Chapter - III

On the Ganga and the Narmada: English and Gujarati Fictions
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Societies have always flourished on the banks of the rivers. Settling down near a flowing, perennial water body has been a civilization norm, initially out of necessity for food and water and then for the convenience of mobility. Water being the life force and river being the point of germination of life becomes quintessential source for any living being. Rivers and life on its banks have always been sources of knowledge growing into civilizations of immense repute and cultural predominance, a testimony of which is their literature. Due to the development of various academic disciplines, these natural scapes and cultures around started being studied more intensely. Rivers have attracted many sages, pilgrims, travellers, adventurers and authors who can be considered to be the knowledge distributors since ages. Once journeyed, they all dwell under the fascinating spell of the river and its feel of contentment and happiness. Life meets another life while journeying on the banks of the rivers, and thus rivers become a site of confluence of peoples and their trades and cultures that in turn inspire stories. Every newcomer has one’s tale to narrate and to add to the old treasure of the river stories.

Narrative is an age old instinct. Every age enjoys a story. A novelist tries to provide the same fun to the readers of all age. This genre being the form of storytelling and free lance captures life well with the strokes of imagination added to the reality what the writer has observed and many times experienced personally. This amalgamation of fact and fancy makes novel more interesting. Historically the novel developed from the prose romance and the picaresque novel. Instinct of wandering and jotting down those experiences instantly or mostly in tranquillity gave birth to
writing and put experiences on record. Element of fiction added by writer’s imagination made it literary writing. Though the experiences might be felt by a single person or they have just been observed from somebody else’s life, the novelist gives it different shape and angle. It happens more easily when the writer and her writing – through her readers – travel and extend her experiences. Novels, as Ishmael Reed in his *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* says “can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o’clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons.” For Jane Austen, the novel is important for what it is: a “work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (as expressed in her *Northanger Abbey*); whereas, for Milan Kundera, a novel’s significance lies in what it does, as he in his work *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* opines: “The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything.”

Travel writing, too, has interested many writers over the ages. As Gustave Flaubert opines, “Travel makes one modest. You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world.” Mark Twain says in *The Innocents Abroad/Roughing It*, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” There is another dimension of travelling: the free time and being away from worldly worries during a journey provides a traveller the scope to ruminate about worldly issues and one’s own conditions. In this way, travel connects to one’s inner self. Wandering around river provides serenity and its constantly changing and running current
inspires moments of epiphany – a traveller happens to experience which he might not have expected or realized in a routine day about his self and life. For e.g. the anonymous protagonist who does not get emotional quickly about things but gets quite amazed about his self, “I had never imagined that I would be able to talk so informally with an old lady whom I didn’t even know. I don’t know why, but after our chitchatting, I suddenly felt very light, perhaps for the first time in my life” (Bhatt 26). The same happens to novelists whose imaginations are triggered with curious queries about Indian culture or the magnanimity and holiness of the rivers like the Ganga and the Narmada. Characters often become a mouthpiece of the writers and they try to bring out the writer’s philosophy on the pages of the novels. It is seen in these novels that characters come on the banks of these rivers with the thought of getting rid of some problem or the other in their life, or, being fed up with the vicissitudes of life, they come with a thought of renouncement, but the river surprises and binds them to the world again imparting variety of worldly knowledge, experiences and realizations. Rivers make them open themselves to the other – whether a person, or, a non-inclusive and an ‘other ed’ idea – and share the moments of their intimate happiness or pain which generally one tries to keep to one’s self. This chapter is an attempt to read such personal (which also is at once universal and cultural) issues in the select English and Gujarati riverine novels on the two major rivers of India – the Ganga and the Narmada.

Rivers are regarded with love and reverence and figure prominently in the epic and folk literature of India. K. R. Srinivas 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” (Iyengar 323). The
Narmada and the Ganga from the *saptasindhu* – group of seven major rivers – are considered to be the most ancient and the holiest rivers of India respectively. Number of stories, myths and beliefs are woven around them. All major novels on both these rivers give knowledge about ways of life on and around the banks of the rivers and their peculiarities. Protagonists and/or major characters have come to these rivers with the purpose of aimless roaming or to know the life around. In the process of this aimless wandering, they gather the knowledge about lives lived here and unknowingly but succinctly they start becoming one with the local events and hence their culture. Rivers fascinate and at times shock them on different occasions. Rivers connect them with their selves, nature and take away their worries and make them almost disinterested about materialistic gains they had decided to achieve prior to their visits. Characters meet a variety of people at regular intervals on various occasions on the river banks which add a different chapter to their life experiences. In the process, the novelists, through their narrators, try to find answers to their different queries, juggles old beliefs, formulates new ones all in an attempt to find the inner happiness and satisfaction of meeting with one’s own self.

