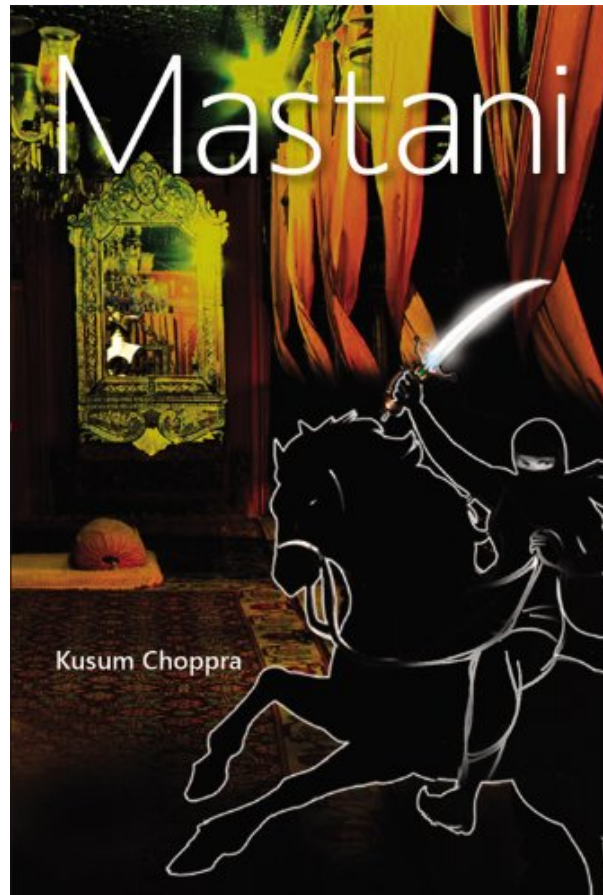
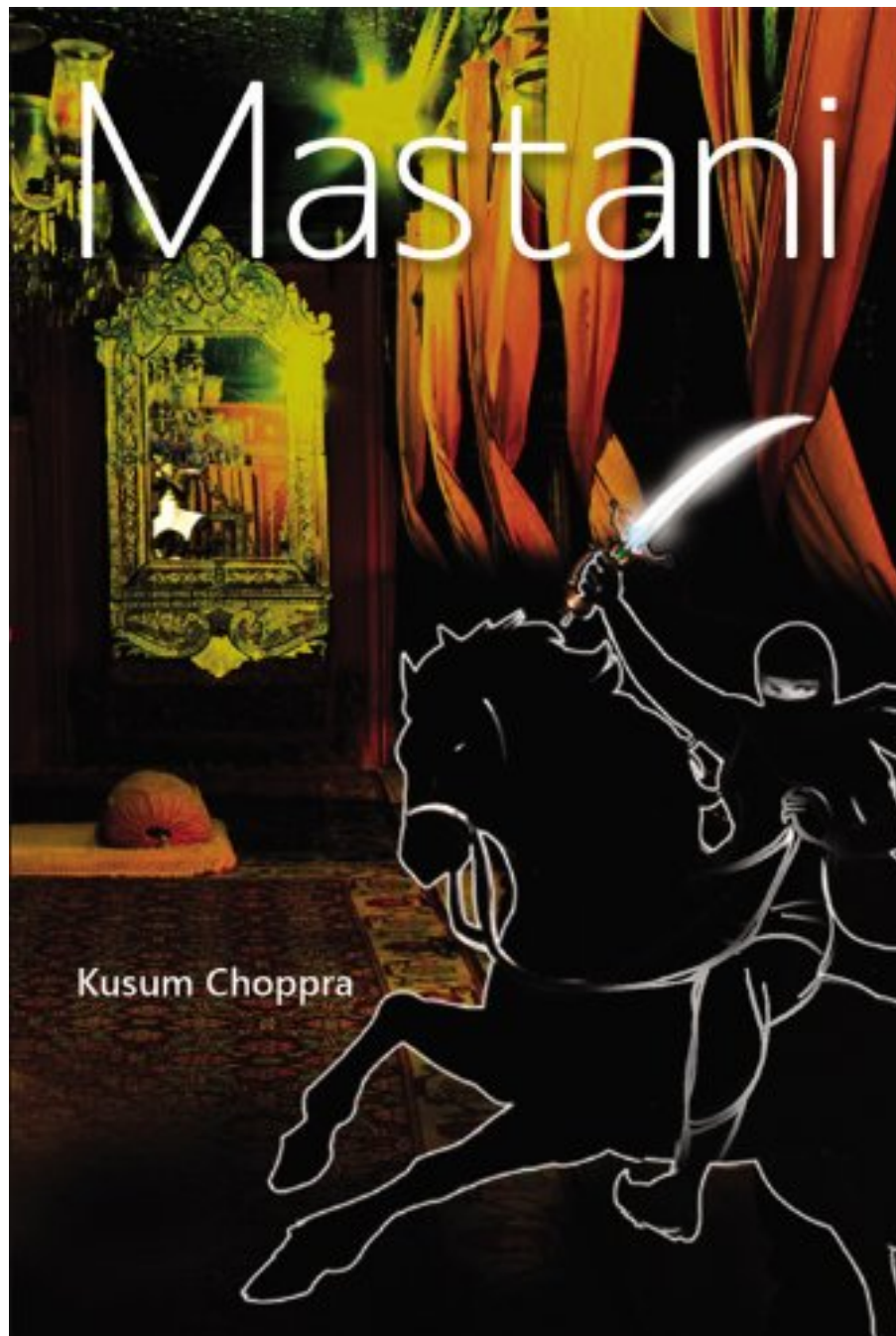


