Chapter –V

The Projection of Current Indian Political Trends

… a series of short essays, combining reminiscence, reportage and reflection… Gita Mehta’s prose is precise, pointed and polished to a sheen … this is a book which informs and delights without presumption or pedantry.

Shashi Tharoor
Chapter - V

The Projection of Current Indian Political Trends

After independence Indian political trends has been taken up as a subject by writers to cater the expectation of Indian masses. To this, many fiction and non-fiction prose appeared in world scenario with outstanding merit for their unflinching assessment. The two most explosive events during the seventies which provided spurt of writings were Indo-Pakistan war leading to the emergence of free Bangladesh and the imposition of the Emergency in 1975 followed by the Janta Party victory in 1977. One of the most moving books that appeared covering the Bangladesh tragedy is Amita Malik’s *The Year of the Vulture* (1972) recapitulating the nine months’ agony, bestiality and heroism. The author herself visited the camps in West Bengal, interviewed with the victims of Pakistan fury and recorded the happenings in her book.

The period of Emergency forced many to deal with the happenings with efficient journalism, like V.K. Narasimhan, Janardhan Thakur, Kuldip Nayar, L.K. Advani and G.G. Mirchandani. Out of these, Jayaprakash Narayan’s *Prison Diary 1975*, which published in 1977, is of far greater significance. Less than 100 pages of his diary are like “… the ECG recordings of fallen, prostrate, semi-conscious Bharat Mata. J.P. incarnates the mood and mind and sensibility and soul and indomitable
will of the nation” (Iyengar 763). He was no professional man of letters but used his writings to fight against injustice, corruption and ignorance. In the early hours of Emergency he was suddenly put behind the bars. During solitary confinement he started writing *Diary* from 21 July 1975, which can be read as a human and heroic document with quiet tones and utter sincerity without any surplusage.

In 1981, an oversize novel *Midnight’s Children* came out by an India-born author Salman Rushdie who has dealt with the period of about six decades around India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The book in many ways reflects the issues faced by a vast diverse India in its early statehood concerning the cultural, linguistic, religious and political differences. Salman Rushdie has depicted the period of Emergency through his protagonist Saleem Sinai who later on involves with Indira Gandhi’s proclaimed Emergency, cleansing of the Jama Masjid slum, the mass vasectomies and tubectomies during the Emergency. The massive novel is divided into three parts with 30 chapters:

Part I going back to Jalianwala Bagh and ending with the birth of Saleem Sinai, the narrator hero on the fateful midnight of 15 August 1947; Part-II concluding with the end of the Indo-Pakistan war on 23 September 1965; and Part-III carrying the narrative forward to March 1977, and the end of the Emergency. (Iyengar 753)
The story has been expressed through various characters in context of actual historical events as with historical fiction.

*The Great Indian Novel* of Shashi Tharoor, which published in 1989, received great critical acclaim among Indian English writers. The novel has been a political satire which covers a period of nearly seventy five years with the description of all the major historical events. In the novel Gandhiji is represented through “Bhisma”, Jawaharlal Nehru through “Dhristarashtra” and Indira Gandhi through female “Duryodhan”. Immense contributions of Gandhiji have been presented in the work which frames a compact portraiture of the father of the nation. The personalities of Nehru and Indira Gandhi have not been presented with a favourable light. *The Great Indian Novel* typically represents the country’s effort for liberation from the bondage which later on ridiculously repeats mistakes by accepting–plurality and multicultural view. About *The Great Indian Novel*; Shashi Tharoor in “Yoking of Myth to History” writes off his intention;

The Great Indian Novel speaks for an India of multiple realities and multiple interpretation of reality. Throughout the novel runs an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of truth that has given shape and substance to the idea of India. (46)
Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995) also takes place during the turmoil of the Emergency. The book exposes the changes in Indian society from independence to the Emergency. Here Mistry criticizes Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in his book and highlights her political career with some of the abuses that occurred during Emergency. The assassination of Indira Gandhi is the subject of *A Fine Balance* which spans the whole of Gandhi’s first term as Prime Minister. The author has exuberantly mirrored historical situations and social realities of the Indian poor through his characters.

Another writer of Indian background who emerged as one of the eminent writers in the West is V.S. Naipaul. He has made significant contribution to Commonwealth literature through his approach as a journalist, a novelist, a travelogue writer and a great master of non-fiction. His three non-fiction books appeared particularly on India i.e. *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). All these works are a close analysis of India; his parents’ homeland in which he has recorded his views and visions after his visits.

In *An Area of Darkness* Naipaul has noted the workings of caste system and the rites and rituals of Indian people. He has also discussed and analyzed the Hindu concepts of *Karma, Dharma* and *Moksha*. Along with religion and religious Indian philosophy the author also comes to analyze persons and personalities especially Mahatma Gandhi. The non-fiction *An
Area of Darkness is the reflection of the author’s first encounter with an experience in Indian society which expects to find too much but actually gets too little.

Naipaul’s second significant non-fiction work India: A Wounded Civilization (1977) is based on his fourth visit to the sub-continent in 1975 during the Emergency and may be treated as a continuation of the previous book An Area of Darkness. The vision of India as projected in this book is dark, dismal and grim, far from the truth. The author’s some views are not only unacceptable but also highly objectionable. Critics like Nissim Ezekiel and C.D. Narasimhaiah appeared extremely sensitive and raised objections to such views of Naipaul. On one hand the books display shocking bad picture of India but at the same time reveal the author’s great passion and fascination for India.

India: A Million Mutinies Now (1990), V.S. Naipaul’s last book on India, brings forward his visit to India in 1988. The book repeatedly records experiences of 1962 to compare and contrast with the India of 1988 in order to reveal the changes and assess the country’s progress. The central theme of the book is manifold changes in the socio-economic scenario of India. After a gap of a score of years the author noticed leap from poverty but with a sense of anxiety and uncertainty. As he writes:

The proclamation of pride was new. It could be said to be something Gandhi and others had worked for; it could be said
to be a vindication of the freedom movement. Yet it could also be felt as a threat to the stability many Indians had taken for granted; and a middle class man might in a reflex of anxiety, feel that the country was going from bad to worse. (Naipaul 9)

All the three books on India can be estimated as Naipaul’s keen journalist observation, which actually show three different stages of his long struggle in search of identity and lineage with India.

Unlike Naipaul; Gita Mehta has a very strong relation with India. Her parents and relatives had been freedom fighters and exhibited great valour in Independence Movement. This seems to be the primary cause of her intense concern for India. In Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India Gita Mehta deals with varied subjects projecting the progress of India in fifty years of independence. She has published the book to celebrate the 50th anniversary of India’s Independence. Through her book she has intended to present social, economic, political, historical and mythical India in form of short crisp essays.

In Snakes and Ladders Gita Mehta has given an unflinching assessment of modern India which is concerned with leading politicians and their policies. The impact of policies has been shown affecting the Nation’s progress like the board game Snakes and Ladders. In this traditional Indian game the player sometimes moves upward many squares climbing ladder and at the same time slides downwards with snakebite
determined by the roll of the dice. All the essays are arranged in such a manner that they facilitate the reader to move the decades from the year of Independence 1947 to the 50th year 1997.

Gita Mehta’s collection of precise prose is arranged in four different sections to divide the book into four smaller books. Book one starts with autobiographical note and proud feeling of the author to be a part of an abstract India. In Book two she has written about the economic condition of Independent India exposing poverty, food situation, conditions of labour, unemployment along with the dreams and demands of citizens. Book three consists of evils and shortcomings of the policies implanted by the ruling politicians during their governance. The author has produced these insights to understand the problems and to find a way of accomplishments. In the last subdivision, Book four she has denoted cultural landmarks and the activities of people which had contributed providing present shape to the things.

*Snakes and Ladders* begins with the period of nineteen forties when the freedom struggle was in its full swing. At that time Gita Mehta’s parents were residing in New Delhi and their house was popular among freedom fighters as “Absconder’s paradise” (*SL 3*). Her father had been a prominent politician, industrialist and a pilot of great courage. During World War II he had helped Burma civilians to escape from brutal Japanese advancement. All the young nationalists in their twenties were in tradition of keeping arms in order to shoot themselves before surrender.
The author has mentioned an incidence of her two paternal uncles who were the part of the young nationalists’ troop. One of her uncles, a nineteen-year-old poet preferred dying on the steps of British Armoury at Chittagong rather than surrender and his younger brother at the age of fourteen had been captured and sentenced to the life time hard labour imprisonment in fetters at the penal colony of Kala Pani. It was the time when Gita Mehta’s father was imprisoned on charges of keeping ammunitions. The period of imprisonment proved to be the toughest for her mother as she followed him jail to jail dragging her two children. After two years she got her kids admitted in a boarding school and devoted next years for the curtailment of the period of imprisonment.

While inside the prison, the revolutionary father of the author utilized this period thoughtfully and polished his skills along with hatching schemes to destroy the British Empire. He made a perfect plan to ruin the British Raj within six months by flooding with counterfeit currency which could be manufactured by using dyes and chemicals used in textile factory.

During the struggle women also demonstrated their immense courage. They marched against the King Emperor and also tried to stop killings during India-Pakistan subcontinent partition. To exemplify the strength of women the author has accounted great nationalist Mrs Sarojini Naidu who called Mahatma Gandhi ‘‘Mickey Mouse’’ and who was herself described by Gandhi’s biographer Robert Payne, as ‘exuberant,
earthly, irreverent, improbable ... one of those women who make the world glad”” \((SL\ 10)\).

After a long struggle, India acquired Independence experiencing many injustices, sufferings, and humiliations. To portray those sufferings the author has mentioned the worst experiences of her parents during the Colonial rule. Her mother described the act of an English woman who pulled off the turban of an old man passing sitting in the railway compartment simply to disparage him for jest. Like her mother, her father described an incidence when he was asked to fly a British colonel and his adjutant to the North-West Frontier. On seeing the native climbing into the cockpit he shouted, “My God! I’m not going up in an airplane flown by a bloody native!” \((SL\ 9)\) Neglecting his words, her father flew the plane. After flying some distance he landed a hundred miles before the destination at the hottest place of India and left the colonel there stating, “… find someone who wasn’t a bloody native to fly him, and took off, leaving him to walk to Quetta” \((SL\ 9)\). This baffled him and he wandered sweating and abusing the natives while his face became redder and redder.

