CHAPTER IV

A RIVER SUTRA: THE ETERNAL WITNESS

Published in 1993, Gita Mehta's A River Sutra has been widely spoken of as an Indian Canterbury Tales. It is a sequence of lyrical stories. Their connecting thread is that they take place on the banks of the river Narmada. The novel presents a "series of mythopoeic experiences as told to a retired bureaucrat on the banks of the river Narmada by a motley crowd of pilgrims and travellers."1 Regarding the diversity of the stories, E.Galle says that "the self-contained yet interconnected characters and stories fit Gita Mehta's purpose of multiplicity and unity which reconciles the rich diversity of doctrines in the symbolic flow of the River and the spirit of sutra."2

K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar in his Indian Writing in English observes that 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"3 and suggests that the river stirs "an attachment almost personal, 4 in the Indian mythology. In A River Sutra, the Narmada river is an active participant in the action of the novel. All those who come to her banks woo her with a view to finding 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.

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The river is also an ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power both of nature and time. On the one hand the Narmada signifies fertility and progression in the life of men and women coming to her banks. On the other it stands for the irreversible passage of time. The time gone is gone for ever and there is a sense of loss and oblivion. Galle says, "The Narmada river is the setting and the organizing principle of the novel. It provides its unity while the six stories give its multiplicity. The resulting figure is one of unitary pluralism, which is also the spirit Gita Mehta appears to promote."  

Mythologically Mehta contemplates the river thus:

It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman... Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the Delightful one, blessing her with words: 'You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible.'

And the objective of the river is suggested in the very opening pages itself: "Narmada River is thought to link mankind to the energy of Shiva" (8).
In the novel the river Narmada is the sutra, a thread that weaves the six stories that come across the narrator of the novel, who has renounced the world and is a recluse on the banks of Narmada. Before that he was a bureaucrat with a comfortable married life though the marriage bears no fruit. After his wife's death, he is now at a government guest house on the banks of Narmada and believes himself as one who is retired from the world: "I am now a vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect..., this rest house situated half way up a hill of the Vindhya Range has been my forest retreat." (1-2-3). Despite his declaration that he has renounced the world, the narrator is often found in curious conversation with the pilgrims at Mahadeo or with Tariq Mia, the mullah of the Muslim village:

The diversity of the people provides me with a constant source of interest and I often fall into conversation with the pilgrims. Across the river the solitary lights of my bunglow shine like a lighthouse in the blackness of the jungles, inviting me to return and consider what I have learned. (194)

The novel's progress relies on the narrator's ability to listen:

The novel, however, derives its strength from his curiosity to know and his capacity to listen. He is willing to listen to the enlightened monk even though he has never given a particular direction
to his life. He has never loved and he does not know what he wants to believe. Out of this negative capability, the novel grows.

As Asit Chandmal writes, “He is the narrator, the sutradhaar who recounts the stories strangers tell him.” As Galle observes, “The narrator-manager of the rest-house carries the thrust of A River Sutra because of his physical situation close to the Narmada and his spiritual preoccupation.” He came to the banks of the Narmada in search of tranquillity, instead he confronts “the powers of mythology, religion, music and philosophy.” The narrator, however, is not given a name.

Predictably enough, the novelist does not give an identity to the central figure by giving him a name. He remains nameless, and is in the process, not a complex psychological entity, but an ethical archetype, and in him the quest for redemption centres. The great aid to his meditation is apparently the beauty of the location in which he had settled.

He is quite convinced that the “Narmada in the holiest river in India.” Gita Mehta's point in A River Sutra is embodied in the progress of a mind undergoing a series of experiences resulting from his hearing stories which act on him as teaching anecdotes in the spirit of the sutra. He exists as a link between the stories, and as the stories are connected with the Narmada, has to live close to it, meeting
people who live in its vicinity or come to it on pilgrimage, or else
attracted by its spiritual or historical values.

