



## Neela: Victory Song (Girls of Many Lands)

*By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*

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**Neela: Victory Song (Girls of Many Lands)** By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in India, is an acclaimed novelist for adults and award-winning poet who teaches creative writing at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, where she also serves as president of MAITRI, a helpline for South Asian women. "Neela" is part of the Girls of Many Lands series which was an American Girl series of eight books and display-only dolls that spanned several countries and time periods. In this story, Neela finds herself caught between the village traditions of India and her sympathy with the freedom fighters who seek to free India from British rule in 1939. When her father disappears to fight with them, she risks her life and reputation to try to find him.

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### Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Grade 5-8-Neela, 12, lives in India, where 200 years of British rule has turned sour. When she befriends an underground freedom fighter, Samar, her interest in India's struggle begins to consume her every thought. Her father has joined Mohandas Gandhi's peaceful "civil disobedience" movement, and she becomes determined to help him and Samar fight for her country's freedom. Meanwhile, her mother has brought her news of an offer of marriage, a lucky catch as the boy is from a wealthy and cultured family. Refusing to rush into an engagement, she steals away from home, disguised as a boy, and heads for Calcutta. Neela has several adventures and close calls, but she finds both men and is instrumental in getting them safely home. A strong female protagonist and historical subject matter are limited by a predictable plot. A hinted-at romance between Samar and Neela never emerges and the drama of the country's political tension is watered-down by far-fetched heroics. For a title that focuses on the mystical and exotic flavor of India, lead readers to Suzanne Fisher Staples's *Shiva's Fire* (Farrar, 2000).

*Alison Follos, North Country School, Lake Placid, NY*

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From [Booklist](#)

Gr. 5-8. Divakaruni is best known for her poetry and short stories for adults, including her acclaimed fiction collection *Arranged Marriages* (1995). Her first offering for young readers, part of the Girls of Many Lands series, is a fast, nail-biting adventure set during India's fight for independence. Twelve-year-old Neela is exhilarated when her sister's wedding is interrupted by a band of rough freedom fighters asking for money and food. Neela is swept up by the patriotic excitement, and later, against her mother's protests, she helps to harbor Samar, a wounded fighter. When her father never returns from a protest march, Neela travels alone to Calcutta to find him, and with the help of Samar and his wealthy cousin, hatches a brazen rescue plan. Passages explaining the necessary historical and cultural background are admirably clear but not always well blended into the narrative, and some of the characters and the story's overt messages lack subtlety. But Divakaruni turns a rare subject in children's literature into a well-paced, gripping story that captures universal emotions as well as the complexity of Neela's choices and her anger as she begins to see the facts of colonialism. The precise, vibrant details of time and place (Divakaruni was raised in Calcutta) will put readers next to Neela on the terrifying train rides, the hot, crowded streets and, finally, in the arms of her parents. *Gillian Engberg*

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**Carl Johnson:**

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