1) **Symbolism of the River in the Fictions**

The rivers in India are regarded as divine and symbols of both life and death. They accept both – living and the dead, pure and the maligned purifying the ills through their holy waters according to their believers. Rivers are the binding force of a culture as different folk traditions like the *parikrama* (circumambulation of the banks of a river) of the Narmada and the *mela* (gatherings in certain months of the year at different riverine places) allow people to travel across the country coming in contact with diverse people with their unique traditions. In Vijay Singh’s *Jaya Ganga*, the protagonist, Nishant, a writer, suddenly plans his journey to the Himalayas
travelling down the river Ganges – a sacred stream particularly loved by Jaya, his beloved and a mysterious girl – in winter, the season not suitable for wandering around the Ganga. His journey is inspired by the hope that the search for his mysterious lady would end on the Ganga ghat, whereby he would also get a clue to his own identity. The novel is a story of a young writer's spiritual/romantic quest for his enigmatic soul-mate which makes him live through various experiences through his journeys in the rocky mountains in the chilling cold, sailing through the river, visiting the prostitute house and government offices. His journey ends at the sacred city of Benares with the hope of meeting his beloved whose fleeting glimpse he has and yet the enigma remains.

The Ganga is the river where the ancient scriptures like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* took their births i.e., the earliest literary texts of knowledge were written on this river bank. The Ganga flows silently but keeps changing its course constantly. She is a healer – but she heals only when the seeker has become part of her and she of him (Singh 101-102). She takes away all the pains and grief of her devotee and provides solace. Thus the river brings a pilgrim near to the nature with all his devotion and attention.

Shusaku Endo in his novel *Deep River* depicts four major characters from Japan – each battling their own inner turmoil and unsaid pain – to India on the Ganga ghat as a part of their pilgrimage tour of famous Buddhist monuments. Each one of them has taken up this tour for personal reasons like Isobe who is looking for the re-incarnation of his dead wife who had made him promise on her death-bed that he would go out in search of her. One research paper by an American scientist and few correspondences with him gave Isobe a clue that a girl called Rajini, near Varanasi in northern India is claiming to be Japanese in her previous life. This brings Isobe on the
banks of the Ganga. Another character, Kiguchi, a World War II veteran, now a businessman, is still tormented by the time he had spent fighting for life in the Burmese jungles. He too wishes to pay homage to his fellow soldiers as well as the Indian and British troops he fought against. Mitsuko, a middle-aged lady, is looking for her friend Otsu who wanted to be a priest, and whom in her youthful arrogance she had tried to seduce and distract from the spiritual path. She really does not know why she is in this place but wants reconciliation, having realized she is incapable of loving another person. Whereas, Numada, an animal lover, believes that his life was a gift by a Myna bird, which died on the same day of his third operation, the first two being unsuccessful. He longs to see India’s fabulous bird sanctuaries before he dies.

Mostly all the characters are visiting the city Varanasi. Varanasi – one of the seven ancient holy cities of India, and probably one of the oldest cities on the earth, it is situated on the Ganga. Its name comes from the names of two rivers (Varuna and Asi) that formed the borders of the ancient town; it is also known as Kasi (the shiny one), Avimuktaka (place of highest liberation). From time immemorial it was a holy city (it was an ancient place by the time of Buddha) and a centre of Hindu learning. Its major temples, especially the Visvanatha temple, were destroyed and rebuilt several times under Muslim rule. The present shrine, built on part of the original temple (the other part is occupied by a mosque), was constructed in 1783 by Rani Ahalyabai. Many Hindus come to Varanasi to die in the hope of finding instant liberation from rebirth. Besides its many traditional places of Hindu learning, Varanasi is the seat of the Kashi Sanskrit Vidyapith and the Benares Hindu University. Varanasi has been the object of much literature, ancient and modern. One of the most extensive descriptions of ancient Varanasi is found in the Kasikhanda of the Skandha Purana. Varanasi has been praised in countless hymns and poems throughout the ages.
(Klostermaier 197-198). Varanasi, to the tourists like a couple called Sanjos in *Deep River* is unhealthy, filthy, populated with old and abandoned people, and with people who travel across far off lands to come here and die by the holy river, getting cleansed of their sins. After the initial cultural shock, each person gets accustomed to the complex nature of the Indian way of life (and its contradictions) and attracted to the myths associated with the river Ganges. It reaches to a level where each wanted to redeem themselves at the banks of the same river in their own way questing for salvation for troubled selves. By their actual journey and their spiritual one, every character confronts the ambiguities that is the Indian culture, its castes and its religious beliefs, its perception that good and evil are intimately intertwined just as the dead bodies flowing in the Ganges are part and parcel of the same belief system that has people bathing and washing on its banks in the hope of freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Characters in both the novels realize that the proverbial dip in the Ganga, therefore, is not a bath to heal wounds or to wash away sins, but just one milestone of a long journey of consciousness which could dissolve wounds or make – *moksha* – salvation possible. It is also an act of supplication, for release from the cycle of transmigration and renunciation because the river keeps flowing continuously, with the same indifference to all that is merging and being offered to her. And that is why may be the Ganga becomes a site where all characters get solace at the end revealing their selves to each other by the riverside.