Gita Mehta has written that she was expecting description of physical brutalities her parents had encountered, but according to them the experiences of humiliations were more torturous and treacherous. At the school days her father’s scalp had been opened in five inch length by an irate police sergeant who beat him only because of his incapability to bear intense heat during solitary confinement. In another description she has
mentioned the great Bengal famine of 1942 when three million people died of starvation on the streets of Calcutta while tons of food had rotten away.

According to Gita Mehta, the freedom fighters who fought for nation considered these sufferings as a necessary price to bargain liberty, so whenever they talked about those years they referred to only jokes and stories. It somehow proved to be fruitful as so many orthodox customs and conventions of Indian society were abolished during this period. All young men and women came out of their social bindings and discovered their own strength into the budding unknown world. No discriminations were left and nuptial bindings were established between young men and women of different religions and castes. Sarojini Naidu’s marriage with Mr Naidu who did not belong to a high caste like her is an example of it.

After dealing with Indian struggle, Gita Mehta moves to the present political scenario in which the expression of pain can be noticed in the author’s writing which claims the possessive nature of Indian leaders over India. They feel that they are India and their sons and grandsons should also possess social and political power. Gita Mehta had noticed such traits in the former Indian Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi who exhibited herself as a high ambitious and intense paranoia personality. Her administration was marked with many coloured instances supporting her strong courageous inheritance. In few public speeches, she was found with lines like “Remember! My father gave you freedom!” (SL 13)
Being a citizen of free India the author was invited for an interview on a radio show in London. The interview started with an awkward question enquiring, “Why does no one want to be an Indian?” (SL 14) The panelists repeated the same and then one replied; “… some of us have it thrust upon us” (SL 14). This forced Gita Mehta to giggle nervously and a feeling of racial discrimination overshadowed her. Managing herself, she replied that who would like to seize the chance to become an inhabitant of the country which had a glorious past and had glorious monument of love like Taj Mahal built hundreds of years ago. The answer provided them with a chance to contradict and present the mirror image of India. They remarked:

Even then it was clear to us that we could be respected for the richness of our past, but were not given much chance of a future. After all, the grim figures of the present were the realities of our youth, a burden of social and economic disparities which even the most Herculean Endeavour seemed powerless to reverse. (SL 15-16)

India, which represents the World’s largest democracy, has been experiencing problems since the inheritance of freedom. The people are facing the problems of population explosion, low literacy level, poverty and corruption. One of the main causes of these problems is the pillars of democracy and the prevalent voting system. To wipe off these engulfing traits the system of election demands total resurrection. With each election
comes a greater demand for accountability. Problems are discussed with priorities but the inadequacies of past parties are exposed more elaborately for asking votes and settlements of injustices. Almost fifty percent Indian citizens are illiterate and below poverty line who cast votes according to the campaigns and choose the government without foresightedness. In such conditions how a sensible government can be assumed.

Gita Mehta feels that the country like India is not only a paraphrase of the Rig Veda but contributes one out of every six people on the planet. The true essence of India shows rich diversities in civilization, history, geography, culture and religion being a sum of million worlds but the field which needs attention is politics.

Geographically Indian subcontinent is enclosed by oceans on three sides and the mighty Himalayas in the north. Each direction shows rich culture while river bank of the Ganges shows three thousand years old sacred cities. During the British rule, one third India was made up of five hundred independent kingdoms. Each kingdom consisted of its own race, language and customs like one separate nation. This may be the reason for variance: “The Aryans of the northern plains are distinct from the Dravidians of the south, and both have little in common with the Mongol inhabitants of the east” (SL 22).

The variance in language claims India to be the most divinely inspired place on the planet. There are seventeen Indian languages
recognized by the government for the settlement of state affairs. All these languages are rich in literature and publish newspapers, programmes and movies of their own. More than four hundred dialects are spoken while some possess written account also. Of these languages the classic language of Sanskrit is our heritage and we have opted English so eloquently in two centuries as if it has been our own for centuries.

India’s richness in language is quite glamorous but it is unfortunate too. The variance in language has become an unchallenged weapon of cut throat politics. Many times the language based politics of India had created chaos in the nation and it’s very painful to notice that the politicians of India had expertised themselves in its skillful usage.

Religion, another feature of the great civilization of India is said to be the “… land of fabulous contrast” (*SL* 22). India can be hailed as a junction of many faiths like Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jain, Parsi, Jew, Sikh, Buddhist and Tribal religion. Hinduism is the religion which is practised by the majority of Indians and Islam stands next to it. Almost a hundred million Indians are followers of Islam which constitute the third largest population on the earth. After this stands two thousand years old community of Christians who believe that the first disciple of Christ Thomas visited India and established church here. India accommodates worshipping places of almost all faiths:
The stupas and monasteries of the Buddhist faith are carved into our mountains. The stone colossi of the Jain religion dominate our hillsides. The Parsis have their Towers of Silence and Fire Temples which may only be entered by the followers of Zoroaster, the Sikhs their marble and gold Gurudwaras. There are the cathedrals of the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox churches of Armenians who fled the pogroms of the Ottoman Empire, the synagogues of the Jews. And there are countless shrines which commemorate the countless holy men of India. *(SL 23)*

This exhibits a civilized tolerance of our nation to accommodate so many faiths under one unifying shelter. The author has mentioned one such shrine amidst the anarchy of Bombay’s traffic which is one of her favorites. The shrine is nothing but a tree which houses a small white Cross, an image of Lord Ganesha and a Koran on its side.

Other than these, India is also splendid in her music and art whether it is concerned with training of art of poetry or singing. In earlier days the rigorous practice session of an artist started from her childhood like *Mushaira girl* who developed the ability to remark in poetic quatrain and practise mastery of an audience. In the same way the singers of raga *Bhairavi* have to meditate on their skills before dawn as it is a morning raga which heralds transition of darkness to light symbolizing rebirth of the spirit.
Spiritual art practice is also a notable feature in which Indians have expertised themselves. Gita Mehta has expounded her thoughts through a fable of a sage and a poet in which she says that once India’s one of the greatest ascetic “The Diamond Hard Ascetic” achieved indestructibility after performing the most arduous penances. On the other hand there was a poet who was considered as the holiest man in India and was acknowledged for his “the field of experience”. This enraged the Diamond Hard Ascetic and he made up his mind to prove his superiority. For this, he gave the poet a sword to hit him. Obediently he gave a mighty blow to the ascetic and as a result the sword shattered making no harm to him. Afterwards the ascetic brought his own sword to split the poet in two halves. He attacked him with all his superhuman strength but the sword passed through him harmlessly. Experiencing this, the ascetic acknowledged the poet as his master and realized that penances provided him with strength while the field of experience went beyond strength.

All these features of our civilization contribute to elevate our culture to immeasurable heights. The reason for an uninterrupted flow of culture lies in ever-widening thoughts and absorption of the best irrespective of its source. The contributing factors have constructed the great nation India which is not a single civilization, rather it is the coexistence of several civilizations at various stages of development.

With the changing world and modernization, India too has changed a lot but her strong culture has always safeguarded it from extinction. People
can still be found in saris and dhotis while other countries have almost lost their cultures. Nowadays the traditional outfits of Japanese “Kimonos” are difficult to be found worn by the people of Japan.

Many changes have occurred in India also, as the stars seem to replace artists like old classical singers and mushaira girls. Live performances are giving way to record, radio and television. The old soothing music is transformed into hybrid music like Indi-pop and Bhangra-rock. In this age of communication and marketing people are reorganizing and developing acquaintance according to their requirements but the proportion is yet to be matched. Every year five million university graduates are produced but with less opportunity of jobs. Although India is one of the ten most industrialized nations it lacks proportionate vacancies. In the same way, we are self-sufficient in food but lack improved irrigation and techniques to fill the hungry bellies of nation. So the increasing population problems like poverty, food and unemployment have become the biggest challenge for the government to deal with and make them understand democracy. As British humanitarian Malcolm Muggeridge had once said, “People whose stomachs are empty have no idea what democracy means” (SL 29).

To overcome the problems of the nation Mahatma Gandhi had once expressed: “… that any solution to India’s problems could at best be valid for about ten years” (SL 30). Here the author remarks that we have already crossed five times of the given time limit but we still lack those actions
through which we could be able to build an imagined perfect place for our future generations.

In the second section of the book an economic assessment of independent India has been presented. These essays can be arranged and studied from pre-independent era to the present time, in order to estimate the contemporary economic status.

In ancient India the society was divided into various castes which used to determine the occupation of a person and follow orthodox Hindu society’s strict laws of Manu. At that time no untouchable was granted the right to get education and in case they overheard the language of scriptures, Sanskrit; they had to face brutality and were killed by pouring molten lead into their ears. Such a society has become liberal and achieved the impossible. The author has produced some exceptions to it. One of the greatest Hindu epic the Mahabharata was compiled by the Sage Vyasa of the lowest caste. Chandra Gupta Maurya was the son of a low caste woman and created the glorious Mauryan Empire while his grandson the great Emperor Ashoka disseminated the teachings of Buddha. He became the pioneer of establishing Buddhism as the religion of Asia and also of the Universities. In 1890s when the barbarity of caste system was at its peak the ruler of Baroda had implemented the scheme of free education for all castes in his kingdom.
Mahatma Gandhi insisted on calling untouchables as *Harijans*, ‘the children of god’. Such an untouchable boy Dr Ambedkar acquired his degrees from Bombay University and London and drafted the constitution of India. In 1947 Dr Ambedkar became the Chairman of the Committee formed to draft the Indian constitution. It took four long years to finalize the drafting. He disposed himself not just to the constitution of the Western countries but also to the greatest ancient Indian work on science of government the *Arthashastra* by Kautilya. On the final reading of the Bill; before turning it into the law, Dr Ambedkar noted:

> It is not that India did not know what Democracy is. There was a time when India was studded with republics.

