A River Sutra: A Sweet Symphony of India

‘Mehta tries to penetrate into the hidden dimensions of Indian culture by focusing on culture while maintain the traditional focus on the collective cultural identity of others.’ (Sharma 10)

The title of the novel is very appealing as the novel revolves around river Narmada. It flows from Amarkantak and binds together the people of different religion, caste, creed and system. Comparative to other novels A River Sutra is a true, rich and lyrical portrayal of India and its culture through varied stories. It includes characters of different status and background depicting real India. This novel is mainly about dignified culture of India and seems musical appraisal full of life and vigour. It focuses on the unity and diversity of culture, variety of religions, and spontaneous flow of love in India which binds the variety of India in a single strand that is the sutra of the river Narmada. Through six unconnected stories the nameless narrator makes us feel passionately that how the holiest river of India, the Narmada threads together the different people who come to its shore and console them all in the manner they want. ‘Each enchanting tale is a rivulet pouring its truth into the long river of life. All are bonded through one sutra, the river Narmada.’ (Sharma 10)

Mehta here exhibits the gratitude of Indians for nature, especially for the river. ‘Throughout the book, the reader is made aware of Hindu reverence for nature, which is an aspect of, not distinct from, the divine.’ (Clintonn Bennett 2) Further, nature has feminine qualities. The river Narmada is described as a lover, going to meet her bridegroom, the Lord of the Oceans. Mohit K. Ray also noticed, 'In A River Sutra Mehta probes the nature-woman relationship from a special perspective which also constitutes the essential Indianness of the novel.' (32) Mehta tries to pour the myth, history and contemporary world in a great intensity in this novel. In an interview with
CJS Walia she said about the novel, 'I was trying to bring mythological time, historical time, contemporary time, and narrative time all into say one paragraph.'

The novel brings richer and more complex essence of true India. It depicts the form of love in the widest sense. The river Narmada is described as a lover, going to meet her bridegroom, the Lord of the ocean. There are six stories about different characters like a Jain mendicant, a Muslim music teacher, a wandering ascetic, a courtesan in search of her kidnapped daughter, a genius sitar player, and a tea plantation official who has encountered Nagas. Different religious themes represent India. It binds all different characters and their religions into a single thread or sutra which weaves them all into a cohesive search for spiritual truth. There lies true unity even in diversity in India and its culture. Madhuri Bite stated rightly, ‘As a diasporic writer, she dedicated her writing towards Indian culture and society.’ (1)

The present novel shows the vibrant, colourful culture and varied aspects of India. Gita Mehta throws the subtle light on the current practices, contrary to the Indian sensibility and culture. Indian culture emphasizes on humanity, contentment and peace of life. Her characters search for something which could satisfy their quench and make them contented. The people lead an unsatisfactory life which they try to make peaceful and satisfactory. The novel depicts the dignified culture of India and contentment involved in it which Indians are unable to grasp, inherit and adopt properly and hence they suffer.

All the six stories portraying different characters show how their life is incomplete and they are ignorant of something which Mehta leaves on readers to brood over. The story of Jain monk is also illustrative of this concept. On the one hand the father of the Jain monk tells us about the sacred human practices done by every Jain, on the other his own business and money is not devoid from violence. Though his father says that 'there are so many activities we can not undertake for fear of harming life' (24) but soon the monk realised that his father 'was unmoved by the condition under which the diamonds were mined, or the distressing poverty of the miners' (25) His benevolence and humanity is like a cover under which lies the
stark reality of violence. Many Indian hypocrites are described in Karma Cola who assume themselves as guru. But they do not follow such norms on which they could be entitled as true gurus. His father opposed violence while selecting profession or manner of doing things, he himself creating violence. Similarly, the renunciation-procession of his son takes place with all pomp and show. He realized that his wealth is not completely devoid of violence. He says, 'over the years I had often insisted that although we did not perpetrate physical cruelty ourselves, our wealth was sustained by violence.' (28)

The procession at the time of renunciation also creates a lot of violence as 'People are clamouring over each other's shoulder to reach the silver carriage from which fortunes are being dispersed so carelessly into the air…Then the crowd pushes against the guards, screaming and waving at my carriage, fearful of losing such treasure.' (23) If the novel is observed minutely the intermingling of Indian sensibility and culture pervade each and every story. When the monk is announcing to be non-violent, for the whole life, the violence takes place at the very early stage of it.

Mehta talks about the changed scenario of India today. It contrasts from its earlier period. People used to live with pride in suffering for the welfare of others. It was their cultural tendency and heritage but now they harm and deceive others for their own sake. The contractor is moved by Imrat's melodious voice in The Teacher's Story. But he resents at Master Mohan, teacher of Imrat when he requests to give him promised money. The changes in the city of Shahbagh in The Coutesan’s Story also reveal the lost glory; the modern features overlook Shahbagh & changing gardens into factories, gracious old buildings into concrete boxes, the forest into labour colonies and even the boulevards into open gutter. The spirit of the city is missing. Such distinct and changed India is portrayed in Fugitive Histories and In Times of Siege. These novels reflect on India passing through post-modern period.

