



Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East

Gita Mehta

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Beginning in the late '60s, hundreds of thousands of Westerners descended upon India, disciples of a cultural revolution that proclaimed that the magic and mystery missing from their lives was to be found in the East. An Indian writer who has also lived in England and the United States, Gita Mehta was ideally placed to observe the spectacle of European and American "pilgrims" interacting with their hosts. When she finally recorded her razor sharp observations in Karma Cola, the book became an instant classic for describing, in merciless detail, what happens when the traditions of an ancient and longlived society are turned into commodities and sold to those who don't understand them.

In the dazzling prose that has become her trademark, Mehta skewers the entire Spectrum of seekers: The Beatles, homeless students, Hollywood rich kids in detox, British guilt-trippers, and more. In doing so, she also reveals the devastating byproducts that the Westerners brought to the villages of rural India -- high anxiety and drug addiction among them.

Brilliantly irreverent, Karma Cola displays Gita Mehta's gift for weaving old and new, common and bizarre, history and current events into a seamless and colorful narrative that is at once witty, shocking, and poignant.

Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East Details

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Lori Theis says

Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East reads like a string of self-conscious journal entries. Nested inside each of Mehta's anecdotes are metonyms within metonyms, fashioned out of poetic free verse, assonance, alliteration, slogans-turned-epigrams, ramped up hyperbole, fragments of dialogue, cosmic irony, and heavy doses of allusion (most likely lost on anyone under 30 years old). Throughout Karma Cola Mehta uses the figurative language of rock and roll to pen her tragically comic and cacophonous soundtrack to the heady days of Tuning In, Turning On, and Dropping Out.

Gita Mehta's 1979 love letter to reason, and rock and roll Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East may not be a novel, but can be seen in an oblique way as a precursor to the genre hysterical realism, a term coined by literary critic James Wood. Wood says, "Hysterical realism is not exactly magical realism, but magical realism's next stop [...] This kind of realism is a perpetual motion machine [...] There is a pursuit of vitality at all costs."¹

Speed, the sensation that so annoys Wood in novels by titans like Salman Rushdie and Thomas Pynchon, is the pitch perfect instrument for Karma Cola, considering Mehta's introduction to the book that cautions the reader to "remember two myths – one Eastern, one Western – which provide a caution to the human race. The Indian myth maintains we are living in the age of Kalyug, which presages the end of the world. Kalyug is characterized by speed. Speed, being the enemy of reflection, will spread fantasy with such great velocity that humans, in their pursuit of escape, will ultimately destroy themselves" (xi). If in the 60s and 70s India felt like America had suddenly launched a freaked out hippie-bomb in its general direction, it must have forgotten the momentum with which a boomerang returns to its owner (Swami Vivekananda landed in America in 1893, Prahbupada set up camp in NYC's Central Park in 1966, etc.)

From the vantage point of thirty years into the future, Karma Cola feels like an elegy to innocence.

Nandakishore Varma says

I totally agree with Gita Mehta's opinion of gullible Westerners falling for bogus Indian Gurus. It would be worth their while to memorise the following quartet by Adi Sankaracharya:

"Matted hair, shaven heads, hair tied up in tresses;
Saffron-clad - varied are their dresses:
Seeing, still the foolish do not see!
All these costumes are for filling the belly..."

Yes, indeed.

That said, the book was only a set of mildly funny and disjointed anecdotes that did not impress me much. Maybe, it was a case of false expectations. Mehta writes well.

Karen says

Hilarious! I read this in India, and it just perfectly summed up so many of the idiotic Westerners I was meeting there. ("Hi, I'm Sally? I've been a Buddhist for six months?...") It also was a good reminder for myself to have a sense of humor abroad and not take myself or my travels too seriously. Highly recommend it if you're planning on some sort of "spiritual journey" here or abroad.

Ffiamma says

il libro è del '79 e quindi un po' datato- ma l'incontro/scontro fra est e ovest e che spesso culmina con un fallimento totale è spesso esilarante. gita mehta, con penna caustica, sbeffeggia gli equivoci e le forzature che seguirono la grande scoperta dell'india negli anni 60 e portarono a un travisamento a volte totale e grottesco del suo misticismo e a ridicoli tentativi di "occidentalizzazione" di un pensiero così particolare. divertente- anche se mi ha profondamente irritato l'ottusità di alcuni personaggi descritti.

Lizw says

Not really about marketing, but about the interaction between Western hippies and Indian (particularly Hindu) society in the 1960s and 1970s. It makes a good companion-piece to Said's Orientalism, I think - more impressionistic and less ranty, but definitely addressing similar themes.

