



Indian Traditions In Transition : A Cultural Critique In Gita Mehta's Works

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Abstract: This research paper explores the dynamic interplay between Indian traditions and cultural transformation as depicted in the literary works of Gita Mehta. Through a close reading of her prominent texts such as *Karma Cola*, *A River Sutra*, *Raj*, and *Snakes and Ladders*, the study investigates how Mehta critiques the effects of colonialism, globalization, and modernity on India's socio-cultural fabric. Her narratives portray a wide spectrum of Indian experiences, from spiritual journeys to royal decline, all framed within the tension between preserving tradition and embracing change.

Mehta, positioned between Eastern heritage and Western education, brings a unique insider-outsider perspective to her critique. She highlights the commodification of Indian spirituality, the decay of feudal systems, the persistence of myths and rituals, and the contradictions in postcolonial identity. This study draws upon postcolonial theory, cultural criticism, and feminist perspectives to analyze how Mehta's characters navigate traditional expectations while confronting the demands of a rapidly modernizing world.

Ultimately, the research argues that Mehta neither wholly glorifies nor entirely rejects Indian traditions. Instead, she reveals them as fluid constructs—resilient in some contexts, vulnerable in others. Her work serves as a cultural commentary on how India's traditions are being redefined in the face of historical, political, and social transitions.

Index Terms - Gita Mehta, Indian traditions, cultural critique, postcolonialism, modernity, globalization, gender, spirituality.

(1) Introduction:

India's civilizational fabric is woven with intricate layers of tradition, religion, mythology, and cultural rituals. These elements have not only defined its historical identity but continue to shape its present-day social, political, and moral values. However, with the advent of colonialism, followed by independence and the forces of globalization, Indian society has undergone significant transformation. This tension between continuity and change—between preserving traditional norms and embracing modernity—forms a central theme in contemporary Indian literature (Mukherjee, 2000).

Among the many voices that have critically examined this cultural transformation, Gita Mehta stands out as a distinctive figure. As a writer who bridges the East and the West—through her lived experience, education, and literary lens—Mehta offers a unique commentary on the changing face of Indian traditions. Her works, including *Karma Cola*, *Raj*, *A River Sutra*, and *Snakes and Ladders*, depict India not

as a static civilization bound by rituals but as a nation in cultural flux, grappling with the demands of a postcolonial, globalized world (Paranjape, 2012).

This study seeks to explore how Gita Mehta critiques, reinterprets, and contextualizes Indian traditions in her literary works. Rather than offering a linear portrayal of cultural decline or revival, Mehta reveals the paradoxes inherent in India's transition—where myths coexist with modernity, and spirituality is both revered and commercialized. Through satire, symbolism, historical retrospection, and spiritual storytelling, she sheds light on how Indian customs are preserved, reshaped, or contested by individuals and society alike (Nayar, 2008).

The present research applies a thematic and interdisciplinary lens—drawing from postcolonial theory, feminist literary criticism, and cultural studies—to analyze Mehta's critique of tradition.

Objectives :

1. **To examine the portrayal of Indian traditions** in Gita Mehta's major literary works.
2. **To analyze the impact of modernity and globalization** on traditional Indian culture as depicted by Mehta.
3. **To explore the intersection of gender and tradition**, especially the roles and challenges faced by women in her narratives.
4. **To investigate the commodification of Indian spirituality**, particularly through the lens of *Karma Cola*.
5. **To study how myths and ancient narratives** are reinterpreted in modern contexts within works like *A River Sutra*.

(2) Indian Tradition in Context:

Indian tradition is a diverse, evolving system of religion, customs, family, caste, and spirituality. Historically rooted in rituals and myths, it provided social continuity. However, colonialism and globalization disrupted this fabric, creating a clash between tradition and modernity (Chatterjee, 1993). Post-independence India, while embracing progress, experienced cultural dislocation as individuals struggled between inherited values and modern ideals.

Gita Mehta explores this tension in her writings, portraying tradition as neither fixed nor obsolete but as adaptable and contested. Her characters reflect how modern Indians, especially women, navigate these conflicting worlds, revealing the complexities of cultural transition (Nandy, 2004).