The river is “an ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power both of nature and of time” (Cirlot 274). On the one hand the Narmada signifies fertility and progression in the life of the people coming to her banks; and on the other hand it stands for irreversible passage of time. It generates the sense of loss and oblivion. The Ganga is regarded as the motherly water force whereas the Narmada is
considered to be the river of beauty and a youthful river when she starts flowing from its origin at Amarkantak. But the Narmada also takes the form of a maternal water force for the pilgrims who undertake an arduous – *parikrama* – circumambulation on foot going up on one of its banks and coming down the other just with the faith in the river that she would look after them during their journey. On the Ganga ghats, people come to spend their last phase of the life or to die whereas on the banks of the Narmada, people take up *parikrama* with the intention of forsaking the world. Before taking the *parikrama* – this tradition will be discussed in the next chapter in the context of travel writings written on the Narmada – a pilgrim has to renounce his name, relations; physical comforts and everything that gives a personal and social identity to a human being. This journey thus becomes an event of deeper introspection on the essence of life for a *parikramavasi* or a pilgrim. Meeting different people and gathering experiences makes a pilgrim reflect back on the actual lived life and motivate them towards a spiritual entity often manifest as nature on the banks of the river, and the river itself. The travails of the travel on and around the Narmada during the *parikrama* teach endurance as one has to live with bare necessities and have to face bad tempers of the people while asking for food from them. As it is discussed in the novel *A River Sutra* an individual who lives on the banks, his experience is the most sacred amidst everything because only when one mingles with it, and all the surrounding start considering you as ‘one of them’ one starts learning about them and living accordingly.

The Narmada *parikrama* expects anonymity and readiness for renunciation which is a peculiarity of both the novels Dhruv Bhatt’s *Tatvamasi* and Geeta Mehta’s *A River Sutra* written with the backdrop of the river. The protagonists in both the novels are anonymous and in the course of the novel, they understand the meaning
and necessity of renunciation. The Narmada is symbolized as the motherly figure that takes care of every individual who comes to her and also recuperates their illness – both mental and physical. So, the perception of the two rivers is that the Narmada cures and the Ganga offers moksha. And this has been a belief held through the ages, becoming an inseparable ethos of these two rivers.

Rivers in India are not just elemental forces but they are worshipped as deities. People make offerings to these deities because they have faith in them, or fear that the ferocity of natural forces unleashed by them is because they for some reason have been displeased. An old lady in Tatvamasi throws a coin as an offering into the river Narmada so that it brings good luck to her and those others praying on the banks, and so that they might be saved in the future from the wrath and destruction of the river in spate. The parikrama of the river brings people from diverse background nearer and amazingly people merely travelling together for a short while start chatting away like old friends; as the old Hindu lady offers food to a Muslim co-passenger and they delightfully share their food and their lives in Tatvamasi.

Gita Mehta in A River Sutra brings a retired Government official – who was a bureaucrat and now considers himself as a vanaprasthi (someone who has retired to the forest to spend the remaining life in reflection and introspection) as a manager of the Government rest house situated on the banks of the Narmada. The proximity of the bungalow to the river was the particular attraction why he considers taking up this work (as a service to the river and its pilgrims, and not as a job) after retirement and his wife’s death. He sees the Narmada symbolizing an enduring and eternal force beckoning people of all shades. The river becomes the object of his reflections and in the course of the novel he tries to become a seeker of knowledge by being a bahushrut – the one who is well heard and gains knowledge by listening to the life experiences
of the others. He meets many travellers on the banks of the river who share their experiences with him. Seemingly unconnected stories in the novel, about Hindu and Jain ascetics, courtesan and minstrel, diamond merchant and tea executive, Muslim cleric and music teacher, as well as tribal folk beliefs and the anthropologist who study them are threaded by the flowing river. These stories offer him a profound insight into human motives just as the river flows into the ocean and swells its volume of water. There is a faith that this river has the healing power because of which local tribal community have faith and observe rituals, customs and festivals celebrating this power of the river and even though the parikrama tests the endurance, travellers take up this journey with complete faith in the river. The ‘sutra’ also refers to an Indian literary form, so in the novel, each story is in it self a ‘sutra’ that presents an insight or a message. Every time the nameless narrator tries to tease out the meaning of one ‘sutra’, he encounters another pilgrim or a lost soul with another story to tell. The narrator has opted for a hard path to knowledge: which is hearsay and not self-experience. But this exercise of seeking knowledge is seemingly fruitful for the narrator because he has chosen a perfect place – the banks of the Narmada – as this river is considered to be a nurturer of and witness to an unbroken record of human race since centuries also inspiring knowledge through hallowed works of literature (The Mahabharata, Abhigyanshakuntal, Meghdutam-The Cloud Messenger, and the Jungle Book) to generations of knowledge seekers which probably make him realize at the end that perhaps destiny has brought him to the banks of the Narmada to understand the world which he had decided to renounce.

