102). The pseudo sanyasis - gurus- made the scenario worst. While the residents of an ashram in Western India put on saffron clothes and smoke hashish and other drugs, a common Indian thinks that they are trying to mock at the sadhus. While these Westerners are obsessed with and convinced about the idea of ‘instant Nirvana’, a common Indian laughs it away as he knows that Nirvana can be attained only after long perseverance. The following paragraph seems to reflect the crux of *Karma Kola*:

It would appear that when East meets West, all you get is the neo-sanyasis, the instant Nirvana. Coming at the problem from the separate angels, both the parties have chanced upon the same conclusion, namely, that the most effective weapon against irony is to reduce everything to banal. You have the Karma, we'll take the Coca-Cola, a metaphysical soft drink for a physical one. (*Karma Cola*, p. 103)

A guru has gathered masses in a playground to provide a proof of God’s existence. What he declares is awesome to the followers, ridiculous to the readers. Another Maharishi at Delhi is famous for giving the followers tailor made mantras for individuals. Not only that, if the mantra stops working, he has a replacement also. He proves himself to be a good orator while talking to the scientists.

Immature amalgamation of two extremely different philosophies where the escapists, drug addicts, fake gurus and greedy locals are instrumental, the result is devastating. It deteriorated the lives of the
Westerners and many of them were reduced to being beggars. When they try to grasp something which is completely beyond their reach, they get engaged in eccentricities and orgies. The French girl is living in the jungle since last seven years. Her husband cum guru and son died a strange death and she is defending herself against the charge of a murder. Surprisingly she still ponders over the opportunity of being ‘the Mother’ of the Pondicherry ashram. The readers find themselves in the state of a shock when they read about the French couple. It is neither Karma nor perseverance of Nirvana, not even being a human when the French couple demands money for their son’s cremation and runs away with the money, leaving the dead body at the gates of cremation place. These foreigners are enmeshed with drug trafficking, passport rackets, illegal international border crossing, perverse sexuality and other collateral anti-social activities. A place like Banaras, one of the supremely holy places, became a hub for all these anti-social activities. The dead bodies of the Hindus being cremated at the burning ghats of Banaras had become spectator spot. The dignity of death and cremation were reduced to amusement of the Hippies: ‘Anjuna beach had become to the Indians what the burning ghats of Benares to the foreigners, mostly a place to watch others lose their dignity’.(Karma Cola, p.175)

As it has been stated earlier, celibacy or control over sexual desires is not the only goal of a sanyasi. It is a collateral aspect of asceticism. But neither the Westerners nor the con-gurus could understand this concept. There were certain ashrams which claimed to be avant-garde and rejected the institution of marriage and family. They believed in free sex- to have a mutual sexual intercourse with anyone. They were induced to act out all their sexual fantasies unless they could exorcise them. Such behaviour is not even distantly related with Indian asceticism and Nirvana process. On the contrary it is discarded as degraded behaviour. In such environment the suppressed libidinal
desires outburst in an Indian male and it is exemplified by the Sikh follower in Ma’s ashram. It seems that the attitude towards sex of the West and the East are poles apart. Their understanding and apprehensions are contrary. If this is the case then the East and West can meet with each other only at the cost of being torn; and perhaps this was the situation. The gurus kept on elaborating the libidinal desires in complicated fashion and the disciples accepted the ‘given’ ideas. In such ashrams the foreigners have a confusion that brooding over sexuality is not as joyful as it is experiencing it. The understanding that allows an Indian to brood over the lust without indulging into it is completely missing in the Westerners. The gurus think that the Europeans were coming to them for a removal of their sense of impotence. Unfortunately they could not understand that it was not a sense of impotence but a confusion of the gender. When asked to meditate over their dual sexuality, the Westerners take it literary and move towards homosexuality. The male members who are given duties of cooking and housekeeping try to persuade their feminine self. The sexual orgy disguised in salvation and religion reaches to the worst level when the nuns were targeted and made corrupt. The gurus respected their abstinence but mocked at them saying that they were cowards as they retreated from sex without knowing what it felt like. If you do not know what is it to indulge in the sexuality, there is no meaning of your renunciation. Taken in by such provocative arguments, some nuns gave into the ashrams where they got firsthand experience of sleeping with men. For the male Christians, sleeping with a nun was a final act breaking the taboo.