Mike says

Karma Cola is a book of the 1970s and the hippies that came to India for enlightenment, for some time at the spiritual spa, before they were called spas. Remember the Maharishi, remember George Harrison, far out man. Om Mane Padme Hummmmmmmmm

Bill says

A mildly interesting look at the sudden interest in eastern mysticism and religions by millions of baby boomers in the late 1960s. The Beatles might be partly responsible but Mehta does major literary eye-rolling at the influx of naive westerners traveling to India and other south Asian countries in search of knowledge. Even Steve Jobs succumbed to the pull of this nonsense. To this day, there are westerners afflicted with this desire to "find" themselves and become one with the universe or some equally idiotic notion. Mehta's writing style is often obtuse and unnecessarily athletic in the literary sense. Had she written the book in a more approachable style, I might have given it 4 stars. As it stands, 2 and half stars will have to do.

Patti says

This book was nothing how I expected it to be. I found the timing difficult at first, but once I started to read, I enjoyed Mehta's story telling.

Mehta writes about the struggles that come with tourism and the Westernization of culture for sales and marketing. The stories of the Westerners who go to India to look for enlightenment and end up falling completely into the Void are interesting. Illusions lead to disillusion. Con men pose as gurus.

Mehta doesn't just hate on tourists, though. She does see the chaos in her own culture and the opportunities for improvement.

I'm curious what Mehta thinks today about Indian culture - what does she think of the watering down of Buddhist concepts in American Vernacular? This book was written before Dharma and Greg or even before My Name is Earl looked to balance out his 'Karma'. What would Mehta think about "Outsourced"?

DoctorM says

A bleakly, acidly funny look at the Westerners who went out to India in the 1960s and 1970s and the dance of mutual incomprehension and exploitation that resulted. Mass marketed Enlightenment, commodified exoticism, and gullibility abound here. Call it a darker, subcontinental version of "Hideous Kinky"--- and one that, as heroin replaces hashish amongst hippies and enlightenment seekers, gets darker as it goes.

Christopher says

Gita Mehta's KARMA COLA, originally published in 1980, is a 1979, is a collection of anecdotes about the Western travelers that Mehta met in India in the 1970s. A westward-looking Indian (Cambridge educated), Mehta views young spiritual seekers with a combination of amusement and dismay. She highlights the absurdity that people looking for enlightenment and truth are falling for the rhetoric of gurus teaching such blatantly irrational doctrines. Whether it's some Europeans worshipping a candy-eating five year old as God or overlooking their guru's use of disciples for sex, you'll be amazed just what silliness was going on in ashrams for foreigners. And while many chronicles of the overland trail of the 1960s and 1970s make mention only of travelers' love of hashish, Mehta shows the disturbing rise in the use of heroin among them and the awful effects on people who got strung out and stranded, either being flown back home at government expense or just dying in the streets.

Unfortunately, KARMA COLA is not written as any sort of coherent history. Mehta's anecdotes are often interesting reading, but I soon got fed up with the lack of any dates or clear statistical detail in her discussion of India under tourist onslaught. Perhaps this book is ideal for people who have read Mehta's other works, but for readers simply interested in the history of the hippie trail I cannot recommend this.

James says

Here we have a book about the development of “metaphysical tourism” in India. The term pertains to non-Indians, mostly Americans and Europeans, who come to India looking for spiritual guidance. Mehta’s book is a mosaic of episodes and observations held together with bits of philosophy and poetic prose. Some of the book describes how certain gurus exploit their foreign flocks as cheap labor, sexual opportunities, and sources of income.

But more than this, “Karma Cola” describes how Westerners damage themselves by using Western ideas to interpret Eastern culture. Ironically, many metaphysical tourists, in seeking freedom from familiar religious authorities, wind up being dominated by gurus in India’s “Stand by your Guru” society. Westerners also frustrate themselves by searching for underlying unity in the unremitting multiplicity of India’s cultures and creeds. And far too many metaphysical tourists wind up exhausted and poor because they treat India’s various paths to enlightenment as commodities to be sought and bought.

Arguably, Mehta captures the greatest misunderstanding that Westerners bring to India in this passage: “The Westerner is finding the dialectics of history less fascinating than the endless opportunities for narcissism provided by the Wisdom of the East. Except that the prime concern of the Wisdom of the East is the annihilation of narcissism. And so on ad nauseam.”

This book gets an “A.”

Ashok Krishna says

Poverty, Chastity and Piety – search for the basic code of conduct prescribed by any religion for its spiritual seekers, and you will find these three aspects standing out. While piety is more internal and is not for others to see or judge, the first two aspects are for all of us to view and verify. But, just as all things change with Time, these too are thrown in the wind and religion has got into the hands of those who have desecrated these principles and manipulated religions for their own selfish ends.