In Tatvamasi, the river itself acts as a narrator – a sutradhar – who details about the inner self of the characters and also the events taking place on and around her whereas in A River Sutra, the backdrop of the river provides occasions to the
narrator and the characters to ruminate about human desires, love and the idea of beauty in various contexts and perspectives. It is also believed by the travellers that the Narmada reveals herself in human form to pilgrims/travellers who have devoted themselves to the river with complete surrender. For a rationalist, it might be difficult to believe in such a myth, but for those who choose to spend their life on its banks, it is equally difficult (even though they might not have experienced it themselves) to say firmly, ‘there is no such thing.’ These two (and other such Indian) rivers then, with the myriad strands of beliefs attached to them, become a binding force for the country manifesting in a way the Indian adage: unity in diversity.

II) Eternal Issues

No pilgrim, devout, traveller or wanderer is able to give reason why a particular river should be considered as a mother or deity but at the same time, they are also not able to reason out why it should not be considered pious. Journeying on the river banks provides serenity from the chaos of the life where one gets opportunity to have dialogue with one’s own self. One realizes the solemn issues about self identity like who is he and what is the meaning of one’s existence. Search for the self is the original search which is a metaphysical question that one has from the moment one starts knowing about one’s existence. River in this context has its own ancientness. It has a mythical connection to the time when only Gods were the entities and no human being was around. River in this sense has an originary role in the life of living being. That is why the river but the other natural scapes become the site for rumination about one’s self. The protagonists started travelling in search of self-identity and back to the roots in all four novels.

The novel Jaya Ganga opens locationally at a cemetery, and though the protagonist takes up his journey in search of a mysterious lady, he simultaneously
tries to find his self and tries to know his own country and people through this journey. He decides to travel from the source to the sea. On the Ganga ghat, there has always been a debate about birth and re-birth. An Indian ascetic had reminded Jaya that she was Nadja, who had inspired the famous writer Andre Breton in her previous birth. That is why Nishant also starts this journey. People visit the ghats of the Ganga with the faith that dying on its banks is a privilege and it would free them from the cycle of the birth and death.

*Deep River* too opens with a death and the dying character Keiko, asks her husband to search for her, she will be reincarnated in some part of this world. The husband, Isobe, tries to search and happens to come to the Ganga ghats. As Buddhist philosophy also believes that by the forty-ninth day the soul invariably attains new life by being reborn as someone’s child. Listening to this explanation of the priest and exchange of researched data with an American Institute, Isobe turns on his journey towards India. Mitsuko, comes in search for her friend – Otsu and in the process she meets herself. She finds solace for her soul on the banks of the Ganga. Numada's forced separation from his beloved Pierrot is another example of the pain of being separated from that which is precious. Numada who had suffered from tuberculosis believes that in a way, he gets second birth because of the death of a bird. Kiguchi, a World War II veteran had also got the second life on the battle field because of the efforts of his friend Tsukada who then suffered over lifetime guilt for having eaten meat of fellow soldiers to survive. Selfless service to others gives inner peace and joy to the characters like Mitsuko and Gaston who had helped and served solace to the patients in mental and physical pain as volunteers in the hospitals and they vanish silently but leaving deep impression on the minds of their patients. Otsu carrying corpses on his back is equated with Christ carrying cross on his back and reaching to
the hill for the service and betterment of human souls. While these tourists are attempting their own form of “rebirth,” word arrives that the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi – one of the many Christ like characters in this story, vilified for trying to unify people – has been assassinated.

Each character’s scene is never mawkish, and the religion involved is therefore merely layering, not for preaching. There are several Christ figures in the story: the myna, Otsu, Indira Gandhi, Isobe's wife Keiko, Kiguchi's war buddy Tsukada, but then there is the Hindu goddess to balance it all out. Chamunda, Asian Mother Goddess contrasted to the Holy Mother of Europe. Chamunda, the ancient mother goddess who offers breast milk to all despite her ancient age and many years of suffering, seems to exemplify the nature of the River Ganges, the sacred site for the dead, the dying, and those seeking purification, regardless of who they have been during their lives. Deep River is thus a story of the journey to salvation and love that is common to several religions (Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism).

It is the sight of all these people, each carrying his or her individual burdens, praying at this deep river. The river of humanity embraces these people and carries them away. It makes each individual a part of it and the journey becomes an attempt for seeking answers to their individual darkness.