The powerful status of courtesan in Indian kingdom ceased. The powerful status which she enjoyed earlier as a courtesan is no more. After the death of her mother she lost the necessary protection from evil people. It was difficult to manage
her survival in a dignified way. The modernity devoid of personal feelings and warmth of love turned the city into a different place. The courtesan notes the change in the society: 'The city is owned by men who believe every human being has a price, and a full purse is power…When they come to our (courtesan) haveli they (people) throw cigarette cases, watches, dirty bank notes at our feet as we dance, oblivious to the frigidness of our salaams.' (168)

Multiculturalism and multi-religions of India and its integrity is depicted throughout the novel. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddha and Jain religion are not only practiced but also inherited from generation to generation. Mehta deals with the three religions mainly--Hindu, Muslim and Jain in detail. She explores almost all the issues and features making them particular of their own kind. Hindu and Muslim religions are analyzed in The Thousand Faces of Night and Fugitive Histories too. But Hariharan depicts reality of the modern time, and non-changing problems regarding peaceful existence of two religious communities in these novels. A River Sutra emphasizes the real tendency of harmonious co-existence of all humanity as essential feature of Indian culture.

Various religions are represented by different characters in this novel. The narrator stands for Hindu religion, Tariq Mia is for Muslim religion. Jain religion is reflected through the Jain Monk. Though all the religions are different from one another in following the path yet they all exhibit the same purpose--enlightenment, and the ultimate destination of human life. Banks of pious river like Narmada are considered to help in seeking enlightenment for self. The ultimate aim of seeking enlightenment binds all people together. Linda Parent Lesher also stated, 'Each person he (narrator) meets, whether Hindu, Muslim or Jain, reveals a different aspect of India's fervent soul and endless quest for enlightenment.’ (469)

Mehta presents the mingling of the religions--the Hindu, Muslim and Jain as we find in India itself. While Hariharan's Fugitive Histories portrays the religious tension and differences in the marriage of Mala and Asad, the religious concern is distinct in A River Sutra. In the surroundings of the Narmada River, all religions are assimilated. They become a single whole which is difficult to feel in other novels
whether it is The Thousand Faces of Night, Fugitive Histories or In Times of Siege. Religious clash is one of the prominent features in these novels. But A River Sutra tells about the harmony amid religious diversity.

At the bank of the River Narmada the narrator experiences a strange but divine feel. On the one hand Narmada goes on 'flowing to meet her bridegroom' which is a Hindu myth. He listens 'Allah-ho-Akbar' by a Muslim priest. At the same time he looks at 'a row of ancient Jain caves cut into the copper stone.' (9) It means that there is a blending of all grand ideas found in any religion in this country. Being a retired beaurocrat official he can manage quality time to watch, think and introspect over the different aspects of various religions in India. It is interesting to note that the nameless narrator is very curious and wants to know more about the religions and their correlation, their practices and their uniformity which is elaborated in the novel.

Gita Mehta explores Jain religion in a very subtle but in a delicate way. She provides the minute details of the story told by a Jain monk. The narrator meets the Jain monk who is quite young. The Jain religious faith lies in freeing the self from the shackles of worldly desire. It follows the difficult vows--'the vows of poverty, celibacy and non-violence.' (11) The Jain monk says to the narrator, 'I must always look down while walking for fear that may slip on an ant.' (11) More than the general habits and practices Mehta focuses on the very spirit and the tendency of the religion. Mehta seems to criticize the superficial practices followed by people in general. K. V. Surendran saying, 'We have several instances in the novel where certain considerable tendencies as practiced by religions are criticized for example, according to the monk the Hindus disguised their greed with their many headed arguments.' (39-40)

The old monk applies the teachings of Mahavira on Ashok (approaching to be monk). He suggests that many people die even before they could realize desire of renunciation within them. The Mahavira's teachings lead men on to the path of spiritual enlightenment and freedom as depicted in The Ghost of Vasu Master by Venkatesan's guru. Mehta explores the stern and harsh path of Jain monks to lead life and survive. Their endurance, suffering and goal all, are very difficult and it is not easy to follow and practice them. The whole ceremony of renunciation including
procession, the donation of all majesty and innumerable wealth possessed by the monk symbolize the undemanding and somber life of a Jain monk. Denounce of even family possession--wife, children and all relatives become a symbol of the complete departure from the worldly desire and possession. It has been a tradition since the time of Mahavira. Mehta describes the ceremony in such a way that it enlivens before eyes and it looks as if one is witnessing the whole activity being performed before oneself. The monks in the ceremony recite loudly:

"You will be a social outcast…
"You will depend on strangers for your most basic needs…
"You will experience cold." (37-38)

A muslin mask, three pieces of clothes, a stick with woolen tufts and a begging bowl is provided to him--the very symbols of being a monk. The muslin mask is to avoid the killing of insects while inhaling; three pieces of clothes are given to cover the most essential part of the body and to avoid any pride due to rich clothes; a stick tied with woolen tufts is to clear the path; and a wooden begging bowl is the symbol of his charity based living. Muslims have their own distinct practices and features which make their religion different from others. Tariq Mia, a mullah sings Sufi songs full of devotion and love to god in the mosque near the river Narmada. The mosque is usually a peaceful and serene place where one can hear 'call to prayer' by people. Prayers are loud and a shrilling voice of it can be heard from far places.

