

Gita Mehta's *Snakes and Ladders*: A Study of Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract: *Gita Mehta, in her fiction and non-fiction, has dealt with the paradox of the old and the new as a significant component of Indian culture. Scholars tend to believe that the twin factors of tradition and modernity are not antithetical to each other, as some earlier thinkers used to consider. They always co-exist, drawing regularly from each other and work together for the progression of society. Taking into consideration the observations of the scholars on the aspects of tradition, modernity, modernization and westernization, the present article is an effort to study Gita Mehta's attempt to explore the dual strands of the Indian ritualistic past and its modern rationalistic present, their interaction and their impact on the Indian culture. For this study, Mehta's non-fiction *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India* is being taken into consideration.*

Keywords: *Indian culture, Tradition, Modernity, Modernization, Westernization, Ritualistic Past, Modern Rationalistic Present, Antithetical, Co-exist.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gita Mehta, a prolific writer of the Indian Diaspora, has emerged as an Indo-English postcolonial writer of eminence. She has been able to secure a place for herself in the galaxy of Indian women novelists by contributing in the form of fiction as well as non-fiction. *Karma Cola* (1979), *Raj* (1993), *A River Sutra* (1993), *Snakes and Ladders* (1997) and *Eternal Ganesh* (2006) are her major contributions. Gita Mehta is one of the greatest exponents of Indian culture. She deals with its complex ethos by exploring its various aspects like spiritualism, the east-west cultural cross-currents, renunciation, mythology, deep rootedness of Indian values in spite of the acceptance of modern means of living, folk traditions etc. The complex nexus between the traditional and the modern currents of Indian culture is one of her dominant themes and is also the present point of study in this paper which is being explored through the writer's non-fiction, *Snakes and Ladders*.

Romila Thapar defines tradition as "the handing down of knowledge or the passing on of a doctrine or a technique" (267). It is a belief or a way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people and has maintained its existence through the element of transmission. Etymologically the English word 'tradition' comes from the Latin noun '*tradition*' whose verb form *traderere* means to transmit or to hand over for safekeeping. Any kind of variation in a tradition is conceivable, if there is an acceptance of the contemporary milieu to develop a fresh mind-set for the benefit of the concerned cultural group or society in general. A novel set of values emerge giving rise to a sense of newness or what may be termed as modernity.

Modernity is a form of time perception which is based on the concept of 'now.' To be modern, implies a manner of apprehending the world towards its fuller development.

Tradition and modernity are not antithetical elements as used to be the belief of the earlier scholars. Naresh K. Jain calls it “a colonial construct” (10). He quotes from Heesterman who states, “We are prone to overstress the stability of traditional societies and the upheaval caused by modernization”(10). The later thinkers believe that tradition and modernity should be considered only in relation to each other. Peter Wade, in his study on an anthropological approach to modernity, cites from Barry Smart: “term derives from the fifth century Latin term, *modrenus*, used to mark an official transition from the pagan to the Christian” (49). Smart observes that the term ‘modernity’ and tradition are relational terms as “they do function dialogically ... in relation with each other ... Satisfyingly asymmetrical in their relation, they require us, in talking of one, to talk also of the other ... (“Mirror to Mirror” 31). But individually they have separate connotations. It can be inferred that modernization consists of industrialization, urbanization, education, wealth and diverse occupational opportunities while tradition is a cultural force in a particular socio-cultural setting. However, positive growth of a society is the outcome of the hybridization of the two. Ashis Nandi, while expressing his views on social transformation, also maintains, “Unmixed modernism is no longer fashionable, not even the modern world” (252). Shedding the unproductive elements of modernity and incorporating the creative aspects of the present and the past gives rise to modernization. The modern trends of today, when exist for a long time, become the traditions of tomorrow and the progression goes on.

Some thinkers assume that westernization and modernization are synonymous to each other but both the processes are different and play different roles. Westernization is a practice wherein the influenced ethnic group adopts the western ideologies not only in the areas of industry, technology and economics, but also in the cultural tenets of law, lifestyle, diet, clothing, language, religion, philosophy and values. Westernization often uses repressive tendencies to influence a traditional culture which can be precarious as it may lead to a cultural collapse and lack of innovation. The western advocators undermine, as Conrad Philip Kottak asserts, “the fact that the models of culture that they have created are inappropriate for settings outside of Western civilization” (“Westernization”). Instead, during modernization there is an attempt to uplift the weaker groups economically and scientifically, within the frame-work of the native culture, amalgamating the positive aspects of the West with indigenous knowledge, resources and opportunities. Aliceve agrees that this process makes “the society self-sufficient ... (that) looks towards the present and existing treasures in one’s own culture” (2).