> It is not that India did not know Parliaments or Parliamentary Procedure. The Sanghas [Buddhist monastic orders] had rules regarding seating arrangements, rules regarding Motions, Resolutions, Quorum, Whips, Counting of Votes, Voting by Ballot, Censure Motion, Regularization, *Res Judicata*, etc....borrowed from the Political Assemblies functioning in the country at the time. (*SL 92*)

On January 26, 1950 the sovereign Republic of India was finally proclaimed which guaranteed:

> The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law
The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex

‘Untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. (SL 93)

With the drafting of Constitution, India was prepared for the first general election. On that great occasion Dr Ambedkar addressed the people reminding: “… it was only a piece of paper until it was inscribed on the hearts of its citizens” (SL 93). And to maintain democracy John Stuart Mill had suggested the caution: “Hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship” (SL 92).

In 1951, first Indian general election was held and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was again elected as the Prime Minister of India. With this the Indian National Congress became a prominent party and experienced victory in three general elections. During the thirties Mahatma Gandhi had drawn attention of all towards the rainfed agriculture based economy of India. He had once advised a European journalist to study Indian villages in order to understand an Indian as three quarters of India resides only in villages. To improve and contribute to nation’s future Vinobha Bhave, Gandhi’s closest associate, urged all landlords to donate their lands to poor, as it could provide India’s landless labourers and tenant farmers with an opportunity to proceed with progressive India. Keeping in view the ruling Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s Government passed a resolution
in 1951 limiting the amount of land any individual could hold. Excess land was purchased by the government and sold at cheaper rate to the poor farmers. This resolution became a huge success in redistribution of feudal land holding but extended only up to the farmers of moderate capacity.

Many transformations were planned during the first five-year plan of economic development and after agriculture the advisory committee of Prime Minister came up with a plan of industrialization to replace the slow economy with fast mechanized economy of the wealthy West. Huge dams like American gigantic hydroprojects were planned but the food conditions suffered a lot and became perilous. Year after year India imported food to meet the requirements and almost every year a place or two was struck by famine.

To counteract the degrading situation the whole nation stood altogether as it was the early phase of our freedom. The women of Ahmedabad set such an example by establishing co-operative bank of their own. In 1952 the women of Ahmedabad were struggling to feed their families; at that time a young middle-class woman Elaben Bhatt came forward and formed a union. Women pooled their every possible earnings and started a bank under the name S.E.W.A., *Self-Employed Women’s Association*. The bank functioned to provide their members with the required loans so that the women could initiate self-employment among themselves. At that time women were ill treated by their husbands and
were facing extreme poverty. This inspired all the desperate wives to come forward and form an institution like S.E.W.A.

Presently, S.E.W.A. bank has its branches all over India and in Ahmadabad it had twenty five thousand saving accounts owned by its thirty thousand members. This association not only supported the families to come out of poverty but also encouraged self-employment in the nation. In the north many orthodox Muslim families set up their own embroidery units while in the south many low caste Hindu women started small business of their own to break the fetters of illiteracy.

The great success of S.E.W.A. gave birth to many imitations and in succession to this six Delhi based women formed an organization named “Dastkar”. They aimed at saving the glory of Indian handicrafts which were on the verge of extinction and provided the craftsmen with an opportunity to re-establish them. Nearly eighteen million craftsmen were based on handloom while five millions on crafts. All these workers were under the threat of mechanization as the factory-made products being cheaper had been snatching market and support from the artisans. They started losing their existence, skill and even livelihood. India, the country of great skill where handlooms and handicrafts, ranked next to agriculture, determined to stand again and save its identity. The institution started polishing the skills of the artisans to compete with the mechanized product. The groups of craftsmen were given training on commercial marketing, book-keeping, accounting and bargaining to acquire the raw
material in low prices. They ventured into the cities to explore the likings of the customers and create modern markets in the fast moving era. Within a short period they achieved great success as their displayed patterns for future orders were appreciated and booked by the exporters.

Gita Mehta suggests that the spinning wheel at the centre of the Indian flag acknowledges that textiles are a living Indian art form. The British trading company which came here looking for spices turned completely towards the textiles and within decades only due to textiles the trading company turned into the strongest empire of the earth. Today the handloom industries of the past decades are performing as the back-bone of present progress.

The techniques and terms used in textiles like Bandana, Chintz, Muslin, Calico all are Indians and can be traced back into history. The archaeological survey proves that the colour spectrum was defined in the Indus valley civilization. The colours like ochre red, black and indigo were extracted from the plants and were used as first dyes. After five thousand years, these experiments led to the growth of pharmaceutical industries.

In ancient times, hand-made rich brocades were worn by the Emperors of China, Byzantium and Rome. Muslins were preferred by the Moghul Emperors under the names “Morning dew” and “cloth of running water” (SL 54) along with the fabric embroidered with gold and silver thread. Presently, these brocades are used in Indian weddings especially
for dresses of brides and bridegrooms. Muslins are used in intense heat of summer and gold silver thread works are used in the fabric of high-class Indian brides. Like fabric, selection of colours, patterns and images were drawn on the basis of geography, culture and choice of people:

… the yellows of northern springs and wheat and mustard harvests, the whites and ivories of southern summers, the green of eastern rice fields and the seasons of desire, the old rose-pinks and musk–blues of Islam, the shades of indigo that denote the fury of the monsoon and the playful god of Brindaban, the differing shades of red that tell the varying constancies of lovers, the silvers and enamelled golds of royalty. (SL 55)

To explain more about weavers the author has presented two fables. The first is of India’s spider goddess and the Aryan god while the second is drawn from the great epic the Mahabharata.

According to the first myth; one day the Mother Goddess of subcontinent opted the form of cosmic spider and began spinning web of cotton thread. As the goddess goes on spinning, it covered the whole of India and reached beyond the Himalayan boundaries. This entrapped the god of progress and mechanical skills, Aryan God, binding him forever in India.
In the second myth from the Mahabharata; the king lost everything including his queen in the game of gambling. The captive queen was ordered to be brought in the winner king’s audience chamber surrounded by the nobles, elderly people and soldiers. The winner ordered her to be stripped before all and obeying orders his younger brother grabbed the queen’s garments. As he begins to pull her clothes, the helpless queen started begging god to protect her honour. With her prayers the cloth multiplied and seemed no end as piles of clothes covered the chamber and the younger brother fainted of tiredness.

These stories come up with thoughts that whenever needed the textile industries had supported to defend India’s honour whether it was mythological or historical. During freedom struggle Indian nationalists had used hand-spun cloth calling it “the livery of our freedom” (SL 53) and was worn as a symbol of self-reliance for free India.

The author is of the view that the living culture of handlooms and handicrafts should be preserved and used to generate wealth as machines can only be replicated. Those who can generate new are Indian weavers. But the fact is that they are suffering from poverty and exploitation. In some interior areas many weavers are working as captives. The owners feed them just enough so that they can keep on working. They become the victim of owners only in exchange of their inability to repay the borrowed money which counts not more than two or three hundred rupees. Watching the pathetic condition of twenty three million craftsmen who are struggling
continuously to preserve the culture, Gita Mehta has forwarded her views on Indian economy through the talk between two gentlemen: “We are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty.... Our tax base will never be large enough to support population....There’s nothing we can do about it” (SL 50).

It can be propounded that in the decade of fifties more emphasis was given on rapid industrialization for self-sufficient economy of the budding country. Consequently in rural India agriculture, handloom and handicrafts were ignored.

During the sixties, these shortcomings were fulfilled by drawing attention once again towards Indian agriculture and launching of Green Revolution by the new Prime Minister of India Lal Bahadur Shastri. Recurrent droughts, famines and death by starvation drew the attention of the Prime Minister Shastri towards agriculture. He noticed that India’s top priority was food rather than mechanization. He concluded that India has the most cultivable plain in the world. In the north there is Indo-Gangetic alluvial plain and in the south fertile volcanic plateau of the great Deccan. Even the American Overseas Development Council had once acknowledged that, “India has a natural endowment for food production very close to that of the United States” (SL 61).

In the decade sixties, the crop production broke through. Indian Agricultural Scientists succeeded in developing high yielding varieties for
two staple food rice and wheat. Amazing response was experienced through farmers and it became the initiation of Green Revolution. Although in starting years unpredictable monsoon led them to face drought but within a decade they were able to feed the citizens of India. In the next decade India began exporting cereals and in the next ten years it had been exporting almost one quarter of Indian agricultural products. Thus the Green Revolution changed India forever.

Next to food, there came water which needed to be conserved. Half of the water was being lost every year because of flood, evaporation and heavy deforestation. Due to lack of awareness chopping of trees for fuel, timber and mining became the most devastating actions against conservation of water. This problem of deforestation still persists today in the rural areas of India which can be managed by primary education of soil conservation and awareness of the people.

So, in the sixties India’s planning to combat with world’s economy was going on correctly. Analysts all around the world were telling that India was ready for her economic take off but the decade of seventies proved to be lethal as the gains of Green Revolution seemed to be disappearing. It was the period of Indira Gandhi’s Prime Ministership and the cause to be assumed was obsessive centralization of power.

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* has also conceived India’s modern history and political interpretations through mythical veiled
caricatures of the Mahabharata. In the novel struggle between *dharma* and *adharma* is fought on the battle ground of Kurukshetra. From the author’s point of view national movement against the Colonial rule for the sake of freedom has been mentioned as “*dharma*” while Indira Gandhi’s dictatorial regime has been considered as “*adharma*”. The Novel depicts that she “… smashed all the pillars and foundations” of “the world’s oldest anti-colonial organization” (*The Great Indian Novel* 351). Tapan K. Ghosh in his critical study writes about Indira Gandhi:

> Indira was chosen as Prime Minister because the old guards of the Congress Party thought that she would remain under their control. But belying all expectations, she soon turned into Frankenstein’s monster who threatened the democratic institutions of the country. She tried her best to keep the Pandavas away from power and even to eliminate them. (32)

Mehta says that Indira Gandhi, after being the Prime Minister of India expanded her government in every aspect. During her time oil prices of the world rose which affected the prices of other essential commodities creating dissatisfaction among people. With this the demand for wages and related resources also soared high being an essential part. Her policies to nationalize insurance companies, banks and regulating private industries failed to impart the desired impact. Private industries were not allowed to produce more than the allotted quota irrespective of high demand. As a result accumulation of undeclared cash and black marketing geared up.
Being undeclared, the accumulated cash could not be used in the floating economy or any productive works like building factories, growing food, creating jobs etc. Mrs Indira Gandhi’s popular slogan “Remove Poverty” during the fifth general election which enabled her to experience landslide victory has been critically evaluated by the author. At the time of election various promises were made to create vacancies and banish poverty but after winning, the things acquired completely different forms. To make Delhi more beautiful slums were removed and the slum-dwellers were left thirty miles away from city without any facility of food, water, shelter and work.

