

## **Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola*: An Attempt of Social Reform**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper is endeavored to study as to how the nonfiction is an attempt of social reform in the face of declining and misleading values of Indian philosophy in the hands of the Hippies and the fake gurus who grew out to make profit. Lives are spoilt, made into astray and the abuse of drugs and drinking spread across the hubs. The author has taken the false curtain of fashionable life off and made aware of the danger of the misleading combination of karma and cola through twelve chapters of the book. The wrong explanations of philosophical terms are corrected through sarcasm. The methodology followed is analytical and the paper is has attempted to make the wheel of karma right in terms of Indian philosophy, the Gita and corroborated by Vivekananda's explanation to the world.

**Key Words: Cola, Guru, Hippie Karma, Religion, Social Reform.**

### **Introduction:**

India witnessed an influx of young Westerners to India with a hope of finding peace and a solution against their aimless life in the West, sickened by materialistic life and disillusionment. Many of them were spiritual seekers and they had love for all at the initial stage of the movement of Hippie culture. They found a hub at the bank of the Ganga under the foothills of Rishikesh which is a place known for austerity and tranquility. Naturally, a host of pseudo-Gurus got opportunity to guide them and began a mess of the whole thing. Karm became a commodity like /cola and they all lost track of their goal. Instead, they led a life of indiscipline, drinking, gossiping, site seeing and in the name of spirituality, sex and drug abuse became routine to their lives. Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola*: Marketing the Mystic East, 1979, has shown an original perspective on this

aspect in a practical manner. It reveals the confrontation between the spiritual seekers and the mysterious India that took shape of near disaster. The book speaks of the Guru-disciple relationship following Indian tradition, but in the essence all were fake as the author exposes the rude and shocking reality with her incisive language. The straight forward manner of representing reality was her deliberate attempt and that served as a powerful tool in exposing the matter for making amends in the existing mess.

The author has undertaken unto herself for a social reform as the pen is mightier than the sword and here, she has exposed the fake religious gurus, drug abuse, vices in the name of spirituality and made the West aware as to how the karma is misunderstood and how the young men and women are led astray in India. It was the need of the hour to revive the cult of the Guru in the face of its degradations. Both the guru and followers are engaged in some consumerist relations and both accrue some or other benefits out of their company. Thus, 'Mehta deals with a different sort of teacher-disciple relationship which none of her predecessors had done till now' (Naveen: 21). She exposes not just the serious devotees who exhibit simple faith in the supreme power of the *Gurus*, but the non-serious scum who casually migrated from the West for getting instant wisdom. The nonfiction is a study of such con gurus and the gullible Westerners who were in search of spiritual gain from mystic India.

*Karma Cola* presents the events that sprawled in various parts of India and to date majority of those centers are still functioning in one or the other forms. What attracted the Hippies and their followers subsequently is the belief that Indian gurus have control on the mind, not knowing that all gurus are not capable of guiding to this effect. The fake gurus made it a lucrative business of earning money and living a life of plenty. They offered them in commercial terms that they have cola and we have karma and thus it is exchange of each other's commodity. But, it is a pity that karma is just not a commercial term. Its meaning is misunderstood and wrongly interpreted by the uneducated gurus and fake people around. The nonfiction is an amalgam of Karma, an Indian concept and Cola, a western drink. This first book is a series of interconnected essays weaving her impressions of India's mysticism with ironic wit and sarcasm. *Karma Cola* is a work of non-fiction by Mehta's terse and brisk prose. Indian philosophy and the concept of Karma turned into pseudo-spirituality and sold by mediocre sellers to mediocre buyers. It yields

dangerous results. The desire of these buyers to attain self-realization in instant ways is childish.

### **Reinventing the Wheel:**

The book has twelve chapters in which she employs different narrators and author's perspective through them. She makes it clear that all that glitters is not gold in the context of apparently happy people who are engaged in spiritual seeking in the leisurely places in India and spending a life of enigma. It is well commented that: "Sarcasm disguised in light comments performs dual functions: to bring smile on the faces of the readers and give a pang at the same time" (Joshi:163). The book opens with the chapter titled as Reinventing the Wheel. It is a satirical comment on the deterioration of the term Karma. It satirizes Western depictions of India's spirituality. On reading the book, one realizes that the author has attempted to let all know the real spirit behind all the lofty terms of Indian philosophy and thus, made an attempt to reform the society. In other words, she has opened up the potential of the issue in hand and engaged one and all for deliberation for a possible solution. Karma Kola examines the stories of both the Indians and the foreigners who were exploited by each other and lives were so painful for so many as a few examples are given as to how young girls lost their mental balance while adopting the new ways of practices in the company of con gurus.