Indian independence has been the beginning of a process of social and political progression for Indians. However, the greatest irony of this progression is its baffling amalgamation of the western rational approach and the traditional ritualistic attitude. India has sent satellites into space and has marked a global presence in the field of Information Technology. Indians are becoming more and more technology savvy but they are tradition loving people. The columnist Jug Suraiya, going along with this idea, but getting a bit critical, asserts: “Despite this our mindset remains anchored in social prejudices and superstitions more in keeping with the 12th century than the 21st ... it seems to regress in terms of social values and norms?”(12). In fact, Indians seem to live simultaneously in the two widely separated time-frames with an unbelieving elasticity. In this social milieu of the old and the new, Indians cherish a pattern of life which is probably a gift of its ancient culture. Richard Lannoy, while attempting to trace the social and cultural ideas that inspired the reformist and the nationalist movements in India, comments: “Re-orientation consists of two strands, Westernization and Indianization; their synthesis results in a modernized Great Tradition, usually called Universalization” (243). This “modernized Great Tradition” or “Universalization” is the coexistence of the traditional and the modern ideologies prevailing in the Indian society.

Gita Mehta, in her works, has allocated the contradiction of the old and the new as an important element of Indian culture. Taking into consideration the opinions of scholars on tradition, modernity, modernization and westernization, this article is an Endeavour to study Gita Mehta’s exploration of the interaction of the twin aspects of the Indian sacramental past and its modern rational present, their interaction and their impact on the Indian culture as depicted in her non-fiction *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*.

2. CONFLUENCE OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Snakes and Ladders is a collection of essays, compiled in a snapshot style, in which she explores the post-colonial modern India of awe-inspiring contradictions. Although some critics do not find the style appealing, Gita Mehta, defending her technique, in her interview with Wendy Smith asserts, "... there's that constant tension and contradiction of immense sophistication and an almost pre-medieval way of life. I thought the only way I could describe that collision was anecdotally, by taking snapshots, as it were" ("Gita Mehta: Making India Accessible"). The book is a panoramic view of the fifty four years of the socio-cultural, economic and political changes that took place due to India's transformation from colonization to decolonization and finally to the prevailing globalization. Explaining her purpose behind this book, the author says that she intends to make modern India accessible to Westerners as well as to Indians. She further adds, "I am a camera and the reader can see through my eyes" ("Gita Mehta: Making India Accessible"). Her analysis illustrates that changing ethos of the contemporary Indian scene is a unique blend of the current and the conventional. The title, *Snakes and Ladders*, illustrates ups and downs of India's movement from an ancient land towards that of modern enlightenment. As per the review of Giuffrida, it is an "entertaining illustration of India's struggle to become modern without shrugging off the mantle of its rich and diverse history." The subtitle *A View of Modern India*, hides multiple concerns like culture and lifestyle, villages and cities, tradition and science, national and global interests.

The complexities of India have always bemused the world. Gita Mehta expresses similar kind of doubt in the opening line of the 3rd chapter of the book, "... I am not sure what India is" (*Snakes and Ladders* 18). The closest she comes to an answer to this query when she was driving through the jungle in eastern India and chanced to see a wooden plaque nailed to a tree and the words written on it were, "WELCOME TO INDIA – LAND OF HOARY ANTIQUITE AND FABULOUS CONTRAST" (18). It is the bewildering contrasts that have given rise to the cliché that India is not really a nation. Scholars believe that it is not even a single civilization. Gita Mehta, in her attempt to define India, writes, "Certainly it is not a nation with the diamond-hard convictions of national identity which inspire many other countries Rather, it is several civilizations in separate stages of development, co-existing despite their contradictions" (19). Definitions for India are hard to come, but there are some great descriptions. Mark Twain, dedicating his travel experiences to the land of contrasts, that is India, expressed his feeling of awe: "the sole country under the sun that is endowed with imperishable interest for alien prince and alien peasant, for lettered and ignorant, wise and fool, rich and poor, bond and free, the one land *all* men desire to see, and having seen once, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for the shows of all the rest of the globe combined" (Cited in *Snakes and Ladders* III). It has been noted that India is a civilization, and civilization is always a process; not a being but a becoming. Even today this observation proves relevant. India has managed to stay a civilization but is still unpredictable.