At the outskirts of Delhi; there was a square mile garbage dump which became the working-place for all those ill-fated slum-dwellers. They compromised with their destiny and became self-employed rag-pickers. They collected rags and sold it to the contractor contributing raw material for paper industry. The narrator along with a paper tycoon visited the place and described it as a living hell with intolerable stink. The narrator interviewed with a few rag-pickers to resolve the conditions which forced them to select such a miserable destiny.

The narrator first interviewed with a woman wearing short peasant skirt and a torn jacket. Reluctantly she said that they came to Delhi after seven consecutive years of drought which snatched all the lands from her. She was a Bhoomiya of Rajputana deserts and forests who traditionally worked as the travellers’ guide. She guided her customers about water
source, edible plants, religious places and sanctuaries and in return was paid in the form of cultivable land.

Like the Bhoomiya woman; a young boy who was working as scavenger was a member of community of bards or poets known as Bhat. In ancient times only Bhat had the rights to recite the genealogies of royalty or compose the epic poems on the great actions of the royals, but in present conditions all the historical poems are used to frighten vultures away in the form of shouts.

Another rag-picker was from a village of Eastern India who along with her husband reached Delhi after experiencing devastation by flood which submerged everything and forced them to struggle as scavengers.

Two girls were from the tribal areas of central India. The dense forests of central province were extensively exhausted by the merchants who snatched the livelihood from many including the families of these two girls. Unable to cope with situation, their parents sold them to a man looking for cheap labourers to work on their city construction sites. After the completion of building the contractor left them to survive on their own and they were dragged up to the garbage dump.

A South Indian girl was also there who told that she and her father had been craftsmen and after three bad monsoons they were forced to leave their village. With no options she adapted herself to be a rag-picker while her father worked as a stone mason.
All these encounters cleared the mind of paper tycoon who used to think them as untouchables, the local sweepers. It also provided him with an assessment of government policies and their implications. Amidst these people there was a person to the rank of god; the contractor. He dealt in filth and his office, stretched piece of canvas on poles; was covered with heaps of plastic, rags and broken glasses picked and sold by the workers. He often worked as a money-lender by crediting the unfortunates and in order to lessen debtors he made them work of picking wastes guised of being self-employed. He felt proud of his work and also made witty remarks on the government’s programme:

‘I know I deal in filth,’... But filth is my Laxmi. My Goddess of Wealth. If I don’t stay here the rag-pickers can’t bring me their goods. They already spend one third of their daily earnings just to take the bus to get here. That’s what the Government’s great Remove Poverty Programme achieved. (SL 40-41)

At Delhi Municipal Corporation when a Sanitation officer was enquired about the numbers of such workers, he replied that they might be hundreds or thousands and stated with honesty:

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

Thus the most spirited and highlighted programme of Congress “Remove Poverty” became “Remove the poor.” During the seventies poverty was the biggest challenge to be faced by the ruling government. In 1973, the state of Maharashtra had been facing drought for three consecutive years. All the wells and reservoirs dried out; crops had withered and people were dying of hunger. At that time the government was concerned to stop the exodus and overcome the situation. In the villages donated food grains of United States were distributed which the villagers refused to accept revealing that the grains were adulterated with Datura seeds poisonous for human consumption. On the other hand they accepted the servings of a textile owner who had opened kitchens across the state to serve the drought-stricken people high protein and high calorie diet.

To observe the matter closely, the narrator, who was a working correspondent for British Television, visited the drought-stricken area along with a political cartoonist. Inside the village they found no male members as they were employed for digging irrigation canal and were paid in food:
‘Digging an irrigation canal.’

‘In a drought?’

‘For the next rains, if they ever come. Food for Work, the government officers call it. When our men build roads or dig canals they are paid in food’. (SL 58)

This eye-opening incidence forced the correspondents to smell the associated conspiracy with distribution of grains, helpage and welfare of countrymen. Datura mixed food grains were distributed and claimed to be of America. The narrator tried to assess the intentions of the government by comparing the privileges provided to them at that crucial hour of need. At every meal the correspondents were given that much food which could keep ten families alive, enough liquor, a private plane and cars to reach the worst sites of the drought. It seems ironic to impress the foreigners when the countrymen had been struggling to save themselves.

By the late seventies the rural India became politically conscious and in 1979 one million farmers from all over India marched to Delhi demanding water, seed, fertilizers and electricity while their foremost demand was water.

By 1980 they had learnt from the incidence and were not at all bothered to march to Delhi. They started launching nation-wide movements demanding higher prices for their crops. Administrative
authorities responded to this by providing them with tax concession and keeping food cost low within the reach of poor.

To provide subsidy the government borrowed a huge sum of money which jumped above two billion dollars. Once again India was in the fetters of economic bondage, facing ever larger interest payments to foreign creditors on ever larger loans.

The excitement of metropolitan life attracted landless labourers, migrant workers and craftsmen towards urban areas for work. This, with time, came to be the most dreaded thing as the agriculture was replaced by other occupations. Cities became more populous and started expanding. The farmers were offered large sums of money for their lands irrespective of being irrigated or unirrigated snatching the prospects of agriculture.

In 1984, Mrs Indira Gandhi was assassinated and Rajiv Gandhi became the acting Prime Minister of India who later on re-elected as Prime Minister. During his regime currency restrictions were lifted. He opened India’s economy to the world, de-regulated industries and reduced taxes. These decisions reflected as if Indians were going to get rid of poverty after forty long years, due to his interest in the foreign goods “Homespun was Out, Luxury Goods were In” (SL 69). Gradually money had become a key factor in Indian economy. Such views have also been expressed by V.S. Naipaul in his book *India: A Million Mutinies Now*:
It was a version of what I had heard many times about India, India had changed; it was not the good and stable country it had once been. In the days of the freedom movement, political workers, honouring Gandhi, had worn homespun as an emblem of sacrifice and service, their oneness with the poor. Now the politician’s homespun stood for power. With industrialization and economic growth people had forgotten old reverences. Men honoured only money now. (4)

In the year 1986, a conference was held, in which five hundred international young entrepreneurs along with their wives were invited to reveal India. The primary intention of the conference was to convince the entrepreneurs for future investments and to start companies in India. Dr Kissinger, Mother Teresa and Dalai Lama were selected to be the speakers from India and after every lecture politics and economy of India were enquired. Towards the conclusion of the Conference, the speakers were evaluated between one to ten marks and Mother Teresa scored a perfect ten as she had succeeded in establishing emotional bondings with the guests. In her lecture she appealed all the young presidents to help AIDS victims not only monetarily but also through their personal participation. After the Conference a fabulous dinner was organized with glimpses of traditional India, Indian music and classical dance with an anticipation of Western investment. Thus, during Rajiv Gandhi’s period
more emphasis was given on political schemes rather than the new Indian economy.

By the nineties, V.P. Singh became the successor of Rajiv Gandhi and he also exhibited less concern for economic development. Till then it had become mandatory to pay attention towards the economy as the Nation’s foreign reserves had depleted up to dangerous levels. India’s gold was pledged against international loans and the world’s credit agencies were demanding reformation of the tax structure and subsidies deduction to agriculture. In 1991, Prime Minister Narsimha Rao delicately handled the market economy approaching towards the new millennium.

In the new uprising electronic age all the dreams and aspirations were becoming true. India was experiencing boom in electronic sector as well as fast communications machines. India started manufacturing colour television, computer, fax machines, telephone answering machines etc. This created plenty of vacancies employing nearly a quarter million Indians which earlier were only five thousand. It was in the late nineties when the creation of vacancies and mode of payment opened a new arena for the private sector. The dream of younger generation was changing and withdrawing attraction from government sector, “… government jobs are going to get leaner and less secure, while the private sector is expanding and paying higher salaries” (SL 82). Progression of period led to the development of many universities and also a number of graduates from different faculties. But in accordance with availability, our sectors
could not bridge the gaps between opportunity and availability. Indian industries being the fastest growing could not match with the demands which as a result became a big cause of brain-drain and poor economic condition.

Literally, during the period of Jawahar Lal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, the economy had been given much attention. During his period illiterates were reduced up to fifty percent of total population of India. During the Third Five Year Plan under Indira Gandhi’s rule, the citizens of India achieved a better living standard and a positive approach in every aspect of life but literacy was overlooked.

In the present age of Globalization, the exchange of knowledge goes on twenty four hour basis. When the Silicon Valley of California sleeps our Indian scientists keep track to solve the problem, which the previous day Americans had tried. These activities are mainly performed at the Silicon Valley of Asia, Bangalore and at such a stage of development, the need for primary education should be on top priority. Absence of it, may lead people to poverty, as defined by the author:

> Poverty is a state of mind as well as an economic condition, a hopelessness, a knowledge that things can never change. Any chink in that bleak wall of despair, and the poor are the first to race through it. For them it is a matter of life or death. (SL 84)
Before these developments the world’s analysts had described Indian economy as “Caged Tigers” (SL 86), while the economy of neighboring countries like Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia were described as “The South East Asian Tigers” (SL 86). The world described Indian economy as such because they believed that the country had enormous potential and had yet to be exploited. They even compared the economy of India and China describing: “India is always the elephant, China the hare” (SL 86).

With growing market things changed the economy and created many millionaires. Today nearly two million people of India are millionaires but only through accumulation of black money and poor government policies. This needs to be taken care of and undeclared wealth should be invested in public welfare. This vision of generation can be achieved through administrative management.