Tribes are one of the main constituent parts of India. Their beliefs, way of living and basic instinct all are different from other religious communities. Though they are considered backward as far as technology and modern civilization is concerned. But they retain the rich cultural values which are sometimes modified or distorted by others. Along with the religion followed by Hindu, Muslim and Jain, Mehta also deals with the religious practices and beliefs followed by the tribesmen in India. They live in a more closed system. They remain unaffected by other communities and are unwilling to let others enter in their life.
The tribeswomen allowed Nitin Bose to worship Narmada to seek her forgiveness by which he becomes quite a normal person--free from any possession. Though Nitin Bose is allowed to worship yet outsiders are restricted to observe or take part in their worship. Worshipping goddess by making mud-idol, praying to it and then immersing it into the holy water of Narmada all are to remove the possession. Desire has been worshipped as the goddess by tribes since long. The priest has thought that Nitin Bose was possessed. But there was no ailment according to doctor. Walking outside during eclipse is considered inauspicious as it leads to different troubles in life. Mr. Chagla becomes the spokesman of the novelist when tells,

'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…And Mr. Bose did not show her respect so he is being punished.' (142)

Love is ecstatic and dignified driving peace and rapturous joy. The novelist deals with the unflinching love and seamless flow of it in life. The whole theme is assimilated into the concept of love--its varieties, intensity and horizon beyond limitation. Love is free from narrow boundaries of society. It is the true basis of our existence on the earth. Mehta describes deeply rooted love which is many-faceted. The river Narmada is itself in love with the ocean, Lord of rivers. The narrator projects the picture of Narmada along with the mysterious powers very vast and beyond our imagination and thoughts. Narmada is personified as a beautiful woman changing herself with the change of time. She is shown walking across the path and flowing towards its bridegroom, the ocean.

Love resides sometimes far away from the existing world dwelling on some other world. She adorns herself with coloured jewels, oiling and scenting herself. In the early morning, dark at all sides, the river looked motionless as if she, being a woman, just awoke and is 'stretching her limbs as she oiled herself with scented oils, her long black hair loosened, her eyes outlined in collyrium. The reddish colour of the river suggests as if she is preparing to beautifying herself by 'painting her palms and soles of her feet with vermillion as she prepared to meet her lover.' (139) By Shiva
himself she is called evoker of lust. The Vindhya Range of hills is called Kamapura, the region of love which turns Nitin Bose also into a desiring human being, excited for love. The atmosphere is appealing and bewitching in these hills. When Nitin Bose comes here, he also is excited and passionate towards love. He said, 'I understood why my grandfather's books called these hills Kamapura, the Kingdom of the god of Love.'

Desire left no one unaffected by it. Even the lord Shiva, the Great Ascetic has been burnt 'in the fire of longing, the goddess whose power had been acknowledged by the ancient sages…' (97) He was pierced by it when he sneered at it. What about the human beings if the ascetic is not saved by it. Though he ceased it, he was 'consumed by Desire' (97) It happens with Nitin Bose who was pierced by desire. For a certain period he leads the life of a happy man, detached from sexual pleasure, contended and busy in reading Indian mythology and scriptures like the Vedas and the Puranas. He becomes restless, and finds no relief in sports or reading the Vedas: 'For the first time I was lonely, and when I entered my boredom I felt the massive bed sneering at my unused manhood.' (122) The tea-picker women now seemed 'knowingly voluptuous, revealing their breasts, their rounded beliefs, their bared calves' (122) arousing his intensity of desire.

Desire is the basic tendency of life. In India desire has been worshipped. It is personified in the novel. People believe and acknowledge its power, importance and influence in their life '…Without desire there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness.' (142) In the novel the tribeswomen worship the goddess of desire and so they also acquire the invincible power of seduction and fascination for love. The atmosphere of the whole jungle, Vano forest and the Narmada rest house changes as the spring season approaches love. Ripe yellow mangoes, teasing of Vano women, scented breeze and sugarcane juice all have seducing power to arouse the desire within anyone. 'Spring rouses even old tigers from their rest.' (92) The same happens with the narrator. The simple and fresh sugarcane juice which the narrator drinks is an enchanting tool of God of Love--Kama. Even if one denies the desire, one is likely to be pierced by it.
The profound love and its variety are reflected in varied characters too. In the story of Master Mohan and Imrat, love is pure and unconditional. Master Mohan whose story is narrated by Tariq Mia has an immense capacity to love a gentle and innocent child. Unfortunately he could never enjoy true love in his family either as husband or as father. Imrat comes as a consolation in his life. He gives him shelter and training of music. It leads to endless quarrel and disputes in his family. But Master Mohan's approach is very sacred in feeding and training Imrat. He knew he had been made guardian of something rare, as if his own life until now has only been a purification to ready him for the task of tending his voice for the world.' (68) It is unconditional love free from any ideas of caste, class and age. Before, he met Imrat he could not even feel any response from his wife and children. He was left to cook a meager meal for himself which he 'took up to the small roof terrace of the house to escape his household contempt.' (57)

