Chapter-5

The Threads and Riddles of life in Gita Mehta’s

A River Sutra

The present chapter focuses on the threads and mysteries of life woven by Gita Mehta in her A River Sutra to our origins and rediscovers invisible strength which the river provides to attain salvation to modern man in modern times. The technique of narration and the ancient Indian tradition of storytelling help the novelist to present a world crowded and teeming with life. Mehta’s A River Sutra deals with some serious question like life and death. Moreover, she delves deeper into the issues of spiritualism and religion. The novel makes an excellent use of Indian myths, folklore, values, rituals, music, art forms, heritage and even superstitions. According to Chandmal, “Gita Mehta has created a new language of literature and recreated India for Indians.” Mehta’s A River Sutra celebrates the river Narmada and the myths associated with it. It is a novel with a difference as it is a collection of six stories linked together by a common theme. The way stories are told the seamless flow of the narrative mirroring the flow of the sacred Narmada.

A River Sutra is a series of mythic experiences as told to a retired bureaucrat on the bank of river Narmada by pilgrims and travelers. Nawal Kishor Sharma observes that, “Each story offers a ‘sutra’ (aphorism), which makes the reader ponder over the wisdom encapsulated in the tale. The stories are held together by a ‘sutra’ (thread) of a common theme-secrets of the human heart running through all with the banks of Narmada in the backdrop”. Narmada does not just provide the setting or the locale for the tales but it is a living presence, a character and
the tales can be described as the stream of the river’s consciousness. The river functions on the literal as well as the metaphorical level. The Narmada is thread that holds not only the central character (nameless bureaucrat) but also monks, ascetics, courtesans, scientists, bandits, music teachers, minstrels, archaeologists and tribals. The novelist affirms faith in quest rather than static, dedication rather than alienation and survival rather than renunciation. The Narmada is immortal in its presence, its beauty, power and continuity of life.

A river flows through various twists and turns, moods and attitudes and on the bank leaves much for the spectator to analyze in *A River Sutra*. All is bound in that flowing river. From the first page to the last pageant, it leaves the reader awed by aura it creates. The novel is set in a mysterious atmosphere. It appears more like a fairy tale about ghosts, and once you are transferred into those gothic surroundings, the stories themselves start unraveling. There is a bungalow in a far, remote village—a land of trebles, about nineteen kilo meters from the main town, situated by the side of river Narmada. The retired bureaucrat, having lived a life immersed in the world and having fulfilled his worldly obligations, decides to settle down in a guesthouse situated on the banks of the Narmada as a manager. It is situated halfway up a hill of the Vindhya Range. On the river bank there is a dense jungle: “towering bamboo thickets and trees overgrown with wild jasmine and lantana creepers cover the hillsides.” (p. 3-4) It takes two years to complete the Narmada pilgrimage. This river originated from Lord Shiva’s body. The legend says that

……Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream
took on the form of woman – the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin
innocently tempting even ascetic to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at
one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet
another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive
variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the delightful one, blessing
her with the words “you shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible.” (pp. 8-9)

In ancient Indian tradition, the river has powers enough to heal or purify a soul. For the Aryans
in India, the ‘river cult’ is a symbol of their pre-Indian existence. The river is also a teacher to
bureaucrat in the novel. The river for some people in the novel is immortal and holy, and for
some others unchangeable. There are extremes also to which religious folly could take men.
People fast to death or immolate themselves on the banks of Narmada or drown in her waters,
in order to gain release from the cycle of birth or rebirth. Narmada’s holiness is believed to
dispel the malevolent effects of Saturn so all manner of epileptics, depressed, and other
unfortunate rush to her banks. The Narmada attracts scholars like Prof. Shankar too.

In the novel, the Narmada is almost a silent character, who has witnessed and encountered
people from all walks of life, listened to them, consoled them with her music, purified them
with her water. The river is a symbol of bondage here. And the stories they narrate sink into the
reader’s consciousness and offer him a profound insight into human motives just as rivers flow
into ocean and swell its volume of water.

The stories in the novel give the writer an opportunity to focus on Indian culture. Story-telling
itself is an art which performs an important function. We no longer live in places where we can hear these ancient mythological stories; parents don’t sit around and tell their children such stories. One way in which stories could be told is through a novel. A very important function of such stories is that they have a healing effect on people living in cities and have been thrown into disarray. A story has something in it that enlightens something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. It need not solve these problems. Each story in A River Sutra leads to serious questions left unanswered by the author. Through these stories Gita Mehta takes the reader to the origins of Indian philosophy, religion, music, asceticism and acquaints the reader with this rich cultural heritage.