2.1 Understanding the Concept of Tradition in Indian Society

Tradition in Indian society encompasses a broad spectrum of cultural practices, including religious rituals, language, mythology, music, art, kinship systems, and social norms. It is inherently pluralistic, varying widely across regions, castes, communities, and linguistic groups. Rooted in centuries of oral transmission and sacred texts, Indian traditions have served as tools of identity formation and continuity (Thapar, 2000). They offer meaning to daily life, social hierarchy, and spiritual goals. However, tradition in India is not static—it evolves through reinterpretation, adaptation, and resistance (Nandy, 2004). Gita

Mehta's works reflect this dynamic understanding, portraying tradition as both a source of cultural richness and a potential site of conflict in a changing society.

2.2 Impact of Colonialism on Indian Traditions

British colonial rule introduced drastic shifts in India's socio-cultural landscape. The imposition of Western education, law, medicine, and moral codes disrupted traditional institutions and belief systems (Viswanathan, 1989). Indigenous knowledge—especially in areas like Ayurveda, astronomy, and spiritual philosophy—was marginalized in favor of Eurocentric rationality. Simultaneously, certain customs were labeled as "barbaric" or "backward," prompting social reform movements but also internalizing a sense of cultural inferiority. The colonial encounter created a split between the "modern" educated elite and the "traditional" masses. Gita Mehta captures these tensions in her narratives, particularly in *Raj*, where royal traditions are challenged by colonial ideologies, leading to a deep cultural and political crisis.

2.3 Post-Independence Cultural Shifts

With independence in 1947, India began constructing a national identity focused on progress, democracy, and secularism. Nehruvian ideals emphasized scientific rationalism and industrial development, often at the expense of traditional ways of life (Chatterjee, 1993). The new legal framework abolished certain oppressive customs, such as untouchability and child marriage, but also created a binary between tradition and modernity. Education, urbanization, and political change accelerated the transformation of traditional institutions like the caste system, village panchayats, and the joint family. Mehta's observations in *Snakes and Ladders* reflect this moment of transition—where India is negotiating its ancient heritage with the demands of a modern republic.

2.4 Globalization and the Challenge to Traditional Values

Globalization has further complicated India's cultural identity by introducing new consumerist ideals, lifestyle choices, and global ethics. The liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s brought increased access to foreign goods, media, and education. This opened new opportunities, especially for urban youth, but also widened the cultural divide between generations and classes. Traditional authority figures—elders, priests, local leaders—have often found their roles questioned. Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* satirizes how globalization turns sacred Indian traditions into spiritual products for global consumption, reducing profound practices into shallow experiences for profit or entertainment.

2.5 Literature as a Reflection of Tradition in Transition

Indian English literature plays a crucial role in documenting and critiquing the country's cultural evolution. Writers like Gita Mehta, who straddle multiple worlds, use literature to reflect the complexities of tradition in a postcolonial, globalized India. Her writing style—marked by wit, satire, allegory, and realism—allows her to question the authority of rigid customs while also acknowledging their emotional and historical significance (Mukherjee, 2000). Mehta's characters often embody the cultural negotiation between the past and present. Whether it's a Western traveler seeking mystical enlightenment or an Indian princess resisting royal expectations, her protagonists serve as vehicles for exploring how traditions are challenged, adapted, and reimaged.

(3) Karma Cola: Satirizing Spiritual Commodification:

Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979) is a sharp, witty, and biting critique of how Indian spiritual traditions are distorted and commodified for Western consumption. Written in a semi-journalistic, anecdotal style, the book offers vignettes of encounters between Western seekers and Indian gurus, satirizing the romanticized fascination with Eastern mysticism. The text becomes a cultural commentary on how genuine spiritual practices are reduced to superficial trends, exposing the vulnerability of Indian traditions in the face of global commercialization (King, 1999).