After fifty years of Independence the country still seems to struggle for economic establishment. India needs to develop a system which can fulfil the vision of its older generation- freedom, equality and non-violence. In this large democratic country all Indians need to stand together against corruption as it is already deep-rooted and sucking their wealth. Present day leaders of India seem to be more concerned with the privileges of office rather than undertaking their duties. Political corruption has become so endemic that winning election is counted as winning a lottery for the family.
In book three of *Snakes and Ladders* Gita Mehta has produced political chronology of first fifty years of Independence. She has chosen to criticize the evils and shortcomings of the policies which had gone wrong to provide the scope for errorless future planning. In this section the author has presented her sincere, dedicated and well-researched unflinching criticism on the contemporary government policies.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great freedom fighter who led India into the heaven of freedom was assassinated soon after Independence. During the struggle he had launched many non-violent movements and always believed in equality and favoured justice. He was a man of distant vision so he pleaded that Indian National Congress should be disbanded after getting Independence as it was not a political party but a party of freedom struggle.

Such a great personality was shot dead by a Hindu fanatic when he was preparing to leave for a peace march for the partition killings. Only six months before, the British Empire had bargained freedom with parting the nation into two India and Pakistan which resulted in great anarchy, chaos and slaughter of millions of people.

Gita Mehta was only five years old when she had experienced despair on Gandhi’s assassination not only of her parents but also of gathered masses. The author recalled herself on the occasion sitting on someone’s shoulders and raising voices as Gandhi “Amar rahe – stay
immortal” (SL 103). The Prime Minister of India announced this tragic happening describing, “… the light has gone out of our lives” (SL 103).

Many years later, when Gita Mehta watched Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi*, she found his last rites different from reality. In the movie funeral cortege of Gandhi had been picturized with a huge military affair with guns and rows of soldiers marching with the beat of funeral drums. Amazed with depiction she asked one of Mahatma’s grandsons about the display of arms for an ardent disciple of non-violence who had always denied the procession of death. On this the grandson accepted, “Briefly that ceremony did take place....Even though Gandhi-ji never wanted a production made of his death. It was invented by Nehru and Mountbatten. For the record” (SL 103).

This forced the author to think how death of Gandhiji could become an opportunity for both to exhibit skills on state occasions. She has expressed her gratitude towards Gandhiji as: “I guess I was lucky. Even if he was dead, even if I was hardly more than a baby, I saw the actual Mahatma. Not a Mahatma invented for history or politics or films” (SL 105).

In the history of modern India first twenty five years were glorious in terms of dedication and welfare of the nation but afterwards few actions of the authority became determining factor for the downfall of democracy like Nehru’s dismissal of an elected state assembly of Kerala. This act of
him was later on exploited by his successors, as a weapon whenever they had felt threatened.

In the year 1959, Kerala the southernmost state of India elected a communist government. This was overruled by the Prime Minister Nehru who during freedom struggle had many times demonstrated and was imprisoned to achieve democracy. People of Kerala erupted against the central government demanding the rights of autonomy to choose the government of their own as enshrined in the constitution.

It was a hot and humid afternoon when a huge perspiring crowd was demonstrating against “… the first major act of corruption in free India’s public life” (SL 108). The author also became the part of this as she was a resident student of Bombay University then. She recalls that it was her first participation in any political event and witnessed thousands of people demanding their democratic rights. Common people, reporters, women, children and thousands of trade unionists were objecting attack on their rights. They were also holding placards claiming “… communism was a legitimate road to social justice” (SL 108). As the situation went out of control the police used tear gas only after removing women and children. This very action of Nehru agitated the faith of youth in him who had made him win three successive elections to be the Prime Minister of India.

Gita Mehta states that dismissal of Kerala government was an impact of Nehru’s nepotism towards Indira Gandhi. He had supported the
appointment of his daughter as President of the party organization. Mrs Gandhi wrote to Pandit Nehru on October 1959, when she was pressurised to continue. In the letter she had written:

By the time I became President, I just was not in the mood for this sort of work and I have felt like a bird in a very small cage, my wings hitting against the bars whichever way I move....I just want to be free as a piece of flotsam waiting for the waves to wash me up on some shore from where I shall arise and find my own direction. (Bhagat 65)

The author has also produced historical reference which shows that Nehru himself was an anointed leader of Indian National Congress by his father. In 1929, he was convinced to join Congress while travelling to a nationalist convention. His father blessed him as a leader of National Congress without any formalities of an election.

In the following years whenever the state governments were dismissed demonstrations were made. The author has exemplified the situation as: “… the strain of centralizing power could make the republic creak like an overloaded ship, its cargo of disparities too heavy a weight to keep it afloat” (SL 109).

In 1969, Gita Mehta returned to Bombay after studying at Cambridge University. During an academic gathering she met with a “Dalit Panther”; the lowest caste Hindu poet who had invited her at his
place for tea. He told the author that earlier he was “Dalit” means “downtrodden” who later on opted for Buddhist faith after struggling five long years to get entrance to a Hindu Temple. He further said that all educated untouchables who had converted to Buddhist called themselves as “the Dalit Panthers”. Dr Ambedkar’s speech on self-respect proved to become the creed of all the untouchables:

‘If you want self respect,’ ... ‘change your religion.’

‘If you want equality change your religion.’

‘If you want power change your religion.’

‘That religion which forbids, humanitarian behaviour between men is not a religion but a penalty.’

‘That religion which regards the recognition of human dignity as a sin is not a religion but a sickness.’

‘That religion which allows one to touch a foul animal but not a man is not a religion but a madness.’ (SL 110-111)

During tea the poet was talking about the “Congress Culture” (SL 112) practised by the politicians. He blamed the leaders for playing religious cards and using fears of country’s minorities like the Muslims, the lower castes, the Buddhists and the Christians for their own benefits. He remarked; “… the British used Divide and Rule to control India but the Congress Party has perfected it” (SL 112). Other than this, the use of
money and muscle power made the poet feel miserable that forced him to express: “Dr Ambedkar was wrong. Changing a religion means nothing. Election mean nothing. For people like us power can only come from the barrel of a gun” (SL 113).

Since Independence, under the Congress rule India had been proceeding as if the country had only single party system for more than two decades. During this period India’s budding democracy faced many hardships. In the period of ten years Indians fought three wars but Indian army had always distinguished themselves from other armies by showing respect for mankind and women.

In 1971, during East Pakistan separation and Bangladesh formation Indian soldiers had demonstrated their high moral values by paying respect to the Bangladeshi girls who were kept as comfort women in the trenches. Witnessing this Bangladeshi people greeted the Indian soldiers with flowers being pressed in place of bayonets in the gun barrels. As a result the enemy surrendered calmly under Indian terms of cease fire.

With the creation of Bangladesh, refugees immigrated to the adjacent states of north eastern province created violent waves among the residents. Such a crisis was faced by one of the most beautiful states above the holy river Brahmaputra, Assam. The state being the dream destination of many was also known as “The Land of Red River and the Blue Hills” (SL 115).
In 1971, thousands of Assamese launched a non-violent protest which closed schools, factories, shops and India’s major oil refinery for nearly one year. To open the oil refinery and to check the movement Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India sent a troop of Indian Army. This step of her was strongly disparaged by the localites and forced them to remark, “We are fighting another invasion and Nehru’s daughter sends the Army to fire on us! Is she mad?” (SL 115)

In front of oil installation a large crowd demonstrated with banners and hoardings proclaiming “We Will Give Our Blood But Not Our Oil” (SL 116). Thousands of boys and girls were lying on the ground and were ready to die for the cause. They expressed: “We have taken the vow of supreme sacrifice. We are not afraid of the Army” (SL 117). Being non-violent the protestors were holding the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi which emblazoned, “Uphold My Teachings. Uphold the Constitution. Kill Me Not Again by Killing the Peaceful Picketers” (SL 116) and were amazed at the army action, “How can the Army be violent to us when we ourselves are non-violent?” (SL 117)

After some time the simple passion of peaceful movement took another form. Many people were beaten to death and many were lit in fire:

They beat seventeen men to death in the next village because their ancestors came from another part of India.
We were lucky. We repulsed the first wave of killers with bamboo sticks....Together, we were enough to frighten the killers away.

Twenty eight villages were put to the torch last night. (SL 118-119)

Till then the Assamese were obsessed with the feelings of isolation which seemed to evoke back in 1962 when the Chinese army invaded India through Assam and the Prime Minister Nehru withdrew the Indian troops under notion that the troops were ill-equipped. He also made a radio statement, “My heart bleeds for the people of Assam” (SL 115). The situation during the protest became the worst for the non-Assamese. The residents were yelling against them as: “Bengali dogs! Get out!” (SL 118). On such act a lecturer couple who were living there stated: “I have lived all over India but I never knew I was a Bengali, not an Indian, until I came here” (SL 118) and the lecturer added wearily:

I tell my students, once you think you belong only to a particular part of the country you deprive yourselves of the wealth of the whole country. Unfortunately, the real fuel of this movement is emotionalism. And in these circumstances anything can happen. (SL 118)
This made the author to remark, “Non-violence may have expelled the British from India but our first lesson in freedom was the violence of Partition” (SL 114).

With 1971 Bangladesh creation war, the economic crisis further deepened, as a huge additional outlay was needed for managing the refugees. No signs of economic recovery were noticed and this became a major cause of the protest against the ruling government. In 1975, the housewives of Ahmadabad started protesting against the rising prices as they found cost of living too high beyond their management. The resident ladies started peaceful demonstration by beating metal platters at sunset hour. They started this demonstration in the state capital of Gujrat which later on rapidly spread throughout the state. This “Thali Revolution” took almost a month to be heard by the Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. To overpower the agitating masses she ordered the Indian Army to subdue the housewives by the use of tear gas, rubber bullets or any other means. On which Indian troops reversed their arms, informing Delhi that the Indian Army did not shoot at Indian citizens. Such an incidence had also occurred earlier during Dandi Salt March when a British commanding officer ordered Royal Garwhal Rifles to fire on the peaceful protesters involved in making illegal salt. Denying the officer, the regiment refused to follow orders to shoot at their own people.

This made Indira Gandhi nervous and it increased further as one more charge was involved with her. She had been charged with the misuse
of government funds during elections against one of her contestants; Raj Narain. He blamed Indira Gandhi for using government funds and government officials against him. He even vowed not to shave his beard until the Indian Court reversed the Prime Minister’s parliamentary election.