We come across a brilliant dialogue between the narrator and the sweeper behind Ma’s ashram. The sweeper put it in a straight forward manner that in the name of Nirvana and Karma, the guru was playing games with the devotees. He could not give them peace but increased
their anxiety and desires. This conversation is a slap on the faces of the Westerners who blamed India for their miseries. A simple road sweeper woman can very easily crystalize the fakeness of the guru. Not only that, she also understands the terms like peace, anxiety and desire. If this is the case, then why could not the Westerners- the advocates of reason and inquiring spirit- understand those acts of deception. The answer is: it was not only an act of deception on the part of the fake gurus but also an act of duping on the part of the Westerners.

After twenty years of blind following, drug paddling, smuggling and baggers’ life, enlightenment comes in the form of disillusionment and disenchantment to the foreigners. They suddenly realize that the gold toilet seat of guru is Maya, acquisition of wealth. As the narrator comments, Carl Jung had rightly said that the Westerners live in India in a bottle protected from the local influences by the dogmas of causality and reason. The inevitable result of such bottled life is disintegration- the Westerners being sent to asylums and rehabilitation homes. Describing the resultant chaos the author mentions that if the Indian wants to learn about India he will have to consult the West, and if the West want to remember how they were, they will have to come to us.

Each story or experience is narrated in a light manner but the undertone of the narration is always serious and sarcastic. The focus is always on the life style of the seekers- life full of vigour but hallucinatory. The language is tailor made for the specific purpose. The short sentences in rhythmic pattern match with the sound of clanging cymbals and chiming bells. Sentences like ‘Shuttle religion’, ‘Shuttle fantasy’, And at what price? Your reason? Your religion? Your health? are loaded with meaning. The irreverence for the authority is brought out by words and phrases such as ‘shit’, ‘bloody’, ‘mind fucking’ and many more. Though it seems to be the use of abusive language in a work of art, it squarely fits into the life style and attitude of the trend setting Rolling
Stones and the unconventional Hippies. Such expressions, undignified and profane otherwise, display either the sense of humour of the Hippies or their irritation. Narrating his experience with a ‘holy man’, an American designer puts it thus:

“I stopped laughing for a month”, says the American designer, who has whirled with dervishes in Turkey.

“That old man with his nice white beard turned on me and said, ‘Be careful how you laugh. You become what you laugh at.”

“Scared the shit out of me”. (Karma Cola, p.20)

Even the titles are loaded with pun, hyperbole and exaggeration: ‘Om is where the Art is’, ‘Home is where the Heart is’, ‘Behind the Urine curtain’. The narrators of various experiences are nameless. Interspersed between the episodes is the piece of factual information which helps in moving the story forward. This information is provided by the narrator-observer who is always moving with the seekers like a roving eye of a camera. It is made implicit by the addresses like ‘madam’ or ‘sister’ that the narrator is female and by implication is the author herself. Karma Cola is classified as a non-fiction work but it reads almost like a novel. The author is almost omnipresent in every scene. The persona gathers the information gradually and also witnesses some incidents. Her intervention gives certain authenticity to the work and saves it from being mere documentation of the influx of the Hippies and their effect on the socio-cultural scene. The work can be considered an authentic one because she does not favour or blame any party- the East or the West- and records her observations with accuracy and punching remarks:

The form she has chosen gives her ample opportunities to come out with biting remarks and this is mostly done through a roving observer who is always present on the
scene. This observer, gifted with a panoramic vision both of space and time, scans vast areas of history with a rare insight and enables us to figure out the chaotic trends.

(Indian Women Novelists, p. 225)

We may add here that apart from the ability of a panoramic vision, the author has quick wit and the ability to poke fun. The non-fiction form and the presence of the narrator help her to cover a vast territory. With the seekers she travels to places with jet speed- Haridwar, Benaras, Pune, Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Goa and even New York and Switzerland. Since the work is not bound by the limitation of necessities of plot, characters or a story, the observer cum narrator enjoys the facility to fit past events and people. This has an effect of fast forward movement and a feeling of journey. The titles chosen for the chapters are loaded with meaning and are very biting; ‘Karma Crackers’, ‘Be Bop’, Vox Pox’, ‘Behind the Urine Curtain’. Though Karma Cola is a slim book, it looks at a major problem with comic and sarcastic style.