All the six stories unravel the deep feelings of the inner
cognizance of man and the secrets of the human heart and attempt to
illustrate the epigraph of the novel: ‘Listen. O brother / Man is the
greatest truth. / Nothing beyond.’ (Love Songs of Chandidas). “The
spiritual turbulence of Karma Cola, the political perturbation of Raj
are replaced by the tranquillity of a new kind .... In many respects
reminding us of Hesse’s Siddartha, the novel has been reckoned as a
spiritual touchstone.”12 Asit Chandmal says, “These are stories of
obsession and renunciation, desperation and destruction, desire and
death. Above all these are stories of sexual, sensual and spiritual
longings and love. A worthy offering to the holiest of Hindu rivers.”13

Almost all the characters in different stories converge for one or
the other reason near the banks of the river to attain renunciation and
tranquillity. On the banks of Narmada we meet monks and ascetics,
courtesans and bandits, music teachers and their prodigies, minstrels
and Naga Babas, scientists and astrologers. Each of them comes here
hoping to find a panacea for the malady that afflicts him or her.
Whether the river really has the power to change the lives of the
hopeful is a recurring question in the novel. “Mehta’s characters are
an unlikely assortment of paradoxes, tensions and confusions, with
each one attempting to discover and interiorize the truth of his being
in his own unique way.”

Standing on the escarpment of a hill, the narrator “can see the
river flowing to meet her bridegroom in all those variations that
delighted the Ascetic while on her banks the pilgrims move slowly
towards their destination.... The white-robed men and women seem
the spume of the river’s waves.” (9)

In “The Monk’s Story” the narrator comes across a young Jain
monk whose father has spent some sixty-two million rupees on his
renunciation ceremonies hoping to outdo even Mahavira himself. After
leading his life in luxury for thirty years as a son of a man who owns
one of the largest diamond companies in the world, he gets tired of it
and decides to renounce the world because he has loved only one thing
in his life – “The human heart” (48) and “Its secrets.” (48)

For the first time I had recognized that
wealth had excised my father’s emotions, freeing
him to examine people as if they were
abstractions. His benevolence had a cold
mathematics that left him unmoved and without
curiosity about those he helped.

The inhuman nature of his philanthropy
had frightened me. Part of me still wished to
become like him. On the rare occasions when he
had allowed me to conduct a minor negotiation, I
had been gratified by his congratulations, and yet all through that year I had felt an undercurrent of fear that in inheriting my father's business acumen I might also inherit his inhumanity... (25-26)

Gradually my life of unremitting pleasure ceased to satisfy me, leaving me exhausted from the last indulgence while anticipating the next. At the age of twenty-six I had already become fatigued by the world, knowing that even at the moment of gratification, the seed of new desire was being sown... My life was like a dreamless sleep, office routine following domestic routine without a tremor. (29-30)

And so he decides to become a Jain monk because, "A Jain monk seeks to free himself of the fetters of worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy and non-violence." (11)

... I am filled with remorse at my father's sorrow as I was once overwhelmed by tenderness at his anguish (33)... His anguish had melted the numbness that froze my heart. I was overcome by compassion for him, for myself, for my concerned and curious wife, for the human helplessness that linked us all.

It was my first experience of ahimsa.

In his attempt to frighten me, my father had made me realize that to prevent suffering a
Rama Nair says that "The Monks' Story" ends in ambiguity and irony. The monk leaves the bureaucrat abruptly, saying that his brother monks were waiting for him. He could not stay longer to answer his questions, for if he was late they would leave him, and he would have to join a new sect of mendicants. "'Don't ask me to do this, my friend, ' he says, 'I am too poor to renounce the world twice.'" This is suggested in the text by the old monk when the young monk tells him about his first experience of ahimsa:

"The human heart must conquer many hurdles to recapture that vision until ahimsa can become a way of life."

"I am willing to cross the hurdles."

The old monk had smiled. "Oh, my innocent young friend. Can you overcome your disgust at all the things from which your father's wealth has protected you? Can you beg in the filth of the bazaars? Can you eat what has been discarded? Until you can do these small things you will understand neither the non-violence of ahimsa nor gain freedom from the world." (35:36)

The essence of the Jaina perspective is suggested by the monk's father when he says that a Jain monk "observes respect for life when all the
time he is working toward the goal of denying his own life" (34-35).