The profound love is reflected in the characters as well we come across. Master Mohan whose story is narrated by Tariq Mia, has an intense capacity to love profoundly a gentle and innocent child. Deprived of love and care by his wife and children, he finds Imrat as a consolation. His meeting with Imrat is a welcome change for him. He provides him shelter and loves him even in the adverse circumstances. Before he met Imrat, he could not even feel the true and unconditional love--love of his wife and children. Love gives him way and courage to handle the troublesome situation and he does not pay attention to suggestions as: 'your wife will never permit you to keep the boy. Make some excuse to the sister. Get out of it somehow.' (65) But the feeling of love he received from Imrat gave him courage to tolerate the curse and sharp-biting statements of his wife and children who left no chance to tease Imrat. 'Somewhere Master Mohan discovered strength in him equal to his family's cruelty to Imrat.' (67) The love between Master Mohan and Imrat is particular of its kind. It reflects in the devotional musical lessons and unconditional affection for each other.

Imrat loved Master Mohan for being his teacher and guardian. He loves him so much that he thinks himself responsible for his murder while the Great Sahib killed him after listening his rapturous songs. It is immense guilt and love that he also
committed suicide after Imrat's murder. Tariq Mia says, 'Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child.' (91) Where Master Mohan killed himself for Imrat (love), Great Sahib killed Imrat to sustain the beauty of music. Seduction and allurement--another form of love is also illustrated by the novelist. Shahrzad's love was also alluring for Shahryar who saved her and other women by it. It was a tool for her to trick the king. This seduction is undoubtedly threatening as it captures the mind of the person and makes him to act accordingly. It is mesmerising. If love is alluring, it may trouble the person who denies it. Only physical union with Rima, a tribewoman, half-woman and half-serpent soothed his disturbed heart. He said,

'…stretching out my hand, I grasped the swelling firmness of a woman's breast. But the petals of a flower garland intruded between my lips and her flesh, a girdle chain between my thigh and her smooth hip, an anklet between my hand and her slender foot. Maddened by the fragile barrier of her ornament, I crushed her in my embrace.'

(124)

In India love is accepted which fulfills the social code or else it leads to endless remorse and guilt. But if love is denied it gives place to guilt. When Nitin Bose did not pay attention to the urge of Rima, he was pierced with the fifth and last arrow of desire. The denial caused punishment and harm. The scene when Nitin Bose goes far into the forest in search of Rima in search of the solution of his guilt towards Rima is mysterious. Though Rima made Nitin Bose's life soothing for a certain period, he was filled with guilt as well. Love differs to both of them. The fulfillment of desire is different for Rima and Nitin. Love made certain difference in his life; love 'with the sophisticated, husky-voiced women' (130) gave him deeper meaning of life. The physical union between Nitin Bose and women at Calcutta seems of lust and ephemeral while that of Rima is of mythical significance and seems to tell principles of love. To Nitin Bose the whole environment is turned cowardice into a sort of
cowardice and guilt. Way back to village he was afraid how he would meet and face Rima but later he realized the reality.

Mehta lets us explore one more variety of love through The Courtesan's Story. Courtesans have enjoyed a distinct status in India. Their importance and influence is evident in historical India. In the novel the Courtesan narrates the story of her gradually developed love with Rahul Singh, a bandit. She took a long span of time to accept his love. Later she realized his deep concern and love for her.

'Suddenly I knew he was speaking the truth, and that night I entered my captor's embrace. Guided by his touch, I learned I had known his body in a hundred lifetimes before he took me again a virgin on the thin cotton quilt which was all that shielded our bodies from the ground.'

(184)

But, the love could not be sustained. Her husband was wounded badly in the exchange of gunfire when he was on the raid and gradually died without bidding her farewell. The unsustainable love gave way to grief and loss. The courtesan drowned herself in the waters of Narmada after she lost her unborn child.

In our country all the religions are free and equal to practice their rituals and ceremonies. In the novel of Gita Mehta unity in diversity is found at all levels: whether it is level of the basic concepts of religion, human tendency and their actions. In India people of all religions are found and they all practice their basic beliefs according to their religion which they inherited. All of them are called Indians and their culture is Indian culture. They are different from one another but still they live with harmony and peace.

