

CHAPTER II

KARMA COLA: THE MODERN KARMIC UNIVERSE

Bearing an enticing title and published in 1979, Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* conjures up the mystic east, more clearly, the occidental ideas of the mystic India along with their sentimental implications, combined with the immanent exigencies of Western society, and the chaotic misinterpretations of ancient spiritual traditions of India in the minds of occidentals. The book becomes a poignant study on the pretentious gurus who ostentatiously profess and promise enlightenment to the Westerners coming in search of the "missing magic" in their lives in a post-colonial India.

Beginning in the late 60's a mammoth exodus of Westerners descended upon India. These Western disciples of a cultural revolution proclaimed that the magic and mystery missing from their lives was to be found in the East. The book reads as a witty satire on these hippies descending on India seeking meaning in their lives. In the words of Gita Mehta, when *Karma Cola* was published, many critics from all over the world reviewed it less for its merits than as an occasion to describe their own encounters with such casualties of spiritual tourism. And yet, as Gita Mehta says,

those days seem now an age of such innocence –
when global escapism masquerading as spiritual

hunger resulted at worst in individual madness, at best in a hard-won awareness that the benediction of the jet-stream gurus was seldom more than sky writing, and that the mystic East, given half a chance, could teach the West a thing or two about materialism.¹

For Gita Mehta, the movement of these western “new nomads” epitomizes a global escapism masquerading as spiritual hunger. The ‘pilgrims’ who are the ‘casualties of spiritual tourism’ are variously exploited by the gurus and the ashrams become places where the traditions of an ancient and long-lived society are transacted as commodities as in Jonestown where, on the instructions of their spiritual leader, more than a thousand people had killed themselves by drinking cyanide mixed with the soft drink, kool Aid: a *karma* attained through grape-flavoured cola. Or there is an Indian journalist’s interview with the members of a commune styling themselves as the Stone Age Cult who give up “everything to follow a large bearded American living in India who claimed to have discovered the secret of immortality” but who unfortunately falls prey to the temporal and contracts an Indian disease and dies. The Indian journalist calls on the followers, and to her surprise, finds that they were not at all bewildered. When the journalist enquires the followers about their current views on immortality, the reply she gets is that their faith in their leader’s indestructibility remains intact. The interview goes like this:

"But he is dead," the bemused journalist insisted.

"You cremated him yourselves."

"The master isn't dead," she was admonished.

"He's being recycled." (XI)

The disciples reply with least knowledge of the process of recycling, according to Indian comprehension. In an article Massimo Introvigne, Professor of History and Sociology of Religious Movements at Torino University, Italy, highlights the fact:

The tragedy of the occidental way of conceiving reincarnation (not to be confused with the tragic and noble reincarnation doctrines of the great oriental religions) lies in its representing a cheap attempt – or dream – to escape from the seriousness of the moral choice and human responsibilities of our daily living. Reincarnation becomes therefore a "joyfully permanent vacation" or "a technique of postponement."²

Or in the words of Gita Mehta who further describes the Indian view of recycling: "In India, recycling offers not the glammers of immortality but the fetters of karma that chain humans to the wheel of existence. And even the most materialistic Indian still knows that wheeling and dealing in karma can turn into the most dangerous practical joke of all" (xii). The novel, with its fund of irony, satire and acerbic wit, is a

probe into the ashram life where spirituality for all its wheeling and dealing in karma has turned into the most practical joke of all.

In the words of Corrado Micheli the characters and episodes of *Karma Cola* are fitted nicely to represent a view of those critical years of our age. "The book therefore becomes a valuable contribution to the analysis of that interesting confrontation between East and West that runs across our centuries and millennia, without ever exhausting its attraction and vitality, forming indeed a major theme in Indo-English literature."³

Western victims of Eastern ostentation make the major subject matter of the novel. With Sitar wiping out the split-reed sax, mantras fouling the crystal clarity of rock and roll lyrics, millions of wild-eyed Americans turned their backs on all their amazing equipment and pointed at Indians screaming, "You guys! You've got it" (6).

