

CHAPTER III

RAJ: EMPIRE, POLITY AND THE PEOPLE

Gita Mehta's second novel *Raj* is a historical novel about princely India under the British Raj. With its exuberance of narration the novel describes the decline and fall of royal India with a keen insight into the political situation of India during a span of fifty years before Independence. It is a fascinating study of India's political turmoils. It spins round the central character Jaya Singh who is born a princess in the Royal House of Balmer. Starting with Jaya's birth and childhood, the novel moves on describing various experiences of Jaya as an adolescent, wife, and mother at a personal level, and as princess, Maharani, and regent at the political level, and comes to an end almost at the evening of her life when she nominates herself as a candidate in the elections of free India.

Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* are a series of novels that deal with the British rule in India. Continuing the trend that had been set in motion by E.M.Forster and Rudyard Kipling before him, Paul Scott wrote these novels which enact the political, social and psychological traumas of the empire. If Kipling shows the spiritual India in his writing and is greatly aided in this by his love for the geographical and spiritual landscape of India, Forster is fascinated by the mystery and

strangeness that are associated with the British understanding of India, Forster's focus is upon "only connect". E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India*, John Godden's *The Peacock*, John Masters' *Bhowani Junction*, M.M.Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* and Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* present an imperial world falling upon the thorns of life. It is not so much with the imperial theme that *Raj* deals with. It deals with the princely India and the awakening political consciousness in the country. It employs a mode which combines history and fiction. The historical novel has indeed been called a *tertium quid* because history and fiction are blended together and in the blending the historical is superceded by the fictitious for a novel after all belongs to the creative realm.

The central theme of the novel is precisely symbolized in the Prologue to the novel. On a cold January morning when Maharajah Jai Singh takes his five-year old daughter with him into the jungle, the village children teach her to taste cow's milk in their own way. After capturing a panther, the Maharajah makes Jaya face that enraged wounded animal chained to a Sal tree. The panic of Jaya that begins when, standing on an elephant's back, she just hears the panther's roar, gets gradually subsided when she stands in less than a foot from the lunging animal. The longer she faces the panther the less is her panic:

For what seemed like hours they stood in front of the Sal tree, her father, her brother and herself, almost within the reach of the enraged panther's claws. After a long while Jaya's terror subsided. It was as though she had lost the capacity to fear and was watching the proceedings from some distant vantage point where she was not threatened. She even wondered if the Sal tree was trying to comfort the panther as it dropped red blossoms like silk handkerchiefs on the captured animal's back.¹

This condition continues throughout her life. She always finds herself facing dangers, both familiar and alien, and is compelled to overcome the fears of those dangers.

"Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fears." (5) These are the words uttered by Maharajah Jai Singh to his children Jaya and Tikka. At that time Jaya was too young to understand that Maharajah Jai Singh was teaching his children 'Rajniti,' the philosophy of monarchy: "*Saam*, a king must serve his people's needs. *Daan*, he must provide for their welfare. *Dand*, he must be implacable in the punishment of injustice. *Bhed*, he must intrigue on behalf of the kingdom, with treaties and alliances," (89) as it had been taught to prince after prince of the House of Balmer. Not until she becomes a ruler herself does she comprehend that the Maharajah taught his children the traditions of courage when he himself was a frightened man.

Three years before the start of the new century, in a year when another famine begins in Balmer which lay beyond the desert popularly known as the Abode of Death, the kingdom gets its thirty-ninth heir:

... the small tribe of bards making its way to the kingdom of Balmer saw many auguries of death. Water holes and village wells were dry. The artificial lakes which watered the great desert kingdoms of Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaisalmar were covered with green slime, their levels sunk so low the foundations of water palaces stood revealed, ringed by brown-scaled crocodiles dozing in shallow water.

Few Europeans had traveled to Balmer in previous centuries, and those who had survived the dangerous journey had confused Balmer with the desert, calling it the Land of Death. In the half-century since Balmer had signed a treaty with the British Empire, Europeans had united the kingdom more frequently. Only ten years ago the Tsarevitch of Russia, accompanied by two Grand Dukes of the Russian court, had passed a fortnight with the Maharajah of Balmer. Earlier, the son of the German Kaiser had stayed in the capital. These recent visitors had found Balmer to be a land not of death, but of prosperous farmers...