As we sheaf through the pages of the novel, it appears as if a mystery unfolds itself; or we are reading through a diary, or, may be, we are looking at the portraits in a gallery, one by one and each one reliving its past through speech, through stories. Reader is reminded of Chaucer and his Canterbury Tales. Just like Canterbury was a place of pilgrimage, so is river Narmada where many lives converge; just like the travelers told their stories to the owner of the Tabbard Inn, we have a set of six stories by different people narrated to the bureaucrat. Chaucer’s characters are never shadowy and lifeless and his Prologue is an introduction to the cross section of the 14th century society. But Gita Mehta’s characters are mysterious and her novel is an introduction to a social set-up interwoven with the rich threads of Indian mythology, philosophy, religion and music.

According to Pushpinder Syal “A River Sutra is a chain of linked stories very much in keeping
with the Indian tradition of story-telling which contains in it pairs different narrators and listeners”.³ In the words of Stella Sandahl “A River Sutra presents the river as a timeless source of Indian spirituality, its banks throng by holy men and by pilgrims searching for enlightenment”.⁴

Gita Mehta's A River Sutra emphasizes the mysteries of the East that need no confirmation from the west. It presents various hues of life in a realistic manner. The novel has a setting on the banks of one among India's holiest river- the Narmada, amid ‘the constant traffic of pilgrims, archaeologists, teachers, policemen, priests, doctors and traders.’ A River Sutra is a collection of six stories: “The Monk’s”, “The Teacher’s”, “The Executive’s”, “The courtesan’s”, “The Musician’s” and “The Minstrel’s” are the beads linked together by a common theme and thread that binds, i.e. Narmada.

On one hand these stories depict complexity of human emotions, on the other they illuminate the paradoxes of India. They are like “worthy offerings to the holiest of Hindu rivers.” Mehta unravels the deep feelings of man especially in an era of growing fretfulness over issues of faith and value. Her thesis is: “Man is the greatest truth. There is nothing beyond.” Her “Sutradhaar” voices her philosophy: “The diversity of the people provides me with a constant source of interest and I often fall into conversation with pilgrims. Across the river the solitary lights of my bungalow shine like a light house in the blackness of the jungles, inviting me to return and consider what I have learned.”(p. 194)

The novel begins with the epigraph ‘Listen, O brother - Man is the greatest truth - Nothing beyond.’ A bureaucrat retires to the sacred river as a manager of a small guest house away
from the busy turmoil of life. Having fulfilled his worldly obligations, he decides to lead the life of a vanprasthi or ‘someone who has retired to the forest to reflect’. (p.1) The stories here are told by strangers who meet him.

‘The Monk’s Story’ is an account of a Jain Muni, whom the narrator meets near the guest house. It is a tale of confused young man named Ashok, who develops distaste for life due to the excesses of material comforts provided by his multimillionaire father. His father sends him to America for higher education but instead of getting real aim of education, under the influence of western culture he indulges baldly in woman, wine and sex which gratify his lust and biological need temporarily but not the requirement of heart. As Ashok himself says:

Gradually my life of unremitting pleasure ceased to satisfy, leaving me exhausted from the last indulgence while anticipating the next. At the age of twenty six I had already became fatigued by the world, knowing that even at the moment of gratification, the seed of new desire was being sown. (p.29)

Later his father suggests him to marry and his life becomes a quest for understanding 'the secrets of human heart'. Ashok's decision of renouncement causes him extreme mental and physical suffering and he himself is responsible for all such consequences. At the diksha ceremony, the other monks intone the afflictions that he would have to undergo. “You will be a social outcast. You will be insulted. You will be hounded.” (p.37) Jain philosophical literature emphasizes not only physical renunciation but also attitude of renunciation. It implies that the mind must be free of evil intentions and this was possible only through ahinsa, love for all
living beings. The monk's story ends in ambiguity. The narrator fails to understand the monk's line 'I have loved only one thing in my life.' (p.47) Then Tariq Mia, a wisest friend of his, explains to him that human heart has only one secret and that is the capacity to love. To make him convince the ways of human heart, he tells him a story.