# MASTANI BY KUSUM CHOPRA



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Kusum Chopra is a writer, journalist, environmentalist, numerologist and mother. She translates a lifetime of experiences into stories that weave grains of truth, set in verbal embroidery. Her writing was shaped by various influences, having lived in Singapore, Jakarta, Pune and Ahmedabad, where she now lives with her family; and from writing for The Week, Rajasthan Patrika, Maharashtra Herald,

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# MASTANI BY KUSUM CHOPRA PDF

Until recently, history had relegated Mastani to forgotten pages as a dancing girl... a myth kept alive by lack of evidence about her true place in the Peshwa household. Daughter of Maharaj Chhatrasal of Bundelkhand, Mastani married Peshwa Baji Rao I while he was in power, but she was obscured almost to anonymity by several forces. Her life as a strategist, both on the field and at home was veiled with intrigue due to the jealousies of women in zenanas and power-hungry relatives in the Peshwai. What was Mastani's story? Was being a true companion to the Peshwa as well as his most loved wife a threat large enough to snuff her out in the pages of history? Fascinated for years by the secrecy behind her life and death, Kusum Chopra unravels the mystery surrounding the deaths of both Peshwa Baji Rao I and his second wife. The novel explores Mastani's royal lineage and the elegant bearing of a warrior princess caught in the political web of a changing empire.

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A very important book!

By Not an Unexamined Life

Mastani, daughter of Chhatrasal Bundela, the second wife of Bajirao Peshwa was not welcome in the Peshwa family. Baji was not even able to perform their son, Krishnasinh's upanayanam. His first wife Kashibai led the Brahmin opposition to Krishnasinh's integration into the household and the Bhat Konkanasth community. Kusum Chopra creates two alternate scenarios to fit known facts - and both scenarios are startling. (I would not want to rob the readers of their moment of discovery by telling the details of the story.)

It is difficult to read the novel - it is sad to realize politics and greed in a family can destroy a nation and a dream. Hubris and egoism added to the poisonous mix that prevented Baji, his brothers and his Sardars from working together in achieving their goals.

I share the author's self-confessed obsession of Mastani. She remains the heroine of folk-lore in spite of having all accounts of her being expunged from the Peshwa Bakhars. Ms. Chopra has painted Mastani as a very beautiful, brave, talented woman, utterly in love with the Peshwa. She must have been. She also characterizes the Peshwa Baji Rao as an extremely talented warrior, who while capable of formulating the policy to free the country of the enemy, was somehow emotionally weak, incapable of that killer instinct to

strike that final blow to finish off the enemy. (It was Baji who articulated the philosophy of the Maratha nation - let us strike at the trunk of the withering tree and the branches will fall off themselves...) Again, it is entirely plausible. She offers as an example, Baji's incapacity to deliver the final assault on the Mughal throne during the Battle of Delhi in 1737, when he went as far as the outskirts of the City and retreated towards Bundel Khand.