For Eleven centuries Balmer Fort had stood on the hill overlooking Jalsa Lake, a monument to proud isolation. Inside its massive yellow stone battlements there were silver fountains and pillars inlaid with lapi and gardens linking courtyards pointed by master artists brought from the ateliers of Delhi. But these concessions to pleasure had the air of afterthought. It was the underground passages which led to Jalsa Lake so that water could be procured in time of siege, the narrow stone corridors with ceilings so low no traitor could raise his sword arm high enough to strike a death blow to an unsuspecting king, which gave the true profile of Balmer. (9, 11, 15)

In spite of the famine in British India, land taxes have not been lessened by the Empire making the farmers dispossess their lands. This leads to antagonism in some of the Indian rulers towards the Empire. An old woman confesses her grief to the Maharani:

'... the Angrez passed a law saying the tax collectors owned our lands. Overnight, the Angrez made us into beggars. The money lenders gave us no credit, and the landlords threw us off lands we once owned. Our arms ache from going through life like this'. (28)

Maharajah Jai Singh says to the Maharani:

'... Cornwallis, a good moral man, passed that law and called it justice. He believed he knew what was

best for India. You see, the British Empire can believe its fairy tales of justice because its soul is five thousand miles away in London too far to learn the price of its justice.' (28)

In the fifth year of the drought when the rains still fail, Maharajah Jai Singh decides to sell the Balmer Navratan to Tsarevitch of Russia and raise funds to the almost bankrupt treasury. This is an act of breaking the terms of his treaty with the Empire and dealing independently with a foreign power. While his negotiations with Russia go well, the Maharani gives birth to a daughter. Pleased at the success of his first act against the interests of the British Empire, Maharajah Jai Singh names his daughter Jaya meaning 'Victory.'

As Jaya grows, she begins to watch the slow-paced anglicization of the kingdom through the fresco paints on the walls of the inner fort:

In the light colours of folk art Jaya learned about the changes in her father's kingdom. Long before she ever saw an Englishman she had been aware that a group of English people had come to live in a new colony on the west bank of Jalsa Lake, factory owners and engineers. But in her imagination the Angrez were pictures frozen in the painted walls of the Zenana, driving orange Rolls-Royce or sitting in trains spouting blue smoke, or forever going for stiff-backed rides in hackney carriages... On the rare

occasions Jaya was allowed out of the Fort, she sometimes found reality better than the bright images in her fantasy world. (53,54)

When Jaya enters the train for the first time, she feels like being “in dream machine fashioned on some other superior planet” (54) or when the first motor cars reach the courtyard she finds they looked too practical, not at all like the chariots fit for divinity which decorated the outer walls of the Zenana” (54). And when Jaya listens to the English tutor of Tikka, Captain Osborne, she feels that in only a year, the Englishman has changed the atmosphere in the Fort which is a reflection of the changes throughout India and she no longer feels comfortable with her brother:

Tikka did not know how it had happened, but the captain’s presence diminished Balmer. With a deepening sense of disloyalty he regarded his father as a ruler blind to the advances of the real world outside the orders of his kingdom. He avoided his mother, embarrassed that he now saw her as a woman steeped in the superstitions of the harem. He despised himself for despising his parents and desperately wanted the Angrez tutor to acknowledge that he was not like them.

In his anxiety to impress the Englishman, Tikka applied himself to his lessons with an ardour that surprised his sister. Jaya was afraid that her brother was becoming an Angrez

himself as his rooms filled up with British newspapers and magazines. The servants had strict instructions not to touch the catalogues piled next to his bed marking the goods he had ordered from the Army and Navy store in London.

Often Tikka returned from the Chand Mahal with his arms full of books to add to the books already crowding his desk: Kipling, Barke, Baden-Powell, and Macarley. When Jaya flipped idly through a volume, a fresh smell came off the pages and she thought it must be the smell of England. England stared from Tikka's walls too. The ivory paintings of the gods had been replaced by the black-and-white photographs of English sportsmen. An entire wall was covered with pictures of a young Indian Maharajah holding a cricket bat in his hands. The brass plates under the pictures read RANJI-SUSSEX, RANJI-LORDS, RANJI-SURREY. (58).