By the time one puts the down the book, one realizes that the author has not trivialize the issue. On the contrary, she has dealt with the topic from wider perspective and deeper insight. As a result we crystalize a vast picture of the 1960s and 1970s in which the tales of suffering, deceit and blundering are told. The juxtaposition of the expatriates’ experience of India and the Indians’ experience of the expatriates allows the author to maintain a neutral approach. The conflicting understanding of ‘this worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’; the myth of the mystic East and the materialistic West; and the antithetical nature of the Occidental and Oriental; all these aspects come under the author’s scrutiny and a new direction is given to the theme of ‘East-West encounter’, a cliché otherwise.
We can say that the core idea behind the work is a misconception of the Westerners that India can be explained to anyone and everyone can understand the subtle spiritual and mythological aspects. But the chaos created by the expatriates is a proof that it is not true. At this juncture, it will be worthy to note what does the word Karma really mean. A short analysis of the philosophical connotation of Karma will enable us to look at the situation with deeper perspective.

Different interpretations in Indian context are available of the word Karma. But the vital source of understanding the doctrine of Karma lies in Hinduism. Let us first understand the word in a simple manner. The pivotal argument behind this doctrine is: God does not make one suffer for no reason nor does He make one happy for no reason. God is very fair and gives you exactly what you deserve. But Karma is not to be interpreted in the sense of punishment. It is the sum of natural consequences of our previous actions. To put into the rational terminology of the Westerners, we can say that Karma is similar to the universal principle of ‘cause and effect’. We may even take liberty to say that the theory of Karma is like the third law of Newton: every action produces equal and opposite reaction. In this perception it is essential to note that the law of causality of Karma operates in a subtle manner. It cannot be verified on the basis of observable facts. One has to believe in it as a spiritual principle. Every time we think or do something, we create a cause. These deeds produce corresponding effects in time. Sooner or later, every action is reverberated in the form of some effect. This process is a cyclic one and produces the concept or reincarnation. What baffles the human being, the Westerners in particular, is the delayed effect of Karma; sometimes felt after years and sometimes even in the following incarnation. Karma should not be misunderstood as fate. Human beings act with free will and create their own destinies. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their resultant effects; while taken
together they determine the future. Even in such rational theory, the western mind does not seem to agree because such doubts:

Karma represents a principle whereby every one of a man’s actions is recorded for or against him, without any provision for repentance, forgiveness or absolution, and at the end of his life a balance is struck and he is incarnated in higher or lower scale accordingly. Although a man’s next incarnation is dependent on his actions of this life, a little scope is left for free will; for his actions in this existence flow naturally and inevitably from the consequences of his actions of...the past life. (Studies in Indian Society Culture and Religion, p.134-135).

The way our actions inevitably fetch counter actions for us, similarly our deeds have some subtle effect on others as well. When we do something good, our mind is in a particular state. At that time other minds which are in similar states are influenced. Thus, with variation in degree our mind and Karma have effect on others as well. Swami Vivekananda elaborates this term in a rational manner by taking some concepts from the natural sciences:

The rays of sunlight or others rays of light coming to us from the universe sometimes travel for years. In same manners the vibrations of our thoughts emanating from mind may travel in the atmosphere until they get an appropriate receptacle. Therefore when you do something good, the rays of goodness travelling in the atmosphere enter into your being; while doing something evil the rays of evilness penetrate your mind. (Karmayoga, P 53)

Apparently this argument appears to be bizarre but when we relate it to the theory of Karma, it gets vindicated. According to Karmyoga, no one’s
Karma vanishes until it produces the result and it may take many years to do so. It is quite possible that during this period the energy of that deed keeps on floating in the universe.

One of the first and profound illustrations of Karma is found in the Bhagvad Gita. The Bhagvad Gita is a primordial source of life sustaining and life guiding principles. While annihilating doubts from Arjuna’s mind, Lord Krishna, his charioteer, persuades him to indulge into the war. He says that it is Arjuna’s Karma to fight for the fairness. But as a remedy to get rid of his hesitation, He asks him to practice Anasakti – disinterestedness. When we do something, we should not expect the fruits of that deed- Karma. This disinterestedness leads you away from the Karmic effects. If you expect something, you become vulnerable to the torments and predicaments. On the contrary if you are a stoic (Sthitpragna), your disinterestedness works as a buffer between yourself and yourself and the tormenting effects of Karma. When you do not expect even gratitude from others, nothing can affect your mental state. Thus,Karmayoga preaches to indulge in Karma but not to expect anything. This disinterestedness helps you detach yourself from the worldly attractions and puts you on the path of Nirvana. Although it is only a bit of Indian concept of Karma, we can say that the Nirvana seekers of the West were not even on the periphery of Indian wisdom. Without trying to understand the word and the concept, they just reduced it to a common word of routine vocabulary.