Tatvamasi opens and ends with ‘take this’ – characteristic of a river. Give and take, the constant offering that a river makes for all the living beings. The Ganga takes away all impurities to transport the soul to the other world and the Narmada takes all the sacrifices and teaches endurance to her pilgrims and how to sustain the life. Taking everything, the river conjures up all the happiness, desires and pains of the dead in her and provides serenity and salvation from the worldly pain. She
symbolizes the endurance and teaches how to ‘give’ away the self. The whole story is about the journey of a soul from ‘par’ to ‘swa’. A non-believer in the rituals and customs, unnamed protagonist arrives in India on the banks of the Narmada to seek knowledge of the culture of the local tribal folk. In the process his self merges with the nature and culture of the river. He starts believing that every Indian inherits the feeling of being one with Nature, from one generation to the next. The protagonist witnesses that each individual finds him/herself one with the Supreme Being – a part of Him. That self becomes as clean and worthy of other’s faith as Nature. When a self understands ‘Aham Brahmasmi’, at the same time, it realizes that actually, there does not exist anything like Aham – I. In fact, whatever exists is ‘Tatvamasi’ – That Thou Art or That Art Thou! (Bhatt translated, Narvane 199).

The protagonist had come to India with the curiosity what is the factor which keeps this country one in so much of diversity. The life being lived on the banks of the Narmada shows him all kinds of experiences. Care and oneness with the Nature, the traditions and efforts to keep them all alive is keeping this country one. He constantly observes his own changing emotions happening on the banks of the river. He had come with a view to collect data and receiving the first impression of the illiterate and uncouth tribal folk, he has planned to use his training in Human Resource Management and change the scenario. But as Ganesh Shastri tells him to observe things around rather than inclination to bring change, towards the end, he finds himself immersed in the local flavour.

Ganesh Shashtri says that it is dharma and not religion that helps keeping things as they are and this country one. Dharma is where one takes responsibility of one’s nature and culture which nurtures him. The commitment of accepting the obligation of the culture in which they were born and brought up and maintaining is
performing one’s dharma truly. As he believes, straightforward, simple understanding of what is right and what is wrong is called ethics of dharma, is one of the reasons why this country and culture have lasted for long. He also says that there are many different religions and sects in this country and if one more is added, it won’t make any difference however, to add to that, it would also have the same followership. But important is one must have faith in whatever one is doing or following. He says that there is no need to have faith in religion but one must have faith (Bhatt, translated, Narvane 57). The protagonist realizes that one good thing about the people of this land is that they do not force somebody to believe in what they believe. Everybody can have one’s own separate faith. The protagonist is trying to make fun of religious faith of an old lady – who prayed to the river for the betterment of him while parting – and asks if a river protects one or drowns. She quite calmly replies to the protagonist – that everything depend on each person’s faith. Even Ganesh Shashtri explains to Lucy that the poor, credulous people, doing hard physical work the whole day, will not be interested in scientific information and reasons. They will understand and accept only a sin or good deed; or say an auspicious and inauspicious one. May be that’s why to make them follow a rule, forbidding it by way of religion becomes simpler (Bhatt translated, Narvane 188).

Taking up a journey leads to a search for the self and having a dialogue with one’s self. The protagonist realizes that a river evokes eternal questions for identity and purpose of life like ‘Who am I’ and from where we have come and where are we to go. But does it happen because one is free from all other worldly activities at that time and has leisure to think about all these? And serene ambience of a river facilitates the chance for rumination.
A River Sutra with the backdrop of the Narmada tries to find the secrets of human desires and love. In the process of forsaking the world, anonymous narrator gets entangled into the knowledge of the world by meeting and listening to the tales of various travellers. Each traveller with their faith and experiences, make him believe and come nearer to the river. Tariq Mia makes him realize that he cannot give up the world when he knows so little of it as he is yet to be stirred by love, the emotion that is the chief motivating force to propel people to sympathize with others and makes him feel that there is yet a lot to learn and gain knowledge. As Professor Shankar who was Naga Baba earlier joined the world again saying that I do not have great truths to share indicating that the greater enlightenment can be attained after serving humanity rather than making one’s self aloof in a cave or on the mountain pick. A River Sutra in this way affirms faith in quest rather than stasis, dedication rather than alienation, acceptance rather than withdrawal. Throughout the novel, the idea of lived-life, rather than annihilation, reverberates.

III) Riverine Culture

Both the rivers have very indigenous life styles. Although both rivers touch major cities, the Narmada has more of a natural landscape on its banks and has been able to retain her beauty in most of her route of flow whereas the Ganga is getting more polluted day by day because of giant industries on her banks. Both the rivers are considered to be life givers. However, on the Ganga ghat, mostly there is cremation going on (at the Manikarnika Ghat it is said that the pyre never stops), and so death is more visible on the Ganga ghats, but it is accompanied with the belief that death on its banks leads to perpetual life in the next world, and so people come here with the desire to die and achieve release from the cycle of re-births. On the other hand, the
banks of the Narmada are full of life, the river teaching one to live life renouncing one’s identity and worldly desires.