About the narrative pattern of the story Indira Nityanandam says,

The opulence of his family, the religious ceremonies and the hardships of a monk's life are graphically described. Human vanity even in renunciation is hinted upon as the monk says: "I push aside the strings of diamond solitaires, anxious to conceal my mortification at the scale on which he has orchestrated my renunciation of the world."16

To explain the secrets of the human heart Tariq Mia narrates "The Teacher's Story" to the narrator. Master Mohan is an unfortunate music teacher whose voice gets shattered, thus his ambition of becoming a successful singer remaining unfulfilled. In the course of his life, he comes across an orphan blind boy, Imrat, with a voice suitable for his becoming a successful singer. "The clarity of the voice, even through the hissing of the old record, is so extraordinary, each note hanging in the stillness like a drop of water, that it is sometime before I decipher the savagery of lyrics" (49), the narrator observes when Tariq Mia plays the boy's record. "Such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judges us?" (89), the great Sahib says about Imrat's voice. Master Mohan starts teaching music to Imrat. As the boy song, "Hearing the clear notes pierce the night, Master Mohan knew he had been made guardian of something rare, as if his own life until now had only been
a purification to ready him for the task of tending this voice for the world" (67-68). And when the songs of Imrat get recorded, they become instantly popular. After coming to know about the divine voice of Imrat, the rich great Sahib desires to hear Imrat singing at his house for which he is ready to pay five thousand rupees, five times more than what is offered by the recording company. With the persuasion of his wife and with Imrat’s willingness to sing, Master Mohan reluctantly agrees to it. After hearing Imrat the great Sahib slits the boy’s throat and kills him. “Why does a man steal an object of worship so no one but himself can enjoy it?” (90) Tariq Mia describes the great Sahib’s act of killing Imrat. After this incident Master Mohan comes to the banks of the Narmada river to hand over the record of Imrat’s songs to Tariq Mia, as Imrat always wished to sing at the tomb of Amir Rumi, a Sufi saint of the sixteenth century. But on his way back to Calcutta he throws himself under the train and dies. “Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he loved the blind child. I don’t know the answer, little brother. It is only a story about the human heart” (91). Tariq Mia concludes, “The story indicates a 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,”17 as Pradeep Trikha observes.
In “The Executive’s Story,” Nitin Bose, an executive suffering from a sort of psychological imbalance, comes to the Narmada rest house to get cured. This Calcutta-based young executive in one of Calcutta’s oldest tea companies, like all his other colleagues, has been educated at exclusive boarding schools, has obtained his job through family connections, and is accustomed to believe that success lay in imitating anglicized aloofness. But getting tired of the sluggish city blitz and suffocated by the sheer weight of Calcutta’s inescapable humanity, he opts the solitude of the tea estate and goes as a manager to one that is stretched at the deserted Himalayan foothills. But later, driven by loneliness—“I pulled the Rig Veda from the bookshelf, hoping to find some philosophical consolation in it, but the passage I read shocked me, so accurately did it describe my loneliness.

At first was Death.
That which did mean an utter emptiness.
And emptiness, mark thou, in Hunger’s Self.” (123)

He develops a relationship with a tribal woman called Rima who turns out to be a coolie’s wife. This disgusts him and in a sense of shame he returns to Calcutta. But by that time he becomes mentally sick and believes himself as possessed. On the advice of a priest at the tea estate, he comes to imagine that his cure lay at the shrine that overlooks Narmada River, for, in the priest’s words, “only that river has been given the power to cure him” (139). The goddess of the shrine is a half-serpent woman symbolizing “desire” –
a stone image of a half-woman with the full breasts of a fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake, because the tribals believe they once ruled a great snake kingdom until they were defeated by the gods of the Aryans. Saved from annihilation only by a divine personification of the Narmada River, the grateful tribals conferred on the river the gift of annulling the effects of snakebite ... The Vano villagers also believe their goddess cures madness, liberating those who are possessed. (6)

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... You have heard the pilgrims praying 'Save us from the serpent's venom.' Well, Sir, the meaning of the prayer is as follows. The serpent in question is desire. Its venom is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire. (142-143)

Mr. Chagla illustrates to the narrator. As Galle says,

The symbolism of the serpent appears with insistence in A River Sutra because it belongs to the mythical essence of the Narmada. The Narmada is a remedy for the serpent-desire
because she was born from desire as well as from asceticism, the conqueror of desire:

You are twice-born  
Once from penance  
Once from love

As the serpent is desire and its poison the denial of desire (137) the Narmada is desire and desire repression. She is "the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from His (Shiva's) penance" (8, 91) but she is also "a beautiful virgin tempting even ascetics to pursue her" (8). She is desire born from the repression of desire and its opposite. As such she is a twin of the serpent.18

Dr. Mehta defines the conflict that drives Nitin Bose mad as the classic conflict of instinct and reason that prevailed between the pre-Aryans and the Aryans. Gita Mehta also brings out the myth of Shiva to describe Nitin Bose's condition:

At noon the sun is so strong its harsh light, gives the river the appearance of beaten metal, but at this hour the morning light catches every nuance of the water's movement. Below me the wind was tossing the rippling waves up so that they sparkled in the light, before disappearing into the shadows below. I watched the water sparkling and disappearing, sparkling and disappearing, like the anklets encircling a woman's foot, and thought of the Ascetic
watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance.