After an attempt to understand the above discussed term, suddenly we feel to have been endowed with a wider perspective. In the light of the above discussion let us again look at the scenario of 1960s and 1970s. The Western seekers were superficial in their approach and did not have the conviction to attain Moksha because they were escapists. On the other hand, the greed and ambiguity of the Orient is
baffling. Indian ambivalence is mind boggling; it is almost on the border of irrational. Gita Mehta elaborates it sarcastically thus:

(Indians have) spent a couple of thousand years cultivating the transcendence of reason, another couple of thousand years on the denial of reason, and even more millennia on accepting the reason but rejecting its authenticity.” (Karma Cola, p. 20)

In the name of culture, vulnerable aspects like snake-charmers, jugglers and puppeteers are displayed as cultural mercantile items. Thus the Eastern scene falls short of the Western expectation. But then the western ideologies get diffused in the inarticulateness of the eastern. Everything- eastern and western- appears naively obsolete. The interplay of eastern traditions and western techniques yield altogether a new ideological challenge for the new generation born of freely loving couples. Since they are not bound by any aspect of institutionalization, their children do not have any nationality or home. The fake gurus become pro-active and the Karma gets modified in the Rock songs. In addition to this, drugs produced hallucination. All these aspects taken together were named, of course wrongly, as Indian mystical experience.

A mystical experience always leads to bliss. It produces a feeling of pure joy; joy of having gained spiritual insight into the things. It is the joy of apprehending the infinite and the eternal by transcending the finite and temporal. This joy leads to oneness with the Divine spirit, God. William Wordsworth has described it as a ‘blessed mood’ in which we ‘see into the things’. The following lines reveal the hollowness of the Westerners’ understanding of the mystic and at the same time conceptualize the real mystical stance.

The blessed mood, in which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and weary weight,
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened. We are lain asleep In body,
and become a living soul:
While an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. ("Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey", Lines 37-45,)

A simple Sanskrit phrase to understand this stance is Satchidanand (Sat+ Chit+Anand). It is often misinterpreted as ‘Always Happy’. Since this mystical experience is often linked with heightened awareness of being, it is misinterpreted by the West in an unwholesome light. This tendency to perceive the East as mysterious and exotic is precarious. It was not only the Nirvana seekers of the West who did this misinterpretation, but even poets and writers of the West have exaggerated the esoteric nature and the dream like magic. Coleridge’s Kubla Khan, Thomas Moore’s Lalla Rookh and Byron’s Don Juan interpreted the East in terms of magnificence and romance. These are the examples of Westerners’ highly representative version of the East. Such opium-induced stance and the presentation of the East as an imaginary land of colours and romance heightened the expectations of the Western travellers. Lalla Rookh’s narration of Kashmir was a fancied version of the northern India and therefore it shattered the expectation of hundreds of Westerners visiting India to see Lalla Rookh’s Kashmir. A number of factors have given birth to the various myths associated with the Orient. John Steadman opines that the myths still continue:

To Western eyes, the East is still a home of marvels, and many Occidental still believe almost any romantic tale about it— the Indian rope trick; Shangri la; rishis who are as old and wise as Taoist Immortals and still haunt the Himalayan ranges; Tibetan Lamas who fly on kites, undergo initiation
ceremonies for opening the ‘third eye’ and project themselves in time or space at will. More than one volume of deliberate fantasy has passed for literal truth. (The Myth of Asia, John Steadman, Macmillan, 1969)

The Western perception of the East as mystic still persists and it is vindicated by Karma Cola. In part four, meaningfully titled as ‘Tricks and Treats’, Gita Mehta pokes three pongoing fun- at the guru who raises the dead man, at his mystified American disciple, and at the incompetence of the of the government officials.

