

# IndiaStar Review of Books

## Gita Mehta, an interview

by *C.J.S. Wallia*

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by *C.J.S. Wallia*

Gita Mehta is the author of four acclaimed books:

***Karma Cola***, a satire on the hippies' pilgrimages to the mystic East in the 1960s;

***Raj***, a historical novel about the maharajas and the early phases of India's independence struggle;

***A River Sutra***, a novel of quest stories woven into an exquisite tapestry of secular-humanistic philosophy; and the latest,

***Snakes and Ladders***, a set of wide-ranging essays about India since independence.

She has also directed a number of documentaries about India for

BBC and NBC. In my earlier interview, in 1991, responding to my question about her documentaries, she had said, " I made four films on the Bangladesh war -- I was with the guerillas, the Mukti Bahini, inside Bangladesh. Later, for NBC, I covered the Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. I also made films on the elections in the former Indian princely states.... I would charge into the offices of BBC and NBC and ask them, ' Why don't you let Indians make films about India?' They were astonished and let me do the films. "

Gita Mehta was born in Delhi, the daughter of Biju Patnaik, a famous freedom-fighter and, later, the long-time major political leader of the eastern state of Orissa. She was educated in India and in the U.K. At Cambridge, she met fellow-student Ajai Singh Mehta. As quoted in a magazine article in *Vanity Fair* Richard Eyre, an old friend of the couple and currently the artistic director of London's Royal National, thought, "the couple were preternaturally well-read, politically, culturally, musically literate in the widest sense." Ajai Singh "Sonny" Mehta is currently the president of Alfred Knopf, a subsidiary of Random House. The Mehtas are central figures in New York's literary-publishing world, where they hold frequent salons for the likes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, V.S. Naipaul, and Norman Mailer. They have one son in London, and they maintain residences in New York, London, and Delhi. Gita spends at least three months every year in India.

This interview took place on 16 May 1997, just before her public reading from *Snakes and Ladders* at the Black Oak Bookstore, in Berkeley, California. In the interview, she came across as a very self-assured, articulate, and charming person. Elegantly sari-clad and wearing a bindi, she spoke with a distinctly Oxbridge accent, developed, no doubt, during her convent schooling in India and her Cambridge years. Yet, at the end of her reading, which was very well received by the large, admiring audience, she chose to speak to me in classic Hindi.  
Charmed again.

c.j.wallia: I have read all of your books...

**Gita Mehta:** Yes, I remember our interview from before.

**c.j.w.:** That was several years ago. Let me begin with *Kama Sutra*. Sorry. I was editing an article on Mira Nair's new film, *Kama Sutra*, just before I came here. I meant to say *River Sutra*-- your novel. This is one of the very best novels I've ever read. To me, it's an exquisite expression of secular-humanist philosophy. I also

read in it influences of Zen Buddhism. Both of these reflect my own predilections. Does my interpretation make any sense to you?

**Gita Mehta:** It does. It does. I could quote Chandidas, the great Hindu mystic poet. The river in the novel is holy to Lord Shiva, who could be described as a great humanist god of the arts, beyond gender. The humanist tradition is native to India. Zen Buddhist thinking comes, as you know, from the Indian "Dhyana." Zen is a corruption of the term "dhyana," which means awareness. I'm very happy with your characterization. But you know, funnily enough, these constructs I can see only after writing the book. It's such a funny book, it seemed to write itself. I don't know whether it was because I had the good fortune of sitting on the banks of a river. Later, when I was in Varanasi, I talked with a professor of Sanskrit at the Hindu University. I told him that I had put the narrator in the novel later. I was trying to bring mythological time, historical time, contemporary time, and narrative time - all into say one paragraph. And he said that, you know, the "Sutradhar" of classical Sanskrit drama was there precisely for this. Just sheer chance.

**c.j.w.:** Works very well. In *Snakes and Ladders*, in several places you have described Indira Gandhi as loopy and in other equally negative terms, especially when she declared the emergency in 1975 and assumed all powers. You have also written that she was responsible for creating Bhindrawale in the first place and you expressed your rage at the killing of the innocent Sikhs in Delhi in November '84. What do you see as Rao's role -- he was the Home Minister at that time -- in not calling the army for three days after the massacre in Delhi began?

**Gita Mehta:** When I called Indira Gandhi loopy, I think that it was an act of insanity for her to suspend democracy. The emergency was insane behavior.

We all know that Bhindrawale was backed by the government in Delhi run by Indira Gandhi and her younger son in order to throw out the legitimately elected Sikh government in the Punjab. And then the monster she had created could not be controlled.

Your question about Rao: I really don't want to get into the minutiae of actual political events because that's not what my book is about.

**c.j.w.:** This means I have to throw away six of my main questions about *Snakes and Ladders* -- that will leave a big hole in the interview.

Here's one you explicitly wrote about in the book:

"In 1985, the Supreme Court of India granted an illiterate Muslim woman maintenance payments for herself and her children from her husband who had divorced her. The landmark judgment applied to all Indian women. But in 1986, to win the support of fundamentalist Muslim voters, Rajiv Gandhi used his brute majority in Parliament to pass a new law. Henceforth, Muslim women would be subject to medieval interpretations of the shariat, Islamic religious law on marriage and divorce."

Are you for a Uniform Civil Code in India?

**Gita Mehta:** Absolutely. Absolutely. No question about it.

**c.j.w.:** Don't you think that there'd be a tremendous backlash from Muslim fundamentalists?

**Gita Mehta:** Many, many moderate Muslims have been asking for the Uniform Civil Code since independence. Muslims are not a monolithic force.

