

Meeting Ved Mehta



Reginald Massey

Reginald was born in Lahore before Partition. He writes books on various subjects pertaining to South Asia. A former London journalist, he now lives in Mid Wales with his actor wife Jamila. His latest book is *Shaheed Bhagat Singh and the Forgotten Indian Martyrs*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi. A member of the Society of Authors, he is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Ved Mehta is a celebrated writer, and a man who overcame severe disability by sheer will power. Born in Lahore in 1934, at the age of four he was blinded by cerebrosplinal meningitis. His father, a doctor, was aware that his son had no future in India since most people in India regarded blindness as a curse, a divine retribution for some great sin or crime committed in a past life.

In 1949, Ved was sent to the Arkansas School for the Blind. From there he went to Pomona College in California, a liberal arts institution with a high reputation. Since few books were then published in Braille he needed a fellow student who could read the text books to him. Fortunately, his friend Eugene Rose volunteered to help. Mehta wrote that his friend's readings were so clear that it seemed as if he was "explaining things".

(Rose later became Father Seraphim Rose, a Russian Orthodox hieromonk and a leading figure of the Orthodox Church in USA.)

After Pomona, Mehta went to Balliol College, Oxford and then to Harvard. In 1957, when he was 23, Mehta published his first book *Face to Face*. It was an account of his struggles and his experiences as a blind man. The book was an instant success. Several books then followed. He became a literary celebrity. As a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, from 1961 till 1994, he exercised immense influence.

Mehta has written on Indian subjects, and follows Indian politics and the shenanigans of India's leaders. He spoke his mind during the 2014 Jaipur Literary Festival. He said that he could not live in India simply because he did not entertain the idea of living in an anarchy.

Mehta married in 1983. His wife Linn Cary Mehta is descended from the prolific writer James Fenimore Cooper best known for his masterpiece *The Last of the Mohicans*.

I was an avid reader of Mehta's fiction and non-fiction. When he was in London many years ago, I went to meet him at Holland Park.



In London's Holland Park Reginald Massey, left, chats with fellow Lahore born writer Ved Mehta. 1990s.

We chatted about Lahore, and the book that he was then working on. What surprised me was the speed and confidence with which he rushed up and down the stairs. I could not have kept up with him. I could not believe that the man was actually blind.

© Reginald Massey 2014