It is, indeed a miracle that though in modern times Western machine and Eastern mysticism have come closer for the advancement of the men, the concept of ‘ the other worldliness’ of the East and ‘ this worldliness’ of the West still have a strong hold on the perception of the both. On several occasions in the course of her narration, Gita Mehta explodes the notion of Indian‘other worldliness’. The gurus, the ‘Gods’ and the sadhus- the people who are supposed to be above the material greed- are all out to dupe the unsuspecting seekers. They not only demand fee for the services offered, but also clinch exorbitant amount from them. What surprises us the most is that the so called rational seekers fall an easy prey to the gurus who demand thick payments apart from complete surrender and obedience to their commands. The author mocks at both- the seekers weakened by their immature seeking and their gurus dazed by the lust for lust for material gains:

The Price of abject servility could vary from paying a percentage of your income to handing over your whole stash. No rebates. No refunds. No questions. An outstanding example of Taxation without Representation. Surely such a takeover owed its success to a general debility in the host body. (Karma Cola,p. 46)
In the absence of psychological strength, the unquestioned authority of the gurus and the servility of the Western seekers indicate the ‘having mode of existence’. This ‘hiving mode’ is defined as a way of life centered on greed and inordinate desire to possess. The gurus are greedy for materialistic gains; the seekers are greedy for quick Nirvana. The understanding of the term authority should be in clear fragmentations: rational authority and irrational authority. Rational authority is based on competence and capacity which helps the person grow. Irrational authority is based on power and serves to exploit the person subjected to it. Here competence of the authority refers to the leader’s skill, knowledge, experience and wisdom. Since rational authority believes in growth, it does not depend on ‘giving orders’ or threatening. On the contrary, the irrational authority has to create an artificial image of knowledge and competence and therefore asserts itself. In this case irrational authority has to be dependent on tricks or threats for obedience. Most of the gurus to whom the seekers turn were not integrated personalities. Far from having any spiritual insight, they even do not have the moral behaviour or elegant simplicity implicit in the local (native) tradition. To use an appropriate term, they are the con-men who force to the unsuspecting Westerners to believe in their explanation of Karma and Maya.

Gita Mehta uses the phrases ‘monomania of the East’ and ‘multimania of the East’ in order to describe the difference. At the same time it is shown how painful it is to understand each other in the absence of rational authority. The Indians look at the world as ‘Maya’ and have the profound consolation that every perception is a con ‘and worse, a self-induced cone, a view enshrined in the Hindu concept of Maya’. The visitors do not have this consolation and therefore get baffled by these contradictions. In a futile attempt to understand this concept they fall an easy prey to the greedy gurus. The use of the words con and
Maya refer to two aspects: Maya refers to our metaphysical thought and con refers to the con-men, the fake gurus. The con-men persuade the seekers to believe that the world is an illusion and therefore it is inevitable to renounce the worldly possessions to attain ‘Nirvana’. Thus the worldly possessions (dollars and pounds) find their way to the guru’s pockets and the rational seekers cannot see the gurus accumulating enormous wealth. The ill-fated seekers, devoid of their cash, living in miserable poverty and filth, unable to return to their homeland either live in humiliation or die humiliating deaths.

The author has narrated many cases of penury, madness and death with an undercurrent of humour. A young American hallucinates to be on the ‘nude sadhu trip’ and runs up and down in a flight of Pan America Airways. A French woman stays with her baby in a jungle near Delhi. The villagers think she is an incarnation of some goddess. Others think that she is a witch. She entertains a mad hope that she will replace the ‘Mother’ at Pondicherry Ashram. An English girl whose grandfather was a viceroy of India, live a filthy life in a shabby room. A girl looks into the mirror and has visions of previous life. She finds that her current life husband was her own child in the previous life. The thought of incestuous relation drags her to madness.

At this juncture three questions are important: first, how do these gurus manage to dissuade or frighten to obey the so called ‘rational’; second, what is the attitude of the gurus towards their disciples; and third, how deep is the motivation of the seekers to attain salvation. The seekers come to the East for instant Nirvana. The gurus have casual and insincere attitude towards their disciples and consider them as ‘good catch’ to be manipulated for materialistic gains. They used the esoteric tactics of being extremely complicated and vague or being silent. By using these tricks the gurus led the seekers to a subdued state followed by total surrender- both physical and material. As a result an
atmosphere of incomprehensibility, deception and superficiality is created and both the sides are affected by it. As described by the author in the introduction, this is the age of darkness- Kaliyug. In this jet-speed era if the seekers want Nirvana as an instant, there are gurus ready with ‘instant Nirvana recipes’. As one guru tells the correspondent of Time magazine, “My followers have no time. So I give them instant salvation. I turn them into neo-sanyasis.”( Karma Cola, p. 102)

