

DEPICTION IN GITA MEHTA'S NON-FICTION SNAKES AND LADDERS: GLIMPSES OF MODERN INDIA

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Abstract:

*In 1997 Gita Mehta brought out a collection of her essays meaningfully titled *Snakes and Ladders: A view of Modern India*. She observes India in all its colours; and with keen insight and by the flow of her language she is able to make the familiar appear unusual—sometimes glamorous, at others mysterious. The book also provides a glimpse of her early years. The theme of *Snakes and Ladders* is again India- not a mystic of *A River Sutra* or the esoteric India of the Nirvana seekers of *Karma Cola* - but India fifty years after her independence. As different aspects of India reveal themselves to her, the author offers us the snapshots of the nation and the emerging national consciousness.*

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In 1997 Mehta brought out a book titled *Snakes and Ladder: A View of Modern India*. She observes India in all its colors; and with keen insight and by the India surge of her language she is able to make the familiar appear unusual-sometimes glamorous, at others mysterious. The book also provides a glimpse of her early years. Daughter of the well-known freedom fighter Biju Patnaik of Orissa, Gita was born in Delhi in 1943. The family was active in India's freedom struggle and was always on the run, going often times underground because of their political leanings and anti-British activities.

Young Gita was growing up in the thick of political activities that always created fluid situations. Her father was often in jail and her mother followed him 'from jail to jail ...smuggling letters into the jail' (*Snakes and Ladders* 1997: 6), and running around offices to get him released. In order to ensure stability for their two children, particularly in their education, the parents decided to send them – Gita and her brother – to a boarding school. Gita received her early education in India; she graduated from Bombay University, and thereafter was sent to Cambridge for a Masters in English Literature.

Though Gita Mehta's heart is in India, as she often confides, she is not sentimental about it, nor is she

unmindful of the present day realities existing in modern India. With her incisive wit and frank assertions, she paints India as it is fifty years after independence in *Snakes and Ladders* with corruption, nepotism, chaos and self-serving politicians, all forming a part of her vignettes. There seems no hope for the country and yet like the game of 'Snakes and Ladders,' things are set right again to slide down once more, vacillating between hope and despair, progress and regress; and within less than 250 pages she paints her India with the strokes of an artist.

The theme of *Snakes and Ladders* is again India – not the mystic India of *A River Sutra* or the esoteric India of the Nirvana seekers of *Karma Cola* – but India fifty years after her independence. As different aspects of India disclose themselves to her, the author offers us the snapshots of the nation and the emerging national consciousness. Each short essay becomes a reflection and a refraction of society. This is a postcolonial society which unfortunately perpetuates the colonial and pre-colonial values. The author shows skillfully how we still live in contradictions- a rag -picker, unmindful of his utter poverty takes pride in telling the author that he is a Bhat, the community of bards who once held mystic power over kings; he and the likes of him are wondrously unaware of the 'banish poverty' slogans of the government; there are the educated people who buy a new gadget and worship it before it is installed; and then there is a senior bureaucrat who sitting in his office, expresses his annoyance with the Prime Minister of the country, and has the nerve to affirm the democratic principle, 'she doesn't bloody employ me!' he snarled. "The people of India employ me" (13). Such paradoxes, the author believes, make India livable and lovable.

The book is divided in four parts and has in all thirty-five chapters- each showing India's march forward towards progress juxtaposed with the traditional attitudes that still persist and make the country a big irony. We worship trees but lured by the 'bumper profits' we slaughter them mercilessly; we have the vision to appreciate great film makers like Satyajit Ray, but we have the

impudence to leave them to die pauper; grand ideas like those of Satyajit Ray's get no financier because such themes do not sell; Indian elections are the greatest show on the earth but the voters are 'faceless, nameless.' The essays cover a long period from the freedom movement to Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and thence to 1997 when we celebrated fifty years as a sovereign democracy. There are lively, sometimes searing, sometimes sour comments on the leaders. In some of her interviews and conversations after the book was published, Mehta admits that she slender down the volume considerably to make it precise and to give one woman's vision of her country. The essays are insightful and often witty; she has the unique knack to involve the reader with her anecdotal style that makes the pieces personalized. It is clear enough from the style that she wrote with the western reader in mind. She provides a brief year-wise chronology of events at the end of the book obviously for them and also to make India accessible to the new generation Indians who are not aware of the events of the recent past.