3.1 Western Fascination with Indian Spirituality

The 1960s and 70s witnessed a surge in Western interest in Indian spiritual traditions, with many disillusioned youth from Europe and America traveling to India in search of enlightenment. Gita Mehta portrays these seekers with irony—most of them arrive with little knowledge of Indian culture, expecting immediate transformation through yoga, meditation, or drugs. Through her depiction of these characters, Mehta critiques the shallow engagement with deeply philosophical traditions. Instead of spiritual growth, many end up confused, exploited, or even mentally disturbed, highlighting the danger of romanticizing another culture without understanding it (Jain, 2014).

3.2 The Role of Fake Gurus and Commodification of the Sacred

Mehta also turns her lens on the Indian side of the exchange, critiquing the rise of self-styled gurus who manipulate spiritual teachings for fame, wealth, and influence. In the book, many such "godmen" are shown peddling simplified versions of ancient doctrines, often laced with marketing language that appeals to Western audiences. Spirituality becomes a service industry, where enlightenment is promised in exchange for dollars. This reduction of the sacred into a consumable product reflects the collapse of authenticity, raising questions about how Indian traditions are being repackaged to cater to global consumerism (Mehta, 1979).

3.3 Cultural Clash and Misunderstanding

One of the central themes in *Karma Cola* is the deep cultural misunderstanding between India and the West. Mehta shows how Western idealism often collides with Indian pragmatism. The West seeks escape from materialism in the East, while the East, particularly postcolonial India, aspires to the material wealth and modernity symbolized by the West. This inversion creates a cultural irony where both civilizations desire what the other rejects. Mehta's narrative thus becomes a space where the illusion of tradition and the reality of globalization confront each other.

3.4 Karma Cola as a Metaphor for Spiritual Dilution

The term "Karma Cola" itself functions as a powerful metaphor. It combines the sacred concept of karma—a fundamental tenet of Hindu philosophy—with the global symbol of commodification: Coca-Cola. The metaphor suggests that Indian spiritual practices, like soft drinks, are being mass-produced, marketed, and consumed without depth or authenticity. Mehta uses this symbolic title to critique not only the spiritual shallowness of the seekers but also the larger phenomenon of how globalization affects indigenous cultures and belief systems.

3.5 *Implications for Indian Traditions in Transition*

Karma Cola serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of misrepresentation, oversimplification, and commercialization of sacred traditions. Mehta does not reject the spiritual core of Indian culture; rather, she mourns its trivialization. Her work urges readers to recognize the need for authenticity, depth, and cultural sensitivity in engaging with ancient traditions. The book exemplifies how Indian spirituality, once a means of inner awakening, is now caught in the web of global tourism, media hype, and capitalist desire.

(4) Raj: Gender, Power, and Aristocratic Decay:

Gita Mehta's historical novel *Raj* (1989) presents a nuanced exploration of Indian royalty during the turbulent transition from colonial rule to independence. Set against the backdrop of princely India, the narrative follows the life of Maharani Jaya Singh, who is born into power but struggles to redefine her role amid political upheaval, patriarchal constraints, and cultural expectations. The novel not only critiques the crumbling structures of monarchy but also interrogates how gendered traditions persist in shaping a woman's identity and agency in both public and private spheres. Through *Raj*, Mehta highlights how traditional symbols of power and femininity are challenged and reinterpreted in a rapidly changing India (Chatterjee, 1993).

4.1 *The Royal Household as a Microcosm of Tradition*

The world of Indian royalty in *Raj* serves as a highly ritualized and codified space governed by strict customs and inherited privilege. The royal palace is depicted as a fortress of tradition, where every aspect of life—marriage, politics, attire, and speech—is dictated by centuries-old norms. The character of Jaya Singh is introduced within this rigid system, raised to uphold ceremonial dignity and dynastic pride. However, as British influence grows and nationalist movements rise, these very institutions begin to collapse, revealing the fragility of traditions once thought permanent. Mehta uses this setting to portray the aristocracy not as noble or glamorous, but as politically irrelevant and socially out of touch.