The pre-colonial era, in which the whites and the natives came in proximity with each other, has its own share of the amalgamation of such contrasts. Mehta highlights the irony pervading in the attitude of a band of young but modern freedom fighters who were supposed to be patriotic to the core. She writes with a touch of cynicism, "Styling themselves freedom fighters, frequently forced to go underground for their political activities against the British Empire, when they were not in jail they spent an inordinate amount of time dancing the rumba, the tango, the foxtrot, and hoping that the British departure from India was imminent" (*Snakes and Ladders* 3). However, they should not be blamed for imbibing this rare mixture of patriotism and westernization as their action appears to be a youth's curiosity to know a new culture. Above all, we must not forget that it was among such youthful and modern patriots that many rose to the cause of fighting against the British. Mahatma Gandhi himself used to wear English dresses when he went to London for studying Barristership.

Mehta brings in the inter-play of tradition and modernity when she takes up the issue of inter-caste marriages performed in the colonial era. In a traditional society of those days, arranged marriages in the same caste were the accepted pattern. The nationalist movement broke so many taboos, related to women, prevalent in the conventional Indian society. Mehta talks about her mother, a freedom fighter, who was raised in purdah, used to play sitar, read classical Sanskrit and

recite Persian quatrains. This kept her away from any influence of the contemporary British culture but not for long. After marriage her father taught her "... mother ballroom dancing. Then he taught her to play bridge. Then he put her on a bicycle, pushed it until she pedaled well enough to retain her balance... (*Snakes and Ladders* 5). Mehta speaks about her grand-mother who "had broken iron convention by marrying a prominent nationalist who was a Muslim from Northern India" ("Upfront Daughter..."124). She relates this breaking of convention and adopting a modern stand by a woman with "entering into an unknown world where they were forced to discover their own strengths" (*Snakes and Ladders* 10).

One of the significant qualities of Indian culture is that it has never been static. India has always welcomed foreign cultures in their various forms, whether they came through merchants, tyrants or preachers accepting the best out of them. In spite of having a bitter past of communal blood-bath, we have innumerable examples of civilized tolerance of mutual faith. Mehta interestingly describes a tree in Bombay which houses on one side "a white plaster Christian cross. On another is a small image of the elephant-headed Ganesha, the Hindu God of protection. On the third side is a small concrete alter on which worshippers place the Koran when they pray to Allah" (*Snakes and Ladders* 24). While it might be difficult for the purists to digest the cosmopolitan nature of Indian culture, such acceptance has only resulted in the enrichment which in itself is part and parcel of the process of its modernization.

Mehta believes that the open-gate policy of Indian culture has provided it with special kind of stamina which on one side enriches the culture but on the other motivates Indians to retain their own conventions and identities. The author discusses about Japanese culture which fostered an "impenetrable civilization" (*Snakes and Ladders* 24), but their traditional dresses like Kimonos are hardly visible now. In India *saris*, *dhotis* and *lungies* are still worn by multitudes making their trade a great contributor to the Indian economy. India, despite her modernity, has retained such elements of Indian culture, in the words of Gita Mehta, "... not in defiant chauvinism but because quite simply that is how we dress...." (24).

Indian culture also drives its strength from the cultural uniformity even among the economically diverse people. Mehta, during one of her tours to the Indian capital, came across a group of rag-pickers, collecting rags from the foul smelling garbage dumps. They were mostly women and kids while their husbands and fathers were working as labourers at road construction or building sites. They had been displaced from their native places in order to escape from the cruel clutches of money lenders. Moved by their pathetic plight, Mehta talked to them and came to know about the sharp contrast between their past and present. One of them was from the *Bhoomiya* tribe which traditionally consisted of the path-finders for travellers guiding them through deserts and jungles of Rajputana. The other was from the community of *Bhats*, the travelling story-tellers, who used to recite in verse about the grandeur and the gallantry of kings. However, a young rag-picker from this community was found using the historical lyrics of bravery "to frighten the vultures away while he looks for rags" (*Snakes and Ladders* 38). The irony of the situation baffles Mehta and she moves on to the contractor of the rag-pickers. Mehta's short dialogue with him reveals that people like rag-pickers, however filthy their work might be and however poor they might be are an undisputable part of Indian culture. The contractor utters, "I know I deal in filth," he said ruefully. "But filth is my Laxmi. My Goddess of Wealth" (40). The obvious paradox is of the traditional Hindu belief which states that goddess *Laxmi* is a symbol, not only of wealth, but also of purity. Ironically, the rag-pickers' wealth is the filth that provides them with money. They are the silent worshippers of rags – the *Laxmi* of their poverty. The very awareness of the contractor regarding goddess *Laxmi* makes him as well as the other rag-pickers an integral part of Indian culture. Unfortunately this section of the Indian society appears to be the victim of a reverse movement wherein the bards of the yesteryears have degenerated into the rag-pickers of the present India.