Snakes and Ladders, the title though in English, has an aboriginal allusion. Gita Mehta purposely chose this title to denote the paradoxes of Indian life. To quote her, 'The traditional Indian game of snakes and Ladders is played by rolling dice to determine how many squares a player can move his marker up a board starting at square one and finishing at square one hundred. Because of its unpredictability it was one of our favorite games when we were children' (vii). What makes the game interesting is that it has an element of chance, it is suggestive of danger and it means going up and then sliding down to the jeers of the opponents. We, in our fifty years of nationhood (the book was written in 1997) have seen 'a roller coaster ride, the highs so sudden we have become light-headed with exhilaration, the lows too deep to even contemplate solution, as if the game of Snakes and Ladders was invented to illustrate our attempts to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment without jettisoning from our past that which is valuable or unique' (vii-viii). The epigraph to the novel is from Goethe who had an urge to make a journey to India to see the land in his own way.

Gita Mehta's style and narrative technique is commensurate with the thematic structure of her works. The style and enunciation of Snakes and Ladders, has the brisk movement of the player throwing the dice, climbing up the ladder or sliding down the snake. Let us consider a few sentences: if 'the Indian home has an aesthetic it is

chaos, enabling it to accommodate regional influences' (173) and 'perhaps it is because the Indian looks on his home more as a place to live than a work of art. The art, if there is one in India, is supposed to lie in the living' (175). Again in the chapter "Food for Thought" she remarks, "The Green Revolution had changed India for ever... Yet millions of Indian were still hungry, millions of dispossessed villagers were still migrating to the cities' (61). Each chapter starts with an idea that becomes episodic as a number of other ideas or incidents are narrated to develop the basic theme but by the end there is a sudden reversal which is almost like sting-in-the tale ending.

The author portrays with expert strokes, the period between 1943 and 1947. It is not a sequential view of the history of our freedom struggle, but it is history all the same and it is connected with her personal life. Born in 1943 to parents' active in India's struggle for freedom, she defines herself in relation to the history of the nation. History was recounted and re-created for her by those who lived it, and they reconstructed the time through memory. Gita Mehta notes that once she asked her mother and later her father about their 'worst memory during the British rule.' To her surprise each recounted events that had nothing to do with personal sense of humiliation or pain. On the contrary, both in their peculiar way created the reality that minimized the hurt and poured contempt on the colonizers. Gita asked her mother, 'what is your worst memory...your absolutely worst...of living under the British rule?' Her mother told her of an incident that when she was sixteen and was boarding a train to Lahore. At the railway station an old English woman pulled off the turban of her old retainer. Furious at the insult to the venerated old man, Gita's mother shouted at the English-woman, 'How dare you? You old hag?' At this the woman looked out of the carriage window and said, 'My dear, one day you will be an old hag too' (8). That was her worst memory of the Raj. Here a kind of relationship evolves between individual memory and collective history. The incident reminds us of Gandhiji's experience in South Africa which changed his and brought him into the freedom struggle.

Gita's father had something more challenging to relate. 'Once I was asked to fly a British colonel and his adjutant to the North - West Frontier. As I was climbing into the cockpit he said, very loudly, 'My God! I'm not going up in an airplane flown by a bloody native!' Of course, he didn't have any option.' So they flew and Gita's father landed the plane in a field a hundred miles from quetta, on

one of the hottest summer days and left the officers sweating and cursing while he coolly told the colonel to find someone who was not 'a bloody native to fly him, 'and getting into the plane Gita's father took off, 'leaving him (the officer) to walk to Quetta' (9).

In retrospect, and more so in a post-colonial situation, the narrators of these experiences seem to have dyed the two incidents with due heroism but what appears potentially liberating in the new historical setting must have been threatening and insulting in the colonial context when the events took place.

Gita Mehta's third narrator to tell his personal history under the British Raj is her uncle who was sent to Kala Pani (the cellular jail in port Blair) at the gentle age of 14. This uncle, now in his seventies (in 1997), was for seventeen years. When asked if he wasn't frightened, the septuagenarian admitted that it really was a frightening experience to be tortured and flogged 'by British jailors in knee socks and starched white shorts cracking their whips on the sand, shouting, "this is where we tame the Bengal tigers" (11-12).