The river Narmada is shown as a sutra to bind all the people of different religions whether they are Jain, Muslim or Hindu or even tribesmen. People belonging to all religion get some consolation in the banks of Narmada. The circumstances may be different, problems varied and situations complex but solution is same i.e. the river Narmada. Bhasha Shukla Sharma also observes the river 'as a gamut or 'sutra’ to
create an ideological consensus between Hinduism, Islam and Jainism.’ (2) The present novel not only reveals the unity of India but also can be seen as an attempt to revive and rejuvenate Indian culture. The aftermaths of modernism and colonialism are tried to mitigate. The traditional values and customs are heightened to remain the identity culture) of India intact. Bhasha Shukla Sharma further observed, ‘The novel seeks to recover an indigenous culture unaltered by colonialism’ (3)

The narrator and Tariq Mia are shown as close friends sharing their beliefs, tendency, practices, beliefs and manner of living. But still they are intimate companion to each other sharing all their doubts and experiences, mingling them and making them as one whole. They seem the perfect example of what India stands for: union of souls, different in customs and opinions yet bound by heart. The narrator’s queries are tried to sort out by Tariq Mia immediately he approaches. Tariq Mia is a true brother-like companion for him. When the narrator is disturbed by the gloomy thought about dead ascetics, Tariq Mia tells it as an inevitable end for all. He tells him the ultimate end is same no matter how important, remarkable or wealthy person one is. He tells, 'India's greatest poet also floated down the river…Kabir, the man whose poems made abridge between your faith and mine.' (46)

The deep and profound knowledge of all religions is same. The Jain monk was told by the elderly monk that Mahavira's teachings contained human beings who 'long to be free'(31) and the important achievement in one's life is to learn 'the secret of the human hearts' (31). This knowledge is also possessed by Tariq Mia, a knowledgeable mullah. Tariq Mia tells the confused narrator that the one thing which was loved by the Jain monk most is the human heart and its secrets--the secret of capacity to love. What the Jain monk knew in his life was known and explained by Tariq Mia as well. Both belonged to the different religions but hold the same knowledge. It reflects the unity of religions in India. The cult and essence of all religions is same. Temple and mosque are only different sources to reach the Almighty.

It is significant that how keenly and sharply Kabir attacked on the useless display in religions and always talked about the ultimate reality which is essence of all religions. Unity and diversity run side by side in India. Bhasha Shukla Sharma
observed: ‘And in this way she (Mehta) is able to reflect how different religious share
the same myths, traditions, forest, space, river and still they maintain their diversity.’
(3) Kabir also favoured belief and worship God instead of wandering in temple or
worship:

'O servant, where do you seek Me?
You will not find Me in temple or mosque,
In Kaba or in Kailish,
In Yoga or renunciation.
Sings kabir, 'O seeker, find God
In the breath of all breathing.' (72)

In Hindu religion, myth lies beneath the every belief. It signifies one aspect or
the other in India. Mehta explores the myths affecting the beliefs of people and their
actions. Myths are also used in The Thousand Faces of Night and When Dreams
Travel to portray women's marginalized space in society. The river Narmada is
believed to be formed from the ascetic's perspiration of the lord Shiva. The Muslim
religion also abounds in myths. Their beliefs and practices are based on them. One of
such myth is of 'Kabir's toothbrush'. It turned there as a 'huge tree' (47) known as
'Kabirwad'. People of different religion came to praise god under this tree. One of such
myth is about 'a four-thousand-year-old Aryan warrior--Avatihuma' (153) believed
believed to be by the people of Vindhya Hills. The bandits specially believed that if
they were stung by a honeybee which encircled that Immortal head, they would never
be killed by police.

Music: vocal, dance and instrument constitutes one major factor of Indian
culture. The novel explores the element of music and intensity of emotions found in it
particular of India. Music and lyrics are not only glimpses in the novel rather it seems
the very heartbeat of the novel which exceeds the plot, create life-like Indian culture
and its unified characters to explore their musical tendency. Uma Ram also finds the
novel as a treatise on music saying, 'Becoming a musician was like entering into a
pact with Shiva himself. The story, thus, is a brief treatise on musicology that enthralls
the reader into nuances of music.' (107) The devotional songs, music and lyrics abound in the novel. The very approach of Mehta seems musical in writing the whole novel.

Music is the identity of the culture where it is played. Indian music also reveals its cultural tendency and approach prevalent in India. The source of the Indian music and lyrics arise in the emotional appeal. And it is not possible until the singer or musician is himself aroused. Music plays the role to convey emotions from singer to listener. The same happened with Imrat. His life was so pitiable, uncertain that it aroused the pure and heart-rending emotions which gave way to pure and heart-touching great music. In the function of 'seven nights and music', the way the singers sang reflected a traditional Indian musical function.