Earlier the charges of corruption had been dismissed but later on the Prime Minister’s own actions seemed to support his blame. She made her son Sanjay Gandhi to acquire a government licence of manufacturing fifty thousand cars a year for his Maruti Company denying the other experienced companies. For the factory premises, at the outskirts of capital, inhabitants of three entire villages were evacuated for four hundred acres of land. Other than this, the government financial institutions were pressurized to release unsecured loans which came to a halt when the Reserve Bank of India issued the directives to state banks that further unsecured loans will damage the country’s credit policies.

When the Prime Minister tried to block the attempt at an enquiry, the entire opposition walked out of the House demanding a judicial enquiry alleging, ‘a disgrace to democracy’, ‘corruption and nepotism’, ‘unlimited corruption’ (SL 122).

On June 12, 1975, the Allahabad High Court found the sitting Prime Minister guilty of, “… using government personnel to further her electoral prospects” (SL 127) and ordered her to be removed from the seat, making
her ineligible to occupy the seat for six years. As a result, Indira got the president of India to declare a state of emergency on June 25, 1975 in order to “… defend India’s unity and integrity” (SL 127). She opted for Emergency to save herself from loss of power and during that time Sanjay Gandhi was very active; “… at this crucial point rather than following her own instincts and searching within herself, Mrs Gandhi’s insecurity took over and she gave more credence to the opinions of those with lesser minds” (Bhagat 224).

The proclamation of the Emergency by Indira Gandhi has been evaluated differently by the writers like Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor. Tapan K. Ghosh writes:

Rushdie has viewed Emergency as the single most traumatic event in post-independence Indian politics and the starting point of the degradation of the country’s secular polity, Tharoor considers it as the culmination of the country’s degenerating political culture since Independence. (36)

Tharoor has criticized Indira Gandhi’s decision to impose Emergency but has also blamed the leaders of the opposition who created the situation for her to take such an extreme step.

Mehta says that with the declaration of Emergency Indira Gandhi’s political opponents were handcuffed and imprisoned. Terminally ill Jay Prakash Narayan who had walked beside Mahatma Gandhi during freedom
movements was pulled from his bed and taken off to jail; becoming the first casualty of India’s lost liberty. At the jail he recited famous sanskrit lines comparing Mrs Gandhi’s behaviour with the madness of Sita who got trapped in attraction of illusory golden deer and lost her protection. “No one sees a golden deer / No one hears a golden deer. / Until the times are bad and the mind is disordered” (SL 137).

To defend the action of Emergency, The President of India declared that India is under maintenance of Internal Security Act, so the citizens could not question on their detention. It followed midnight raids and mass arrest of political opponents, students, rebellious party members, social workers, reporters, teachers, judges, union leaders, tourists and thousands of other citizens.

The newspaper printed blank pages with black borders announcing the death of India’s freedom in their obituary columns and many newspapers were closed by the government including Mahatma Gandhi’s newspaper. In absence of nearly half of the elected representatives and presence of own party members Indira Gandhi experienced little trouble in pushing amendments to the Indian Constitution which was amended four times:

The first amendment prevented any legal challenge to the declaration of Emergency.
The second amendment deprived the court of jurisdiction over any electoral malpractices by a Prime Minister, dismissing the judgment of court against Indira Gandhi.

The third amendment provided permanent resistance from any civil or criminal proceedings to India’s Prime Minister even after leaving the office.

The fourth amendment provided Indian citizens with a list of fundamental duties.

All these amendments had been strongly opposed by Justice Khanna while the others accepted it. He argued:

… all these constitutional amendments had become meaningless, since depriving a person of life and liberty without the authority of law was to remove the distinction between a lawless society and one governed by law. (SL 129)

Two hundred rebellious Delhi lawyers were bulldozed and the lawyers who were marching in silent protest were arrested as arsonists and looters. Slums of the city were bulldozed and poor were arrested. At this crucial period, in need of trust and confidence Indira Gandhi turned towards her son Sanjay Gandhi who became an enthusiastic advocate of the Emergency. Under his watchful eyes, a new programme of forced sterilization was launched, as a means to control the birth rate. The
government employees were allotted definite quotas which they had to accomplish, to seek promotion or even to keep their jobs. Mass operations were held and the doctors, who had objected, were jailed. After surgery the persons had been encouraged by the government through giving a radio transistor.

To legitimate her actions and prove herself as the voice of India, Mrs Gandhi suddenly relaxed the Emergency on 18 January 1977 with an announcement of the next general election just after six weeks. To ensure success she played all the tricks. Salaries of government employees were hiked, communication media radio and television were used to boast the government and the newspapers were censored. In order to justify the process of election all the imprisoned political leaders were released on parole.

Rallies were organised for election propaganda. At such a mass rally a retired politician who had been the first woman President of the General Assembly of the United Nation and the sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, Madame Pandit came forward to address the masses, urging to vote for freedom. She had held meetings all over the capital and discouraged the actions of her own niece. Before the general election a meeting was held inside the great Friday Mosque facing Red Fort. People of all creeds and castes gathered ignoring their previous hatred and listened to understand the power of ballot which could reverse the history.
The general elections of 1977 reflected the fallout of Emergency. When the government was preparing for its victory celebrations the news declared that Mrs Gandhi had lost her parliamentary seat by a massive margin. Congress failed to win a single seat in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, Haryana and Delhi. Janta Party came to power and India got her new Prime Minister Morarji Desai. After becoming the Prime Minister Morarji Desai formed the Shah Commission to enquire the causes of Emergency. The hearings were broadcasted on the television and hundreds of people appeared before the commission to describe their experiences. These hearings made people understand the necessity of alternative party to control the excesses. Various political plotting and turbulences projected the image of Mrs Gandhi as a helpless woman being victimized by the government. Waves of sympathy worked in favour of her and she was again elected as the Prime Minister. Immediately, the copies of Shah Commission were seized and destroyed.

Till then various religious issues were proliferated and supported by the ruling government to maintain their dominance, which with time became a threatening like the Bhindrawale issue, Kashmir issue, Tamil guerrillas and Ayodhya issues.

During the early eighties the congenial relationship between Hindus and Sikhs were completely destroyed. It is said that during religious persecution of the fanatical Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb, Hindu families gave one son to Sikh faith, to keep their line alive.
Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale; a Sikh extremist confident of central government’s protection, entered the holiest shrine of Sikhs along with his followers. From the Golden temple he issued a fanatical order that anyone who was not a Sikh should leave the state. This developed resentment among the residents and his followers created chaos by beating up people who tried to raise voices in protest. Soon, he became so powerful that he started demanding country of his own. The situation became the worst; Hindus were being terrorized in the state while Sikhs outside the state. To restore peace and maintain law and order Mrs Indira Gandhi handed over control to the Indian Army which converted the golden Temple into a battlefield. This incidence hurt the religious sentiments of Sikhs and the situation became worse when anyone wearing a turban was attacked.

To avenge those deaths Mrs Gandhi was assassinated by two of her guards in 1984 when she was leaving for campaigning of new general elections. Usha Bhagat; the secretary of Mrs Indira Gandhi quotes:

Perhaps in the two most tragic decisions of her political career – The Emergency and Operation Blue Star – either Mrs Gandhi was not allowed to take the decisions in her own style or perhaps things moved too fast and left her no alternative. (230)

Like Punjab, Kashmir was also victimized by Indira Gandhi’s unthoughtful policies. Kashmir, the crown of India, had always been
recognized for unique religious mystics. During partition Mahatma Gandhi had praised peaceful Kashmir as “an island of sanity” (SL 142). The state always remained congenial with two major religions Hindu and Islam. It is said:

Kashmir’s Islam was inspired by the ecstatic visions of the Sufi poet-saints; her Hinduism was a product of the great sage Shankaracharya, who had urged pilgrims to travel India from the beaches on the Indian Ocean to her highest mountain-caves and learn they belonged to a common world. (SL 141-142)

Before assassination, Mrs Indira Gandhi had dismissed an elected government in Kashmir and installed the government of her own. Three years later Rajiv Gandhi did the same and the beautiful Kashmir valley erupted into violence demanding justice from the Central Government. The communal riots entrapped the valley causing the butchering of thousands of Hindus and Muslims. To maintain peace, Army and Police actions also massacred the people of Kashmir. Suddenly the face of serene Kashmir turned into the disturbed one.

In 1982 when the Srilankan Tamils were facing injustices; Indira Gandhi came in support of them. Through her act she favoured thirty million Tamil voters in her support. Under Rajiv Gandhi’s regime this continued and when Indian Army reached Sri Lanka to dismantle the
rebels, they denied. Within the period of three years nearly fifteen thousand Indian soldiers were killed by Tamil guerrillas; who were finally brought back during the period of V.P. Singh.

Rajiv Gandhi’s government, which was formed after the death of Mrs Gandhi, proved in achieving a high scale economic growth but a few mistakes created irregularities and dissatisfaction among the two major religions of India, Hindus and Muslims.

One of the biggest mistakes, Rajiv Gandhi’s government had committed was misreading of the Shah Bano Case in 1985. In this case an illiterate Muslim woman Shah Bano filed a case of divorce; on which the woman had been granted payments for herself and her children as per the orders of the Supreme Court. On this case, the Supreme Court questioned about the validity, competence and interpretation of Shariat from the Muslim jurists. But the efforts of Rajiv Gandhi seemed to overturn the Court’s judgment by passing a new law. According to that the Muslim woman would only be subject to interpretations of the Shariat, Islamic law of marriage and divorce. With this he tried to pacify the Muslims. After this, his next step was to please the Hindus. In 1988, Rajiv Gandhi ordered for the reopening of Ram Janambhoomi temple, which had been locked since 1948. Hindus claimed that the actual site of Lord Rama’s birth was the sixteenth century old Mosque next to the Ayodhya temple. On demand of the Hindu fundamentalists and pledging before a district judge, the
Prime Minister permitted them to lay foundation stone for temple at the disputed premises.

Although Rajiv Gandhi received the status of “India’s Mr Clean” (SL 153) but the controversy regarding financial irregularities flourished with Bofors scandal. It was a widespread notion that he and his wife had received millions during the purchase of Swedish Bofors guns. This scandal tarnished his honest image and also led V.P. Singh to resign from the post of Defence Minister to fight against Rajiv Gandhi’s government.