The reason which led to degradation of the gurus and the seekers was that the sound and pragmatic concepts like Karma, Nirvana, the precepts of the Gita and the Upanishads, the teachings of great seers, and the symbolic significance of Shiv-linga or Kali drinking blood were reduced to banal; the explanation and understanding of these concepts were totally devoid of the original spirit. It seems that the author wants to clarify this point when she writes:

A sanyasi in India is half way to being a saint, a man who has renounced the world to seek the truth, a renunciation that is social as well as physical. His vows are not significantly different from those who join monasteries in the West- dedication to poverty, chastity and if the sanyasi is a teacher, obedience.( Karma Cola, p.103)

Perhaps when Lord Krishna spoke of self-knowledge, meditation and infinite bliss, his focus was on the disinterestedness of Karma- action. As mentioned earlier, the Hindu thought system suggests that the divine can be realized in four different ways; through the study of theology( Jnana Yoga), or through rigid mind control ( Raja Yoga), or through right action ( Karma Yoga), or through love and devotion( Bhakti Yoga). But ironically the Western seekers interpreted love as lust, meditation as intoxication kicked by drugs, sanyas as living in filth, Shiv-linga as sex
symbol and Karma as everything. Highly philosophical concept of Karma was reduced to distorted interpretations of the Westerners:

“I can’t visit London anymore. The Karma there is too heavy for me” says the Iranian hair dresser.
“I crashed my car last night. I have bad Karma,” says the Harlem drug dealer.
“That dude’s dangerous. He has heavy Karma,” explains the American gambler’s girlfriend.
“My daughter is called Rani,” says the German mother, “the night she was born in Goa my friend and his lady had a daughter in Los Angeles and they called her Rani. We have such close Karma.”

(Karma Cola, p. 100)

In order to explain how new converts into Hinduism started marketing selling our Gods, the author has taken an analogy of Hindu caste system: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Shudra and Vaishya. When the Western enthusiastic Nirvana seekers started pouring in India, the first wave of the expatriates became their guides and sold them their knowledge. Here both, the traders and buyers are Westerners. Soon the new comers are brought to the ashrams by their co citizens. Now the marketers and consumers are the disciples themselves. The Hindu Gods became ‘cool’ entities. The seekers, with their heating dopes and chillum used to sit in front of God’s idols, trying to be one with the Absolute Being. Whether it is Hindu faith or Buddhist philosophy, everything was stream lined to a single marketing formula. Its only characteristic was miracles. The locals started believing that if a Westerner converted into Hinduism dies, it is his Hindu mindedness that caused his death.

The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and the Hippies face the same problem; the conflict of unresolved religious, social and cultural crisis. In addition, it was a conflict between reason and unreason, consumerism
and faith. If we pause and think for a while, we realize that these were problems for them because they wanted to escape from them instead of solving them. In place of searching for answers, they wanted instant remedies. Their approach was to evade the problem. The author has put this escapist approach in the mouth of numerous Nirvana seekers. They can be considered as the victims of boredom and loss of excitement born out of materialism. Thus there is no seriousness of purpose nor scholarly inquiring spirit.

It will be a gross error to hold the seekers solely responsible for what happened. The gurus and sanyasis are equally responsible. They worked to turn them into neo-sanyasis knowing very well what they were doing. There is a Maharishi with a seat in Switzerland offering his disciples a short term course on Transcendental Meditation. On one hand he gives individual follower a specific mantra; on the other he explains to the scientists the theory of atom and particle. In another ashram, the concentration is on laughter, while in yet another, mind control and body control is taught through violence. The attitude of the gurus towards the disciples is of indifference. As the matriarch of the ashram says, “These people want toys. They are fascinated by sex and violence. So Bhagvan gives them games and riddles.” (Karma Cola, p. 38) Thus shattered in flesh and spirit, almost insane, the seekers have to live a filthy life of baggers or they go back to their countries and undergo treatment in mental asylums.