**c.j.w.:** In your book you have said that the Aryans and Dravidians are a different race. I don't understand that.

**Gita Mehta:** Well, you are from the Punjab. You are of a different race from someone from Kerala.

**c.j.w.:** I don't think so. We are the same race. Even the languages are related. The Aryan/Dravidian binary was a divide-and-rule colonial construct of nineteenth century imperialism. In recent scholarship, the so-called Aryan invasion of India has been shown to be a myth. Proto-Sanskrit and proto-Dravidian were the same language -- the Nostratic language. There are words from the Munda languages even in the Rig Veda.

**Gita Mehta:** There wasn't an Aryan Invasion?! I could quote much chapter and verse that there was.

**c.j.w.:** New books by a number of scholars like Subhash Kak, David Frawley, Georg Feuerstein, Navaratna Rajaram, and N. Jha argue that the "Aryan Invasion" theory was a construction of Eurocentric historians in the nineteenth century. It was picked up by Marxist historians and now keeps being repeated by their Marxist disciples like Romila Thapar at Jawaharlal Nehru University. There is absolutely no evidence, scientific or literary, to support this "Aryan Invasion" theory. The scholars I named argue that, instead of an Aryan invasion into India, Sanskrit speakers migrated westward from India beginning as early as the sixth millenium B.C. The Aryans propagated their language and their invention - agriculture - among the tribes of hunters and

gatherers they found all over the western lands. "Arya" means a person with a hoe. These scholars cite a whole body of linguistic evidence as well as archaeological evidence. Their work is hardly known because it's contrary to the establishment dogma. I am sorry for my long comment-- it's unusual for an interviewer. I'll send you my reviews of these new books.

**Gita Mehta:** Yes, do that. I'd like to read your reviews.

**c.j.w.:** In *Snakes and Ladders*, you mention an uncle, who at the age of 14 was sentenced to the horrible jail - "Kala Pani." What was his name?

**Gita Mehta:** Ananda Prashad Gupta. And his elder brother, Dev Prashad Gupta, was shot down at the steps of the armory.

**c.j.w.:** Uncle -- from your father's side or mother's side?

**Gita Mehta:** My father's side. My grandmother was a Bengali, related to Chitranjan Das.

**c.j.w.:** What did a boy of 14 do to get sentenced to "Kala Pani" ?

**Gita Mehta:** His elder brother had taken over the British armory and he the police station at Chittagong. They held it for 18 hours.

**c.j.w.:** This is of much interest to me personally. I am doing research on the Gadri Babas for a novel of my own.

On a different subject in *Snakes and Ladders*. You are full of praise for G.V. Desani's *All About Mr. H. Hatterr. Desani*, as you wrote in the book, drew high acclaim from the likes of T.S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, and E.M. Forster, no less. You call him a "modern wise man." I, too, like his writing very much - deeply metaphysical and so witty. The only other writer I know who writes such ambitious metaphysical fiction is Raja Rao, you know, his *Chessmaster and His Moves*, but he's not witty like Desani. What's your opinion of Desani's more recent book, *Hali and Collected Stories*?

**Gita Mehta:** Recent book by Desani?!

**c.j.w.:** McPherson, a small New York publishing house sent me a review copy. Delightfully clever, metaphysical stories.

**Gita Mehta:** I'll get a copy when I return to New York.

**c.j.w.:** Unfortunately, there's another side to Indian writing also. I mean the poor perception many Americans have of Indian universities. I have an example of this in my bag. I am a member of

an internet discussion group on copyediting. Most of the members on this large international list are professional copy editors. It's an influential and very active list --60 or 70 messages every day discussing language usage. Here's a printout of my posting on this list during a recent discussion. I realize this has nothing to do with your writing; however, I would very much like your reaction to this little piece.

**Gita Mehta:** [Gita Mehta reads the single- sheet printout:

" The 'lazy writers' thread also included several derogatory references to Asian Indians. The medium of instruction in most Indian universities is English. Therefore, I was astonished by the posting that Indians are the worst writers of English, along with the Japanese. The sender of that posting also professed great friendship for Indians - 'my dearest friends'! I received my B.A. in English in India (Punjab University) and went on to complete a Ph.D. in Communication at Stanford University, where I regularly competed in seminars with graduates of Harvard, Yale, Berkeley. Let me cite two studies about Indian students abroad.

'According to a large-scale study of student performance recently concluded by Professor Desmond Nuttal of London University, school students from Britain's South Asian community come top of the class in English language examinations, scoring higher marks than counterparts from English, Welsh, Scottish, and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. English is often a second-, third-, or even fourth language for many South Asians in the U.K.' The second is the study of SAT scores, 1991 current. 'Of all ethnic groups, Asian Indians score the highest in verbal and math.' Incidentally, for those not clear on the concept, whites are also an ethnic group. My information on these two studies comes from articles in the 'India Abroad weekly,' published in New York and London."

After reading the printout, she hands it back.]

I am astonished by this. Just prejudice. You should have told them about Krishna Menon's remark. During the United Nations debate, the British representative, Sir Something or other, remarked to Krishna Menon about his English. And Krishna Menon replied, " Look here, I learned English. You just picked it up!"

**c.j.w.:** Menon's acerbic repartee. That's great. It's also an excellent example of your famous gift as a witty story-teller.

**Gita Mehta:** Thank you very much.