

HEADLINE: Embodiment of Shakti

SUBHEADLINE: Based in Thailand for the past four years, scholar and journalist Julie Banerjee Mehta, co-author of 'Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia' with husband Harish Mehta, is a specialist on Indian, Cambodian and Thai arts, culture and society. Here, Julie shares her thoughts on Southeast Asia

It's seven o'clock in the morning. From her spacious and elegant apartment overlooking the Chao Phraya River, Julie Mehta pensively observes the buzzing waterway, still draped in the morning haze.

It is this colourful scenery, at this privileged time of the day, which inspires Mehta the most and provides the necessary atmosphere for her work.

To this Indian scholar, writer and journalist, working means dealing with a wide range of topics. It might mean researching further into the 1,000 year-old Khmer dance in order to complete her upcoming book entitled *Rising from the Ashes*. Or it might mean working on another book, investigating the lifestyle of women living in the compound of Cambodia's Banteay Srei in the 10th century. Or perhaps she will work on her newly established Cosmic Flute Foundation's next project. Or on her newspaper feature story related to Thai art and culture. And then there are her duties as the elected president of the Soroptomists International Association in Bangkok....

A Bangkok-based independent scholar, Mehta definitely has the makings of a great mind, or intellectual giant.

Her character is the fruit of an extraordinary upbringing and education.

Born in 1957 to an upper-class Indian family in Calcutta, her father a gynaecologist and her mother a nurse, Mehta was taught from a very young age the values of broad-mindedness and self-respect.

"I grew up in a very special environment, in a home with two extraordinary people - my parents. They were very particular about their children being educated in a Western style, so as to know how to handle the world. But they wanted us rooted in Eastern philosophy as well. Thus, although I would say "Hail, Mary Mother of God" twice a day at the prestigious Loreto Convent run by Irish nuns I was enrolled in, I would still read the Bhagavat Gita at home," recalls Mehta, comfortably seated on a soft sofa, sipping a cup of coffee.

"My father, through his profession, saw the suffering of women at the hands of their husbands. He would often tell me, when I was just six or seven years old, "see your mother, I work with her as a team, I respect her. When you get old and get married, if you don't have respect, your marriage will not work. Another very important thing is also to be financially independent," Mehta remembers.

With clear-cut and progressive ideas, the young Mehta devoted herself to fulfilling her father's vision.

After brilliantly completing her higher education in Calcutta, gaining a BA with honours in English Literature, a BA in Economics, Bengali Language and Literature, followed by a MA in English Literature, and collecting a few gold medals and best performance awards, Mehta took off to Australia with the intention of pursuing a PhD. But a "fantastic offer", from the Australian Ministry of Science and Technology to work as a journalist when she was only 22

years old, delayed her doctorate ambition and marked the starting point of her journalism career.

Her assignments as a journalist, covering stories related to veteran affairs at the culmination of the Vietnam war and the period that saw Cambodia gradually opening to the outside world after the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, marked the starting point of her fascination with Cambodia.

“In my dealings with war veterans, I felt there was much to learn about this mysterious country called Cambodia,” she said.

But it was 10 years later, in 1990, that Julie actually visited the country which had aroused her curiosity for so long.

Before that pivotal year though, the adventurous Julie had gone through a few formative and determining experiences, such as an encounter during a trip in India with her husband-to-be, Harish C. Mehta, then a promising young journalist who was about to move to Singapore to work for the Business Times.

“I travelled something like 32 times between India and Singapore. I was madly in love with Harish but I did not want to move to Singapore unless I found a job there,” Mehta confided.

Finally, after two and a half years of a relationship across continents, the young woman took the plunge. “Before even getting married, I went to live with him, which was unheard of in middle-class Indian families. But my parents thought, ‘this is the girl we brought up to have an independent mind,’ so they accepted the consequences.”

With the support of the female Indian community in Singapore, Mehta soon fit in and found a job to match her abilities; the position of art, culture and literary reviewer, and features editor for the Straits Times Group. It was a situation which – especially through the running of a help line – brought her celebrity interviews, radio shows and fame, and in 1994, a Special Award for Excellence in Journalism for investigative reporting on social issues like teenage abortion, incest and the status of unmarried women.

But the best was still to come: Mehta's first encounter with Cambodia.

Harish was travelling there to cover a story for the Business Times and his devoted wife accompanied him ... as a photographer.

“We were looking for an interview with Prime Minister Hun Sen but we never imagined we would get it. The fact that we were Indian surely helped; Indira Gandhi was the first to recognise Hun Sen's rule,” Mehta explained. From the two and a half hours of a “nearly closed-door” interview with Hun Sen and the “royal treatment we received” followed the best-selling biography Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia, published in 1999.

But for Mehta, braving the dangers of a visit to Angkor Wat and meeting with the head of the temple's archaeological team was a highlight.

“I was mesmerised by the beauty of Angkor Wat and the reflections of Indian civilisation that I saw there. I thought ‘here is a civilisation which somehow, surpassed India; we have no temple of this complexity.’”

“This meeting really marked the start of my journey into Southeast Asian culture,” the Indian scholar said of a journey that seems still far from reaching its end.

Living in Bangkok for the past four years with her award-winning journalist-husband, (currently Thailand and Indochina's correspondent for the Business Times), the prolific Mehta

will soon release her forthcoming books. `` I can't sit still, I think that sums me up pretty well," says Mehta, beaming with enthusiasm.

It's not hard to believe her, knowing that she still finds the time and energy to take part in many other social and charitable activities, and doubtless has many projects in mind and tricks up her sleeve. Her ambition to pursue a PhD still haunts her, and she must fulfill the more down-to-earth dream to ``be able, one day of her life, to catch a nap...".

`` I am a culture freak, and have always been. I have this very rich cultural heritage that I take wherever I go and surprisingly, it arouses much interest everywhere I go, so I can always start a dialogue about cross-cultural similarities," she explains.

Mehta's firm conviction that `` there is so much common ground to celebrate" between Southeast Asian nations is strengthened by her personal findings and observations.

`` I realised that Hinduism and Buddhism existed together for so many centuries, hand in hand, peacefully and consistently, from the 6th to the 15th century and more.... Unlike in India, where Buddhism has been mostly wiped out because of the Muslim influence, Hinduism and Buddhism co-existed like brothers in so many places," Mehta said.

`` In Thailand," she continues, `` the Brahmanic influence is very strong, whereas in India we have lost this shared heritage; you have Brahma, Vishnu on the Garuda on the royal emblem, Vishnu on the Naga (the serpent)... Indian religion didn't spread out of force, but somehow like a tea bag, with the flavour of the tea slowly permeating the whole cup. And its strength is evident still.

`` Thai people are re-living the Hindu philosophy every day, showing tolerance and making it a way of life. It is great to see the syncretism, how Theravada countries like Thailand and Cambodia have so successfully embraced two great religions of the world. I don't think there are any other countries in the world which have this mixture.

`` Buddhism from India has become far more tolerant in Thailand, much more subliminal, it has entered the whole fabric of society," says Mehta, who was surprised to find out that monks here would not refuse offerings of meat or fish.

Placing the Thai virtue of tolerance on a pedestal, she is still aware of the possible excesses. `` Thai tolerance can mean closing one's eyes to the ills of society," she said, referring to irresponsibility, prostitution, corruption and other ills.

`` In India, we see women as mothers, as the power, as Shakti. I wish some of that ethos would find its way to Thailand. There is so much to do for women in this society."

There can be little doubt that Julie Mehta is a great illustration of Shakti's power _ a source of strength balanced with peace and comfort.

BYLINE: Story by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

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