Among such gurus, it becomes inevitable to learn the real role of a guru in the Indian tradition. The word guru is derived from the Sanskrit roots gu signifying ignorance and ru implying remover. Thus a guru does not give much but removes a lot. Suppose one is suffering from illusions, guru will help you emerge from it. He will arouse the powers of discrimination which are hidden within your consciousness. Thus, he helps you realize your basic nature rather than imposing a bunch of
doctrines on you. A guru knows that second hand enlightenment is of no use. The true guru measures the depth or shallowness of the pupil before the teaching process starts. The traditional *guru-shishya* had particular shelter of the guru. As a member of a family- *grukul*- the student would derive multi-dimensional education. In addition to formal education, the guru would impart an ethical perspective; a sense of right and wrong. All the time the importance of guiding values was emphasized. The guru invariably led the pupils to the sphere of ultimate knowledge of the universe; to the cosmic principles which the *Upanishads* called Brahma. Such is the importance of the guru. The divine incarnations like Rama and Krishna are depicted to have flourished under the guidance of their gurus Vishwamitra and Sandipani

Totally incompetent to the core, the gurus pretend to have achieved the heights. In doing so, they give bad reflection of Indian spirituality and Indian society. This situation compelled people to think whether India really has some real spiritual men or real gurus who can lead the disciples on the path of enlightenment. At that time we have to refer to the names like Aurobindo, Swami Vivekanand and Swami Yoganand who are highly renowned for their knowledge and understanding of spiritual precepts. But the gurus who surfaced with the entry of the expatriates were the counterfeiters. They were the devils expelling the spells of ambiguity and vagueness and thereby controlling the gullible disciples. Their strategy can be summed up as: ambivalence, double-talk, obscure statements, angry outbursts or silence.

Silence, in fact, is very important in the Eastern tradition of higher spiritual practices. It is a means to comprehend the knowledge of the Absolute. This relation between silence and the Absolute is logical because the Absolute is beyond words. He can be experienced mystically or can be realized intuitively, but he cannot be talked about. As per one of the tales of Buddhism, once a disciple asked Buddha about secret of
Nirvana, he refused to reply and looked at the golden flower and smiled. The same contemplative silence is followed in Hinduism as well. Gita Mehta pokes fun at the use of silence by the gurus as weapon to defend rather than to attain higher spiritual goals. Baffled by the questions of the Westerners, the gurus keep their lips tightly closed, lest they omit their incompetence. The guru is too shallow to understand the question, ‘What is the answer?’ Nor he is able to provide any convincing answer. But the gullible clients-disciples are not ready to accept this inability and therefore mistake politeness for profundity. In this way, the gurus made the knowledge inaccessible to the disciples and thus insulted the Indian spiritual tradition and the guru-disciple relationship.

Gita Mehta looks at the esoteric religious practices with microscopic eyes and uses the analysis to poke fun at the gurus and their disciples. The Maharishi’s discourse with the scientists is like the pompous narration in mock-heroic style. Again, the conversation between an American and a sadhu about sexual control is another example of misdirection and deviation. Some gurus force new names to their disciples as if changing the name would enable them to grasp the spiritual concepts of the East. Those who keep on saying in a meaningless manner ‘it’s beautiful’ are also ridiculed. The use is so recurrent and meaningless that we wonder whether they know what it is be beautiful. There are gurus who giggle at everything or make a mockery of everything. Those gurus also come under the scanner of the author who force new Indian names on their disciples. These disciples have little knowledge about the names they carry. The new names obliterate their identity but do not change the individual in any significant way. The little boy is called’ Buddha’ but he demands guns and weapons..

The gurus could successfully use these tactics in order to convince the seekers that their journey of transformation is going on well. It also helps them retain their faith in the power of their gurus. The spell bound
seekers took almost a decade and a half to realize the fakeness of the gurus. But, during this period, whatever the guru does or says is ‘spiritual’.

As mentioned earlier, the influx of these Hippies and others cannot leave without a deep impact on the local atmosphere. A large segment of Indian population came under the influence of the life style of the seekers. But, the reaction of the public to the seekers was a self-centered one. By and large the Indian mentality is of minimal interference. As it is said in a popular fashion, ‘as long as they do not harm me, I pretend no to have noticed them’. Gita Mehta has recorded one such shock wave in the incident of Goa. The public anger arose when they learnt that the beaches had become open brothels. But there is no result of this indignation because of administrative apathy, political influences and public helplessness. A cliché complaint against an Indian is that one looks at a foreigner lady as ‘easily available’. The public in general took all Europeans as amorous or of easy morals. Any white woman was an object of desire. The evidences are found in earlier literature as well. For example, Mr Aziz is accused of assaulting Mrs. Moor in A Passage to India. But if they openly indulge into sexual intercourse on the beach, an Indian’s interpretation is not illogical. This point is revealed in the Khajuraho temple incident from multiple points of view. It seems that by juxtaposing the Eastern and Western attitudes, the author is again and again denying the possibility of a happy amalgamation.