There is a quite plausible account of palace politics that describe the interactions between the Chhatrasal household and the Peshwa household. Baji's insecure wife Kashibai comes off as conniving and weak. Baji's mother Radhabai comes off as a domineering matriarch too fond of controlling the family. The political savvy of the Peshwa women is portrayed as highly questionable. Again, this is a very believable scenario. These were, in all probability, extremely ambitious wives of highly capable men folk, but too newly elevated to wealth and power - and predictably of limited world view. The cloistered Brahmin upbringing would not have contributed much to their getting a broader outlook on life.

Kusum Chopra has done a great job researching a topic that is not found much in primary source material. She has stitched together a tale that holds true to history. It is admirable in an age when authors falsify historical facts in the name of writing historical fiction. (For example, I particularly find a novel/film a la mode 'Jodha-Akbar' deplorable, where a Jodha character is largely fictional.) The gallant but tragic story of Mastani comes through cleanly. She exposes the less than idealistic spouting of the Chitpavan Brahmin coterie that would not even leave Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in peace. (Paraphrasing Dr. Jadunath Sarkar, the empire that Shivaji created carried in its DNA the seeds of its own destruction. "The first danger of the new Hindu kingdom established by Shivaji in the Deccan lay in the fact that the national glory and prosperity resulting from the victories of Shivaji and Baji Rao I created a reaction in favor of Hindu orthodoxy; it accentuated caste distinctions and ceremonial purity of daily rites which ran counter to the homogeneity and simplicity of the poor and politically depressed early Maratha society. Thus, his political success sapped the main foundation of that success...")

It is heartbreaking when you go beyond the tragic destruction of two grand human beings as portrayed by Chopra, and consider the larger untold stories that the novel hints at but leaves out.

First, Krishnasinh. Can you imagine how a six-year old boy who has lost both his parents must have been brought up Muslim in a strict and disapproving Chitpavan Konkanasth household? The slow and inexorable, and utterly needless alienation of your own? Chopra makes a point of spelling out the fact that until the time of Ali Bahadur, the Chitpavan traditions persisted in Banda.

Second, a willful destruction of Chhatrasal's dream. (Chhatrasal deserted from the Mughal army to meet Shivaji. He offered to join Shivaji in his work of building the Swaraj. Shivaji encouraged him to carve out an independent Bundelkhand, and promised help if needed. Chhatrasal sought Baji's help in repelling Muhammad Shah Bangash's attack.)

Third, the seeds of a defeat at Panipat were sown when the dissensions that were allowed to fester during Mastani's life in Pune were not appropriately resolved. If Kusum Chopra's story is correct, Balaji Baji Rao must have had a somewhat fractious relationship with Gopikabai.

I am a purist when it comes to writing style, and I think Kusum Chopra's liberal use of Hindi and the Hindi vernacular in an English novel take away from her message. (I would give it five stars were it not for these style issues.) When Ms. Chopra discusses Mastani's dress and accoutrements, somehow, Mastani comes off as less than regal. Mastani's torment could have been made more poignant. But Kusum Chopra should be commended for not making the book into a tear-jerking, maudlin tragedy. While not completely stick figures, the characterization of both Mastani and Baji could have been fleshed out better.

Kusum Chopra has done a remarkable job of researching the material for this novel. In the `Afterword', she shares her findings briefly. She has personally interacted with the descendents of the Peshwa and Mastani. In the section `Aftermath', she describes in brief the events that happened after the deaths of the main protagonists of the novel - after the time span of the novel, if you will. All in all, this is an extremely important book. I don't read Marathi, and I feel the lacuna keenly. This book is a very important addition to the library of an English language reader seeking to learn about this period.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

The book Mastani

By Trupti T.

A very well written book which helps you to connect to the rich cultural heritage of India during that era. The writer's extensive research can be experienced from the specific facts revealed in the book. She has sensitively explored Mastani's emotions and inner turmoil as a woman.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

I love the book

By Satomi Hitomi

I love the book. It was thoroughly researched, well written and touching. There are parts that describe Hindu customs that I do not really understand completely but overall, the book is enlightening and it introduces me to a great woman who has been deliberately slandered and bad-mouthed throughout the centuries. It is thankful for writers like Kusum Chopra that brings out the hidden truth (though understandably some parts might be dramatized) of those characters that had been belittled by those in power and with their reasons for hiding the skeletons in closets.

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