So we tagged along with Americans one more time. Not because of right thought, right speech, right action. But because of the rhythm section. Never before had the void been pursued with such optimism and such razzle dazzle. Everyone suspected that whatever America wanted America got. Why not Nirvana?" (6)

The result was endless rows of soul-questers pouring in from the West to India. And there was tremendous inflow. With them were the French, Germans, Scandinavians, Australians, Canadians, Italians,

South and Central Americans, the British the Swiss and so on. Of the quarter million French people on the subcontinent, a good eighty per cent are in pursuit of either mind expansion or obscure salvations. And the same is true with most of the other nationals who are here in large numbers, except those from Russia or the Eastern Bloc countries. The true misfortune is that despite the efforts to teach them that things are not easy in India, the numbers increase. In his article Corrado Micheli illustrates that, contrary to the traditional pattern of most Indian writers, in *Karma Cola* Gita Mehta appears on the literary scene to present Western characters as major victims of alienation in and out of India. He says,

India actually becomes a kaleidoscope, briefly and brightly reflecting the occidental modern anxieties, while if we take a closer view, we will be confronted with a clearer reality of a deep-rooted Western despair. Americans, Australians and Europeans all show a sense of non-belonging to their respective home lands, a refusal of traditional modes of living, a desire to deracinate themselves from the Western origins and past. Their escapist drive, mingled with a peculiar sense of alienation, makes an explosive cocktail for Gita Mehta's occidentals, who are often stranded and on the verge of insanity.⁴

Building a cenotaph over their spiritual aspirations, the gurus enact their materialistic drama with spiritual counters like Karma, Nirvana and so on:

God sat in a cushioned swivel chair with a blue denim hat on his head and spoke about the revolution. As the discourse gathered momentum it became clear that God was an intellectual snob. He dropped only the heaviest names. Jesus, Marx, Mahavira. And Fritz Pearls. His two-thousand-odd devotees inhaled, writhed or listened in an ecstasy of *being*. (29)

Nirvana, karma, cosmic energy, eternal silence are metaphysical postulates whose essence their rational minds fail to understand. Gita Mehta brings out the irony of the situation when she interviews a western inmate of the ashram.

“What are you doing in India?”

“I am being”

“Pardon?”

“Being”

“Ah, I catch on. Being. Yes, we all be. We definitely are, no doubt. But what are you doing?”

An irretrievable breakdown in communications. Sorrowful smile meets suspicious glance in a hammerlock.

Freeze frame on a B movie. (34)

For the Indian mind these spiritual doctrines are the sacred element of the essential Indian experience. To the occidents, these spiritual

pathways are pastimes excruciating experiments in plumbing a beyond. The attempt to “find oneself”, as western imagination defines the effects of the supposed healing power of India, reverts itself to losing oneself completely. The alienation of *Karma Cola's* occidentals is so extreme that even their birth name can be disturbing to them. The deceitful gurus give them a change of names and the smugly complacent disciples become entangled in a magic spell that they have reached three quarters of Nirvana – “Buddha, the Enlightened one”; “Abhimanyu, who knew how to enter the circle but not how to leave,” “the just king, Yudhistira”; “Saraswathi, Goddess of Learning” (35). Nobody is Joanie anymore. What has gone wrong with the names they were born with? When questioned by the author, an inmate of an ashram who is from California says, “well... its weird hearing a name like Joanie again. We’ve left the past behind us, see. And names, people like her and you... It’s from that terrible world where everyone is mind-fucking everyone else. We left home to get away from that shit.” (32-33)

“It’s all words, words, words,” says Essex with a deep sigh...

“Yeah. You know lady, you should join in some of our meditations. You could learn to be silent and exist. You look like you need it. To be. It’s really a terrific high.”