Jaya recognizes the difference between her brother and her cousins. Tikka did not want to imitate the *Angrez*; he wanted to be better than them and force their admiration. Jaya fails to come to terms with these changes and feels that something precious has been violated in the Fort:

She did not know that the confusion in the Fort reflected the changes throughout India. Indian newspapers, freed at last of Viceroy Curzon's

editorial censorship, were filled with passionate editorials demanding Home Rule for British India. Indians were boycotting British goods to show their resentment of the Empire's exploitation of India's resources. Nationalist leaders were being sent into exile. From America, Europe, Africa, Japan, the exiled leaders continued to demand representation in the government that ruled their country. Realizing that the momentum of nationalist feelings had become irreversible, the new Viceroy had circuited Indians to sit on the Imperial Council which governed British India, and called the first conference ever held between the kings of India and the representative of the British Crown (62).

When Tikka leaves for study in England, the frustrated Maharajah instructs Jaya to learn the tenets of government:

For no reason that she could fathom, the Maharajah instructed her to learn the texts on Rajniti, the classical art of government, which Tikka would have studied had he not been in England. Her music classes with the old Ustad, even the lessons with Mrs. Roy, were curtailed, and now most of her time was spent in the Fort Library...

Over the months, Jaya studied the Arthasastra's tenets on civil and criminal jurisprudence. She learned that the revenue system of British India was still modeled on the

revenue system of Chanakya. She was taught the different punishments to be meted out for crime and was surprised to learn that the harshest sentence was exile, and could not help thinking of Tikka's exile in the cold country of the Angrez.

The lessons in the Fort Library added to the contradictions that increasingly confused her. When the Raj Guru discoursed on monarchy in his day whisper, Jaya believed the old priest was speaking of a world that was inviolable. Then, at her English lessons, Mrs.Roy made the position of kings sound as precarious as that of men drowning in quicksand. (88, 89-90)

When the first World War begins, the sixteen year old prince of Balmer joins the war against the Maharajah's wish by heading the Balmer Lancers. After Tikka's departure, Maharajah Jai Singh who attends a secret meeting of Indian kings and Indian nationalist leaders – the first such clandestine gathering ever held in India – decides to reconstitute his kingdom with the aid and advice of Maharajah Dungra, and Mrs.Roy's brother, the lawyer and nationalist, Arun Roy: The reconstitution is a partial wish of the Maharajah for he was convinced about the traditional principles of monarchy which he believed were sufficient in themselves.

‘Many years ago in London, His Highness
Dungra tried to warn me the world we knew was

already finished, and to prepare for a new age. I would not listen to him. I fought against allowing the British to bring their factories and railways to Balmer. Like the Maharana of Udaipur, I argued that once we adopted the machines and institutions of the Angrez, we would adopt their ways, and in the process lose our souls.

'During this secret conference in Patiala, I met the representatives of many Indian rulers who have experimented with parliamentary representation – Bikaner, Baroda, Travancore, Mysore. I also met many nationalist leaders. It is now clear to me our very survival as independent countries depends on imitating Angrez institutions and including the people in the running of the state's affairs.' (135)

And by the time the Maharajah of Dunga, his son Tiny Dunga, and Arun Roy arrive in Balmer, to assist the Maharajah in the drafting of a new constitution, Tikka and the Balmer Lancers leave Europe to join General Allenby's army in Palestine and Jaya gets engaged to Prince Pratap of Sirpur who rescues Tikka from a fatal danger during the war.

Tikka's letter from Palestine reveal his tiresomeness as many soldiers die of influenza:

'I suppose it is no surprise that the men are going down like ninepins to the Influenza...

Allenby wants all troops who are fit enough to advance an Aleppo at once. Everyone hopes it will be the last serious battle fought on this front. The men are very tired and anxious to go home. So am I.' (153)

But in this battle Tikka gets killed and within ten days of Tikka's death Maharajah Jai Singh dies of sickness. But the rumour that circulates in the kingdom about the sinister suddenness of the Maharajah's death is that he was poisoned by his cousin, Raja Man Singh, who is to rule as the Regent of Balmer until Jaya comes of age.