The depiction of public and general reaction is also vivid. On one hand we find a sweeper woman who perceives the situation very precisely. She is far more rational than the seekers. The sweeper woman also feels sorry for the victims of the guru. On the other hand we also come across greedy shopkeepers near ashrams who call the seekers foolish or mad. But they are happy because these foreigners give them business. The government and local administration also behave
strangely. They come into action only when some crime is committed. Their investigations are totally void of any conclusion. The Indian girl from a ‘good family’ is accused of a Dutch millionaire’s murder. The French woman is charged for murdering her guru-husband and a son. The Anand Marg followers are nothing less than mafia and are involved in numerous murders. Neither the police nor the government is able to expose these issues. The involvement of Police is full of suspicions. As mentioned in the earlier paragraph, the criminals get scot-free because of inaction on the part of law-enforcing authorities. Apart from this, their personal fooling also obstructs their duty.

Western seekers coming to India in search of peace and self-realization is not a new theme in the field of literature. A variety of issues have been discussed so far: the profundity of Eastern thought, the obscurity of Indian mysticism, mind baffling doctrines of Indian philosophy, philosophical schools and much more. The gurus depicted in these works are not con-men of *Karma Cola*. Those gurus show the real ways to the disciples and after doing their duty they may and may not remain a part of disciples’ lives. After the influx of the Hippie movement there was some change in the serious tone of guru’s depiction. Gita Mehta weaves the situations alternately in such a witty manner that one cannot vindicate the gurus nor blame them. In one conversation the Swiss remarks that the Germans are frightening because they go to the Himalayas and try to be superman. It is a clear indication at the insanity on the part of the seekers. It is not the gurus but their own mental state that is responsible for such eccentricity. In another incident a guru teaches the seekers the concept of free love and asks them to get rid of latent desires. Taking his words literally, a young girl rushes to him at one night asking him, “Take me lover! I’m yours.” (*Karma Cola*, p. 149) We do not wish to say that all the gurus are flawless. Most of them use
words with double meaning and their actions are ambivalent. One guru manipulates the concepts given by Carl Jung and Freud thus:

“There is no sin but self-loathing. The self is God. If you loathe your body, you loathe yourself. Go towards your body, go toward your desire, and then go past them. The death of desire is the birth of Atman.” (Karma Cola, p. 149)

In normal metaphysical setting of Indian audience, the words carry authentic connotation and the essence cannot be doubted. But the seekers who want to act out their sexual fantasies perceive it in different light. This seems to be a clear reason why the gurus do not want the Indians in their ashrams. The ashrams have become a hub for sexual orgy and tantric practices.

Unfortunately, politics, administration, society and religion invaded upon the movement that had started with the young Westerners who suffered from the boredom of routine life and sought a release from the tedium of their societies. They moved to India as they looked at her as more religiously oriented and a primitive land. Over the decades, the nature of the influx of foreigners changed. What had started with the Hippies, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles was targeted by the marketing cult. The consumer greed on both the sides boosted it and soon the Karma wave involved crime, political intrigues, drugs, smuggling, sexual perversion, the entry of CIA and what not.

The closing of the book is very significant. She closes with a toast to those who fear and also to those who are beyond fear and cannot hear. It is a subtle warning to the West; it is not for the feeble mind to understand ‘Infinity’, and by implication to comprehend India. A faint flavor of love for India is perceivable here. Karma Cola covers the period from mid 1960s to the end of 1970s. The East-West encounter that Gita Mehta is interested in is not the usual stereotype post-colonial tussle
between the two at socio-cultural level. Nor does she describe the abstracts like the esoteric East and the ‘materialistic’ West. She refuses to glorify any block; instead she shows the damage done to the individuals and to the cultures because of half-backed knowledge, misconceptions and misinterpretations. The cross-cultural transactions, the transformation of the Indian culture on the Western lines and the tension between the old traditional approach and the new outlook are shifting the society from inward to outward entity. At this point, one tends to agree with Gita Mehta that since the ‘rock and roll’ is being performed by the East and the West together, it is quite possible that we eliminate the boundaries. Both for contextual reasons of assessing and accessing a problem through a literary work and also to comprehend the radical cultural change leading to the evolution of new syncretic culture, *Karma Cola* is of special value.