In *Snakes and Ladders*, Gita Mehta highlights the progressive sensibilities of the colonial and the post-colonial Indian women. Sharing her information on one such women's organization, Gita Mehta, informs that this was a group of poor women who owned their own bank. "... the poorest women in Ahmadabad", the novelist adds, "pooled the meager sums they earned ... and started their own co-operative bank (*Snakes and Ladders* 43). In the early fifties, years before feminism became popular in the West, these women of Ahmedabad had started a Self-Employed Women's

Association and called themselves S.E.W.A. (43). The association was founded in 1952 and today S.E.W.A.'s bank "boasts twenty-five thousand savings accounts" (45). Traditionally Indian women are supposed to be physically weak and highly docile in their behavior, living incessantly with a mute surrender under the patronage of the male domination. However, in India there have been many cases of women who have shown exemplary feats of courage, taking serious responsibilities on their feminine shoulders that would defy even the strongest of men. Maharani Laxmi Bai and Sarojini Naidu are some to be remembered for their bold exploits. Sarojini Naidu, Mehta reports, "Shocked Indian sensibility by marrying beneath her own high caste. Such women were fearless, whether they were on the barricades or...leading marches against mounted police" (Upfront Daughter 124). Mrs. Indira Gandhi was the second woman in the world to be sworn in as a prime minister, (The first being Mrs. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka) who administered India for 15 years in two reigns, respectively from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984. Although the author has been quite critical of Mrs. Gandhi's policies, she acknowledges the fact that Mrs. Gandhi could get the recognition of international import representing the contemporary woman of modern India. This contrast of the traditional and the contemporary could very well be observed even after almost half a century has elapsed after the Indian independence.

In her attempt to further highlight the contrasts of Indian culture, Gita Mehta discusses the crucial issue of the contrasting claims of the ancient craft and mechanization. Europeans may have come to the east looking for spices but soon they entered into trading with India on the Indian textiles. The Indian weavers created wealth of such magnanimity that the nations of Europe fought for supremacy over India's cloth. The Britain exported raw cotton from India to the mills of England and later started importing "... those gods of progress, the machines of the Industrial Revolution, into India" (*Snakes and Ladders* 52), robbing the Indian weavers of the source of their income. The ancient Indian art of weaving was so much ingrained in the Indian way of life that it received an international acclaim not only as an art but also as a reflection of Indian culture. The author comments, "This precise paradox – craft and machine, an ancient culture or contemporary progress – haunts India today" (53). At present, the cottage industries of Indian weavers like *Khadi* Gram *Udhyogs* still co-exist with the machine and survive. But they have to face a tough competition with the mechanized and computationally designed cloth and readymade garments. The modern Indians might consider the cultural craft as backward, but they do buy goods from the craft emporiums as the antique seem to be in vogue today. Mehta makes use of the spinning wheel or the *Chakra*, depicted in the centre of the Indian flag, as a symbol to emphasize upon the paradox of craft and machine. Gita Mehta adds: "A large school of Indian thought believes the spinning-wheel in the centre of the Indian flag is symptomatic of all that is backward in India. Symbols once useful in expelling a foreign empire and its exploitations are now dangerous anachronisms in a country where ... wealth must come from increasing and more efficient mechanization" (53). However, the co-relation of the *Chakra* of the Indian flag with a spinning-wheel seems to be misfit as in reality, it is King Ashoka's *Chakra*. Gita Mehta's article on Ashoka, written after *Snakes and Ladders*, clarifies the point. She writes, "... modern India defines her sovereign status by two symbols from Ashoka's reign – the wheel in the center of our flag and the pillar crowned by four lions stamped on our coins these 2,300-year-symbols were not mere deference to antiquity; they were to inspire us to create a country governed by righteousness" ("Ashoka, Beloved of the Gods" 21). The Ashoka *Chakra* carries an aura of infinite variety as it can be inferred as a symbol that links a two and a half millennium old tradition of Ashoka's *Dharma* with the modern India's efforts to define herself by this symbol.

