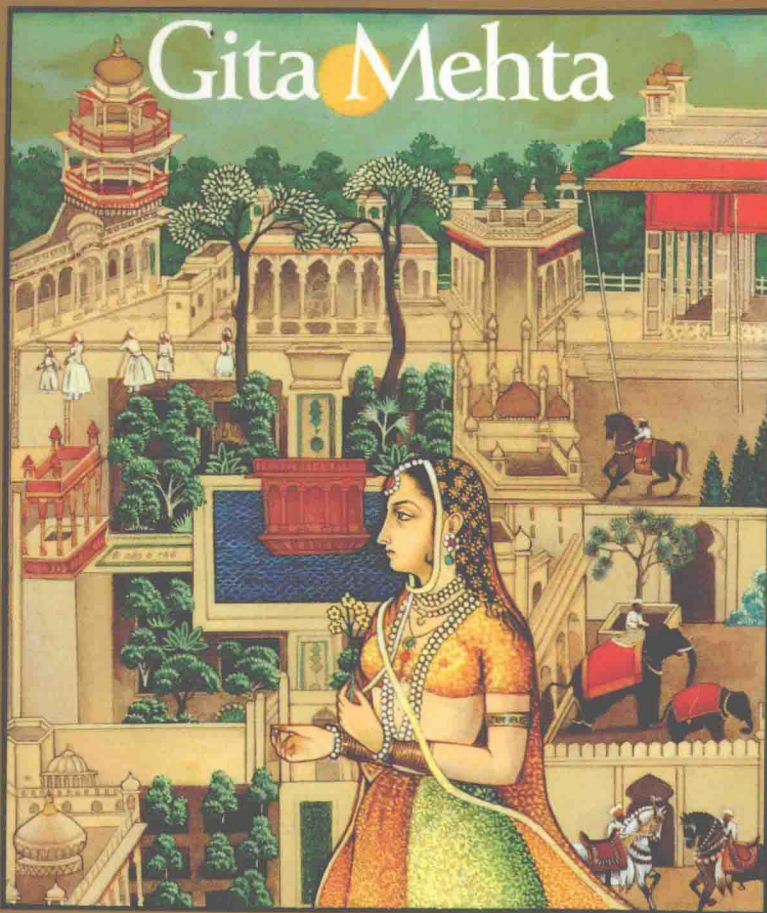


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RAJ

A NOVEL

Gita Mehta



"A fascinating and vivid glimpse into one Indian woman's long moment in history...Accurately documents and compellingly dramatizes the maelstrom of allegiances and conflicting loyalties that beset the... rulers of princely India."

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

A N O V E L B Y

Gita Mehta

Raj

江苏工业学院图书馆
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INTERNATIONAL PRAISE FOR

Raj

from America

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"Many distinguished and capable British authors have depicted and examined life in India under the British Raj (Kipling, Forster, John Masters and Paul Scott, to name but a few) but their views are inescapably British and all too often reflect the prejudices of imperialism. . . . Doubly refreshing, then, is Mehta's ambitious and successful book."

The Los Angeles Times

"Riveting . . . There are many strands in the colorful tapestry of *Raj*. . . . A powerful, enlightening and engrossing story."

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"At last, a historical novel that takes a fresh perspective on India under the British Raj, offering not the usual vaporous Englishwoman adrift on the subcontinent, but a portrait of the momentous changes that swept across the country from the point of view of a maharaja's daughter. . . . An engrossing and strong first novel."

The Kirkus Reviews

"A vivid historical novel . . . Full of ravishing and richly described detail."

Booklist

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Raj

from England

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“Mehta’s talent is as sharp as a laser beam. It cuts through layers of Indian tradition and comes up with the truth, as it did so brilliantly in her first book, *Karma Cola*. But in its heart-breaking last chapters . . . Jaya’s story moves us to tears.”

London Sunday Times

“What a risk for a novelist to include the riveting real figure of Gandhi in a story. But what a tribute to Gita Mehta that in her first novel, her heroine, Jaya Singh, not only holds her own with Gandhi but with several real kings and viceroys and a raft of maharajahs in a narrative which sweeps in most of the story of Indian independence.”

Mail on Sunday

“[*Raj*] slowly, innocuously, but not innocently, absorbs you into its mood. You succumb to what might be called an Indian trance as the pages gently slip away.”

Manchester Guardian

“Easily the year’s best novel to date . . . A more important book than *Jewel (in the Crown)*.”

Daily Mail

INTERNATIONAL PRAISE FOR

Raj

from India

.....

"Rarely does one come across a work in which history and fiction have been so finely interwoven. On a purely literary level this novel cannot be faulted."

The Times of India

"*Raj* is more than just the story of one woman. It is the depiction of the British Raj from the Indian side."

The Indian Post

"The best work of historical fiction from the pen of an Indian writer."