The second story, ‘The Teacher’s story’ is steeped into Sufi mysticism. It is about a music teacher, Master Mohan who led 'an unhappy life, in spite of his small acts of kindness.' (p.53) His life is full of disappointments right from the beginning to the end. His wife and children disrespect him. The music teacher acquires the name as a child singer and is offered a fabulous recording contract, but "only weeks before the record was to be made, Master Mohan's voice had broken." (p.55) Master Mohan agrees to help a poor woman by keeping her blind brother Imrat at his home. He finds his family atmosphere turned much torturing and disturbing. But as the innocent child has an angelic voice, a sudden belief takes root in his mind and he is convinced, ‘God was giving him a second voice, greater than he had ever heard, greater than his own ever could be.’ (p.72) Therefore he instructs Imrat to sing songs of Kabir, Mirabai, Khusrau, Tulsi, Chisti and Chandidas, the wandering poets and mystics who had made India's soul visible to herself. Imrat's innocent devotion can be heard when he sang,

\begin{quote}
In the very spasm of death I see Your face.

I prostrate my head to Your drawn sword.

O, the wonder of Your protection.

The heat of Your presence.

Blinds my eyes.
\end{quote}
**Blisters my skin.**

**Shrivels my flesh. (Pp.86-87)**

While practicing songs in the gardens of Victoria Memorials in Calcutta, he attracts attention of people and soon becomes a famous singer. Once forced by master's cruel wife, the child agrees to perform at the residence of a great sahib. The master and the disciple have no idea of the inevitable. The sahib slits Imrat's throat saying, 'such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judges us?' (p.89) The end is gruesome and drives Mohan to the verge of madness because he thinks that he is behind the death of small child whom he loved most in the world. Master Mohan comes to the bank of Narmada in search of peace and lives with Tariq Mia for few months. Later on his way back he commits suicide because ‘he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child.’ (p.91)

The narrator becomes upset by old Mullah's accusation that he does not understand the world. Loud laughter pierces the morning silence as he walks through the jungle back to the bungalow. Mr. Chagla, his assistant, hands over him a letter from his old colleague. The latter said that his nephew, Nitin Bose, a director of a tea company, will be coming to his bungalow for a few days leave. After a month he receives a telegram of Nitin's arrival. But before he could reach the bungalow, he was arrested by the police. The police found him standing on the very edge of a cliff, staring down into the Narmada. The distinction of the young man surprises everybody. Dr. Mitra pushes the narrator into the cell to talk with Nitin. As he meets the young man, he requests him to help him and to read his diary. The story indicates distrust in the
goodness of human beings. It has a sensitive emotional unfolding, which consequently mark
the ways of the world and generates tolerance towards inhuman acts of man.

‘The Executive's Story’ is a strange case of romance which is narrated from a different angle.
The protagonist, Nitin Bose, a young executive, who suffocated by the sheer weight of
Calcutta's inescapable humanity, voluntarily exiles himself to a tea estate at the foot of the
Himalayas. Isolated from life, Nitin lives a life of deceptive tranquility as the manager of a
lonely tea-estate. He had renounced all the vices of the city life and finds an abiding interest in
the abstract world of the Puranas, the Vedas and the Upanishads, fact and fantasy merge, and
then to his horror, he discovers that he is obsessed by the spirit of a woman. He himself admits
to have been 'sick with love as if I had been pierced by all five arrows of desire? (p.126) Rima,
a tribal woman, comes to him every night and slides into his bed to coil her limbs around him.
He reminiscences in his diary:

Like a magician she drew me into a subterranean world of dream, her body teaching
mine the passing of the seasons, the secret rhythms of nature, until I understood
why my grandfather's books called these hills Kamrupa, the kingdom of the God of
Love. (p.129)

In due course Nitin is pierced with enchantment, inflamed with lust, parched with desire and
renders helplessly with the paroxysms of his own longing. The tribals of the region, with their
intuitive response to life, recognize the nature of his problem. To recover his mind he would
have to worship one particular goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada. The tribals
would beg the goddess to forgive Mr. Bose for his arrogance in denying the power of desire.