A flock of parakeets, messengers of Kama, God of Love, settled in a green cloud on the mango tree shading my head. I smiled, remembering how the Ascetic had sneered at Kama’s power, even though the gods had warned the Ascetic that he too must feel Desire for without Desire the play of the worlds would cease.

But still the Ascetic had sneered as he was pierced by the five flower-tipped arrows unleashed by Kama from his sugarcane bow — the Exchanger, the Inflamer, the Parcher, the Paroxysm of Desire, the Carrier of Death.

Then Maya, the illusion of the worlds, had appeared — the only woman capable of arousing the lust of the Destroyer of worlds. Enraged at the destruction of his meditation, the Ascetic had opened his third eye, the Lotus of Command, and reduced Kama to ashes, even as he himself was being consumed by Desire. (96-97)

Nitin Bose, after performing the rites to the goddess, gets cured.

In “The Courtezan’s Story,” Rahul Singh, the most wanted bandit in the Vindhyas, abducts the beautiful and tender daughter of a renounced courtesan of Shahbag, makes her rest in a cave and waits
for her consent to marry her. On the north bank of the Narmada beyond the thick forest the bandits reside in the temple of Supaneshwara. The tribals of Vano village believe that an Immortal – a four-thousand-year old Aryan warrior named Avatihuma – sleeps in the forest near the temple. Though his head was severed from his body by their ancestors, the pre-Aryans, he could not be killed because Aryan warriors had been granted immortality by their gods. The head just lies in the jungle, sleeping because it cannot die, and honeybees are said to circle it. The bandits living in that forest also seek the Immortal because they believe if they are stung by one of the honeybees, they cannot be killed in a police shootout. The men of Rahul Singh's gang believe that Rahul Singh himself is immortal because he had been stung by one of those bees. The arts of beauty, refinement, and sophistry of the courtezan's daughter stand in contrast with the careless, crude and unpolished life of the bandit: “From the bells on her anklets she could teach the impermanence of the world. Through a song she could inspire her listeners to imagine the possibility of perfection” (168), the courtesan says about her daughter. Still she agrees to marry him because there has been a greater art in him than all her arts, the ability to love someone. “He was a strange man, you see. So generous he did not know he was generous and yet always hesitant to ask anything of others,” (185-186) she says about him to the narrator. Rahul Singh is also said to have the highest decorations for his valour in two wars with Pakistan.
When his soldier's commission ends and he comes home, he finds his family dead and his lands stolen. No one dares to help him because the man who took his land had the protection of the local politicians. Denied justice, he takes vengeance on the family of the man who takes his lands by killing them. Thereby he becomes a hunted man. After a few months of his marriage Rahul Singh dies in an exchange of gunfire with the police. His wife, whose grief was too great to sustain the life within her, decides to return to her mother and take vengeance on the men who had killed her husband and her unborn child. But in defence of her recapture she gets drowned in Narmada river.

In “The Musician's Story” a young musician comes to Mahadeo as a pilgrim. This trip is a part of her musical education. Her physical ugliness is a contrast and hides the beauty of her music which is one of the arts gifted by Shiva to mankind:

“There was no art until Shiva danced the Creation” .... Music lay asleep inside a motionless rhythm – deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being, as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shiva’s face, and through their vibrations the universe was brought into existence.
"The melodies of these six ragas sustain the harmonies of living things. When they fuse together they become the beat of Shiva's drum that brings the universe to destruction. But they are all male. And music can never be without desire. Life must create more life or become death. So each of the six ragas was given six wives, six raginis to teach them love. Their children are the putras, and in this way music lives and multiplies." (205-206)

The young musician is the daughter of a great genius of music who has shared his knowledge only twice – with his daughter and with a handsome young man who promises to marry his daughter. About the purpose of teaching music to her, the musician says, "Through music he tried to free me of my own image so I could love beauty wherever it was to be found, even it was not present in my mirror" (211). And so she can find beauty in a crude painting of a woman’s torso, which the narrator fails to find. "Perhaps only genius can see beauty in what appears ugly. My father can. And he is called a genius" (196). But the student of her father fails to keep his promise. From then she stops playing music and the very sound of music becomes hateful to her ears. Her father brings her to the Narmada banks to make her meditate on the waters of Narmada, the symbol of Shiva’s penance, until she gets cured and become again "the ragini to every raga." (225)
He says I must understand that I am the bride of music, not of musician. But it is an impossible penance that he demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside.