Freedom fighters like Gita's parents and her uncle were fearless and selfless individuals aggravated by a noble vision. They had no 'self-aggrandizement, or ideological dogma or religious fervour' (11). Mehta has an obvious regret that though freedom came with the sacrifices of numerous people, the real freedom fighters have been pushed into oblivion and power politics has taken every care to wipe off the names of those who 'genuinely fought freedom' (12). Decolonization, instead of bringing freedom in the real sense has landed the country into another colonization - the internal colonization with autocratic and dynastic rule in the offing.

Indian democracy draws Gita Mehta's attention several times: a multi-coloured affair consisting of the big show called elections, colourful and wasteful displays to please a leader, the dark years of the emergency, the demonstration and strikes over issues like cow-slaughter and price-rise and the current waves of violence over non-issues. These things are happening in a country founded on the principles of simplicity and on the dreams of non-violence. Mehta narrates how Prime Minister Nehru's reception arranged in the North-East. An impressive gathering of tribals was 'arranged' to welcome him but when the Prime Minister arrived, instead of the 'colourful guard of honour' the tribals all turned 'with regimental precision and lifted their colourful sarongs. The

Prime Minister of India found himself taking the salute of hundreds of naked tribal behind' (96).

We Indians have a distinctive panache for pageants and strikes and demonstrations. Our democracy, says the writer, is one of the funniest spectacles of the world. Consider thousands of naked sadhus, all armed with iron tridents, marching to the parliament; hermaphrodites dressed in brilliant saris staging a demonstration against Family planning, the hue and cry over cow slaughter and the Thali Revolution of Gujrat against rising prices. The price index rose to an alarming height in 1975. To attract attention of the government, thousands of women armed with thalis (stainless steel or brass plates) came out on the streets and created 'such a din that the state echoed with their displeasure' (121). This was necessitated because of the inaction of the administration/ the government. Prices were rising rapidly and 'finding it impossible to make ends meet and feed their families, the housewives waited until street lamps came on. Then they best their metal platters, their thalis, with wooden rolling-pins to express their dissatisfaction with rising prices' (121). Gita Mehta laughs at this unique method to display women's solidarity and to draw the attention of the dumb and deaf administration to the real problems of the people. On the one hand, it is a residue of the colonial psychology; fifty years after we ceased to be a colony, 'we still bristle with the over sensitive antennae of a colonized people' (94); and on the other hand, such demonstrations have become necessary to raise the administration from its torpor. 'Modern India is a fiction. A fiction in search of an administration' (97), says Gita Mehta.

Gita Mehta sees India as she is, half a century after independence, and she spots India's weaknesses which are the formation of her own politicians and political system. Throughout her travel, Mehta is saddened by the spectacles she sees but she has the knack of deriving fun out of the idiosyncrasies of people and the absurdities of situations. She is ashamed and angry at the greed, filth, decay and submissiveness. She wants her country to be rational, efficient and progressive like the west without losing her cultural authenticity, her base of rich heritage and healthy traditions.

Snakes and Ladders also focus on Indian literature, art and cinema, the reading culture and the home décor. She appreciates the simplicity of our homes because for an Indian 'home is neither his castle nor a stage set by his decorator. By necessity it is organic' (173). But living in the west her personal sense of home décor differs from the Indian sense

of aesthetics, which she finds lacking in imagination, with no artistic sense; only given to chaos and decay. Mehta's scribbling on Indian literature and cinema are unfortunately not thought provoking and are rather trite like entries in the general knowledge books meant for students.

Despite its obvious drawbacks, *Snakes and Ladders* is considered an agreeable contribution to India's prose writing in English. It may not be as organized and strong as Naipaul's travelogues or as acerbic as Nirad Chaudhari's works but it has simple jottings on our postcolonial history in everyday language. The observations have a grain of truth in them whether we like it or not.

As a travelogue, *Snakes and Ladders* takes upon itself the onus to provide us the camera view of our own recent history; as a memoir it gives the author's viewpoint of her motherland which she does with genuine concern. Both travelogue and memoirs are history in that they are based on evidence. What she sees, she presents and in recording her anger and resentment she is not

deriding the culture but is certainly voicing her resistance to the present that has made a mockery of the past, the vision of freedom and of the high ideals that motivated the freedom fighters.

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