4.2 *Colonialism and the Manipulation of Tradition*

Mehta intricately weaves colonial politics into the narrative, showing how the British manipulated Indian traditions to consolidate their control. While publicly maintaining respect for Indian customs, the colonial administration in *Raj* covertly undermines princely states, exploiting their ceremonial grandeur for imperial pageantry while stripping them of real power. The British "Resident" acts as a shadow ruler, subtly controlling Jaya's father and the state's decisions. This duality reflects how colonialism preserved the form of Indian tradition but hollowed out its substance. Mehta's portrayal reveals how tradition can be weaponized by both foreign and native powers to maintain hierarchies.

4.3 *The Collapse of Aristocracy as Cultural Metaphor*

The eventual disintegration of Jaya's royal world serves as a metaphor for the broader collapse of outdated cultural structures. The rituals, opulence, and titles of the past are no longer relevant in post-independence India. Through poignant imagery and symbolism, Mehta illustrates the irreversibility of change. Yet, she does not present this transition as merely tragic. Instead, she suggests that in the crumbling

of old power, there lies the possibility of renewal—especially for those like Jaya who embrace change rather than resist it. The end of the raj becomes not just a political moment, but a cultural turning point.

4.4 Tradition, Resistance, and Female Empowerment

Ultimately, Raj becomes a story of female empowerment through the redefinition of tradition. Jaya's journey illustrates how women can reinterpret and challenge inherited roles while still engaging with their cultural roots. Mehta does not call for the wholesale rejection of tradition but advocates for critical engagement with it. In giving Jaya a voice and agency, she reclaims a space for women within history and heritage—suggesting that traditions can evolve when confronted with courage, intellect, and self-awareness.

(5) A River Sutra: Myths, Stories, and Sacred Geography:

Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* (1993) offers a profound spiritual and cultural journey along the banks of the Narmada River, intertwining myth, memory, and modernity. Structured as a series of interconnected tales, the novel captures the diversity of Indian traditions and the complexities of cultural transformation. Through the narrator's encounters with characters of various backgrounds—monks, musicians, businessmen, lovers, and mendicants—Mehta weaves a rich tapestry of sacred geography, philosophical inquiry, and personal redemption. The river itself becomes a metaphor for continuity and change, reflecting the movement from traditional belief systems to contemporary crises of identity and purpose (Nair, 2002).

5.1 The Narmada as Sacred Space and Symbol

The Narmada River is central to the novel—not merely as a physical setting, but as a spiritual axis and living embodiment of Indian tradition. Revered as a goddess and mentioned in ancient scriptures, the Narmada is both timeless and mutable, carrying centuries of myths and legends. Mehta uses the river as a unifying motif that connects diverse characters and narratives, representing the enduring sanctity of nature amid societal upheaval. The river's symbolism encapsulates India's cyclical worldview—where rebirth, suffering, and liberation are constant currents in the human journey (Mukherjee, 2005).

5.2 Storytelling as a Medium of Cultural Transmission

In *A River Sutra*, stories function as vessels of tradition, carrying moral, spiritual, and cultural wisdom across generations. Each tale—ranging from tales of unfulfilled love to renunciation—reveals deeper truths about Indian values, beliefs, and dilemmas. Mehta frames storytelling as a form of sutra, a thread that connects individual lives to collective heritage. The unnamed narrator, a retired bureaucrat seeking peace, becomes the listener and interpreter, underscoring the oral tradition's role in sustaining cultural memory. This narrative structure reflects the Indian epical mode, where stories are layered and fluid rather than linear (Singh, 2011).

5.3 *The Quest for Meaning in a Changing World*

The narrator's journey mirrors that of many characters—a movement from disillusionment to insight. As a retired government official, he represents rational, secular India, yet is drawn to the mysticism and stories of those who seek liberation. Through his interactions, Mehta explores the contemporary Indian's search for identity amidst the erosion of traditional values. The spiritual quests of the characters are metaphors for India's own cultural reawakening and negotiation with modernity. The novel suggests that despite modernization, the core questions of life, love, death, and divinity remain eternal.