'On the podium nine performers sat cross-legged in a semi-circle around a harmonium and a pair of tables… Every now and then a spectator, moved by the music, handed the Sheikh money, which he received as an offering to God before placing it near the table dreams sending their throbbing beat into the night.' (59)

It is mythical concept that music was created by Shiva himself: ‘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 sixty 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.’ (205) 'Om' is also very prominent in music. 'The first sound of creation was Om.' (209) Each vibration of it created as new sounds that led to the primary scale. The musician's father asked her daughter: 'Think of these seven notes as the Om of music. If you can not play them correctly you will never be able to master a raga.' (210)

The true source of music is love, penance and devotion. It reveals Indian sensibility in enthralling one in the other universe--to feel the new dimensions of life
and love. The father of the musician who is himself a musician of the world repute considers music in the broader sense. The novelist explores that music which has power to transcend one into another universe, is related profoundly to the world as well. It is related to life and its several different aspects whether it is dance, painting and emotions. A very practical knowledge is essential to give the music significant intensity. The musician's father also carried his daughter to many such places where she could find music interlinked with life. The dance academy taught Shiva's dance of Creation and street of painters helped her to understand the link between music and the world. It fascinates not only human beings but even animals. On listening music even 'a feeding deer will drop its food to listen to music, and a king cobra sway its hood in pleasure.' (204)

Learning music is sadhna (rigorous training) in India, to elaborate and to know the intricacy and philosophy of life. Its training is rigorous. Instead of teaching 'the seven notes of the scale: sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni that are the do, re, fa, so, la, ti of western music' his father asked her to listen, concentrate and then repeat the same sounds produced by the different animals. It demands minute observations. The music lessons were started amid nature. Different natural sounds created music. One has to train himself and differentiate the different tones and microtones in order to attain quality-training of music. The half notes and even microtones had to be listened for the perfection of music. The music of birds is of the rarest kind—difficult to produce even by great singers. He tells his daughter,

'Do you know why birds sing at dawn and at sunset? Because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music.' (203)

The rigorous practice of years is essential to be perfect in music. One has to leave all physical comforts. The musician also underwent the rigorous training given by her father. Music is a time-taking acquirement (sadhna). For the whole two years the lady musician only learnt about the skeletons of melody—the scales forming the ragas, and identification of the raga. But music is created by human emotions. Even if
veena stops playing music, human emotions create music. Her father said, 'any pedant
can learn a raga's melody. It is only a matter of practice.' (219) Different animals
produced different sounds, thus initiating a unique sound of music. The peacock's cry
produced sound 'sa'; calf calling its mother, producing the note 're'; bleating of a goat
three times very quickly gives impression of the sound 'ga'; 'ma', the cry of the heron;
the song of the nightingale producing the note 'pa'; 'dha', the neighing of a horse and
the last note 'ni', the trumpets of elephant. In order to imitate the sound of nature one
has to do penance.

Raga is the creation of the mood, an emotion and music. Ragas are depiction of
mood as the paintings are. Ragas and raginis create different emotions. The raga is
heroic and ragini is erotic. Emotion is considered the basic thing which may reveal the
soul of raga. Particular rags are sung in a particular time or season creating a
particular effect. The musician's father said, 'Each raga is related to a particular
season, a time of day, an emotion. But emotion is the key that unlocks a raga's soul.'
(206) The raga of rain, Megh; the raga of heat, Deepak; Vaulika, Desi and Todi are
the ragas sung in a particular season or in a particular situation only. The notes of
raga are only the skeleton of the melody: the rasa, achieved or created by it is its soul.
Humility is needed to play the instrument veena. Veena and notes are of no
importance until soul is infused in it. The lady musician's father tells: You see, a raga
has its own soul. Without its soul-- rasa, a raga is only a dead thing.' (209) Pride and
feeling of perfection may destroy the essence of music. Musicians should not dare
dominating music rather they should try to be dominated by the music--its rasa. The
lady musician was also told that he should give life to her music by paying respect to
each note of music. He also told the story of a great musician who murdered the
nymph of note with his pride.

Music may lead one to the path of salvation. The description of Gandharva
Veda also claims that 'by playing the veena with the correct rhythm, keeping its notes
and its character intact, a man can hear that sound and attain salvation.' (207) In Indian
culture music has soothing effect. It can free one from one's weaknesses and
shortcomings. In Thousand Faces of the Night, Sita, Devi's mother-in-law also seems
to play veena for this purpose. Music transcended her into other world free from restrictions and patriarchal suppression. In the novel, in The Musician's Story her father tried to do the same with his daughter. He knew that great music could transcend her and move her beyond worldly pleasure and plains. By attaining music her ugly daughter could 'love beauty wherever it was to be found.' (211)

It could be a very subtle manner to convey one’s feelings and emotions. It may also move even God. Devotional songs are sung before Him along with enthralling music as offerings. It may go beyond worldly limitations and can create magic as happens in the case of Imrat. Sometimes it reveals even mystery and hidden facts of life which are otherwise unable to understand. Tariq Mia reveals the spontaneous influence of music over the minds of people. It could play several functions, and appease anger and could seduce one. Her father also taught the lady musician 'the subtleties of tenderness, how to be supple before gravity, how to gentle anger, how to seduce and sigh and caress.' (215)