The life on the river encompasses different aspects like social, political, religious, cultural and environmental. The study of these novels reveal through different types of characters and events on the river banks how the local people deal with the issues and how foreigners perceive riverine culture of India. In Jaya Ganga Nishant meets different sadhus – ascetics – and porters who all live a very hard life in the Himalayas. The Ganga is the meeting place for diverse group of people from abroad and India. The porters and local people have a dislike for foreigners as they behave ‘intimately’ even in the public which is not part of Indian behaviour and so this aspect becomes rather scandalizing for them to witness something like a man and a woman kissing openly in the public. They feel these outsiders do not have respect for the sanctity of the river and the place they are visiting. The depiction of political life on the Ganga ghats is very strong. Both the novels Jaya Ganga and Deep River have the backdrop of the time when the Gandhi family and the Congress party were in the prime of their rule. Often there is a disgust expressed in these novels at the way inherently the seat of power passes on to the next generation within the family, resulting in a hereditary hold to power not dissimilar to monarchy. People comment that those in that family don’t die until the next generation is ready to take over (Singh 58) and as if this Prime Minister’s seat has become the private property of the Nehru family (Singh 106). There is comment on the peace of the river banks being destroyed by a huge political campaign held by the famous film actor Amitabh Bachchan. An old man doesn’t like this political campaign made by film stars as he considers that it is nothing else but a publicity stunt and is very critical that young students get diverted from their studies. The opinion is cinema spoils behaviour of the youth and makes
them socially irresponsible and fashionably modern which adds to their fancy rather than becoming sincere citizens.

The sanctity of the river is spoiled by the brothels and the hell like life throbs in them on the ghats. In the holiest city of Benares on the Ganga ghat, has many prostitute houses. Nishant who meets Zehra on his journey, comes to know that she is a tawaiff – a courtesan but staying in a prostitute house and he puts in the efforts to free her from the place as he has taken liking to her. Newer girls are trained with all manipulations and even the police are of no help in bettering these situations as they are being fed well by the owners of the prostitute house. None of the pilgrims have given up their pleasures or vices. Many of them come on the ghat for such pleasure. They are unscrupulous. And after having all the fun, they come to the river bank to make offerings. In fact, they need this theatre precisely because they know they are guilty as they have committed such deeds which trouble their inner conscience like making money through ill means, indulging in prostitution and alike.

On the Ganga ghat, because of the lack of resources, the village poor often leave their dead to the unfathomable depths of the sacred goddess. They do not have capacity to offer them proper dignified cremation. Even after death one’s betterment will be decided and offered from the earth. Pind daam is such a ritual in which pandas have the record of the family and they would know all the customs to reach all offerings for the dead. The ritual of pind daam on the Ganga ghat is very significant. The ritual offers peace and happiness to the dead members of the family who are in the other world. The pandas – the ancient mediators between the living and the heavens, had by now become the pimps of the religious underworld – inherently maintain the whole lineage of the family even if just one member from the family has visited the ghats. It is also one type of exercise to find roots and going back to one’s
own identity that pilgrims undertake which keeps such business alive for years. A modern *panda* as one happens to be in *Jaya Ganga* has all types of facilities available. If nobody has died in the family of a tourist, then he has services of good hotel, arrangement of boat for the journey on the river et c. available with him.

Different strata of Government servants are very picturesquely described by Singh. A small clerk at the post office is not bothered about his duty of weighing the posts as he was busy in listening to the commentary of the cricket match. The nearby shopkeeper to whom the narrator visits for getting his envelop weighed, knowing the ills that go around in this office, comments that the government is eaten up by its own personnel (Singh 66). He assumes that the clerk must have sold off the weight box for jingle of some coins. Nishant had to face the bureaucratic treatment just to meet an Executive Engineer. No responsible officer was available in the government office to direct. Thus, *Jaya Ganga* encompasses the very essence of a society, captures its spirit and reveals the soul of its people on and around the Ganga ghats.

*Deep River* focuses on search for the self and peace for that troubled soul. The novel brings together Buddhist, Christian and Hindu beliefs. A group of travellers journeys down in India on the banks of the Ganga. Before their journey began, they were given few cautions like how filthy few facilities would be in India which beforehand creates a kind of disgust in the mind of the foreigner. Like, use of toilets should be done with a great care and also bottled water should be preferred for drinking as water in India is contaminated. Whereas, the belief of the locals is exactly the opposite, e.g., a boatman in *Jaya Ganga* says that the water of the Ganga is elixir, the purest water on the earth so there is no need to carry drinking water while journeying on the river. Tourists were also cautioned against the beggar children they would meet in India and not to get concerned about their plight. The tourist guide
explains them that the beggar children are a source of income to their poor household and if one child is entertained, they would be endlessly thronged by the other children.