Nitin, possessed by Rima's soul goes to the bank of river Narmada for healing. Here he receives a psychological treatment in rituals performed by Vano villagers. By making idol and worshipping it Nitin respects both the power of desire and womanhood pervading in the nature as it is described in the story:

“The goddess is just the principle of life. She is every illusion that is inspiring love. That is why she is greater than all the gods combined. Call her what you will, but she is what a mother is feeling for a child. A man for a woman. A starving man for food. Human beings for God. And Mr. Bose did not show her respect so he is being punished.”(p.142)

And when the idol begins to disintegrate in the current, he watches fragments of the image being swept downstream - a broken arm, a breast, torn garlands spinning in the water… With this the binding of attachment of Rima's image gets fragmented like the idol, and Nitin Bose regains the normal state of mind.

Finally Nitin Bose leaves the bungalow and shortly after his departure the narrator receives a letter from his old colleague thanking him for looking after his nephew. After attending a seminar at Delhi, Dr. Mitra visits the bungalow. He talks about the threads of mythology, archaeology, anthropology in which the river is entangled. Dr. Mitra exposes the fact about the Supaneshwara temple on the north bank of the Narmada, where an immortal, Aryan warrior,
Avantihuma is asleep. To prove the fact, the bureaucrat enquires to his bungalow guard and gets his problem solved. After few months, one morning the bureaucrat was sitting behind his desk in the office, Mr. Chagla arrives with a woman visitor. Uncomfortable to keep her, the narrator inquires why she has been here in such a heavy monsoon. In response, she tells him her account and how her daughter was kidnapped two years ago. The story suggests that man suffers from emotional and spiritual limitations but despite these there is a realization of achievement.

In ‘The Courtesan's Story’ we meet the courtesan's daughter, young, beautiful and vivacious, compared by her mother to an angel, ‘giving love to all who met her as a child gives love to those who have cosseted and spoiled it because it does not know there is harshness in the world, or ugliness.’ (p.169) At the age of seventeen, she performs at the election meeting in the capital. The effect of love is so pervasive that even Rahul Singh, the most dreaded and wanted bandit in the Vindhyas, kidnappes her. Rahul Singh's patriotism which earns him ‘the highest decorations for his valor' in the Pakistani wars. On coming home, he was shocked to find his family dead and his lands grabbed by a man prospering under the protection of local politicians. Love, when thwarted or jilted, turns into hatred and vengeance, and 'Denied justice, Rahul Singh only did what any man of honor do.' (p.182) While she practices dancing inside the cave, he stands outside watching constantly 'as if trying to prove there was a greater art than all my arts, the ability of love someone as he loved me' (p.184) It is for her love that he risks his life. To please her, he goes into the bazaar, forgotten that whole bazaar knew his face. Before he could escape the police arrive and he was badly wounded in the exchange of gunfire. The tale ends with the death of Rahul Singh and his pregnant wife.
The diversity of the people on the river bank provides the narrator with a constant source of interest and he often falls into conversation with the pilgrims. The writer transports us to an innocent devotional world of music which attracts people irrespective of their status or position and leads them into a trance. Mehta's narration of the painful story of musician allows us to realize for ourselves the power of music and magic it creates. It has been brought out very well the belief that music has always had a soothing and healing effect on man in Indian culture.

‘The Musician's Story’ is a story which gives an insight into the classical music of India. The music teacher, a true genius, wants his daughter to listen to nature to learn music. Through music he tries to free her from her own image so that she could love beauty wherever she finds it. He teaches her,

“Listen to the birds singing. Do you hear the half notes and microtones pouring from their throats? ……..How that song ended on a single note when the birds settled into the tree? The greatest ragas must end like that, leaving just one note's vibrations on the air. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music.” (p.203)

The knowledge of the origin of ragas, the birth of a melody, the emotions through which ragas and raginis communicated with each other, Gandharva Ved’s creation of different moods by ragas etc. show the closeness of music to nature. The two stories have a painful end, and the two characters, Master Mohan and the musician's daughter come to the banks of Narmada for healing therapy. Does the Narmada heal their wound which life has given them? The former
commits suicide and the daughter wonders whether she will be able to become again the ragini to every raga.