The gurus got cheap popularity and the commercial people joined hand to sell Indian soft power for immediate economic gain. There were patrons to popularize such bizarre ways of life and put Indian culture as commodity for sale. This implication is justified by the sub title, 'Marketing the mystic East'. The direct influence came from the band of Hippies from America and it was followed by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. This band of Hippies and spiritual seekers can be identified by their use of drinks, casual life, long hair, drugs and sexual excesses. Mehta made it clear that the effect of Hippie movement in India has created a chaotic atmosphere and it has affected people physically, socially and psychologically. It just combined the Kaliyuga of India and devil of the West. Kali is characterized by darkness as people would be lazy and pleasure seeking. Naturally, darkness will spread in absence of right karma. The West being nations of material science has let the devil spread all over. Both are in trouble and the union

without the right spirit will destroy all. It is witnessed that the society is adversely affected by such dissimilar undigested culture that could not take root in to the soil, into our tradition.

## **Hippy culture:**

In 1960s, when the movement began in England, it had its goal of love for all and a sense of brother and sisterhood among all. It rejected consumerist life style as they all were fade up with too much of materialism and a want of core values among fellow beings. The followers were known as flower children. Their philosophy was coined in the Beatles song: “all you need is love”. Some other aspects of their lifestyle were ‘sexual libertarianism; communal living characterized by free and open love relationships, and extensive travel’(Joshi:63). Thus, they gradually deviated from their original goal and degenerated into vices and criticism. The fact of the matter was reflected in Dev Annand’s cinema: “Hare Rama Hare Krishna”. The local people around their hubs, especially in places like Banaras, Rishikesh, Hardwar were affected but they remained silent for they were source of income for many. A declining value system was taking place, yet no action was taken to put a check on such activities. Indian concept of karma, Maya, nirvana and so forth lost their original significance and in turn became commodities. The band spoiled the environment of beautiful places like Goa, Kullu, Manali, Shimla and religious towns like Rishikesh, Haridwar, Almora, and Banaras. Mehta’s imaginary conversation with the parrot suggests the cue to this aspect.

Veterans are still alive who witnessed the scenario in person and stories are handed down and still the traces are remaining as when one goes to Rishikesh in particular which is a serene place under the foothills of the Himalaya and nourished by the perennial Ganga; one would find so many hubs are functioning for Yoga and spiritual practices. The inmates are foreigners who spend a considerable time over there and some of them are frequenters for so many years. India becomes their second home. The does not question the intent of the happenings, but without a proper understanding and regulatory system, many are misled and in turn they spread social vices of various sorts.

The author The author looks at this scenario, as Joshi comments:

In a bewildered manner and wonders whether these fantasies would ever go beyond the market place. Her question is answered by the parrot moving rapidly on the mango branch first by evacuating on her head and then by dropping a half-eaten mango on her lap. These actions symbolize the hiked up optimism and the frivolity of buying and selling. It seems that Gita Mehta implies that the Western utopia and Eastern mysticism have been messed up and this yielded chaos- a situation with no possibility of return (38).

India a global mercantile tool: The myth of the mystic East and the materialistic West; and the antithetical nature of the Occidental and Oriental; all these aspects come under the author's scrutiny and a new direction is given to the theme of 'East-West encounter'. Mehta shows India is emerging as an exhibition item. As a global mercantile tool India finds herself as an object of other's consumption. This point has been brilliantly brought out by Gita Mehta's tongue-in-cheek description of the aims of various conferences like seminar on 'Kundalini by swami Muktananda. The seminars and conferences are organized with only aim of selling India to the West. Their titles are formidable: 'Truth Justice and Spirituality', 'Moral Values and the Future of Mankind', 'Meditation and Dedication' and many more like these (Patel: 24).

### **Meaning of Karma:**

The core idea behind the work is a misconception of the Westerners that India can be explained to anyone and everyone can understand the subtle spiritual and mythological aspects. But the chaos created by the expatriates is a proof that it is not true. At this juncture, it will be worthy to note what does the word Karma really mean. A short analysis of the philosophical connotation of Karma will enable us to look at the situation with deeper perspective. The life of Indian gurus and their devotees, both Indians and foreigners, in the ashrams is portrayed in the third chapter. While description is comic, rather hilarious, the serious undertone of sarcasm never vanishes. In one of the ashrams the guru is addressed as God. The narrator provides a vivid description of the tricks and miracles performed by the gurus. The tricks suggested by them often result into horrifying experiences, mental imbalance and trauma. Following one of these tricks, a girl stood in front of a mirror for half an hour without blinking. She goes back to her past life and sees

that she was the mother of her husband of present life. Shocked by such vision of incestuous relationship, she loses her equilibrium.