Poverty is a part of living in India which affects even in offering proper dignified cremation to a dead. Otsu, carries dead bodies of unknown people from the streets and reaches them to the cremation grounds. People come to Ganga ghat to die, as per the belief that death on the banks of this river, and especially at Varanasi, frees one from the cycle of deaths and rebirths, and yet there is no proper provision or system to deal with this situation by the city administration. Dead bodies are simply floated in the river considering that the river will accept them and transport the soul to the other world. Nobody except few foreign travellers bothers or feels disgust about these floating bodies while bathing in the river as they consider it a good fate of the dead to get purified by the most holy water. Bathing in the Ganga, has the sense of purification, at the same time it is an act of supplication for release from the cycle of transmigration and reincarnation.

To take the other river which has an equally ancient set of beliefs and practices about itself, Tatvamasi, the Gujarati novel by Dhruv Bhatt, gives an overview of the life and culture lived on the banks of the river Narmada especially of the tribal folks. A question why marriages are not planned in a particular time of the year by a German couple made Dhruv Bhatt to take the travel on the Narmada believing that some old generation person on this bank might be available to explain the reason. The writer’s search made him present the beliefs and traditions of the people through a discourse how each custom is a larger religious or cultural need to make life good and peaceful. Like marriages and other social gatherings cannot be planned in a particular time of the year because the most important religious occasions, gatherings like the Kumbh Mela and the custom of bathing at holy places have been arranged in a
Sinhastha year. Kumbh Mela is a mass Hindu pilgrimage of faith in which Hindus gather to bathe in a sacred river. Traditionally, four fairs are widely recognized as the Kumbh Melas: the Haridwar Kumbh Mela, the Allahabad Kumbh Mela, the Nashik-Trimbakeshwar Simhastha and the Ujjain Simhastha. These four fairs are held periodically at one of the following places by rotation: Haridwar, Allahabad (Prayaga), Nashik district (Nashik and Trimbak) and Ujjain. The main festival site is located on the banks of the river Ganga at Haridwar; the confluence (Sangam) of the Ganga and the Yamuna and the mythical Sarasvati at Allahabad; the Godavari at Nashik; and the Shipra at Ujjain. Bathing in these rivers is thought to cleanse a person of all sins. The Kumbh Mela is held once in 12 years. There is a difference of around 3 years between the Kumbh Melas at Haridwar and Nashik; the fairs at Nashik and Ujjain are celebrated in the same year or one year apart. The exact date is determined according to a combination of zodiac positions of the Jupiter, the Sun and the Moon. At Nashik and Ujjain, the Mela may be held while a planet is in Leo (Simha in Hindu astrology); which is also known as Simhastha. At Haridwar and Allahabad, an Ardhha ("Half") Kumbh Mela is held every sixth year; a Maha ("Great") Kumbh Mela occurs after 144 years. In this way, every twelve year, at a fixed time, people from all the corners of the country start travelling to reach a definite place on the banks of the river. One cannot have marriages or any other important work that would incur a lot of expense in this year. But the same restriction may not apply in the other parts of the country where different customs and norms are followed. The narrator of this novel is unable to find out whether the pilgrimage and travel have moulded this country and brought a change in looking at life. Each individual sees a moment, a particle, or a small stream of water from a larger perspective as if every person inherits at birth, a unique way of
looking at life. He observes how illiterate tribal folks also know the great ancient scriptures because they are not merely stories; they are life lived according to the traditions. The realization surprises the narrator himself as to how without ever reading he knew the stories of these ancient scriptures.

The tradition of parikrama of the river is still alive in modern time because of the pilgrims having commitment and the local people who facilitate them. Simple folks believe that by serving parikramawasis they are not serving these people who have undertaken the journey but they are serving the cause of the parikrama and this responsibility preserves a tradition. Looking after the pilgrims is considered to give one the happiness achieved by doing a good deed. The parikramawasi may well be acquiring the fruits of good deeds while doing the parikrama, but the cultural value of what he gets over and above that, will be perhaps understood by one, if one undertakes a parikrama oneself. Similarly, a peculiar custom takes place in the forest area of the Narmada. A traveller is being looted at a place called Shoolpaneshwar Zadi by a particular tribe – the Kaba. They consider the act of looting pilgrims/travellers to be the command of Ma – the river goddess. They loot everything and the traveller is left with just a loin cloth which symbolically suggests he has renounced everything, even the ego attached to his own name. This act also imparts him probable answers to his questions like what is renunciation, what is sacrifice and what is other-worldly knowledge.