The last tale is 'The Minstrel's Story'. It is the very interesting story of a Naga Baba, a disciple of Shiva, who undergoes the severest tests of penance. A child comes into his life and is renamed Uma, the daughter of the Narmada. She becomes a renowned singer of seared songs under the guidance of Naga Baba. But Naga Baba leaves her and goes away. The tale culminates in its climatic end. The Naga Baba reappears again surprisingly, after many years, as Prof. V.V. Shankar, the foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada in the country. Uma, the wandering minstrel emerges at the bungalow as a young woman, singing songs in praise of the Narmada:

The sages meditating on your river banks say
You are twice-born,
Once from penance,
Once from love. (p.275)
Bards and ascetics sing your wonders.
Gamblers, cheats and dancers praise you.
We all find refuge in your embrace
O holy Narmada. (p.279)

The bureaucrat is shocked at Naga Baba's identity. Naga Baba smiles replies, 'Don't you know the soul must travel through eighty four thousand births in order to become a man? (p.281)
Though Naga Baba renounces everything; he comes back to the world, for he realizes that renunciation is not the key to enlightenment or to attain salvation. A blend of reason and intellect is also necessary in life. All the characters who converge on the bank of Narmada regard it a holy river, but Professor Shankar says, ‘I am afraid I only care for the rivers immortality, not its holiness.’ (p.263) Once narrator asks Prof. Shankar why he does not think the river is sacred. His reply is so derisive, ‘Mere the mythology! A waste of time! If anything is sacred about this river, it is the individual experience of human beings who have lived here. (p.267) The bureaucrat had come to the banks of the Narmada River as an escapist who wanted to run away from the world. It is through the stories told to the narrator that one gains wisdom through lives lived keeping with the age old Indian tradition.

Rivers are regarded with love and reverence and figure prominently in the epic and folk literature of Indians.\(^5\) Mehta’s involvement in A River Sutra echoes Herman Hesse’s “Love this river, stay by it, learn from it.”\(^6\) Iyengar suggests that the river stirs “an attachment almost personal,” in the Indian: “The river in India is a feminine power and personality and the land (and men living on it) must woo her and deserve her love if their hopes of fruitfulness and security are to be realized.”\(^7\) In A River Sutra the Narmada is an active “participant in the action of the novel. All who come to her banks “woo” her in a hope to feel emotional security. Characters like Nitin Bose, Master Mohan and the Music Teacher experience “a sense of loss” in their lives, but on the banks of the river they are purged.

The river is “an ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power both of nature and of time.”\(^8\) on the one hand the Narmada signifies fertility and progression in life of men
and women coming to her banks; and on the other hand it stands for irreversible passage of
time. The time gone is gone forever and there is a sense of loss and oblivion.

There are several songs of the Narmada used as structural devices in the novel. Mehta weaves
her novel around the myth and ritual pattern of the ancient because it provides “emotional
certitude” to her. Like Herbert Weisenger she too believes in her five –thousand year old
tradition: “Because it beings with the need to survive, the pattern never loses its force, for it is
concerned always with survival, whether physical or spiritual.⁹ K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar points
out that rivers are regarded with veneration by writers like Kabir, Rao and Narayan: “Novels
with a river background are K. S. Venkataramani’s Murugan the Tiller, Humayun Kabir’s Men
and Rivers ... and of course R. K. Narayan’s novels centered in Malgudi-on-Sarayu. In Raja
Rao’s Kanthpura ... and The Serpent and the Rope.”

The contemporary relevance of A River Sutra cannot be denied because of the nation-wide on
going protest against Sardar Sarovar Project. To Mehta it seems “learning the secrets of a river
is a way to save it.” She joins hands with other activists to save the Narmada. Her crusade is to
restore not only the one but others also.

Mehta’s craftsmanship of using the Indian history is highly commendable. In Raj the theme of
India’s Royal past, colonial agenda and freedom struggle provide the ample setting to the
novelist from which to read the Indian history she tells. All the major events of the early
twentieth century are covered with the progression of protagonist as well as the action of the
novel. The later, A River Sutra, as the title itself suggests, the word ‘River’ in Indian mind
naturally relates to a culture which eventually fits for the fictionalization of the history. The
choice of her characters contributes to upkeep the sanctity of the river. A senior bureaucrat detaches himself from his own past, from the environment which was intolerable to him, from a background where snobbery persisted and life was bound by ridiculous codes of conduct. Stories which come to him have characters in them, making adjustments with their passions and environment. But until they make some sacrifice they do not get peace within or calm around. The river Narmada- and myth, rituals, tribals, their ethos, customs related to it and specially the diversity of the people on her bank provide the novelist to use her authentic historical material to have us a seminal work called ‘A River Sutra’.
References