'Everyone is saying your father was poisoned by Raja Man Singh, Bai-Sa.. And now Raja Man Singh has gone to Delhi to petition the Viceroy to overturn your father's decree and let his son, John, succeed to the Balmer gaddi.'
(162)

In the year 1919, when King George issues a royal proclamation promising limited self-government to India, Jaya gets married by proxy to Prince Pratap of Sirpur. During that year many incidents take place that alter the relationship between Indians and their British rulers. The publication of the details of the reforms promised horrifies the British community in India and their newspapers wage a sustained campaign against the idea of natives being competent to govern themselves. From the northern borders of India, the Afghans, who believed that the British troops had profaned the holy cities of

Mecca and Medina, call upon the Indian Muslims to join them in overthrowing an infidel empire. Despite the severe shortage of food due to the influenza followed by a disastrous monsoon, the Empire continues to export Indian grains refusing to reduce land tariffs, and Gandhi leads a movement among Indian peasants to withhold taxes until the Empire recognizes the seriousness of their plight. In reaction against the perceived heartlessness of the British Empire, many Indians embrace the doctrines of Marx and Lenin, actively encouraged by the one-year-old Bolshevik government of Russia. Instead of institutionalizing its promised reforms, the Imperial Government proceeds to pass the Rowlett Acts under which Indians could be tried in special British courts with no rights of appeal. This leads to the Muslim leaders calling upon all believers to stop working for the British Empire and Gandhi launching a nation-wide non-co-operation movement to show Indian displeasure at what is called the Black Act of the British Raj. But when the rumours of General Dyer's massacre spread, Indian dissatisfaction with the Empire grows enormously and to most Indians the incidents of 1919 render King George's proclamation irrelevant. The Indian National Congress responds to it with a new resolution.

This conference is of the opinion that the Reforms are inadequate, unsatisfactory, and disappointing. This conference reiterates its declaration that India is fit for full responsible

government and repudiates all assumptions and assertions to the contrary. (167)

Similar to these nation-wide incidents, many incidents take place in the House of Balmer. Jaya has been kept as a virtual prisoner in the Zenana for almost a year. During that year Raja Man Singh's son, John, gets crowned as the Maharajah of Balmer with the support of the British Empire. The new ruling family ruthlessly consolidates its position in the kingdom, heaping humiliation on the Maharani until the widow flees Balmer to seek sanctuary with the Maharajah of Dunga, who, after the death of Maharajah Jai Singh, places at her feet a brother's wealth. Then in his eagerness to remove the only remaining threat to his son's throne, Raja Man Singh tries to hasten Jaya's marriage. Though at that time Prince Pratap has remained in Palestine with his Lancers, Raja Man Singh, after protracted negotiations and after agreeing to pay a large annual sum to Prince Pratap as well as Jaya's dowry, finally prevails on the Sirpur Council to permit Jaya to be married to Prince Pratap's sword. And with the marriage Jaya's association with Balmer comes to an end: "Jaya's eyes welled with tears at the thought of leaving Balmer's empty desert landscape for that ancient alien kingdom sprawled across the delta of the Brahmaputra River" (172).

The initial years of Jaya's married life mark a virtual westernization of herself. Almost after two years of marriage Prince

Pratap returns to Sirpur. He belongs to one of the two remaining great dynasties that had followed Krishna's chariot into battle. He briefly sums up their marriage to Jaya saying, "ours is strictly a marriage of convenience Jaya Devi. Should the necessity for children ever arise, I am sure we can both rise to our duty..." (190). Then he simply rejects all the traditional education that Jaya gets in her kingdom and asks her to get herself accomplished with the English intricacies so that she can be the official hostess to receive the royal guests of the British Empire:

'It is not a simple matter of cosmopolitan manners, Princess. But of politics. Despite my brother's almost suicidal devotion to the British Empire, its officials are convinced that victor is flighty and squanders the kingdom's revenues on film actresses' ... 'Unfortunately, when the British Empire disapproves of the loyal Maharajah of Sirpur, it disapproves even more of the Maharajah's younger brother, whom the newspapers of British India are characterizing so unkindly as an irresponsible playboy. The Empire has instructed me to stay in India. If I am permitted to travel abroad again, I shall have to be accompanied by a wife. That is why I agreed to our marriage. So here we are, Jaya Devi ... through you I must outmaneuver the Empire which forced me to this marriage.' (191)

He invites Lady Modi to Sirpur to teach Jaya the intricacies of western society. "Royalty is hemmed in with officials who represent tradition and power. But society concerns itself solely with fashion," (226) Lady Modi says to Jaya. By the end of the year Jaya, as desired by her husband, is so transformed that she is even able to play polo to entertain the Prince of Wales who visits Sirpur on his tour of India: "... to go straight from purdah to a Polo game in front of the Prince of Wales! ... you are about to become a legend," (223) Lady Modi observes. "A Polo mallet can sometimes be as useful as a dagger. You have studied Rajniti, even if Prince Pratap has not. Such knowledge would give a wife great power over her husband if she used it intelligently. hukam" (232). The Prime Minister says to Jaya, "... your husband certainly made monkeys of us in front of the Prince of Wales today, Bai-sa." Captain Osborne's son and Tikka's friend and companion at school in England, James Osborne says to Jaya.