India Today

"Eschewing the mushy nostalgia which dominates many books about that turbulent period in Indian history, *Raj* prefers to deal with human relationships in a colonial society in a way that no other writer has really done before."

The Illustrated Weekly of India

"A montage of modern India unmatched for sheer brilliancy of detail and scope in any novel to date."

India Magazine

By Gita Mehta

RAJ

KARMA COLA

RIVER SUTRA

SNAKES AND LADDERS

Dedication

A.

S.

A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

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M AHATMA GANDHI ONCE ADVISED A VISITOR wishing to learn about India to study India's villages and her women.

To the many women from the former princely families of India who were so generous with their memories, I am indebted.

I am equally indebted to the many former Indian kings who shared their views and pasts with me as they described their transition from ruling monarchs to ordinary citizens, as I am indebted to their sons and daughters for being my guides to their former kingdoms.

Because they were so generous with their time and recollections, and to avoid any inference that the fictitious characters in this novel might be derived from any one of them, I take this opportunity of thanking them collectively for their kindness rather than naming them individually.

In studying India during this period I am also indebted to two great British institutions: the India Office Library for its exhaustive archives, and the London Library for its wide and eccentric span of books on India.

To my parents, from whom I learned about the nationalist movement and the partition of India; to my uncle, who at the age of fourteen was sentenced by the British Empire to two decades of penal servitude in the Andaman Islands; to the many leaders of the nationalist movement and the many former rulers with whom I talked, I am grateful for teaching me the grace of that generation of Indians who speak of the past without bitterness and mention those responsible for their misfortunes only with rueful reluctance.

x • Acknowledgments

My special thanks to Lalit and Mapu and Anthony for providing me with places in which to work; to Rudi and Lee for their advice on the text; to my brothers for their erudition and encouragement; and to my editors for their patience.

Finally to the friends on three continents who so often saved me from the tyranny of the blank page—thank you, and God rest you merry, gentlemen.

R a j
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Prologue

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*O*N A COLD JANUARY MORNING WHEN JAYA WAS five years old, her father insisted she accompany him into the jungle. The Maharani objected. The Maharajah overruled her.

"You coddle the children too much. Tikka's feet weren't allowed to touch the ground until he was old enough to ride a pony. Now you're doing the same with the girl."

Under her veil the Maharani frowned in concern. The crown prince of Balmer, known to everyone as Tikka, was a sturdy nine-year-old with his mother's fair skin and the hard black eyes of his father. Tikka stood respectfully enough while his mother lectured him about the target practice that littered the ramparts of the Fort with dead pigeons. Minutes later the Maharani would hear shots and turn, half remorseful, half proud, to her attendants, "What can I do with this boy and his love of guns? It's his Rajput blood."

Tikka's younger sister, on the other hand, was a gentle child who had inherited the Maharani's green eyes and her father's dark skin. The Maharani frequently wondered if that dark skin would create problems when the time came to arrange Jaya's marriage. She worried about Jaya's temperament too. In the evenings when the Maharani untied bundles of brittle miniature paintings to show her children their ancestors, Tikka always demanded to see scenes of battle. He loved the ancient Rajput weapons, the great crossbows and the evil short spears which opened like shears in a man's belly. But Jaya stared silently at the strange, almost mystic paintings in which a horse was composed from trees and mountains and kings, and the Maharani did not know what went on behind her daughter's wide green eyes.

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TWO hours before dawn Maharajah Jai Singh swung his excited daughter onto his saddle, cursing when her long skirt caught on the pommel of his saddle, as officers of the Household Cavalry, rifles slung across their shoulders, reined their skittish horses, casting strange shadows on the cobblestones outside the stables. Jaya settled back into her father's arms, the unfamiliar cartridge belt pressing against her spine. Someone wrapped a cotton quilt around her. In a clatter of hoofbeats through which Jaya could hear the sound of her anklets as her short legs hit the side of her father's mount, they rode down the ramparts of Balmer Fort.

The city below the Fort was silent. A few lamps in the lakeside temples showed that here and there a priest was waking. The metallic ring of horseshoes on the cobbled streets set dogs barking, and irate voices from lampless windows called the dogs to be still. Then they were in open country, fields on their left, the flat blackness of Jalsa Lake on their right.

The riders tunneled through the dark by the light of the lanterns swaying on the riders' lances. The steady rhythm of her father's horse lulled Jaya to sleep. When she awoke, farmers were moving toward their fields behind black buffaloes dragging wooden plows, and smoke from cow-dung fires was rising above the mud walls of the villages.

A line of camels approached, cushioned feet making no sound on the road. Men covered in rough shawls swayed on their backs.

The dozing camel herders were startled awake by two shikaris, royal huntsmen, galloping toward the ruler.

"What news?" the Maharajah shouted.

"Panther, hukam! Six or seven miles into the jungle."

"It's a big one, hukam. Better not take the princess."