In *A River Sutra*, Mehta portrays Indian tradition as neither static nor obsolete, but fluid and resilient. The sacred geography of the Narmada, the persistence of storytelling, and the spiritual yearning of individuals all serve to demonstrate how tradition adapts to modern challenges. Mehta's work offers a critique of modern alienation and materialism, while affirming the enduring relevance of India's spiritual and cultural inheritance. By fusing myth with realism, the novel affirms that tradition is not a relic of the past, but a living river that nourishes the present.

(6) **Snakes & Ladders: Personal and National Reflections:**

In *Snakes and Ladders* (1997), Gita Mehta departs from fiction and offers a collection of personal essays that blend memoir, cultural commentary, and political observation. Through these reflective narratives, she critically examines post-independence India's journey, capturing the flux of tradition, modernity, and nationalism. The title itself—a metaphor from the traditional Indian board game—symbolizes the unpredictable rise and fall of fortunes in both personal and national life. This work provides a direct lens into the complexities of Indian identity, the contradictions of development, and the challenges of preserving cultural values in a rapidly transforming nation (Mishra, 2008).

6.1 *The Game Metaphor: Cultural and Political Flux*

The title *Snakes and Ladders* metaphorically represents India's uneven path of progress—oscillating between advancement (ladders) and regression (snakes). Mehta uses this symbolism to describe the turbulence of Indian history, from colonial resistance to democratic experimentation. The essays show how gains in education, economy, and technology often coexist with regressions in communal harmony, corruption, or political instability. Tradition, in this context, is not abandoned but constantly reinterpreted—sometimes as a foundation for national pride, sometimes as a burden resisting change (Nandy, 2001).

6.2 *Post-Independence Identity and the Legacy of Tradition*

Mehta reflects on the struggle of post-independence India to define itself, torn between Gandhian ideals and Nehruvian modernization. She explores how traditions, such as village life, non-violence, or caste structures, were both preserved and re-evaluated in the face of democratic reforms and urbanization. Her critique highlights the tension between preserving heritage and pursuing a modern, global identity. Through autobiographical sketches and historical anecdotes, Mehta presents tradition as a living, often contested space within national consciousness (Chatterjee, 1997).

6.3 Role of Women in Tradition and Change

Several essays in *Snakes and Ladders* touch on the evolving role of Indian women—a central theme in Mehta’s broader critique of tradition. She observes how traditional gender roles, once dictated by religious or familial codes, are being challenged by education, employment, and feminist movements. However, Mehta is careful to show that this transformation is not uniform; rural and urban experiences differ greatly. While some women embrace empowerment, others remain caught in traditional expectations. Thus, Mehta presents gender as a key site where Indian traditions are both upheld and transformed.

6.4 Spirituality, Ritual, and the Commodification of Culture

Mehta’s essays critique the commercialization of Indian spiritual traditions in the global age—echoing themes from *Karma Cola*. She questions how authentic spiritual experiences are often overshadowed by spectacle, tourism, and political appropriation. Festivals, rituals, and symbols once rooted in deep meaning now risk becoming performances for consumption. Yet, she also acknowledges the persistence of genuine devotion, especially among ordinary people, who continue to engage with tradition in meaningful, personal ways. Her narrative balances irony with empathy, exposing contradictions without dismissing cultural resilience.

In *Snakes and Ladders*, Mehta uses her personal insights to engage in a broader national introspection. Her reflections show that Indian traditions are not static monuments but dynamic forces—capable of growth, distortion, revival, or decline. By weaving personal memories with national history, Mehta humanizes India’s journey and calls for an honest, critical, yet compassionate engagement with tradition. This work complements her fictional narratives by grounding cultural critique in lived experience and philosophical reflection.