The Sirpur brothers' lavishness and hypocrisy places the treasury in debt. The budget reveals that the Prince of Wales' visit has overstretched the Sirpur treasury to such a dangerous degree that Jaya, despite Tiny Dungra's warnings, wonders if she should tell her husband of her private fortune that is being looked after by Tiny Dungra. But her generous impulse gets evaporated when she comes to learn that her husband has been visiting Esme Moore, a dancer from the Globe Theatre. And when Prince Pratap exhausts his credit with

Calcutta bankers he decides to raise funds from an advance on Jaya's dowry payment:

By winter, he had exhausted his credit with the Calcutta bankers. Returning at last to Sirpur, he instructed Jaya to prepare for a journey. 'These damned fool bankers want me to start selling jewels, like some tradesman. There's nothing for it but to go to dusty old Balmer and ask Maharajah John for an advance on your dowry payments'. Remembering the harsh penances imposed by the desert on her own people, Jaya told herself she had been bred to an endurance which could yet conquer her husband. (253).

Maharajah Victor, who has developed an infatuation towards an American actress, Cora Hart, decides to marry her risking the possibility of being dethroned by the Empire. "To British justice. The Prince of Wales has affairs with married women only. But the heirs apparent of Indian kingdoms lose their thrones for the same penchant," Maharani Cooch Behar observes. But when Cora Hart, realizing that she would never be received by King George and Queen Mary deserts him, the Maharajah, unable to mend his heart as well as to defend himself from the imposing scandals on the Indian rulers by the Empire, kills himself:

Maharajah Victor was kneeling on the ground. He picked up a piece of driftwood, and

the hollow filled up with water. The wind succumbed past sand too wet to be lifted into the air as the Maharajah walked to the edge of the water. Jaya followed him in silence.

'Isn't that sea the colour of Henry Cenroy's eyes?' the Maharajah asked at last. 'I was always terrified of him and my grandmother. My whole life has been controlled by those two people. I'm tired of lying to them. I need a rest from all the lies, Princess.' (276-77)

Jaya grieves for the gentle brother-in-law who has always treated her with tenderness. Maharajah Victor's death results in Prince Pratap getting crowned as the Maharajah of Sirpur. A son is born to Jaya, and it is only after the birth of Prince Arjun that Jaya for the first time feels that she belongs to Sirpur at last.

The long delay of reforms in India begins to frustrate the British Empire and enrage the Reformists. And at a time when the Reformists are gradually winning their war against royal India, Maharajah Pratap's relations with Esme' Moore get strained and complicated as the latter persuades the ruler to marry her, leading Jaya finally to negotiate with Esme' Moore:

Each time she went into the upper deck she saw groups of Indians deep in discussion about the Butler Report. Whenever a nationalist leader appeared, he became the focus of attention, as though it were already clear where India's future

lay and she huddled into her deck chair, afraid that an accident of destiny could leave her struggling to preserve her son's throne from the shifting realities of India.

Arun Roy stopped at the side of her deck chair.

'Your Reformist friends must be gloating over their victory, after the Butler Committee's report,' Jaya said bitterly.

He smiled down at her. 'Not at all, Bai-sa. Do you think the British Empire gives anything away? We are all going back empty-handed. The Reformists will be the means by which the Empire foments disaffection, but after the Reform movement succeeds, the kingdoms will not be returned to the people.'

'Where will the kingdoms go?'

'They will be annexed by the Empire Bai-sa. No more Balmer, no more Sirpur. Just more pink patches added to the map of British India. I warned you, this is an unpleasant and ugly jungle.' (339)

With the help of Tiny Dungra the negotiations lead to a positive result, releasing Maharajah Pratap from the tangles of scandal. In return to this service, the price that Jaya claims from her husband is the regency of the throne after him until their son comes of age to take

the throne. "Your price would have to be power," (333) Maharajah Pratap comments on his wife's price:

Jaya was unbalanced by the accuracy of his perception. After a lifetime as power's victim she wanted to be its executor, and she could taste the longing, even as she remembered that her husband was a fit and active man who would be reigning long after their son became an adult. (333)