Saints (!) these days lead lifestyles that can make the rockstars fade in comparison. Swanky mansions, sleek cars, globetrotting habits, private islands, gatherings that can fill huge football grounds to the brim, sprawling ‘ashrams’ – any and every aspect of luxury that an ordinary person can only imagine are at the disposal of these modern-day ‘gurus’. These people have literally started peddling spirituality and god in affordable packages. Affordable for those with bank balances the size of their own egos, that is. There are some of the spiritual ‘gurus’ whose photographs are updated in social media with a frequency that can put a narcissistic adolescent girl’s selfie craze to shame. Then, there are those who perpetrate and permit all kinds of sleaze in the name of ‘spiritual fervor’. Some of these ‘gurus’ have even performed acts that puts them on par with professional pornstars.

As these sacrilegious things continue growing alarmingly these days, there sprouts a question in my mind as to who is to be blamed for all these abominable deviations from the path of the Ultimate Truth. Should we blame those fake gurus and spiritual leaders that charge obscene amounts of money for their mere ‘darshan’ or should we kick those gullible masses that have forgotten what it means to feel silence and solitude in their purest forms.

Gita Mehta's book deals with one such topic here. India, considered the beacon of spiritual wisdom, has long been the haven for spiritual seekers from around the world. Since the ancient days, travellers from faraway places have flocked to India to partake in her spiritual fountain. In the last century, the advent of air travel has helped more and more such seekers in visiting this mysterious land of snake-charmers and super-power sadhus. While the inflow was comprised equally of those in real spiritual quest and those souls that are simply confused about the course of their lives, India has offered counterfeit 'teachers' that can adeptly manipulate the gullible ones for having their own fill of the coffers and coitus.

Gita Mehta displays an amazing sense of sarcasm and wit while writing about the many ways in which these gurus exploit the seekers. Right from the funny encounter of a Western aristocrat that ended up drinking the urine of a sadhu (said to be pissing rosewater) to the painful truth of foreign women that are sexually exploited under the influence of narcotics, this book, written almost three decades ago, holds true to the modern day atrocities committed in India by the fake saints.

Having had the benefit of a Western education, Gita has the advantage of both worlds. At one end, she can discuss threadbare the nature of the seekers that end up in India. Not everyone is thrilled just by the confluence of life and death at the ghats of Kashi. Some of them seek the thrill of the chillum too. On the other, she flays the monks, saints and hermits, having the knowledge of not just the blissful but the banal as well, for exploiting the foreigners in terms of the material and mundane. Drug induced trances, sexual orgies under the guise of spiritual evolution, stupid practices in the name of dynamic therapies - Gita explores the whole razzamatazz that goes in the name of spirituality these days. It informs us also of the sad plight that these foreigners end up in, having lost their all here, forced to sell whatever they have or they can, from pieces of clothes to their flesh to make a living, with little or no chance of going back to their lives in their own countries.

The book is, though, more like a bunch of columns put together than any coherent work. She has put together a lot of anecdotes and observations without a complete flow. While it is obvious that she is writing about Osho and Mahesh Yogi, I wish she had written more plainly about the other such 'gurus' too. Also, I found her snobbish attitude a little annoying to be candid. Couldn't help but feel that she is another of those high-society NRIs with a bit of aversion and contempt for the Indians and their ways of life.

To sum it up all, it is a good book. It goes on to vindicate my feeling that Indian 'saints' have thrown the three basic principles of poverty, chastity and piety to the wind and replaced them with the two principles with which the Batman operates – Theatricality and Deception!

Manish says

I was pleasantly surprised with Gita Mehta's effort in Karma Cola especially since my previous outing with her (The River Sutra) was a disappointment. Written in the late 70s when Mehta was probably in her 30s, Karma Cola is a kaleidoscopic view of the naivety of the Westerners who flocked to India in search of spiritual salvation in the 60s and of the bankruptcy of the Gurus who mushroomed all across the country to cater to this demand. While no Guru was explicitly named, I could only recognize Osho and his establishment's treatment of the 'disciples' among the others.

Some of the more interesting facts which I learnt related to the huge black market for discarded passports, the subtle perceived differences amongst the believers from America, France, Germany and Switzerland etc, nudism in the beaches of Goa and other such tidbits.

Mehta's employment of a unique writing style - part notes, part narration, part scrutiny is another stand out feature of this work. Happy to have read it - I now understand atleast a bit more of the 'Hippie' culture/heritage our country was once party to - albeit partly involuntarily.

Sankari Ni Bhriain says

I read this while I was travelling around India and I laughed out loud and loved every page. I only wish now that I hadn't passed it on because I can't find it again. Next time I lay hands on this little wonder I'll keep it.

Ryan says

I need to read this again--I recall finding it very interesting. I loved the insights into the "other side" of the West's fascination with the so-called "mystic East." I picked this up after reading Mehta's A River Sutra in a college lit. class.