California winks archly. “It’s better than coming” (33).

Putting on orange robes and changing names cannot undo identities, cannot exterminate differences. Major crises of cultural displacements of the non-Indian votaries can find no lasting solutions in "arrogance of nomenclature."

"It's kinda nice for your ego running a movie in which you're always the star," affirms a character after having experienced an *arcane* "reincarnation meditation" in an Indian ashram. An ineffable concept of reincarnation: he was the Buddha's charioteer, driving the Enlightened to his destiny. Corrado Micheli says that the main irony Gita Mehta brilliantly depicts is that her Occidental, in his quest, seems the least aware that the prime concern of the wisdom of the East is the annihilation of narcissism. So that delicate aspects of Hinduism easily end up on a breakfast table to be greedily devoured after careful selection. Such comfort, as Gita Mehta intuitively illustrates, appears to have prevented thousands of visitors to India from diving through death's door. As the author says,

The visitors do not have that profound Indian consolation of knowing that everything and every perception is a con, and worse, a self-induced con, a view enshrined in the Hindu concept of Maya. As a result, too many visitors take the masquerade as incontrovertible fact. The gurus, their Indian hosts and fathers, don't help them to acquire the tranquility that comes from the oriental ability to see in a plethora of

contradictions a literally mind-blowing affirmation. To go from the monomania of the West to the multomania of the East is a painful business. Like a sex change. Too many visitors discover that changing their names does not inevitably lead to a change in their vital organs. More and more frequently this discovery together with the flies and the dysentery, humiliates them unto death. Or madness. (35)

An embassy doctor, whose only function is to deal with the casualties of the great pilgrimage, has been attached to the Delhi Embassy for barely a month, but in that short time his feeling for those he accompanied, diseased, suffering from malnutrition, or trapped in inarticulate nightmares, has gone from sympathy to contempt to fear. He sympathetically observes: "They are scum. What is the point of taking them back home where they can infect other people with their lies and their dirty habits? I sometimes wonder why we don't let them die here in India, where it doesn't matter." (22)

An aged Italian countess in search of peace comes all the way from Rome to receive a personal mantra from a famous guru who paradoxically is flying to Switzerland the following day for "professional" reasons. She lived a stone's throw from the Vatican, and was a practising Catholic. She was also not a fool. But she believed so totally in the power of this incomprehensible word from another religion in an unknown language that she had paid the airfare from

Rome to Delhi. Mehta's sharp irony defines the countess' illusory "need of the peace." Back at the Vatican they were offering the "peace that passeth understanding," remarks Gita Mehta, "but it wasn't enough for the countess. What she wanted was Shanti with a name tag. A specific, not a general reprieve."⁵ Corrado Micheli observes that

The traditional Occidental heritage is thus erased, cut off, escaped, variously hybridized and simplistically "transcended" into alien forms of Oriental meditations. Consciously deracinated, our occidental characters' ultimate hope lies in India's mysticism. And although they may be right to consider India as a land of ancient mystical traditions, they ought at least learn, comments Mehta, that it is also the soil that nourishes *Maya*, the Great Illusion. Their hazardous searches, devoid of any understanding of those traditions, are bound to meet only a saddening derision, if not by complacent Eastern Masters, certainly on the part of the common Indian and profusely in the pages of *Karma Cola*.⁶

Whether the westerner is to be blamed for seeking Indian asylums or the Indian guru is to be accused for doling out alms indigestible to the western psyche is a rather perplexing issue. America is a continent that has revered rebellion. Yet its children are falling easy prey to men who are demanding not only "complete and unquestioning obedience to their commands," (45-46) but also

"exacting payment for that privilege." (46) And the price of contemptible servility could vary from paying "a percentage of income to handing over the whole stash." (46) 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. Or else to the rumour that the streets of India are lined with miracles.