The volatile issue of “Ram Janam Bhoomi” had been seized as a political weapon with a promise to give India “Ram Rajya” (SL 144) by the Hindu nationalist party; BJP. In 1992, a mob of three thousand Hindu fanatics demolished the mosque structure and placed the images of Lord Rama. This followed massive Hindu-Muslim riots. Far away from Ayodhya at Maharashtra Shiv Sena; closest BJP allies started massacring Muslims all over the state which resulted in bomb explosion across Bombay city damaging hotels, offices, stock-exchange and killing and injuring many hundreds.

Indian politicians had always used the rich diversity as an instrument to win the elections. Clashes were promoted between people of two different castes or religions until hatred became the pattern of democracy. To ensure success they were ready to perform all corrupt activities and did not hesitate relying on criminals.
Gita Mehta has mentioned such events of booth-capturing in the early eighties when the hired muscle power frightened the voters and stamped the ballot papers for their employers. A young woman Nalini Singh witnessed the whole incidence and made a documentary on it. For her film she interviewed the hired gangs, who told about their working. It started with bribing the villagers and if it didn’t work, threatening started with slapping elders, beating up respected community members, breaking up arms and legs and in extreme shooting every odd voter. This always worked but if the voters were adamant to cast vote on their franchise there was always the bomb. Such practices of “muscle power” (SL 148) were threatening to democracy. The gang members became fearless and unlawful as beckoned by political leaders who had hired the police, the bureaucrats and the judges to guarantee victory.

Commenting on the Indian general election of 1996, the Financial Times had noted, “The democracy of India is a wonder of the world” (SL 159).

With the announcement of polls, many techniques were employed to attract the voters: street plays, songs, video-films and especially composed poems. Other methods involved were massive political meetings, door to door campaigning and sometimes sympathetic “Wave” i.e. a strong favorable feeling of voter which empowered a candidate to wash off every previous calculation. Such a wave of sympathy made Rajiv Gandhi win the election with historic massive votes.
Encompassing multiparty system size of ballot paper varied according to the constituency. In one incidence a television announcer showed a ballot paper that had the names of one hundred and twenty two different candidates with symbols. The size of actual ballot paper was of a newspaper page and took three minutes to fold and insert into the box.

Booth-capturing had become an unavoidable part of the election polls. The Polling processes were becoming unfair and no attention had been paid on the voters. The author has expressed herself on democracy as, “… its guardian is not the politician so beloved of feature writers but the faceless, nameless, all enduring Indian voter” (SL 159).

For many years no political party had got clear majority but with the passion of power Indian politicians had been demanding government properties to be renamed. Once, on such demand the authority of city planning had expressed: “… the names of existing streets should not be changed. The renaming of streets not only creates confusion for post offices and the public but also deprives people of a sense of history” (SL 157).

Keeping in view of this Rajiv Gandhi made the budget of India a family monument:

… government subsidies to agriculture are now permanently attributed to Nehru, welfare schemes for the poorest sectors of society to Indira Gandhi, youth employment and educational
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projects to Rajiv Gandhi – converting the citizen’s own money into the politician’s gift. (SL 157)

Gita Mehta has focused that till now Indian democracy had faced two major threats more lethal than the bomb; Political totalitarianism, when all democratic processes were suspended and Civil War, when religious sectarianism was unleashed.

Today the Election Commission of India has banned the use of government media for political propaganda; keeping in view of the case in which a High Court Judge, Justic Sinha dared to confront the Prime Minister of India Mrs Indira Gandhi in the courtroom. She faced the charges of electoral corruption into the witness box and remained there till the judgement. Slowly the results reflected in sentencing the top leaders with corruption charges. The commission also prohibited passing of populist bills on the eve of an election and use of religious hatred as enshrined in our constitution. The Economist had reported on Indian democratic system: “This has no equal in the world. In many ways it puts Soviet central planning to shame” (SL 68).

In the final sub-division of the book, the author has provided with cultural landmarks to compare thoughtfully with present values. In the nineteenth century when Mark Twain visited India, he wrote; “… the one land all men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would
not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined” (SL 164).

In 1945 the writer Alex Aronson described India as a civilization and “civilization is always a process: not a being but a becoming” (SL 164). After fifty years India, the land of experience “Karma Bhoomi” had managed to stay a civilization, unpredictable and surprising. India’s traditional versatility which appears fragmented is traditionally unifying and becomes a cause of perpetual motion.

In ancient times, the architecture and interior of castles, forts and houses were recognized by the presence of pillars, engravings, paintings and decorative items. They reflected the Indian aesthetic sense, to a great extent. Up to earlier few decades, images of these timeless masterpieces could be seen on Indian homes’ walls which now have been replaced by the calendars of deities or film stars. During the British rule, they imported the aesthetics of Grecian and Roman pillars. In today’s houses collage of all these can be noticed as traditional decoration with European comfort. Over the time, arts of alien world had become familiar to India through its extended usage and became unnoticeable because, “… the Indian looks on his home more as a place to live than as a work of art. The art, if there is one in India, is supposed to lie in the living” (SL 175).

In India, illiteracy is widespread, therefore, reading always creates an aura of dignity among others. Books are treated with great respect. It is
believed that books are the containers of knowledge and thought and are also a source to wander in the world of imagination. Indian children start reading from their childhood but as a part of leisure and the author feels that it should be directed towards self-improvement. She has even told about her reading habit which started from the boarding school and continued till she became addicted of it. Importance of reading can be estimated through these words, “… those Classic Illustrated Comics which would later prove invaluable in getting university degrees in literature because the plots and characters of the West’s great novel had been painlessly but indelibly engraved on our brains” (SL 168).

Like books, another means of media which help in shaping the minds of people are newspaper, television and other communication media, which play an important role in redefining the evil practices of the society and to rub shoulders with the fast moving age of global communication.

A scholastic person G.V. Desani explored India as an ascetic for fourteen long years and worked to establish the connection between past and present. Unfortunately, he failed to get an employment for the magazine *The Illustrated Weekly* and was further alleged regarding the originality of his reviews. This forced him to lower his metabolic rate until he died.
Unlike G.V. Desani; R.K. Narayan, the novelist and his brother, Laxman, the cartoonist both achieved greater success. The author felt that the reason of their success was nothing but the simple approach towards complex ideas.

Laxman, the cartoonist’s works were recorded in the newspaper *The Times of India*, describing the struggle for power and was noticed by almost every common man. He had succeeded in puncturing the elaborate self-delusions of the human race better than the maxims of a sage.

Like Laxman his brother R.K. Narayan, the famous novelist picked up common man as a subject of his works like, “*The Bachelor of Arts, Mr Sampath the Printer, The Financial Expert, The English Teacher, The Vendor of Sweets*” (SL 213) placed in the small fictitious town of Malgudi.

On their contribution Gita Mehta has complemented them in following words:

> It is our good fortune that two such gifted brothers should have happened to live in India during our first half-century of freedom, as if the gods knew we desperately required our own great satirist and our own great ironist to keep us sane. Their combined work could stand alone and still provide a record of India’s first fifty years as an independent nation. (SL 213)
In 1912, the great poet of India Rabindranath Tagore was asked to compose a poem honoring George V on his coronation as the King Emperor of India. The poet composed a hymn in praise of God instead of king. This composition of him which was meant for displaying regards towards newly crowned king became the national anthem of free India, adapting completely different form.

In olden days *Sati* was a prevalent culture in Indian Rajputana dynasty to save widow women from humiliation by others, which nowadays has been stated illegal. In 1987, an eighteen year old widow of western Rajasthan became sati on her husband’s funeral pyre in front of thousands of villagers. The localites treated this event as a matter of great sacrifice and the place became a pilgrimage. Some argued this, as an act of heroism while others demanded charges of murder against the family members and spectators. A few rural women supported her act describing, “Even if she went willingly she was only a young girl trying to escape the cruelties still practised against rural widows, forced to cut off their hair, living like slaves on the charity of their in-laws” (*SL* 186-187).

Ten years later when an enterprising young reporter revisited the area he witnessed that the ancient cruel practice had been wiped away by the global communication through a personal computer. Matrimonial advertisements of all types could be traced including widow marriage, without any caste and religion discrimination but as per professional and educational qualifications. Global communication had also provided the
scope to mingle brighter aspects of Eastern and Western values. At the same time its darker aspects constituted platform for hybrid culture; which might be devastating to the valuable classics of arts. In the twelfth century the greatest poet Jayadev composed and sang a famous love song outside the Jagannath Temple of Puri. It is among one of the holiest places of pilgrimage in India and Lord Jagannath is believed to be the last benign incarnation of God Vishnu. It is believed that after him Lord Vishnu will incarnate as Kalki and destroy the world.

The priests of Jagannath temple were always obsessed with caste discrimination, so the great poet Jayadeva sang *Gita Govinda* standing before the temple. In which he had described Radha’s impatient love and respect for the divine Krishna. Increased intensities of her desire with the sound of flute had been composed in the form of sublime poetry *Gita Govinda* which posed erratic images of breath-taking sensualities.

The King of Puri after listening to the ecstatic song, ordered the temple singers to sing it at dawn and at dusk every day. This passionate love song added a new bhakti movement to the mythology of Krishna removing all the social and religious differences. Presently, the government has no provision for singers and the ecstatic sensualities of legendary India have been replaced by the fantasies of sexualities.
Gita Mehta remarks that with the opening of cable channel in 1990, young Indians started imitating Western fashion. From last few years advertisements offering sex can be seen in the magazines:

*KGB secrecy assured / expected*....

*Do you wish to taste the forbidden fruit? Shy and reserved young girls welcome*....