In spite of the emergence of modern technology, there are millions of craftsmen in India who are dependent on their crafts for their living. Here Mehta's viewpoint may be noteworthy when she affirms, "If twenty three million craftsmen depend on India's culture for their living, India's very culture depends on giving them a living" (*Snakes and Ladders* 56). This shows that the interdependence of Indian culture and the traditional art of India is possible only with a living culture like India whose roots are deep and strong and are always ready to withstand the test of time.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the reinforcement of Indian traditions is not at the cost of the scientific advancement which surprisingly goes on at a much faster rate than ever before. In the electronic age new gadgets are arriving. A few years ago, we were not allowed to import colored television sets but today the latest variety of color TVs are manufactured in India. India-made computers, fax machines, telephone answering machines, mobile phones are making it possible

for Indians to be a part of the global future. Mehta personifies this proximity of the old and the new through the image of an old villager, outside his mud and stone house “lying on his perennial string bed, a bullock or two tethered in the background, near an Indian car parked under the shade of a tree. The farmer himself will be drawing on his hookah and talking into a cellular telephone...” (*Snakes and Ladders* 81). Nowhere does science and tradition come so close as one observes in India. It surely leaves Westerns puzzled.

Another instance that brings the focus back on the confluence of ritualism and technology in India occurred when the novelist visited a typical Indian bazaar strewn with dirty plastic bags and red streaks of betel juice. She saw a French lady standing in front of a video shop shouting angrily, “Do you know what these video people are doing? ... They have put religious rituals on film! Imagine switching on a machine so that your priest can chant prayers while you prostrate yourself in front of the television! ... People are *worshipping* their videos! (*Snakes and Ladders* 80). Mehta did not say anything but thought to herself, “This is India. We worship air-conditioners and computers and cash registers and bullock carts – in an annual ritual called Weapon Worship” (80). A westerner may consider it a scandal but Mehta considers it as a celebration. On this aspect, Usha Bande comments, “Modernization and ritualistic attitude stay cheek by jowl in India and that is probably her beauty or let us say her post modernism” (168). Even in modern India, people of almost all the religions offer garlands to machines and computers hoping for an auspicious outcome. As per one of the estimates of Gita Mehta, by the end of the 80s, five thousand Indians were working on computers while today a quarter of a million Indians are producing software which is being bought by multi-national IT companies. India’s youngest industry is also among the fastest growing one. Although this has led to the problem of brain-drain, many migrants – technocrats, professionals and doctors do not want to lose their bonds with a world of close family ties, traditions and festivals. The real India is one where the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the past and the present meet in order to create an integrated future or the one as the writer calls, “... framed by the old India, determined to take advantage of the breaks that are coming its way?” (*Snakes and Ladders* 82).

3. DISTORTION OF MODERNITY

In the proud exaltation of Indian values and the nation’s march towards modernity, the bleak aspects of Indian culture cannot be overlooked. There have been instances of the unreasonable adherences to the practices like *Sati*, child marriages, shaving of a widow’s head as a sign of one year mourning and blind idolatry of fake spiritualists. Although, it can be observed that the modern India has achieved a good deal of technical advancement, (Mehta also talks about India’s march of technology) facts do indicate that still the country has to go a long way in achieving the research standards of the West. Mehta brings the spotlight on this matter in *Snakes and Ladders* when she refers to an incident of 1987 in Rajasthan where a girl of just eighteen burnt herself on her husband’s funeral pyre in full view of the thousands of spectators. Although *sati* practice has been banned in India for nearly two centuries, this “modern sati” (*Snakes and Ladders* 186) drew hordes of pilgrims, journalists from national and international press and women’s rights groups among variety of insinuations about “the woman been forced to burn herself, (moved) by the avarice of her husband’s family Or was it a plot in which all the villagers were involved?” (187). although the novelist has not notified the name of the widow, from the given details it appears to be the infamous Roopkanwar *sati* case which was a deliberate attempt to prove the survival of the ancient tradition. Mandakranta Bose, in her article on the issue of *sati*, states that the advocates of the crime claimed that the act “reiterated the ancient values of Hindu society and rediscovered the power of spiritual and physical self-sacrifice ... (21). It has been reported that people still place garlands on the site of the immolation. Here one may notice how a bizarre happening makes a progressive India suddenly regress into the past of dominant conventionality. But when a reporter enquired if any of the village women was also likely to perform *sati*, he got a shocking answer: “Only if our husbands agree to burn themselves on our funeral pyres if we die first” (187). Mehta takes up the issue of matrimonial demands and she finds a dramatic change in the last few years. In addition to the reducing number of advertisements on same caste marriages, what she finds poignant is “the willingness to marry widows ...” (185). Progression to regression and back to progression, such stunning contrasts can only be seen in India and they are sufficient to bemuse any distant observers of Indian culture. But certainly India is changing as the past has always paved the way for the present. . Jawaharlal Nehru, in his much acclaimed book *Discovery*

of India, claims that in spite of India's weaknesses the positive aspect of her culture is its continuity which is marked by "a desire for synthesis between the old and the new. It was this urge and desire that kept (her) going and enabled (her) to absorb new ideas while retaining much of the old" (55).