Unlike the admirable Jain monks, mullahs, and Sufi saints of *A River Sutra*, the gurus in *Karma Cola* are shallow mendicants exploiting the gullible and the knowledgeable alike. Like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, gurus are of an infinite variety. With an iconoclastic violence, the writer lashes out at these so-called gurus who, sitting on cushioned chairs with blue denim hats on their head, "spoke about the revolution." (29) One guru writes a long piece in an Indian magazine explaining his views on the Apocalypse, which in its way, is a perfect example of what happens when great cultures meet. He wrote,

"Everything is perfect. But also the Third World War is coming! That is going to be perfect, too! It will kill utterly."

A mind reared on relativity can't help overheating at the excitement of the absolutely absolute.

“You are sitting on a volcano. Never before was it so dangerous. And you think, what are you doing here meditating? What else can you do?”

Meditate while the time is still there! If the volcano erupts and you die meditating you will know the taste of the deathless!” (103)

This guru is reputed as the thinking man's guru. For the less intellectually demanding there are gurus like the eternal teenager Guru Maharaj Ji, who once hired Houston Astrodome in order to spread his teachings, and the scoreboard carried the “encouraging Eastern message: ENJOY ENJOY ENJOY” (100). Another guru bolsters the faith of his followers by promising proof of the existence of God. The guru informs that if one looks in the Oxford English Dictionary under the letter G, he will eventually find the word God: “It is in the Dictionary. Let those who doubt the existence of the divine look for proof in the Dictionary. How could what does not exist, then exist in the Dictionary?” (104) The guru's following over the last few years has become so extensive that he has to give the benediction from a helicopter. The lure of the guru is such that whatever he does, he is cheered and loudly acclaimed. He is spoken of as the spiritual doctor for all mental ailments. At cross-swords with institutionalized thinking, Gita Mehta blasts at the hollow ritualistic life that is prescribed for patients seeking spiritual balms:

In an era where today's miracle becomes tomorrow's toy it is inevitable that the world should draw closer to the Indian view that the miracle lies in the eyes of the beholder.

Beneath the pavements of busy Manhattan is a basement consecrated to the religions of one hundred and ten countries. It is indisputably the high temple of religious egalitarianism, an Acropolis for the Aquarian Age. (53-54)

Here is a guru, a nice clean Brahmin, who is reputed to have miraculous healing powers. He rolls his eyeballs. This unusual form of his meditation has attracted many of his devotees who see that eyeballs are located at the focal point of all distress, either physical or spiritual. True believers are convinced that if they rolled their eyes long enough they will, like the guru, acquire healing powers. But the irony behind this miracle comes forth when the guru tries to give his benediction:

The guru's eyeballs began their descent. The pupils constricted. The teacher tried to zero in on the paper. It would have been an optimal miracle if he had been able to read after rolling his eyes for an hour. But he didn't pull it off.

The guru's powers were something limited to controlling the bodies of others, but not his own. (55)

A reputed guru is sent for on the death of one of his devotees. He is expected to raise the dead into the living. But when the morgue attendants fail to find the exact body, the guru steps into the inner recesses of the morgue, locates the correct body and proceeds to raise it from the dead. When the guru's bewildered American disciple questioned:

“Was that the greatest miracle you saw in India? Your guru raising a man from the dead?”

“No man; the real gurus in India do that sort of thing everyday of the week. I didn't think raising a guy from the dead was such a big deal after I'd been around India a couple of years”.

“What was a big deal? Did you think anything was a miracle?”

The American had thought a long time before he answered the question.

“Yeah. I saw a miracle. You should have seen that morgue, guys rushing all over the place, clerks, morgue attendants, administrators. Nobody knew where anything was.

“I reckon the real miracle was when the Master *found* that body. The rest was peanuts”.