### **Karma in terms of Gita & Swami Vivekananda:**

Different interpretations in Indian context are available of the word Karma. But the vital source of understanding the doctrine of Karma lies in Hinduism. Let us first understand the word in a simple manner. But Karma is not to be interpreted in the sense of punishment. It is the sum of natural consequences of our previous actions. Karma should not be misunderstood as fate. Human beings act with free will and create their own destinies. Karma refers to the totality of our actions and their resultant effects. Swamiji has made it clear in his 'Karma yoga' in support and clarification of the principles of the Gita that any Karma performed would produce some good or bad results or every Karma is a mixture of good and evil. The way out of getting rid of it is the non-attachment, thus action does not bind our soul. We need to control our tendencies to be ready for good karma even though one has to go beyond both good and evil Karma as the purpose is the liberation of soul. It can be achieved only by going beyond any fetters of good and bad.

Here, comes the context of character which is exemplified by the example of the tortoise tucked in shell. Thus, one has to build a strong character, "Who has control over his motives and organs. He controls his own inner forces, and nothing can draw them out against his will(Vol1:55). Similarly, the gurus and their followers needed to have such strength of character and control over inner forces. Instead, they took to leisurely life of attachment. Four Yogas are mentioned in our scriptures as the pathways of salvation or spiritual progress. Lord Krishna spoke of self-knowledge, meditation and infinite bliss; his focus was on the disinterestedness of Karma- action. If one reads Upanishads, one finds the strong adherents of janna, bhakti, Yoga; all unrivalled among themselves, each claiming superiority for its own chosen path. No one tried to reconcile. The author of the Gita did. The reconciliation of the different paths of Dharma, and work without desire or attachment- these are the two special characteristics of the Gita. (Vivekananda 4: 105)

### **Sex and sexuality:**

Meaning of Sanyasi: It seems that the attitude towards sex of the West and the East are poles apart. By provocative arguments, some nuns got firsthand experience of sleeping with men. For the male Christians, sleeping with a nun was a final act breaking

the taboo. Each story or experience is narrated in a light manner but the undertone of the narration is always serious and sarcastic. An Oriental frame of mind is necessary to assimilate the subtle principles of dharma or karma. The author has exposed the foolishness of the followers and the shallowness of all so called gurus. With least knowledge of the Oriental philosophy they just moved all of a sudden in a touring temperament to India in search of spirituality and only too few understood that it was just not a matter of merry making. It requires a lot of sacrifice. Lack of knowledge can be compensated by intense study, but from where would they bring the Oriental frame of mind and frame of reference. It is shown that the westerners are escapists and not capable enough to unlearn their frame of reference.

### **Possible solutions:**

If we focus on culture or cultural representation, a number of issues come to collide with each other. In postcolonial world cultural boundaries are dissipating. Again, postcolonial discourse has argued for liberal concept that endeavours to go beyond the margin-periphery phenomenon and postulated for a new paradigm on cultural encounters. Tagore envisaged it long back-“Where the narrow domestic walls have not broken the world into fragments of pieces”... In present time, we are neither able to uphold our own culture nor to compromise with the western culture. Right from the beginning, the British had uprooted our sound cultural heritage. We have gone to the extent of being ignorant of the things Indian. It is high time for us to stop and look back at the cultural heritage.

### **Conclusion:**

Mehta's *Karma Cola* is arresting to whoever reads them for her keen observations and incisive comments while holding up mirror on the mess the combination of what the combination of karma and cola did. It just commercialized the lofty concepts and made India a picnic spot for pleasure. Here, the crafty and cunning gurus have misled not only the foreigners but also spread vices among the locals. Scriptures made the meaning of spirituality clear but the not so educated people and the commercial interests made those sellable objects. Karma is for 'Being' and 'Becoming', and not the blind belief of a system and degeneration like Hippies and so called Indian gurus. Finally, modern India continues to be a bleak landscape in which Mehta by attempting to expose its dismal commodification, has played the role of great benefactor and reformer to the nation.

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