



Sacred Games: A Novel (P.S.)

By *Vikram Chandra*

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A policeman, a criminal overlord, a Bollywood film star, beggars, cultists, spies, and terrorists—the lives of the privileged, the famous, the wretched, and the bloodthirsty interweave with cataclysmic consequences amid the chaos of modern-day Mumbai, in this soaring, uncompromising, and unforgettable epic masterwork of literary art.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Sacred Games is a novel as big, ambitious, multi-layered, contradictory, funny, sad, scary, violent, tender, complex, and irresistible as India itself. Steep yourself in this story, enjoy the delicious masala Chandra has created, and you will have an idea of how the country manages to hang together despite age-old hatreds, hundreds of dialects, different religious practices, the caste system, and corruption everywhere. The Game keeps it afloat.

There are more than a half-dozen subplots to be enjoyed, but the main events take place between Inspector Sartaj Singh, a Sikh member of the Mumbai police force, and Ganesh Gaitonde, the most wanted gangster in India. It is no accident that Ganesh is named for the Hindu god of success, the elephant god much revered by Hindus everywhere. By the world's standards he has made a huge success of his life: he has everything he wants. But soon after the novel begins he is holed up in a bomb shelter from which there is no escape, and Sartaj is right outside the door. Ganesh and Sartaj trade barbs, discuss the meaning of good and evil, hold desultory conversations alternating with heated exchanges, and, finally, Singh bulldozes the building to the ground. He finds Ganesh dead of a gunshot wound, and an unknown woman dead in the bunker along with him.

How did it come to this? Of course, Singh has wanted to capture this prize for years, but why now and why in this way? The chapters that follow tell both their stories, but especially chronicle Gaitonde's rise to power. He is a clever devil, to be sure, and his tales are as captivating as those of Scheherezade. Like her he spins them out one by one and often saves part of the story for the reader--or Sartaj--to figure out. He is involved in every racket in India, corrupt to the core, but even he is afraid of Swami Shridhar Shukla, his Hindu guru and adviser. In the story Gaitonde shares with Singh and countless other characters, Vikram Chandra has written a fabulous tale of treachery, a thriller, and a tour of the mean streets of India, complete with street slang. --Valerie Ryan

Questions for Vikram Chandra



After writing his first two, critically acclaimed books, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and *Love and Longing in Bombay*, Vikram Chandra set off on what became, seven years later, an epic story of crime and punishment in modern Mumbai, *Sacred Games*. Chandra splits his time between Berkeley, where he teaches at the University of California, and Mumbai, the vast city that becomes a character in its own right in *Sacred Games*. We asked him a few questions about his new book.

Amazon.com: Did you imagine your book would become such an epic when you began it?

Vikram Chandra: No, not at all. When I began, I imagined a conventional crime story which began with a dead body or two, proceeded along a linear path, and ended 300 pages later with a neatly-wrapped solution. But when I began to actually investigate the particular kind of crime that I was interested in, a series of connections revealed themselves. Organized crime is of course connected to politics, both local and national, but if you're interested in political activity in India today--and elsewhere in the world--you are of course going to have to address the role of religion. These realms, in turn, intersect with the workings of the film

and television industries. And all of this exists within the context of the "Great Game," the struggle between nation-states for power and dominance; some of the criminal organizations have mutually-beneficial relationships with intelligence agencies. So, I became really interested in this mesh of interlocking lives and organizations and historical forces. I began to trace how ordinary people were thrown about and forced to make choices by events and actors very far away; how disparate lives can cross each other--sometimes unknowingly--and change profoundly as a result. The form of the novel grew from this thematic interest, in an attempt to form a representation of this intricate web. The reader will, I hope, by the end of the novel see how the connections fall together and weave through each other. The individual characters, of course, see only a fragmented, partial version of this whole.

Amazon.com: You interviewed many gangsters, high and low, to research your story. How did you get introductions to them? What did they think of someone writing their life?

Chandra: When I was writing my last book, *Love and Longing in Bombay* (in which Sartaj Singh first appears), I had contacted some police officers and crime journalists. I stayed in touch with a few of them, and when I began to think seriously about this project I asked them to introduce me to anyone who could tell me something about organized crime. Amongst the people I met in this way were some people from the "underworld," which turns out not to be an underworld at all. It's the same world we live in, inhabited by human beings who are very much like the rest of us, even in their distinctiveness. For the most part, they were as curious about me and what I was doing as I was about them. They're not big novel readers, but they had very certain opinions about representations of their lives they had seen on the big screen: "Such-and-such film got it all wrong"--they would tell me--"don't do that." And, "This was correct, that was not." So I listened, and I hope I got it mostly right.

Amazon.com: For most American readers--like me--your story is full of slang and cultural references that we can't hope to follow. For me that's part of the charm--I feel like I'm immersed in a world I don't fully understand. Were you thinking of a particular audience as you wrote?