In Muslim religion a divine joy is tried to attain by singing Sufi songs. It is a kind of sadhna which is performed for Him. The devotional Sufi songs are sung in continuity for ten days and nights: 'For ten days and nights the marble platforms are covered with carpets, campfires flicker on the hillside, the hills echo to ecstatic singing.' (44) The ceremony is not formal but a medium to reach the ultimate reality of the world and to experience God. The narrator is moved by such devotional songs like any one. He is moved by the 'uninhibited delight in that quavering voice'. One of Sufi songs says:

"Can't You see my blood turning into henna
To decorate the soles of Your feet?" (46)

Music reveals the mystery of the world, the truth of life and also other mysterious facts. In the history of music the name of Amir Rumi is considered as one of the stars in the sky of music. He is renowned not only for he sang well but also for he illustrating philosophy of life in his songs. Imrat also wanted to sing the song of Amir Rumi at his tomb with his father. It was not only his tribute but also dream.
Kabir, Mirabai, Khushrau, Tulsidas, Chisti and Chandidas were all poets who produced the devotional songs and tried to establish the reality and appraisal of the ultimate reality, the God. Though they belonged to different religion, they all constituted 'India's soul'. (73) It is revealed through the purity of the lyrics.

Master Mohan also reveals the philosophical knowledge and mystery to Imrat through music. The music became the binding factor between Master Mohan and Imrat. It bridged their emotions, life and dreams. Mehta also tried to exhibit that music was not only a passion and form of worship but, also a consolation and relief from the hectic life. In the novel whenever Tariq Mia finds the narrator sad and gloomy, he creates music to change his mood and soothe him. The narrator himself says, 'If I am downcast he will suddenly banish my gloom by breaking into song.' (45) Music is used for the variety of purpose. It is a sacred channel to convey one's feelings and thoughts, and move one accordingly. When Tariq Mia's short and subtle answers are not satisfactory he takes help of music. Tariq Mia sings which enthralls the narrator. His music is calm and captivating. Each note hangs in the stillness ‘like a drop of water’ that sometimes the narrator deciphers 'the savagery of the lyrics' (49) The music produced by him is devotional and praises the ultimate God. The music and lyrics sung by the minstrel centers Narmada as the spiritual embodiment born after Shiva's penance.

The novel A River Sutra is rich in the respect of multiple narrators narrating their stories or telling the course of events themselves. The novels like The Thousand Faces of Night, Raj, Fugitive Histories and The Ghost of Vasu Master are narrated by the central characters Devi, Jaya, Sara and Vasu Master respectively. In A River Sutra, multiple narrators find equal space to narrate their varied past-life revealing different facets of culture. The nameless narrator is the chief person who binds all the different stories in a single whole through the sutra of the river Narmada. Bite compares the narrator of the novel with Vyasa of the Mahabharat: ‘The technique of the novel is partially similar to the epic The Mahabharata, Vyasa wrote the Mahabharata but he himself is not involved in it as a character.’ (2)
The interesting narration made the novel worth read. Her art of combining all six unconnected stories is flawless and allows us to look into their lives more intensely. Vish Mangalapalli also remarked,

'Mehta has a very effortless and engaging narrative style and never gets didactic when it to explaining the intricate concepts of the thoughts in Indian philosophy. Mehta manages a very interesting portrait of India and its uniqueness in being home to such philosophical concepts and the concepts of its people seeking the truth underlying these concepts.' (2)

The Jain monk, the executive, the courtesan and the minstrel, all are characters where Mehta drops the chief narrator and let the characters tell their own stories. The novel contains total six stories--The Monk's Story, The Teacher's Story, The Executive's Story, The Courtesan's Story, The Musician's Story and the Minstrel's Story--each contain and add the particular flavor in the whole novel. Bite also noted, ‘Generally the novel includes a saga of events related to the central character’s life but the novel comprises different characters and different events. The novel highlights not only one character but with the help of various characters Gita Mehta expresses the psychology of human mind.’(8)

The Monk's Story is told in the first person narration by the Jain monk himself instead by the central narrator. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that the emotion of one could be expressed best by oneself only rather than by others. The critic, Madhuri Bite also favours it. The monk himself tells his story that how he renounced the world and became the Jain monk--the true and constant follower of Jain religion and its practices. Mehta seems throughout the novel quite suggestive. In Jain Monk's Story the statement of the monk 'I have loved just one thing in my life’ is incomplete and it remains the same till last. The novelist gives opportunity of introspection, analysis and anticipation of what she could not tell to readers.
The second story is of The Teacher's Story where Imrat and Master Mohan are the chief characters. This story is told by Tariq Mia. He is an intimate old-aged friend of the narrator and subtle philosopher. He tells beautifully how the life of Master Mohan met the misfortune twice. Once when he lost his melodious voice in an accident and secondly, when Imrat was ruthlessly murdered. But Mehta did not give the whole command and power to narrate The Teacher's Story to Tariq Mia. At many places the direct conversation or thoughts are come across to feel the intensity of emotion and reliability. Undoubtedly Mehta's power of narration lies in blending well both the things--what is to be told by the chief narrator and what by the characters themselves.