(50)

"I think they should have a quality control on gurus. A lot of my friends have gone mad in India," one of the author's fleeting characters, a German economist, observes. The quality of certain gurus is questionable, and as *Karma Cola* shows, their guiding may be totally misleading. But the writer never denies or derides the value of her country's religiosity. Mehta's approach "is never devoid of a profound sense of respect for the mythological, traditional aspects of her land."⁷

Escaping from an unwanted past the materially advanced society has turned to India not only for spiritual knowledge but also for various other reasons. For instance, Mike, an American who has been in India about twelve years in fact didn't really come here to get but sort of drifted here. He rigidly says, "just another draft dodger I guess. Didn't want to freeze my ass off in Canada, came to India instead. I go back to the States every year for a while. Just to check whether I could live there, I mean like anywhere in America. Each year I come back quicker" (64-65). Jasmine, a hippie, elaborates the theme:

"We discovered these places, Afghanistan, Nepal, Goa. When we arrived everybody loved us. Now the whole dawn world is on the trail we opened up, and the same people who loved us, fucking hate us. There's too many of them..."

“They’re not in the same *class* as those of us who got here first.” (66)

According to a Swiss banker the Germans come to India to go to the mountains, the Himalayas, and try to be supermen. “They are like vampires. Waiting, waiting for the twilight of the gods ... To take the place of the gods” (74). And the reason for himself being in India is something else:

It is nothing significant. Just I was tired of dollars, dinars, telephones, telex. For a while I enjoyed this, but a man cannot spend the rest of his life doing a jigsaw puzzle, putting one piece here, another one there, and know he will never see the complete picture.”

Picture of what?

“Of myself. Of life. It is here a noisy, dirty silence. So many millions being born, living, dying, without the fuss. This I appreciate. So little fuss. We Swiss are supposed to like order. Well this is order because in India you are always reminded of the significance and the insignificance of life. In Switzerland it was disordered. In my life I remembered only the significance of banking.” (75)

The Canadians get here with little black notebooks which tell them how much a rickshaw costs, what they should pay for a room, for a coconut and so on. According to an American, they are paranoid:

“Can’t imagine how that book is going to protect him against the real crooks” (76). He says laconically. The French who come to India always ask for pictures or statues of the God Shiva. It is the Indian gods not Indians who comfort them and they show interest in familiar things like mala, beads and incense with which they worship not Mother Mary but Kali. “That shows they are bad charactered” (77). A shopkeeper’s assistant assumes. An old man reconsiders his position by saying, “No they are not bad. But I do not think they like beauty anymore... They say Mother Kali shows the strength of the female” (77). For Gita Mehta, a book shop owner’s assertion is something more sympathetic:

“At least when they come to my shop they buy books on holy subjects, Yoga, Tantra, *The Gita*, the *Upanishads*. Sometimes I get angry that they do not work when I have a family to feed and prices are so high. But even if they do not work, at least they take the name of God.

“Our Indians, when they come to my shop, they only want to find hot books...

“You may say these foreigners, they work like donkeys but think like kings. We Indians, we think like donkeys and we work like kings.” (77)

An exhausted filmmaker from Britain explains:

The simple reason to the whole movement is that we come here to get unwired. Where else

is there to go? And here, you're ignored, you're not important at all, so you are forced back on your own resources, not the resources of some huge mammary Machine. If you can get used to the indifference, you learn to function again."
(78)

"India as the new magnet to the new despair. When you are tired of winning come lose with us." (78) Gita Mehta says.

In the fifties when Indians spoke English at all they spoke in well rounded sentences with more than a hint of Macaulayan grammar. Dell comics had not yet devastated their minds leaving them easy prey to the fractured prose of America. But, by the sixties, modulation had given way to acceleration. "The explosive shorthand of America seemed infinitely preferable to the dilatory obliqueness of England" (98). And by the seventies, a national Indian newspaper, with perfect linguistic confidence, carried the headline "Fag Hag Crooner." On the other side of the planet the world's fastest speech looked for new words for slowing down. For twenty years we had borrowed their vocabulary, now they scavenged in ours. But now that America has taken our most complicated philosophical concepts as part of its everyday slang, things are getting sticky. Whose interpretation should be accepted as final authority – the Sanskrit scholar's or the street hustler's? But of all these terms karma has lured the imagination of everyone. It has gained international

spiritual currency. It is "ironic that of all the terms from Hindu philosophy that have captured the American imagination, none has greater currency than karma – and that in the last fifteen years, for a generation disenchanted by war" (99).