Do you think it can be done?
Do you think this river has such power?

The musician asks the narrator. Pradeep Trikha says that this story is "both dramatic and tragic and also gives insight into the music of India. The descriptive passages create an 'atmosphere of astonishment' for the reader... In this story there is a blending of humane and compassionate qualities in a man." 19 "The beauty of music, the grace of a raga, the origin of the saptasuras, the music of nature, the tenets in Ragavirodha – all figure in the musician's story." 20

"Of course not. The beauty of the Narmada makes it a perfect retreat for anyone like myself wishing to withdraw from the world. But how can it exorcise a lover's grief?" (227) the narrator asks Tariq Mia. To explain if the Narmada river has such curing power or not, Tariq Mia narrates "The Mistrel's story" to the narrator. The story is "a recreation of the myth of Siva and Narmada." 21 In this story a Naga ascetic, one who belongs to the martial ascetics called Naga sadhus, the protectors, after enduring all his hard penances, finds a little girl and gives her a new name, Uma and a new mother, Narmada for, "The
Narmada claims all girls as hers (259). Reason and desire are juxtaposed in this strange combination. On the banks of Narmada the Naga Baba teaches Uma to read and write and sing in praise of Narmada, thus making her a river mistrel. After fostering her for some years the Naga Baba leaves Uma to follow the next stage of his enlightenment.

"I didn't think the Naga Baba would ever leave Uma. She was more than a child to him. She was the fruit of his austerity."

I asked what he meant. Tariq Mia paused at the bridge, staring into the water, his narrow face thrown into shadow by the flame tree above his head spraying its bright feathers of red and orange petal against the green fruit of a nearby banana tree.

"Maybe it's only an old man's foolishness, little brother. But if the Narmada was born from Shiva's penance, then surely Uma was born of the Naga Baba's penance. Tell me what higher enlightenment could he acquire by leaving her?" (258)

Tariq Mia says to the narrator.

A delegation of archeologists, headed by Prof. V.V. Shankar, the foremost archeological authority on Narmada river in the country, arrive at the rest house bungalow to conduct an archeological dig.
kms from there and use the rest house as their headquarters. Prof. Shankar, who has brought forth a book on Narmada. *The Narmada Survey*, that made a huge splash in archeological circles, is the Chairman of Indian Preservation Trust, which is financing the dig.

At first the narrator feels that the activity of the archeologists has intruded the solitude of his secluded life, their energy bringing back memories of his own days as a government officer. Later the absence of the archeologists, when all of them are gone for a week to a site farther up river, leaves the narrator lonely:

I had not suspected that I would feel so lonely while they were away. I found I missed the noisy lunches with the young archeologists and their infectious enthusiasm when describing the progress of their excavations. I found I missed Professor Shankar and the pleasure of talking to a companion who shared my own background of government service.

Sitting on the terrace, meditating in the darkness before dawn, I admitted to myself that I envied the archeologists for still belonging to a world that I had given up. (270)

And it is only through their conversation that the true relevance of the Narmada is, for the first time, recognized by the narrator. – Thousands of years ago the sage Vyasa dictated the *Mahabharata* on this riverbank. In our own century, this region provided the setting for
Kipling's *Jungle Book*. In between, countless other men have kept their mark on the river. For instance, Kalidasa's poem *The Cloud Messenger* and his great play *Shakuntala* both describe the hills behind this rest house. Then twelve hundred years ago Shankaracharya composed a poem to the river. And so, for Prof. Shankar the river's relevance is its immortality:

"... the Narmada is what we call a degrading river. It has a very fast current, which erodes the riverbed, cutting deeper and deeper into the rock. But the Narmada has never changed its course. What we are seeing today is the same river that was seen by the people who lived here a hundred thousand years ago. To me such a sustained record of human presence in the same place – that is immortality." (264)