The third story we read in the novel is The Executive's Story. In this story, Mehta takes help of the narration through diary. Nitin Bose takes help of diary for confessing his guilt and the immortal sexual deeds. The whole story of Nitin Bose is not told by Tariq Mia rather readers are able to read the diary of Nitin Bose themselves. We observe what is exactly written by Nitin Bose. No one could express the thoughts, dilemma, and intensity of emotion as he could do. Mehta made the art of narration flexible and reliable. Nitin keenly narrates his background, desire and illicit acts with fullness without hiding any embarrassing fact or detail. The Courtesan's Story is the next to The Executive's Story where we find two sub-narrators--the courtesan and her daughter. The chief narrator comes across in rainy season and gives her shelter when it is persisted. The power of narration is transferred from the mother courtesan to the daughter courtesan. Mehta, through her subtle narration, tried to reveal how a victim of society is either murdered or commits suicide as happened with Rahul Singh and the daughter courtesan respectively.

This story leads to The Musician's Story--one more pain and agony to analyze. It moves around the background of the music. A renowned music teacher and her dark-skinned daughter are at the centre. Mehta creates first the environment suitable to explore her story and makes it natural in the novel. The dark-skinned lady musician when meets the narrator at the bank of the river Narmada shares her life-experience when asked. As the musician's story is told by herself, it is narrated in the first person
narration. Each story the narrator listens, grows the seeds of further introspection and analysis which binds also all the stories into a single whole. This story also makes the narrator think about the truthfulness and reliability of the certain issues. The musician herself asks the narrator whether it is possible for river Narmada to pacify her, to reduce her grief and attachment she built up for the male musician.

In the novel the narrator analyses the events and situations. Tariq Mia helps the narrator to understand the philosophy of life beneath the varied emotions and events. But Mehta never explores her personal ideas directly into the novel. She is symbolic and suggestive; readers have to analyze the situations themselves. Bhasha Shukla Sharma also supports it saying, ‘In her narrative Mehta is highly symbolic and changes facets like the fast flowing Narmada. A substantial part of the novel is aimed as describing connotative meaning of text which is produced simultaneously with words or alternating with them.’ (10) The last story is of The Minstrel's Story which is experienced by Tariq Mia. He tells the narrator the penance of Naga Baba and the little minstrel. It is the only story which ends with the happy note. The ascetic, Naga Baba made her free and fused music and devotion towards Narmada. The elements of surprise are apparent in all over the novel. Especially, at the end it is remarkable when Naga Baba appears before us as Prof. Shankar and grown up Uma is the girl saved by him. Madhavi Murthy also states, 'Mehta continues to assimilate facts and narration well--enlarging the conclusions with elements of surprise and intrigue.' (1)

Thus, in all the stories Tariq Mia is the common observer who analyzes the relations between people and the river. He is omnipresent in the novel: ‘Tariq Mia narrates the story from third person point of view and makes the narration omniscient.’ (Bite 4) Mehta creates the natural atmosphere and background to fit the stories into her whole narrative frame. Madhuri Bite also observes: ‘In the narrative technique the nameless narrator provides background to each story. The writer uses flashback technique in the novel.’ Diversity of the country suits appropriately with the diverse narrators. The structure of the novel is tight-knit and finely woven. Bhasha Shukla aptly remarks, ‘Gita Mehta studies Indian culture in depth and tries to hold it by strings of her narratives in her novels.’ (2)
The language is in constant flow with that of the theme of the novel. The characters also are life-like and belong to the real world having pains, anxieties and longings. Uma Ram seems right stating, 'Gita Mehta's language is exquisite, meticulously chiseled, and evocative. Her characters are the work of a master craftsman.' (109) The charm of the novel lies in the handling of the novel with efficiency. ‘Compared to these women novelists Gita Mehta’s contribution is though quantitatively less but it is qualitatively significant because of her handling of the subject-matter and form.’ (Bite 1) Thus, the novel explores the rich Indian culture with various shades of love, religion, music and spirituality. Usha Bande aptly remarks:

'Thematically, the novel has many focal points & renunciation, love, lust, ego and involvement and a number of others. It contains an eloquent commentary on Hindu myths, rituals and beliefs; it is an exposition of contemporary Indian psyche; it provides a useful dialogue on spiritualism vs. materialism, detachment vs. attachment, love vs. its various shades, and modernity vs. tradition, but finally and significantly, it eulogizes Narmada.' (126)
Works Cited