They wheeled their horses behind Jai Singh as the riders approached the elephants waiting at a village on the edge of the jungle. Maharajah Jai Singh dismounted, watched by a group of village women with veiled faces. "Take care of the child, daughters. I will send for her later."

Surrounded by cooing women who pinched her cheeks and marveled at her green eyes, Jaya did not notice her father's entourage climb onto the waiting elephants.

The women dispersed, and a ring of village children appraised Jaya through kohl-lined eyes, waiting to see what would happen to this Bai-sa, or royal sister, from Balmer Fort.

A boy of perhaps ten years asked, "Bai-sa, have you ever drunk cow's milk?"

"Of course I have. All children drink cow's milk."

"But you must drink out of a big golden glass, Bai-sa."

"No, I don't," Jaya retorted. "I have a glass from England with a picture of a red soldier."

"It's still a glass. Do you want to try it our way?"

A cow was chewing sugar cane beside a tree. The boy clambered under the cow, pulling Jaya behind him. Jaya obediently squatted, her head pushing against the cow's soft belly. The boy squeezed the full udders, directing a stream of warm milk into her hair and eyes, and the crowding children hooted in delight.

The village women broke through the cordon. Seeing Jaya covered in mud and milk, the women held their earlobes in mortification.

"What will Maharaj say when he sees his daughter?" they shrieked.

"It was only a game," the boy wailed. "She wanted to try it."

Ivory bracelets clattered as the women beat the children.

"What will Durbar say?"

"Junglies! That's what you are!"

Tikka came striding through the crowd of bawling children. In the sudden silence the women tried to clean Jaya with their veils. Tikka winked at the ten-year-old before turning in disgust to his sister. "You'd better stop crying and get on the elephant. Bappa's caught the panther."

Lashed on the elephant's back was a shooting howdah, a canvas box with sides high enough for a grown man to stand and take aim. Jaya and Tikka clambered onto stools inside the howdah, their waists held by shikaris as the elephant keeper, the mahout, sat on the elephant's neck, stroking the back of the elephant's ear with a steel prong.

"Gently, my beloved. Step as lightly as a dancer, my graceful one," the mahout chanted.

The elephant moved off the road, uprooting young plants and dusting them against its knees before looping the plants in a crackle of breaking stems into the soft maw of its mouth.

"Lightly, lightly, my beloved." The elephant flapped its ears at the mahout's whisper, and the sound of those huge ears brushing against the leaves was like the sound of sails filling with air or the wings of some mighty bird about to alight.

The moisture of the night had not yet evaporated. Sunlight glinted off cobwebs stretching across the thorned bushes where a herd of blue bull deer was feeding. Jaya shouted in excitement. The herd turned for a second, then, in a rush of leaves and trampled branches, broke into flight. "You're not supposed to talk in the jungle," Tikka hissed. "You'll frighten the animals away. And if a tiger hears, it will attack."

In the distance an animal roared. The elephant trumpeted in fear. Wild boar squealed and wheeled out of the elephant's way, tusks shining white in black-tufted snouts. The roars got louder, and Jaya crouched on the floor of the howdah, gripping her brother's ankles.

Tikka pulled her plaits. "Stand up, Jaya. It's the biggest panther you'll ever see!"

Under the insistent blows of the mahout's steel prong the elephant reached the Maharajah's position, but Jaya stubbornly clung to her brother's ankles, eyes shut in panic. Only when the shikari lifted her up did she open her eyes, terrified she might fall from the howdah rocking on top of the agitated elephant.

Through the undergrowth she saw her father and his men facing a large black panther chained to a sal tree. Blood dripped from the panther's neck as it leaped against the steel links of the chain, and roars of rage filled the jungle. Jaya clung to the shikari, eyes squeezed shut, even as she felt herself being lowered into someone's arms and carried closer and closer to that sound.

When she dared open her eyes she was standing less than a foot from the lunging animal. Spittle and drops of blood fell on her skirt. She tried to hide behind her father's legs. Maharajah Jai Singh prised her fingers loose and forced her to face the panther.

For what seemed like hours they stood in front of the sal tree, her father, her brother and herself, almost within reach of the enraged panther's claws. After a long while Jaya's terror subsided. It was as though she had lost the capacity to fear and was watching the proceedings from some distant vantage point where she was not threatened. She even wondered if the sal tree was trying to comfort the panther as it dropped red blossoms like silk handkerchiefs on the captured animal's back.

The Maharajah took her hand as they walked back to the waiting shikaris. He put his other hand on Tikka's shoulder. "Rulers are men and men are always frightened. A man cannot govern unless he confronts his own fear."

Jaya was too young to understand that Maharajah Jai Singh was teaching his children Rajniti, the philosophy of monarchy, as it had been taught to prince after prince of the House of Balmer. Not until she became a ruler herself did she comprehend that the Maharajah taught his children the traditions of courage when he was himself a frightened man.

B O O K O N E

Balmer