Modernity is always welcomed when it goes in the right direction serving a national purpose of universal progress but it is not something that can be put in a water-tight compartment. Instances of distortion of modernity are common in India and westernization is one of its results. Mehta, in the chapter titled "The Old Ways" of *Snakes and Ladders*, focuses on the modern dismantled counter-part of traditional Indian knowledge. The ancient scriptures and the history of India talk at length about the knowledge evolved on this land through meditations of sages who in turn and as the religious scriptures propagate, were in communion with Gods. The author highlights that the ancient Indian disciplines of *Ayurveda*, *Yoga*, *Mantras* and *Vastushastra* were designed "to help mankind find the poise and balance necessary for stillness ... to "release energy" (*Snakes and Ladders* 208), achieve self-realization and develop spiritual coherence with the Almighty. *Ayurveda*, the ancient Indian art of healing, manifests itself in physical, mental and spiritual forms. Its main concern, as the author also surmises, is the well-being of human soul (209). The basic principle of *Vastushastra*, the Indian treatise on architecture, is "to allow the energies of the earth's magnetic fields to enter from all sides" (209) of a house. Mehta reports that such ancient disciplines are being presented today through their modern versions. She appears pained to feel that the modern context of such traditional know-how has been disharmonized in order to achieve monetary goals. *Ayurveda* seems to lose its original sheen when the manufacturers sell "beauty aids" (210) in the name of this ancient science or, to add to this author's comment, mix quick-relief supports to get faster results. In other words, *Yoga* drifts away from its philosophy when the modern trainers replace it with its hybrid variety of 'Power Yoga.' It has been defined as a generic term for *Ashtanga yoga* – a modern-day form of classical Indian *yoga* ("Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga") while Ann Pizer calls it a "gym yoga" ("Power Yoga"). *Vastushastra* is sold as commodity to exploit the superstitions and fears of the modern man. Despite her earlier acclamations of India's past and the glorifications of its awe-inspiring contrasts of its past and present, Gita Mehta this time gets critical and asserts that the modern practice of the traditional knowledge has "indeed fragmented a once intact vision of the world in which man is the guardian ... responsible for seeing its fragile equilibrium is maintained" (*Snakes and Ladders* 210). Mehta's view on the disharmony of the ancient Indian knowledge is agreeable but if their hybrids are a product of sincere research based on their utility and adaptability to the modern way of life, there seems to be no harm in accepting them.

4. CONCLUSION

In *Snakes and Ladders* Gita Mehta attempts to trace India's 50 years journey since its independence. The book presents an unbiased discourse on good as well as bad conventions of India, the Western influence, the co-existing contrasts of the old and the new and the resulting India's struggling growth towards modernity. The book appears to support the point, what thinkers also advocate, that tradition and modernity cannot be looked upon as unbridgeable extremes and for a balanced growth of a society they always cohabit. Swami Vivekananda caught the pulse of India when he wrote, "On one side is modern Western science, dazzling the eyes with the brilliancy of myriad suns ... on the other are the hopeful and the strengthening traditions of her ancient fore-fathers" ("Modern India" 71). The modern India lives with this conflict and so the great saint questions, "In this violent conflict, is it strange that Indian society should be tossed up and down?" (72). It is this dilemma of the Indians that Gita Mehta ventures to exhibit through *Snakes and Ladders*. The deep rootedness of Indian values, beliefs and superstitions, in spite of the acceptance of modern means of living and the undying tradition of following the scriptures, is an important aspect of Indian culture. The West regards all such elements as a part of Indian mysticism. Gita Mehta, in her attempt to reinterpret Indian culture, has tried to demystify these concepts in her books. The following excerpt from Mehta's "Foreword" to *Snakes and Ladders* would be a befitting conclusion to the current study:

Living through our first half-century of nationhood has been 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 had been invented to illustrate our

attempts to move an ancient land towards modern enlightenment without jettisoning from our past that which is valuable or unique. (viii)

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