Chandra: I wanted to use the English that we actually speak in India, the language that I would use to tell this story if I were sitting in a bar in Mumbai talking to a friend. This English would be sprinkled with words from many Indian languages, and we would share a universe of cultural referents and facts that a reader from another country wouldn't recognize instantly. This, of course, is an experience that all of us have in a very various world. I remember reading British children's stories as a kid, and having long discussions with friends about what "crumpets" and "clotted cream" could possibly be. An Indian reader reading a novel about Arizona by an American writer might have no idea what a "pueblo" was, or why you went to a "Circle-K" to get a bottle of milk. But the context tells you something about what is being referred to, and there is a distinct delight in discovering a new world and figuring out its nuances. This is one of the great gifts of reading, that it can transport you into foreign landscapes. It's one of the reasons I read books from other cultures and places, and I hope American readers will share in this pleasure.

Amazon.com: Your book has dozens of characters who could live in books of their own. Aside from your two main figures, the policeman Sartaj Singh and the criminal Ganesh Gaitone, which was your favorite character to write?

Chandra: That would have to be Sartaj's mother, Prabhjot Kaur, as a young girl in pre-Partition India, I think. She's curious, innocent, and passionate; writing that chapter was hard and exhilarating.

Amazon.com: The movies of Bollywood (and Hollywood) are everywhere in your story, and many in your family (and you yourself) have been screenwriters and directors. For someone new to Indian film, what are some of your favorites you'd recommend?

Chandra: A very small sampling from the '50s onwards might be: *Pyaasa* (*Thirst*, 1957); *Kaagaz ke Phool* ("Paper Flowers," 1959); *Mughal-e-Azam* ("The Great Mughal," 1960); *Sholay* ("Embers," 1975); *Parinda* ("Bird," 1989); *Satya* (1998); *Lagaan* ("Land Tax," 2001); *Lage Raho Munnabhai* ("Keep at it, Munnabhai," 2006).

From Publishers Weekly

Mumbai in all its seedy glory is at the center of Vikram Chandra's episodic novel, which follows the fortunes of two opposing characters: the jaded Sikh policeman, Sartaj Singh, who first appeared in the story "Kama," and Ganesh Gaitonde, a famous Hindu Bhai who "dallied with bejewelled starlets, bankrolled politicians" and whose "daily skim from Bombay's various criminal dhandas was said to be greater than annual corporate incomes." Sartaj, still handsome and impeccably turned out, is now divorced, weary and resigned to his post, complicit in the bribes and police brutality that oil the workings of his city. Sartaj is ambivalent about his choices, but Gaitone is hungry for position and wealth from the moment he commits his first murder as a young man. A confrontation between the two men opens the novel, with Gaitonde taunting Sartaj from inside the protection of his strange shell-like bunker. Gaitonde is the more riveting character, and his first-person narrative voice lulls the reader with his intuitive understanding of human nature and the 1,001 tales of his rise to power, as he collects men, money and fame; creates and falls in love with a movie star; infiltrates Bollywood; works for Indian intelligence; matches wits with his Muslim rival, Suleiman Isa; and searches for fulfillment with the wily Guru Shridhar Shukla. Sartaj traces Gaitonde's movements and motivations, while taking on cases of murder, blackmail and neighborhood quarrels. The two men ruminate on the meaning of life and death, and Chandra connects them as he connects all the big themes of the subcontinent: the animosity of caste and religion, the poverty, the prostitution and mainly, the criminal elite, who organize themselves on the model of corporations and control their fiefdoms from outside the country. Chandra, who's won prizes and praise for his two previous books, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and *Love and Longing in Bombay*, spent seven years writing this 900-page epic of organized crime and the corruption that spins out from Mumbai into the world of international counterfeiting and terrorism, and it's obvious that he knows what he's talking about. He takes his chances creating atmosphere: the characters speak in the slang of the city ("You bhenchod sleepy son of maderchod Kumbhkar," Gaitonde chastises). The novel eventually becomes a world, and the reader becomes a resident rather than a visitor, but living there could begin to feel excessive. (Jan.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review "The game lasts, the game is eternal, the game cannot be stopped, the game gives birth to itself." So muses a veteran Indian intelligence officer on his deathbed, his devoted disciple, Anjila Mathur (one of many tough women characters), at his side. The games that Chandra choreographs in this riveting epic of Mumbai's underworld are far more profane than sacred, yet they do require some form of faith. Sensing that the legendary don Ganesh Gaitonde was involved in something far worse than the usual gangland activities, Anjila covertly assigns police inspector Sartaj Singh to the case. Seen-it-all-weary yet disciplined, Sartaj is both ruthless and compassionate, and his acute awareness and street wisdom play in counterpoint to Ganesh's naked ambition. Chandra (*Love and Longing in Bombay*, 1997) has created a compulsively involving literary thriller by drawing on the *Mahabharata* and aiming for the amplitude of Victorian novels. He spins webs within webs, portrays a multitude of diverse characters, nets the complexity of a huge metropolis, and takes full measure of how the world really works. Corruption, murder, arms dealing, Bollywood, plastic surgery, and a superstar guru on an apocalyptic mission--all fuel this novel of crime and punishment, survival and annihilation. A splendidly big, finely made book destined to dazzle a big audience. *Donna Seaman*

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Users Review

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Thomas Rinaldi:

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Bruce Williamson:

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