Prof. Shankar denies the mythological implications of the river's holiness: "Mere Mythology! A waste of time! If anything is sacred about this river, it is the individual experiences of the human beings who have lived here." (267) He says that the narrator has chosen the wrong place to flee the world because too many lives converge on these banks, to which the narrator agrees:

I nodded agreement although the archeologist was already moving across the dark lawn towards the light of the veranda. I was thinking of the people I had encountered since I had come to the rest house, and Tariq Mia's observation
that they were like water flowing through lives
to teach us something. Perhaps the old mullah
was right. Perhaps destiny had brought me to
the banks of the Narmada to understand the
world. (268-269)

When the narrator, in his desire to know more about the river, asks
Prof. Shankar if he could send any river minstrel, Uma as a slender
young woman comes to sing on the Narmada, and to the narrator's
shock, Prof. Shankar turns out to be the Naga Baba who has
"reentered the world." (281) "I have no great truths to share, my
friend." ... "I told you, I am only a man" ... "Don't you know the soul
must travel through eighty four thousand births in order to became a
man?"... "Only then can it re-enter the world." (281) Prof. Shankar
tries to clear the narrator's doubt. The novel ends with
Shankaracharya's song on the Narmada sung by Uma in which the
immortality of the river is mentioned:

"It is written in the scriptures
That you were present at the birth of time
When Shiva as a golden peacock
Roamed the ocean of the void.

"You reminded the Destroyer
Creation awaited his command.
Fanning then his terrible feathers,
Shiva brought forth this world and the
mountain
Where he sits in meditation
Until the Destruction.

"You were present at the Creation
By Shiva's command you alone will remain
At the Destruction"

"It is foretold by the wise who know the truth,
At midnight when the dark flood comes
You will turn into a girl
As radiant as a column of luster.

"Holding a trident in your slender hand you
will say
Sages, leave your forest hermitages.
Do not delay. The time of great destruction
is here.

"'While the Destroyer dances
All will be destroyed.
I and I alone am sanctuary.

"'Bring your knowledge of mankind
And follow me
I will lead you to the next creation." (277-278)

Prof. Shankar says that the datings of the rock samples picked from the caves behind the Narmada waterfalls prove that they are from the Stone Age. Lower down the same cliff they find implements from successive ages - Neolithic, Iron, Bronze. Dr. Mitra says that according to the puranic scriptures four hundred billion sacred spots are supposed to be there on Narmada banks:
"... the great Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the Narmada. I suppose even the Greeks and the Alexandrines had heard about the Narmada's holiness and the religious suicides at Amarkantak—people fasting to death or immolating themselves on the Narmada's banks, or drowning in her waters—in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth."

He shook his head in disbelief at the extremes to which religious folly could take men.

"The ancient Greeks would probably have sympathized with the river's mythology, but at least they had to deal with only one set of myths, whereas Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in."

I laughed at Dr. Mitra's expression of incomprehension as he expanded on the excesses of the devout.

"On top of all that mythology, there's the river's astrology. Her holiness is believed to dispel the malevolent effects of Saturn so all manner of epileptics, depressives, and other unfortunates rush to her banks. And yet, the Narmada is also a magnet to scholars. Towns on the banks of the river are renowned for the learning of their Brahmins. It is as if reason and instinct are constantly warring on the banks of"
the Narmada. I mean, even the war between the Aryans and the pre-Aryans is still unresolved here.” (152, 153)

At the end of the novel, the narrator, who for years has been admiring the Narmada as if it is a woman:

I watched the water slowly redden, catching reflections from the rose colours of dawn, and imagined the river as a woman painting her palms and the roles of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover.

(139)

and who has been seeing the river as “the living daughter of Shiva”:22

“... Looking from his inward contemplation
To watch you The Destroyer said,
O damsel of the beautiful hips,
Evoker of Narma, lust,
Be known as Narmada... (273-274)

When he looks at the river he can only see the water flowing black under a moonless sky and the current carrying the flickering clay lamps toward the ocean. As Galle observes.