But the expected joy at her victory is not felt by Jaya: "when the strongest kings in India were impotent before the might of the Empire and the ambitions of the Reformists, how would she hold a kingdom for her son if anything happened to her husband?" (339) And only in a few months after the agreement, when the Simon Commission Report is published that the British Empire intends to keep its power: self-government for India is delayed for an unspecified time and Dominion status postponed indefinitely, Maharajah Pratap dies in a plane crash. With the Simon Commission Report, India's rage towards the Empire and the Indian rulers increases:

'the Empire changes its mind as often as a capricious courtesan. That is why you have bombs. Last year we were promised Dominion status. This year Britain says we are not yet ready to govern ourselves... Of course, if we were to govern ourselves, the British would have to leave the luxuries of India. Perhaps India has

corrupted you, Major, and like ourselves, you now
fear unity more than you fear division.' (359)

The Prime Minister says to the Resident of Sirpur, James Osborne, who succeeds the usually frigid and arrogant Henry Conroy a few months before Maharajah Pratap's death.

Seizing the opportunity of the very young age of Maharajah Arjun, the priests of Sirpur try to challenge Jaya's Regency. Hopeful that rapid construction would allay fears about her Regency, Jaya accelerates her development programmes. "Rajniti is a map to just government, Bai-sa. But to be effective in today's world, my father sent me to learn government under Maharajah Baroda and foreign affairs under Maharajah Bikaner." (364) Tiny Dungra says to Jaya:

Tiny pulled a volume from the shelves. "Take this, for instance. Did you know that the ruler of Bikaner was only twenty years old when he conceived the greatest irrigation project in India? The British prevented him from raising enough loans to realize his dream. But if he had succeeded, Bai-sa, your desert, your Abode of Death, would have become the granary of India."

He replaced the volume and lowered himself into the chair behind the desk. "The next years will be hard for us rulers, Bai-sa, caught between the Empire and the Reformists. Already the Empire raises more than ten million pounds every year from our kingdoms to spend on British

India. As the demands of the nationalists increase, and the situation in Britain grows gloomier, where will the Empire look for funds, except to us? And each time we increase taxes, our own people will be more disposed to join the ranks of the Reformists.' (365)

While Jaya is immersed in construction projects, the religious enmities that lead to the failure of three Round Table Conferences begin to vitiate the harmony of Sirpur. The world that Jaya so painstakingly constructs to keep Sirpur intact from the events beyond its boundaries crumbles when the British Empire seizes upon the differences between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. The Hindu-Muslim riots flare up throughout British India. The ten-year old Maharajah of Sirpur is frequently called away from his lessons to sit on his throne, getting confused as he listens to his subjects hurling accusations at each other. Seeing all this uncertainty, Jaya, on Osborne's advice, decides to send her son to study in England: "But every time Jaya drove past the cricket grounds and saw the boys playing with Mr.Stevens, she was filled with foreboding that her son, like Tikka, would be lost to her once he went away to England." (402)

Worried by the scale of religious rioting, the British Parliament agrees to an All India Federation in which Indian rulers would share power with the Viceroy. "Now all that remains is for the rulers to implement the reforms they promised ten years ago at the chamber of

Princes. That is the only condition Parliament has demanded before inaugurating the Federation." (396), Osborne says to Jaya. But in the troubled year that follows, Jaya learns that James Osborne's description of Parliament's conditions had been too simple:

Parliament had permitted each king the choice of joining the Indian Federation: but until the majority of Indian Kings did so, Parliament would not endorse the Federation.

Worse, smaller kingdoms had been asked to merge with larger ones – a suggestion intolerable to rulers with historical enmities. Added to such humiliation of the Reformists, who were now demanding democratic elections in every Indian kingdom. (396)

The increasing chaos in the subcontinent robs the Indian princes of the courage to play statesmen. Instead of enforcing the reforms, many conservative rulers follow the advice of their equally conservative British advisers who feared a Federation could mean the end of the British Empire. Dissension is forbidden, Reformists are threatened with jail or exile. As a result, demands for elections in the Indian kingdoms grow more vociferous every day. Although Sirpur's citizens have long had the rights which other royal subjects are demanding, *The Sirpur Herald* gleefully reports Reformist speeches. Month after month, Jaya watches the Reformist movement gaining momentum and realizes how foolish her dependence on James Osborne has been:

'Don't you Indian rulers ever time of self-pity, Bai-sa'. The Viceroy has exhausted every avenue in urging you to save yourselves from dying in the past you all love so well. Now he has been forced to give you an ultimatum. But ask yourself this, Bai-sa. How long do you think your Regency will last if Gandhi's or Jinnah's followers enter Sirpur?' ... In his uncharacteristic rage Jaya recognized fear. She had seen her father and her husband respond with equal frustration to events over which they had lost control, their fury hiding their despair, and her entire experience had attuned her to recognize the futile gestures of power when power itself was leaking away. (412)

The Indian rulers' indifference towards the Federation leaves Jaya with no choice but to invite Arun Roy, the National Congress leader, to Sirpur in the hope of getting his support to her Regency. But Arun Roy's rejection of the ruling race leaves Jaya lonelier than she has ever felt before:

'...For years we have begged the rulers of India to give their subjects the simple dignities which differentiated a man from a slave. Denied those dignities in British India, we looked to the kings of India to show the British Raj the meaning of justice. But the rulers of India ignored our pleas... Must we be condemned to slavery because five hundred foolish men and women, lost in dreams of harems and shikars and foreign cities,

cannot see that human beings have a right to be consulted about the conduct of their own affairs?

'True justice lies in the claims of the majority. I say to you, the princes of India have forfeited their chance to share in the governing of India. By their refusal to enact simple reforms, they continue to keep millions of Indians in chains. Demand elections in every Indian kingdom. Let history say it was the subjects, not the kings, of royal India who freed every Indian from the shackles of slavery' (417-418).

Arun Roy says during his speech at Sirpur.

Lonelier than she had ever felt before, Jaya stood in the study where Maharajah Victor had once recreated an ancient navy to impress the Prince of Wales. Where her husband had planned an airline to win the approval of the Viceroy. Where she had spent long nights studying budgets and development plans to impress James Osborne. (418)

With the outbreak of the War between Britain and Germany in 1939, the Viceroy suspends all preparations for Federation, and India joins the war. "This war has been an unmitigated disaster for India ... Between two and three million people died of starvation. Self-government postponed indefinitely, making Hindu-Muslim hatreds more savage than they have ever been..." (435), the Prime Minister of Sirpur observes.

During the broadcasts, Jaya barely listened to the tales of destroyed tanks and aircraft and ships. This was not warfare as she had been raised to understand it. The strength of a man's sword arm, the rituals that purified the warrior before he rode out to engage the enemy had become meaningless....

Arjun was interested only in the air battles, questioning Major Osborne about spitfires and Messerschmitts as Tikka had once run behind Major Vir Singh asking about the firing capacity of Maxim and Gatting guns...

Preoccupied with raising the funds required by Sirpur's treaties with the British Crown, Jaya allowed Arjun to take flying lessons and wished she could find similar means of distracting the British Resident from his concern over his country's desperate war.

Sometimes she escaped to the purdah palace, where the lives of the harem ladies had not been touched by submarines and armoured cars. As dusk darkened the balcony and the haunting melodies of the river pilots' flutes floated across the water, Jaya watched the ladies wind fresh jasmine garlands around their wrists, and thought of Major Vir Singh describing the weeks it had taken for the Balmer Lancers to arrive in China. Was that only forty years ago? Arun Roy's admiration of the Japanese bombs that had defeated the Tsar's

enemies. Was that only thirty years ago? Tikka's letters from France describing the toy aircraft of the Kaiser's forces. Was that only twenty years ago?

The inventions that had been experiments in the Great War had become familiar weapons in this new war, transmitting destruction with terrifying rapidity across the world, until the pace of human action no longer restrained the foolhardiness of human courage.

Throughout the subcontinent, the war effort and a distrust of the war vied for supremacy, and with increasing concern Sir Akbar and the British Resident discussed a war that was going badly not only for the allied troops but also for the Empire. (426-27).

As soon as the war ends, the British Empire in India starts packing its bags. In his hurry to get out of India, the frustrated Viceroy swears in an interim government without Jinnah resulting in the savagery of communal disharmony:

'Britain is washing its hands of us, hukam,' Sir Akbar said, turning on the radio with uncharacteristic ferocity. 'If Britain's Parliament, in its haste to get out of India, is prepared to ignore the Hindu-Muslim bloodshed of the last months and leave Jinnah out of the government, I assure you it will not hesitate to throw royal India to the wolves.'