As options proliferate all over the globe, the ability to understand the nature of necessity appears to be diminishing ... So the terminology has accommodated itself to the needs of those who use it.

"I can't visit London anymore. The Karma there is too heavy for me," says the Iranian hairdresser.

"I crashed my car last night. I have bad Karma," says the Mexican student.

"That dude's dangerous. He has heavy Karma," says the Harlem drug dealer.

"Craps – its' a low Karma game," 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*."

Coincidence, chance, *deja vu*, anything goes as karma (100).

Karma Cola according to *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, is “a short taut savagely satirical account of the hippies and Western star freaks on a spiritual quest in India.”⁸ In an interview to this magazine, Gita Mehta says:

It was the product of my own experience. I was at university when Ginsberg arrived and there was the business of the Dharna Bums. And I came back from university when John Lennon and the Beatles hit India. I had been watching this whole Caravanserai arrive and also the anticipation of Indians who said, at last the West is coming to us, at last the rock'n roll show is on.⁹

The arrival of the disillusioned spiritual questers from India was a matter to be discussed with much graver concern:

And then they arrived dressed as Indians mouthing Indian platitudes and mantras – the book is about that and our longing for the adolescent irresponsibility guaranteed by American culture and our shock when we didn't find it. And the occidental longing for salvation and their shock when they didn't find it. It was a sad misreading of the goals and desires of other civilizations. The Westerners wanted every Indian to be non-materialistic and engaged in higher metaphysical activity. Clearly we weren't. We wanted Levi's and ghetto blasters

and to zip around in cars with headlights that went up and down like eyelids.¹⁰

The culture shock is for both. In the novel Gita Mehta mentions this saying, "The seduction lay in the chaos. They thought they were simple. We thought they were neon. They thought we were profound. We knew we were provincial. Everybody thought everybody else was ridiculously exotic and everybody got it wrong." (5)

Karma Cola does not underline the anguish or rootlessness of an expatriate writer. Gita Mehta's views are objective. For all the irony and satire in her work there is a human concern at its core when she says:

The visitors to India already suffered from *fatigue de largesse*, which is why they consent to stay with us. From them we have at least heard that all is not well in the lands of plenty, a rumor further reinforced by the spiritual laments being purveyed around the world by the record companies...

The Eastern Master when asked, "What is the Answer?" has traditionally replied "who is Asking?" In that lies a central difference between Eastern and Western thought. The East is not concerned with intellectual aggrandizement, so much so that Jung testily called the Eastern mind childish, a mind that didn't even ask questions, but simply perceived them. In a tradition where the question asks

itself and the answer replies itself and all that remains is to establish the identity of the asker, clearly the occidental is going to experience serious difficulty in eliciting any information at all, be it spiritual, physical or just the fastest way to get to the next town. (71)

Thus all Occidental interrogatives unfortunately are bound to remain frustrated. Corrad Micheli says: "The inevitable confusion which derives from it, only adds a further element to India's disorienting effect, contributing to strengthen certain common ideas or banal expectations that only serious reflection and cognition may hope to dismantle,"¹¹ Gita Mehta does not ignore the other aspect:

For those who can't take too much indifference, it is enlightening to find that India provides so much that is familiar to the weary traveler.

