

Stylish Raconteur

Gita Mehta's latest hardhitting tome on modern India, 'Snakes and Ladders', reflects the bestselling writer's mercurial personality—as also her wit and worldview

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IT took a well-known publisher, his writer-wife and a hapless correspondent to try fix an errant tape-recorder. The one hour that Gita Mehta, bestselling writer and author of Snakes and Ladders, a collection of essays on modern India slated to hit Indian bookstores in mid-March, had granted

Outlook for an interview was long up. It had been dotted with feeble protests and a willingness to scribble, as the eloquent Mehta talked, words flowing like vintage champagne.

I had underestimated two things.

The immediate warmth and quiet willingness to help on the part of Sonny Mehta, high-pro-file publisher, trying to wire my microphone to his stereo system, for one. And the naturally curious Gita for the other, who was trying to wrench the player from her husband, declaring that she had the answer. Snakes and Ladders reflects much of the mercurial personality of the person who wrote it. The essays, an attempt to "explain modern India" to herself, according to the foreword, do more than that. Couched in anecdote and fact, they explain modern India to modern Indians, they uncover some uncomfortable truths for India's baby-boomers and GenerationX, and they are bound to instill an urgency in Indian readers to take a longer, closer look in the mirror.

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But Gita is mortified by parables. "I don't like reading political diatribes, I don't like writing them," says the daughter of veteran politician Biju Patnaik. "My approach to Snakes and Ladders was an 'I am a Camera' sort of thing. I wanted the reader to have some human relationship with the enormity of the subject. The only relationship I could offer him was an eyewitness one." Speaking of relationships, it is easy to see why Sonny and Gita Mehta are the archetypal golden couple. Books and music line the exquisitely furnished apartment in Manhattan's chic Upper East Side. Literature, good taste and an innate understanding between two individuals, both of whom are engrossed in their own worlds and still share a common one, seem the key here. For instance, when Salman Rushdie or Toni Morrison come over for a dinner cooked by a writer, who probably lends as much creativity to her cuisine as she does to her work.

Right now, the clock ticks away, the recorder remains silent, and Mehta sparkles with wit and good sense. "What is my life like and how I fit writing into my day? I have no one typical day. My greatest privilege is that I am tricontinental." (Mehta lives alternately in India, London and New York, where her husband heads Alfred Knopf, one of the largest publishing houses in the world, but one which both conscientiously keep uninvolved with Gita Mehta's own work). "When I am really involved in a book, I spend a lot of time in London," she says. "One, it allows me to extract myself from my husband's life because I think it is hard to stop working, switch your brain and go into hostess mode. We mostly spend evenings with writers who have finished books, which is very disheartening! You are right in the middle of one, still deep in the misery of trying to make something out of nothing, while they are light and drunk with the excitement!"

It is hard to picture this ebullient, small-framed woman in the dregs of depression over anything. Gita Mehta radiates a passion for life and its quirks. "When I am with my husband in the evenings, obviously the idea is to tell writers how wonderful they are and their work is. I don't want to have to do that! I want them to tell me how wonderful my work is!" "When the thought has begun to coalesce is when you're ready to sit down and write," she ruminates. "All you then really want to do is get it down on paper before you lose it. And then the nightmare begins. Of rewriting, to try and make the prose as limpid as possible. I have struggled to make all my books effortless for the reader. There was once a great conversation between Kurosawa and Satyajit Ray, in which they both talked about the nature of film. And they said it is, in a sense, antithetical to Asian culture because Asian culture is by definition reflective. What always fascinated me about their films, although they are slow, is that they are always 10 minutes in advance of the time of the viewer. And 10 minutes in film terms means acres of time in terms of passage of material. It is that sort of discipline I have tried to bring to

my work."