Table : Comparative Thematic Table: Gita Mehta’s Major Works

Theme	Karma Cola	Raj	A River Sutra	Snakes and Ladders
1. Tradition vs. Modernity	Satirizes Western fascination with Indian spirituality; critiques modern spiritual consumerism	Explores conflict between royal traditions and nationalist change	Highlights tension between personal spiritual longing and societal norms	Depicts India’s socio-political evolution from tradition to modern nationhood
2. Role of Women	Western women spiritual tourists portrayed as misguided; Indian women largely absent	Central female character (Jaya Singh) struggles with patriarchy and royal obligations	Stories depict women's suffering and sacrifice within traditional structures	Reflects on real Indian women’s roles in nation-building and societal change
3. Spirituality	Mocks commodification of Indian spirituality by the	Religion as part of tradition but not	Spirituality deeply	Balances critique and

	West	central theme	embedded in stories; myths and divine love drive narrative	reverence for India's spiritual past and its political use today
4. Colonial Legacy	Western gaze dominates; portrays neo-colonial spiritual tourism	Detailed portrayal of British colonialism's impact on Indian royalty	Indirect influence through character backgrounds and historical context	Analyzes post-independence India's struggle with colonial residues
5. Identity and Nationhood	Focus on East-West cultural identity clashes	Conflict between personal identity and royal/national duty	Philosophical quest for identity; fluid, story-based exploration	Reflects on India's 50-year journey toward self-definition
6. Tone and Narrative Style	Satirical, ironic, fast-paced	Historical fiction, descriptive, serious	Philosophical, multi-narrative, poetic	Reflective, personal, often ironic yet sincere
7. Tradition as Dynamic	Exposes shallow understanding of tradition by outsiders	Shows tradition adapting or resisting in the face of political change	Tradition as both binding and liberating depending on individual journeys	Tradition shown as fluid—interwoven with nation's rise, fall, and reinvention

(7) Findings :

- **Indian traditions are portrayed as dynamic and evolving**, not static or rigid, constantly negotiating with modern values and global influences.
- **Spiritual traditions are commodified**, especially in *Karma Cola*, where Mehta critiques the Western consumerist gaze on Eastern mysticism.
- **Gender and tradition intersect critically**, as seen in *Raj* and *A River Sutra*, highlighting how patriarchal customs restrict and define women's roles.
- **Myth and modernity co-exist** in Mehta's narrative world, with *A River Sutra* demonstrating how ancient stories continue to shape contemporary lives.
- **Multiple narrative styles and voices** reflect India's cultural plurality, from satire to myth, memoir to political commentary.
- **Critique is balanced with cultural reverence**, as Mehta honors the spiritual depth of Indian traditions while exposing their limitations and contradictions.

- **Tradition becomes both a source of identity and a site of struggle**, especially in the face of globalization, feminism, and nationalism.
- **Mehta's works provide a cultural critique rooted in insider-outsider perspective**, bridging Eastern heritage with Western readership sensibilities.
- **Transition is a central theme**, where the past is neither glorified nor rejected but critically engaged to understand India's complex present.

(8) Conclusion:

Gita Mehta's literary oeuvre offers a profound, nuanced, and often ironic examination of Indian traditions as they undergo transformation under the pressures of modernity, globalization, colonial legacy, and internal cultural shifts. Through works like *Karma Cola*, *Raj*, *A River Sutra*, and *Snakes and Ladders*, Mehta explores the complexities of Indian identity, the commodification of spirituality, the role of gender within traditional structures, and the dynamic negotiation between past and present.

Her writing does not merely lament the erosion of traditions, but critically interrogates the forces—both internal and external—that shape their evolution. Whether through the satirical lens of Western spiritual tourism in *Karma Cola*, the personal-political narrative of aristocratic decline in *Raj*, the mythic and philosophical storytelling in *A River Sutra*, or the reflective voice in *Snakes and Ladders*, Mehta brings into focus the paradoxes and possibilities inherent in India's cultural journey.

Ultimately, Mehta's works emphasize that Indian traditions are neither static nor sacred relics, but living, contested, and often contradictory realities. Her thematic exploration serves not just as literary observation but also as cultural critique—highlighting how tradition must continuously re-negotiate its place in an ever-changing India. As such, Gita Mehta remains an essential voice in postcolonial literature, inviting readers to reflect on how authenticity, adaptation, and identity co-exist in the shadow of both heritage and change.

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