

Passionate Activism & Giving Lake Victoria A Hindi Name:

Nitin Mehta's Story

BY MILLY MAINA

Nitin Mehta is a passionate and renowned speaker on India's spiritual heritage; vegetarianism and veganism; and an active campaigner for animal rights. He was instrumental in setting up the first vegetarian society in Kenya, Mauritius, New Delhi, Paris, Lisbon and in the Indian states of Punjab and Andhra Pradesh.

Nitin was born in Kisumu but has lived in the UK for many years and holds a degree in Sociology from Goldsmiths, University of London. He lets us in on his passion and shares an interesting story about Lake Victoria.

Welcome back to Kenya Nitin, how long has it been since you were here last and what changes have you seen or experienced since you arrived?

I was last in Kenya 15 years ago. The changes I see are that Kenya is developing very rapidly. The people are amongst the best in the world! They are polite and friendly and always willing to help.

What inspired your passion for vegetarianism/veganism and animal rights?

My passion for compassion for animals started when as a child I threw a stone at a dog and struck the dog. I heard a painful scream from the dog and realised my action had caused pain to an innocent animal.

That experience changed me. I would never harm an animal again, not even a mosquito!

Tell us about the varied causes you have been worked on and are currently involved in.

In the UK, I have served on many government bodies to help various causes. In 1999, I received an award of MBE from the Queen for serving the community. It was a proud moment for Kisumu!

You describe yourself as 'argumentative and opinionated', has your activism landed you in trouble and would you say it has borne any fruits?

Years of campaigns to promote a vegetarian/vegan diet are bearing fruits as millions of people in Europe are going vegan.

Most people are adopting a vegan diet as they realise the immense cruelty animals suffer in the process of meat production. But there are other very important reasons to give up meat. Meat-eating is associated with many killer diseases as well as high cholesterol. Vegetables do not have cholesterol!

An even more important reason, especially for Kenya and Africa, is how food cereals that can feed human beings are fed to animals. Almost 50% of maize is fed to animals raised for meat. This means that this staple food is wasted. Another big problem with meat eating is global warming.

Kenya should zealously protect its ecological heritage. More meat production will impact the environment; forests, birds and pollinating insects will disappear and the country will suffer from long droughts or heavy flooding. I have fearlessly pursued the cause of animal rights in spite of the fact that it upsets vested interests!

Nitin, what was your experience setting up vegetarian societies across the world? And what have they achieved so far?

These societies have raised the understanding of the dangers of meat consumption. Some societies have disappeared over the years but the Kenya Vegetarian Club has stayed active. It staged the World Vegetarian Congress a few years ago. The Kenya Vegan Society is also very active. They also run a Cat Rescue Centre and are planning to start Kenya's or may be Africa's first animal sanctuary. They also provide vegan meals to local schools. They enjoy the support of Hindus and Jains here in Kenya and in the UK.

You have an interesting story about how Hindu scriptures knew the source of Lake Victoria. We're all ears, tell us about it.

When planning his discovery of the source of the Nile, British explorer John Hanning Speke secured his best information from a map reconstructed

from the Puranas. The conventional wisdom was that Lake Tanganyika was the source of the Nile. However, a Hindu pundit from Banaras told Speke that the real source was a much larger lake that lay to the north. Following his advice, Speke went on to discover Lake Victoria.

The pundit had also told Speke that the real source were twin peaks known as 'Somagiri.'

'Soma' in sanskrit means moon and 'giri' means peak. Therefore 'Somagiri' are none other than the fabled Mountains of the Moon in Central Africa.

According to Speke, it was remarkable that Hindus christened the source of the Nile, 'Amara' which in Sanskrit means immortal. There was a country by that name in the north-east corner of the Victoria Nyanza. 'Nyanza' means a large mass of water in Bantu language. Bantu was one of the provinces of Kenya with Kisumu as its capital.

This means that ancient Hindus must have had some communication with the northern and southern ends of the Victoria Nyanza. Cowrie shells from the Maldives were found by Dr Mary Leakey in an Iron Age settlement near Nakuru. Indians who traded with Egypt used cowrie shells as money, a system that dated back to the 28th Century BCE.

According to Arab geographers, the name Zangistan, from which the name Zanzibar or Zang Coast is derived, covers the whole of the eastern part of Africa. 'Zang' is the equivalent of the sanskrit word 'sankh.' The name 'Sankha Dvipa' means the island of shells. In the early 20th Century, famous Jewish-French Indologist Sylvain Levy remarked, "From Persia to the Chinese Sea, from the icy regions of Siberia to the islands of Java and Borneo, from Oceania to Socotra, India has propagated her beliefs, her tales and her civilisation. She has left indelible imprints on one-fourth of the human race in the course of a long succession of centuries. She has the right to claim in universal history, the rank that ignorance has refused her for a long time, to hold her place among the nations, summarising and symbolising the spirit of humanity."

What Hindu name would you suggest for Lake Victoria and why?

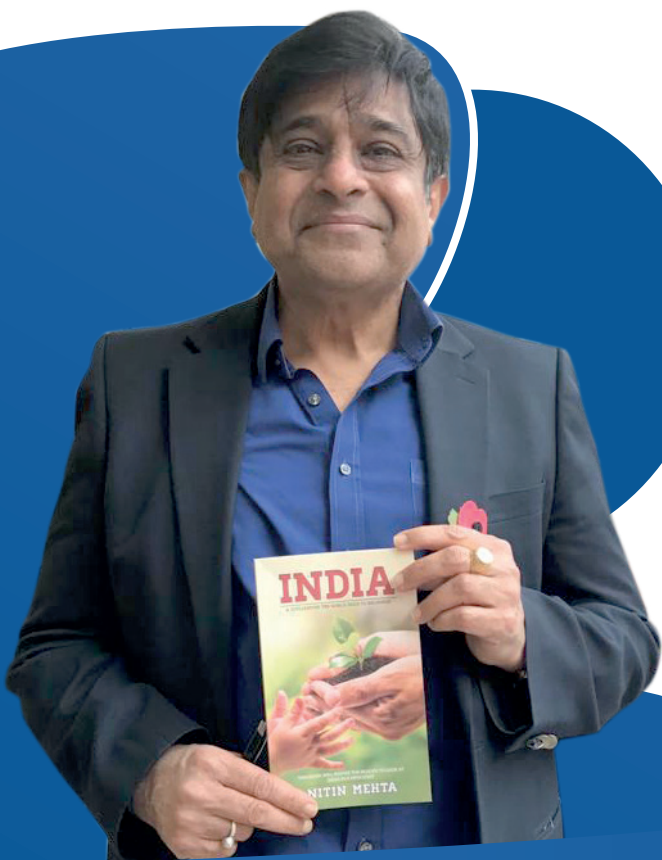
Lake Amara as mentioned in ancient Hindu scriptures. It also sounds Swahili.

What would you advice our readers regarding the work you do?

Have two careers: one to earn a living and a second one to take up a project to do good. That way when you are old, you will have a sense of satisfaction that you have done something positive in life.

What drives you?

Human injustice towards animals.



Nitin poses with his book 'India: A Civilisation The World Fails To Recognise'