I abandon the struggle to keep pace with her fast flowing answers and decide to go out for another tape recorder. Making my hasty way back to my office, I recall what Mehta says about the Big Apple. "When I am here, it seems anything is possible. When a writer finishes a book, the feeling is, oh God, I am never going to do this again. America makes it possible. It energises one," she says. Though she once described New York to a relative as "Calcutta with the lights on", a great metropolis whose museums, music and Central Park appeal to her ("I love Central Park, it's like Calcutta's Maidan, I mean who knows what is going to happen in Central Park next?"), Mehta sees through its glitz. "It is the most powerful city of the most powerful nation in the world, and therefore it is wilfully ignorant about the rest of the world. There is a narcissism in New York which I find both perturbing and exhausting. There is an indifference towards what is going on anywhere else."

I finally reach her apartment and clicking cassette into place, I try again. How does she react to the frequently heard criticism—mainly from Indian quarters—that non-resident Indian authors could not possibly be qualified enough to write so authoritatively about India?

"The virtue of living away from your subject is that it gives you a perspective. Years ago, my husband had commissioned a Marxist histories of the world, and Allende and Marquez were going to write the history of South America. In India, the

CPI(M) was ready to produce the researchers but said: will you find us a writer, because we are too close to the woods to see the trees?" Mehta does not feel that the Indian press has been unfair to her works, at least not on account of what she calls her 'tricontinentality.' "One of my great privileges as an alien writer: to be given some distance from the subject, when I am doing my work. When I am in India, I am not running a house, I can travel. So, I end up seeing much more of India than most Indians do. But there are dark sides of being away too. Here at home, I read six newspapers everyday. If I were to then write about India, I would already be overwhelmed by what I am reading. While I was writing about the politics of India for this book, I was doing it while America was going to the polls. I had to, therefore, extract myself from this endless information about Clinton and Dole to write about Indian politics."

MY recorder has broken down again. I flayingly ask her about the authors who have inspired her. She mentions Scott Fitzgerald and R.K. Narayan. "When Fitzgerald's daughter told him she wanted to be a writer and asked what she should do, he sent her a telegram which went:

Read, read, read. The sum total of what you read gives you, not so much the inspiration to write, but some discrimination of where you are really bad. I think every good book inspires you, because I think all good writing has a subtext which is about good writing. "R.K. Narayan. I truly believe that of all the writers writing today, Narayan's opus will stand and stand and stand. Because there is nothing grandstanding about it and yet, if you take that whole opus together, you really get an idea of what modern India is about. Because there is no subject in modern India that he has not touched—from politics, to Partition, to family planning, to commercial India's impact on Indian culture. And he does all that in the gentlest of ways," she concludes.

Snakes and Ladders—whether the author intended it that way or not—is hardhitting all right. Given Rushdie's plight, is it likely to ruffle feathers on the volatile subcontinent? "Salman's was a very specific case. He found himself caught in the crossfire between Iraq and Iran. Iran had lost a war with Iraq and then suddenly decided this book should be a rallying point. Salman thus found himself the hapless victim of a geopolitical situation which described itself as a literary censorship. When I wrote Karma Cola, I got death threats written in blood from many cults, which said they were going to get me. I am not interested in shocking anyone. To me, the fact itself is shocking. The fact that you have people from cultured and tremendously wise backgrounds, living in the garbage dumps of India; that, to me, is shocking. The statistics I quote in my book, that people borrow Rs 200 for food and 18 years later, are still working to pay off interest on that debt, what could be more shocking? I am not the first person to have seen this: the greatest of India's thinkers did so much before. I feel that reminding today's Indians of these debates that have taken place in our past is already a kind of service."

Gita's aim is to give Indians an idea of how unthinkingly they are taking cultural impact. "Buying shiny toys is not progress. I hope my work, my self-awareness leads to self-examination in other Indians." Would she ever consider going back to live in India? "Like a shot—if it weren't for him." Mehta will be in India, after passing through Germany, and then go on to France, England and West Asia, on a book tour.

When she is back, she will write again, about her favourite playground in the whole world, her 'damned soil'. Her books will be marked by meticulous research, a gentleness and steer clear of banal sentimentality. Even the thriller she is planning to write next.

In the taxi, Murphy's Law prevails. My recorder springs back on. I flip open the galley copy of Snakes and Ladders she has personalised for me. "For Padma," it reads. "With thanks and—the human connection is always better than the mechanical."

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