The central knowledge Gita Mehta wants the main narrator to reach is that the Narmada will not satisfy his wish to “withdraw from the world”(1). He will have finally to re-enter the world like Professor Shankar, discovering under
Tariq Mia's gentle prodding that he was "brought here to gain the world, not forsake it." (216)

The Narmada River unites the institutional tribal philosophy with the rational Aryan worldview, and the mythical perceptions of both with the conceptual approaches suggested through remarks by various characters such as Mr.Chagla and Dr.Mitra. Nothing is destroyed or discarded, but a new insight is proposed. Mythology cannot be maintained as belief, it remains as knowledge, pleasure and wisdom, the metaphoric expression of realities that concepts cannot account for.2

As Rama Nair says,

The river sutras unsettle his (the narrator) subconscious, and unconsciously and ironically, that is his 'epiphanic' moment. In interpreting and systematizing the meanings available to provide a coherent vision of life, the protagonist is compelled to question those values that he had taken for granted.2

"I stared at the flashes of illumination, wondering for the first time what I would do if I ever left the bungalow," the narrator contemplates.

Novels set on the banks of a river are not new to Indian literature. Rivers are regarded with love and reverence and figure prominently in the epic and folk literature of Indians. Nirad
C. Chaudhuri observes that the river cult is a pre-Aryan belief brought from the banks of the Danube. In this novel, Gita Mehta’s idea echoes Hermann Hesse’s “Love this river, stay by it, learn from it.” Rama Nair says.

The bureaucrat exiles himself from life to seek enlightenment in a setting that abounds with the exuberance and vitality of the very essence of creation itself. The images of the Narmada and its lush banks are described with its associative richness in lyrical terms.

Woodlands heavy with wild Jasmine
Embrace you with their fragrance
Hearing your approach
Young plantain trees
Burst into sudden blossom.

The use of such expressive symbols stirs universal meanings by evoking archetypal associations.

The central paradox of A River Sutra begins with the dominant myth of Shiva. As Rama Nair points out,

In A River Sutra the myth of Shiva, the Great Ascetic, is contemporized to communicate an aesthetic experience of salvation. Shiva is the supreme yogin, but he is also the lover of his spouse who is often called his Sakti, the divine energy without which the world would cease to move. Man, himself, would be a ‘fragmented’
being if reason and desire did not fuse to enable
and enrich each other. The holy Narmada was
the fruit of Siva's penance — it was the river,
which sang to its devotees:

Bring your knowledge of mankind
And follow me.
I will lead you to the next creation.

Seen from this angle, passion could be
interpreted as creative force — with powers to
cleanse, heal and redeem.²⁷

The traditional form of the novel is replaced in *A River Sutra* by
a didactic subdivision of its constituent elements into narratives noted
for their brevity and romance. The irony of life itself is woven into the
moral fabric of these tales. The organising principle of *A River Sutra* is
conceived both temporally and spatially. The oracular tales of *A River
Sutra* embody within themselves "fragments of significance" and
derive from the epiphanic moment, the flash of instantaneous
comprehension with no direct reference to time. Northrop Frye states,
"by the time we get them, in the form of proverbs, riddles,
commandments and etiological folk tales, there is already a
considerable amount of narrative in them. They too are encyclopedic in
tendency, building up a total structure of significance, or doctrine,
from random and empiric fragments."²⁸
As Indira Nityanandam says,

After *Karma Cola* and *Raj* comes *A River Sutra*. The first had hordes of Westerners arriving in India to understand and embrace Indian culture. The second combined history and fiction to present a "richly decorated brocade over-sewn with sex, landscape polo, politics and tragedy," according to *The Observer*. *A River Sutra* reminds us of the gopurams of South Indian temples – crowded with a myriad sculptured figures – each an independent entity and yet part of a unified whole. The novel echoes the view that "a novel is more a way of travelling than a point of arrival, more an invitation to wander than a secure niche, and more akin to the way a man enters and meanders through this world than to an assured resting place in the after life."  

The oracular tales of *A River Sutra* build up a total structure of significance from empiric fragments, as Northrop Frye would say. They show that myth is a central informing power that in its archetypal connotations suggests a ritual of self-discovery. The protagonist at the end of the novel arrives at a coherent vision of life and is compelled to question those values that he has taken for granted. The stories told to the bureaucrat on the banks of the river tend to be quite savage. Each tale is aimed at exploring the tragic reality of life and presents choices, metaphysical and others. Thus the
existent pattern of thought and expression seems to be that renunciation is not the only key to enlightenment. Reason and passion, intellect and emotion are vital components of life. The redemptive vision of life would entail recognition of the inherent contradictions of life, which is a necessary prelude to the struggle towards coherence.
REFERENCES