On the river, fishing craft were being tossed up and down by muddy waves. Jaya could see the brown bodies of fishermen struggling with their tangled nets as Jinnah's voice vibrated the radio: 'The two parties with whom we bargained held a pistol at us, one with power and machine guns behind it, and the other with non-co-operation and the threat to launch mass civil disobedience. This situation must be met. We too have a pistol. Today we have taken a most historic decision... We have said goodbye to constitutions and constitutional methods.'

'What does he mean, Sir Akbar?'

'I don't know, hukam.' Sir Akbar studied his hands as if surprised by the wrinkled skin. 'when I came to Sirpur as a young man, the world was simple. All of us, Hindus and Muslims, nationalists and rulers, wanted the same thing – to live with dignity, free of Britain's interference. But I am too old to understand this new India or the greed of leaders snarling over the corpse of a nation that has not yet been born.' (439-40)

The communal killings lead to the death of both the Prime Minister and the ruler of Sirpur leaving the Sirpur throne with no heir.

A year after this when India and Pakistan are announced as independent nations, once again India gets charged with communal disharmony having no rescue force to control it. The Indian

government gets busy trying to merge all the Indian kingdoms into the Indian Union:

'... There is only a Boundary Force now. The Navy, the Army, the Air force have all been carved up. Their officers are sitting in Delhi haggling like housewives. Over how many guns, ships, aircraft and tanks belong to Pakistan and how many to India... Nobody but Gandhi is behaving honorably, Bai-sa. Do you know what I was doing in Delhi while Hindus and Muslims were murdering each other? The Viceroy, Mountbatten, wants to give the secret files we have kept on the weaknesses and vices of the Indian rulers to Nehru, so India can blackmail them into joining the Indian Union. For weeks I have been with the head of our political office, Sir Conrad Corfield, burning those secret reports without Mountbatten's knowledge. Four tons of paper burnt, Bai-sa, and no one ever noticed our little bonfire among all the other fires' (449-50).

Osborne says to Jaya and advises her to merge Sirpur with the Indian Union:

'The rulers are defenceless, Bai-sa. Most kingdoms are landlocked, and the Reformists will now be assisted by the sympathetic Indians around them. It is a highly dangerous time. Sign the Instrument of Accession before your subjects

start fighting each other and the butchery begins in Sirpur.' (450)

And when the Raj Guru of Balmer reminds Jaya about the first principle of government, she decides to merge Sirpur with the Indian Union:

'I once told your father, as I am telling you now, this ancient land is old in the ways of government. It has witnessed the councils of nobles, the fiats of emperors, the whims of kings, the reigns of priests, the tolerance of great republics. Things go wrong only when men forget the first principle of government. The people... Your dharma is protection, Bai-sa. You cannot escape your destiny.' (454).

Signing the Instrument of Accession Jaya says to Sardar Patel:

'To the subjects of Sirpur, such documents will indicate only that India has merged with us... Their family names are mentioned in the Mahabharata wars. Indian present leaders are mentioned in newspapers used by housewives to wrap yesterday's vegetables.' (457-58).

And when the elections are announced in India, Arun Roy gets nominated to Sirpur constituency. Jaya remembers Arun Roy's last speech in Lady Reading Park, and how he has stated with absolute conviction that true justice is proved by the vices of a majority:

If Arun Roy was elected from Sirpur, what would happen to the kingdom's different tribes and religions? Would he speak for them? Would he give a sympathetic ear to their concerns against the greed of the majority? ... Jaya thought of the old Raj Guru's words in the darkness of the Fort Temple: 'Your dharma in protection, Bai-sa. You cannot escape your destiny.' His implacable insistence crushed her with the weight of duties she was no longer strong enough to carry. (460).

Jaya contemplates and decides to be a candidate in the elections. As Arun Roy and James Osborne argue about who had taught the Indian rulers the lesson of democracy, the Nationalists or the British Empire, Jaya remembers "the Raj Guru's harsh whisper under the painted frescoes of the Fort Library, demanding, 'What is the first principle of Rajniti, Bai-sa?' and her stuttering reply, 'The people.'" (461)

With history and fiction combined *Raj* becomes a fascinating study of the political situation of India during the last half century of colonial India. The novel is an insightful study of politics and sociology questioning certain principles in the theory of *Rajniti*. Gita Mehta's art of narration as a historical as well as sociological novelist is best exemplified in this novel.

REFERENCE

1. Gita Mehta, "Prologue", *Raj* (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1993), 4-5. Subsequent references to the novel are indicated in parenthesis in the text itself.