The Latins, seeing in the saffron-clad sadhu the burgundy robes of the Cardinal. The British, still conscious of the lines of Imperial Vision, retreating from the monuments of conquest to the hair shirts of the slums. The Canadians and the Australians, trapped in their fears of provincialism, following the caravan with an eye on the piece tag. The Germans, unable to shed the logic of their scholarship, exorcising Aryan romanticism in the isolated mountain retreats of the Himalayas. And the Grand optimists, the Americans, trying for the

big one – the vault from solitary into nothing. Well, they have the money and we have the time, and few feel shortchanged.

Perhaps the few should look to their point of view. (78)

When the guru in the ashram in Western India with a large number of foreign followers confides to a correspondent from *Time* magazine, “My followers have no time. So I give them instant salvation. I turn them into neo-sanyasis” (102) there is a tinge of sadness about the cultural decadence. For the author explains:

A sanyasi in India is halfway 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 has a teacher, obedience. But the simple-minded Hindu, when he comes upon two light-skinned strangers in the bazaar, sharing a chillum of hashish while they fondle each other, is apt to think that the strangers are wearing the sadhu's orange robes of renunciation as an act of aggressive mockery. The simple Hindu, unlike the sophisticated guru, has not incorporated such concepts as “neo” or “instant” into either his daily or his religious vocabulary.

(102-3)

Gita Mehta is against the process of reducing mysticism to the banal, to a commodity labeled "marketing the mystic East". This remains central throughout *Karma Cola*. Following this principle karma, one of the fundamental "kinetic ideas" that "bring us directly to the core of Indian spirituality,"¹² becomes a metaphysical soft drink to be exchanged with "the physical one," Coca Cola.

Nirvana for \$100 a day (103) and instant salvations are the outcome of the East-West encounters. The disillusion of the disciples of various ashrams is clear. One disciple leaves the ashram because it is so "corrupt". (183) The guru never stops playing favourites. Another disciple leaves because he finds that "there's more politics in one Indian ashram than in the whole of the Western Hemisphere!" (183). In another ashram the people who are rich get closer to the guru than those who are poor:

Disenchantment in cloisters

Is it justified?

Can the gurus be dismissed as con men,
manipulating their way to great fortunes? Or
the plot in fact thicker than cash? (183)

Gita Mehta doubts. Apart from all this wheeling and dealing in karmas and nirvanas, the spiritual heart of India remains intact touched only by those who struggle hard with no guarantees of instant enlightenment and no escape from life. Gita Mehta's message

therefore seems to be enclosed in the simple sentence that in India “for every seeker there is a sage.” Its main implication is that the validity of a guru lies in the authenticity of the disciple’s spiritual quest. Corrado Micheli says:

On her part, India the land of the sages, will never cease to provide us with the widest range of assorted gurus who will ably match our desires, tastes, sincere ambitions or mere illusions.¹³

Sardonic and sometimes Swiftian, the novelists’ invective never deviates into cynicism. An Indian painter explains all such encounters as “the shuttle” (18). “We have all been buggered by the shuttle. Shuttle diplomacy. Shuttle religion. Shuttle fantasy.” (18)

The painter may be onto something. The speed of jet travel appears to have eliminated the distinctions between geography and philosophy. Or those between history and mythology. Which means that although one can get anywhere, one is packing all the wrong things for simple survival, let alone for having a lovely time. (19)

Gita Mehta not only conjures up the mystic East in this novel but pours out dithering satire on the ostentation, spiritual hollowness, and the great gulf between profession and practice as it obtains in the ashrams. In a tone that is Swiftian, Gita Mehta analyses the

deficiencies not only on the part of the Western seeker of the mystic east but also on the part of the Indian presenter of the mystic experience of enlightenment. There is a travesty at both ends and Gita Mehta's novel *Karma Cola* is deeply concerned with a delineation of travesties. A student of St. John of the Cross or of St. Augustin or of the Buddha would indeed see how the path towards spiritual enlightenment is filled with excitements of various kinds that one ought to abjure in a spirit of self-discipline. It is this lack of self-discipline which is subtly exposed in *Karma Cola*.

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