*First Timer, Virgin, Very Lonely to be Loved, Having Unique Fantasies.* (SL 205)

After books, television, newspaper and computer, the technique which has influenced every Indian mind comes out to be the film industry. India has the largest film industry of the world and had learned the craft of film making directly from the Lumiere brothers who had invented cinematography. The Earliest films had been made by Dadasaheb Phalke in the early eighteen nineties which were based on mythological themes and were silent. In the nineteen twenties and thirties the use of foreign locations and actors were started, while some concentrated on historical themes like Meera Bai, Prithvi Raj, etc. After Independence filmmaking took a new direction and a fresh subject of social issues was taken under consideration. Till the late sixties India had accumulated a huge amount of undeclared money and the cine world became the most glamorous and expensive field. In the eighties and nineties special effects of wealth was demonstrated through high-class life-style of the leading actor. Some years
ago, a young film maker of Kerala planned to raise funds for his future project through portable cinema hall. He along with his crew moved from village to village and arranged shows with a nominal charge of one rupee. The excited villagers gathered in huge masses to watch foreign movies and within a year and a half the crew was able to gather money for the production of movie.

Like above, one more film maker who faced money crisis throughout his lifetime and was honored many times in abroad, was Satyajit Ray. In his long forty years’ career budget limitations never allowed him to take more than two takes. In many films he composed music, wrote dialogues, designed the sets, directed action and even edited the films. He was always acknowledged at film festivals but the Indian authorities had always been objectionable to him. The politicians remarked, “He is painting a bad picture of the nation ... The world will think we have only poverty” (SL 176) and the movie financer expressed; “Your films will only lose money. We want films that give Indians the chance to escape the drudgery of their lives” (SL 183).

Although his movies never achieved great commercial success, the people of India had exhibited great respect for him. During his last days Holly-wood awarded him “Lifetime Achievement Award” and the President of France awarded him “France’s Le`gion d’ Honneur” (SL 183) while the Indian government only appreciated him for his valuable
contribution to cinema. After his death nearly six thousand people came out on Calcutta streets to pay a silent homage.

India, the great civilization of diverse cultures, shows an inseparable interdependence like dependence between man and nature. Since ancient times Indian culture has been teaching citizens to preserve forests and trees and save the environment. Like man and nature; Indian philosophy and trees are also complementary to each other, as all the sacred writings had been generated by forest dwellers. In Indian philosophy, forest is readily accepted as the symbol of an idealized cosmos. Two great religions, Buddhism and Jainism, started only when their founders Buddha and Mahavira had achieved enlightenment while meditating under a tree. Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel Laureate poet had explained the relation between men and trees in his book *Tapovan* as:

India’s best ideas have come when man was in communion with trees. Indian thinkers were surrounded by and linked to the life of the forest, and the intimate relationship between human life and living nature became the source of their knowledge. *(SL 192)*

In India, trees are considered as Nature’s precious gift to mankind. In Puranas there is a myth on trees. Once the gods had become quarrelsome and Vac, the sacred speech flew away from the profaning gods to hide in water. On demand of gods the water gave her up then the
sacred speech sought refuge in a forest. The trees refused to surrender the speech even after their recurrent claims and presented them the instruments of music made of wood. This enraged gods to curse the trees; “Because through instruments of wood you have given what is sacred to mankind, so again with instruments made of your bodies, with axes with wooden handles, as thunderbolts will men cut you down” (SL 194-195).

Other than puranas; Indian mythology also features trees as providing shade to the divine and becoming sacred. It is believed that the goddess Meenakshi resides in the forest at Madurai. The grove becomes sacred twice because it is also the playground of god Krishna and his milkmaids.

In Kanchi, God Shiva appeared to a sage sitting under a mango tree since then the mango grove has been a pilgrimage centre and all mango trees are considered sacred. Throughout India trees are worshipped as incarnation of goddesses. The divine powers Bamani, Rupeshwari and Vandurga disguised themselves as trees of the saal, the deodar and the banyan. The goddess of forest; Aranyani has inspired writing “Aranyani Sanskriti”, which translates as “the civilization of the forest” (SL 192). The tribals of India show a close affinity with forest civilization. They believe earth as a mother and display great regards for trees. In some great tribes like the Bhils, the Santals, the Nagas and the Bhisnois there is a culture that whenever a child is born a tree is planted in child’s name. With child’s maturity, tree also becomes the supporter of life.
Three hundred years ago in the Kingdom of Jodhpur a woman named Amrita Devi from Bishnoi tribe sacrificed her life to save trees. Khejari forest, situated in the Thar Desert, was the only shade and fodder of the area to meet with royal and other requirements. On the arrival of royal axeman for chopping trees, Amrita Devi confronted with them and begged to leave the forest for their religious beliefs. Unable to convince, she plunged herself around the tree marked for felling but the king’s men sliced the tree through her body. After this her two daughters also sacrificed their lives and when her youngest daughter came forward all people rose together from eighty three surrounding villages. Amrita Devi’s words became a slogan for her tribe; “A chopped head is still easier to replace than a chopped tree” (SL 195) and by the nightfall nearly four hundred tribals sacrificed their lives to save trees and forest.

Santal tribes of Bengal and Orissa also venerate trees and believe to bring honour in the existing life and the next world. Gita Mehta has explained their belief through a story of a king who had planted many trees and cared for them. Once the king climbed up the branches of banyan tree and was carried to the sky. Up in the sky he noticed that some men were building a palace very fast. On asking that for whom they were making the palace, they replied, “… for you, Because you are a good ruler who plants trees for your subjects so they will have food and shelter long after you have gone” (SL 198).
After death, the king was taken to the palace he had seen and only because this, they say, “... the trees you have tended in this world will bring you honour in the next world and all the worlds beyond” (SL 198).

During the British rule; half of the trees had been cut down by the administrations to make way for railways and mines. After Independence half of the remaining half was chopped off in a period of thirty years. The astronauts who had circled the globe had expressed their grief and told that Earth is no longer visible from space. “Our planet is now obscured by smoke from Siberia to Brazil, rising from the funeral pyres of our great forests” (SL 199).

To take out the subcontinent from the state of shock an activist Sunderlal Bahuguna known as “the Mahatma of India’s forests” (SL 196) started “Chipko movement” inspired by Amrita Devi’s act of Bishnoi tribe. He launched this movement to save the remains of Himalayan forest which later on speeded up to South India. The movement not only meant to halt deforestation but also to plant trees. They demanded to replace fast growing trees like eucalyptus and pine with slow growing trees as the economy of country depends upon mixed forests. Nearly three decades ago, a group of peasants uprooted thousands of eucalyptus seedlings from the government nursery and replaced it with tamarind and mango seeds. This concluded in the imprisonment of those peasants. Other than these trees also hold great place in Hindu rituals. In India a manglik
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girl as per the horoscope is believed to bring ill fortune to her bridegroom and in-laws. To solve this, the girl is suggested to marry with a tree, thus transferring her ill fortune to another husband and cleaning her misfortune. The idea of receiving misfortune by a tree is an ancient one and is also mentioned in Atharva Veda, written a thousand years before the birth of Christ: “The sin, the pollution / Whatever we have done with evil / With your leaves we wipe it off” (SL 190).

Uses of trees and plants for medicinal purposes are also mentioned by the greatest sages of India, thousands of years ago. Lengthy meditations and deep concentration facilitated our sages to produce the science known as “Ayurveda”. It describes various techniques for establishing a balance in human body and to soothe the mind of a person. For eyes they had developed various geometrical patterns with different colours, which helped to calm mind. For entire body sage Patanjali had evolved various asanas or postures along with breathing exercises. Those who can expertise in this discipline are able to eliminate the separating line between life and death and be always living.

Ayurveda has categorised human sufferings in three different forms- physical, mental and spiritual. According to it, physical ailments can be cured using various healing herbs, mental serenity can be achieved using meditation while spiritual health can only be attained by understanding interdependence of lives.
To exist in the external world Indian scholars had extensively worked on literature of architecture known as Vastu Shastra. It tells that the house must incorporate with the elements of earth, air, water, fire and energy. In an ideal construction there should be an open space along with building to experience every element.

But today these sincere studies of Ayurveda and Vastu Shastra have taken form of personal decorum. Plenty of books on Ayurveda are concerned with beauty aids while Vastu is superstitiously believed to bring wealth and good fortune to the owner.

Gita Mehta has suggested her sincere advice to find the avenues so that the indepth and vast knowledge of India should become accessible to every common man.

Through *Snakes and Ladders* Gita Mehta has assessed India’s first fifty years’ achievement. Her work stands as, “… an attempt to explain the country to herself, an explanation that provides a user friendly guide to the many snakes who have stuck their fangs into contemporary Indian politics” (Gorra 1).

Short, crisp, frank and intelligent essays of the author evoke thoughtful insights among readers to understand the acquired shape of things in present India. She has conveyed that in India things happen by happenings as Indian leaders including countrymen are always involved in leisure activities.
After presenting politics, economics, history, art, literature, caste and many more subjects the author has produced her essay “Leisure Activity” at the very end of the book. Through this she has tried to give deeper insights into the psyche of the political leaders as well as the citizens who target achieving comfort and leisure in their lives. She has intended to express that the countrymen neither experience the hustle bustle of life nor exhibit any desire to attain. She has written; “The assault on the senses / The caress of the senses / Surely God made India at his leisure” (SL 219).

Thus we can say that *Snakes and Ladders* centres on the theme of power, politics, political personalities, development programmes and people’s response over them. Gita Mehta has thematically connected these essays with nation’s progress after Independence. Contemporary political policies, strategies and their execution by self-serving tunnel visioned politicians have been focused to determine factors responsible for transformation of India. The declaration of Emergency and amendments in the Indian Constitution during that period has been bitterly condemned by the author. Many government policies that undermined democracy and proved detrimental to the country’s economy has also been scrutinized. Post-Independent Indian culture of empty slogans and resentment against government can easily be estimated through accounted democratic demonstrations. Gita Mehta’s hard-hitting analysis of the political scene shows the degradation of values and standards but does not end on the note of despair. Her great concern for the motherland is
reflected through presence of autobiographical note in a few essays. She has analyzed the events of post-independent first fifty years as they actually are the steps in creative evolution and self-renewal of democratic and egalitarian India.

Madan Gupta also views the same and has rewarded the book in the following words:

As one lays down and reflects on her observations, one feels that, inspite of its ups and downs in these fifty years, the psyche of the Indian people has more than once established that it will not let the boat sink. The future may look bleak and dismal today, but the unpredictable tomorrow is bound to unchain the chained Indian tiger. (25)