Riverine folk shower immense love and care to the travellers and pilgrims. Even in their intense poverty, they do not allow a holy man to go away from their place without having something. A poor tribal man offers merely grains of salt from his household as food to an eccentric character in the novel called Gandu fakir and others but he feels honoured when all accept his offering. He believes that a holy
pilgrim should not be sent empty stomach from his house. People like Bittubanga prepare resting place for eternal mythical travellers like Ashwatthama or Vyas Muni and women put an earthen bowl with oil every night outside their home thinking that if any traveller passes by the oil can help them to massage their tired feet. An aged volunteer Kamala spruces up the entire aashram with great care to make girl student-travellers feel at home. They love selflessly but at the same time they can hate somebody with the same intensity like the incident where the whole forest was against Puriya and ready to kill her when she was found with the dead child of Rambali. They naturally care a traveller as if he/she is the family member. This ease and comfort allow some unknown to open up in front of a stranger and in no time, they start sharing their lives like old friends. The narrator was amazed when he himself started chatting out his life so frankly with Parvatima. He feels that he has never learnt so much about any person or family in such a short time. He could not believe that anybody meeting somebody for the first time can talk about one’s personal life with such ease.

Even if livelihood is difficult, the poor families are true to their selves. They do not have proper houses of their own. They live in mud houses on the river banks which get washed away almost every year during the rains. But whenever they borrowed money from people like Guptaji, they mortgage their houses as they do not have any other valuables to put as guarantee. Their houses are thus not permanent property which can be captured if debt is not paid but are symbolically attached against their name. So what is actually indebted is the man’s existence and his name. This existence, that name puts binding on itself that they have to pay back their loans. They get the command from within and go across the forests on the full-moon night. As Guptaji respects their commitment to their self, he does not keep any account,
extends their time for payment or accepts any offering, in cash or kind – like honey or a pumpkin – just to relieve them from burden of the ir loan at some extent. In another incident of a performance by school students, nobody watched it for free. Everybody offered something or the other like corn or jowar etc. to the young performers. Going through all these experiences, the narrator feels that he does not have any right to change these simple minds whom he had considered as uncultured tribal and for which he was pro-active. But with the passage of time, he starts believing that the straightforwardness, simple understanding of what is right and what is wrong in these people is probably one of the reasons which keep the ancient culture alive. And he admits that even if he spends his remaining life travelling in this country just to know the finer details of the vertical and horizontal threads of this culture, it will not be possible to understand the people completely. That is why probably the narrator starts taking part in their activities more rigorously than finding faults in them.

In *A River Sutra* the forest life around the river Narmada is portrayed through different individual stories. Everybody has one’s own tale to share. There is a belief that the Narmada is the most ancient river as it finds its reference in the great Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy’s writings. This river is such a record of human presence in the same place as it finds its reference in ancient scriptures as well as contemporary literary works – proof of the immortality of the river. The tribal folk living on its banks also believe that the river cures all ills, and by word of mouth this is passed on to others. That is why an Executive, Nitin Bose who was considered to be possessed was brought to the river banks to complete the rituals of a goddess at a shrine overlooking the river to free him from the clutches of the evil spirit. According to the river’s astrology, it is believed that it dispels the malevolent effects of Saturn and so all who suffer from epilepsy, depression, and other psychological problems are
rushed to her banks. But the river is equally a magnet for scholars. The Narmada is full of myths and cultural beliefs. Forest dwellers believe the presence of an Immortal on the river banks. The Bandits thus reside there and try to seek the same immortality. Even if somebody commits suicide like a girl did by drowning herself, it is believed that their souls would be purified of all sins by the holy river. The music-teacher father sends his daughter who was disturbed by the setbacks in her youth to meditate by the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva’s penance, until she cures herself of her attachment to what has passed and can make a good come-back in the world of music and be a learner again. Thus, the sacredness of the river and its amelioratory effect is testified by the individual experiences of those who have lived on its banks, be they natives or those who come from places far off having heard myriad things said about it.

But human desire for the fame makes charlatans sacrifice the sanctity of rivers which may cause damage to the image of a land. Rivers and their natural surroundings are used by photographers, writers or by political leaders to add mileage to their unholy gains. Through their creative works, they try to build a picture of a place to satisfy their lust for the getting name. A common thread related to selling the scenario of India to the world is found there in all four novels without bothering much about the reputation of a nation. The most sacred pilgrimage is becoming commerce. The protagonist in the *Jaya Ganga* is the journalist by profession. His visit from Paris to India gives an impression that the purpose of visit is professional and has nothing to do with Eastern faith and culture. He is being looked at with red eye by his uncle when he says that he would write on his Ganga journey, and was remarked that how the most sacred pilgrimage for a Hindu is to his newspaper an exotic reportage. Even in *Deep River* Sanjo, the photographer wanted to capture the moments of cremation
and by publishing them, he wanted to earn the fame in international canvas of photography. His hunger for becoming famous kills Otsu who tried to save Sanjo from his fault of capturing the death pyres and disgust of the people.

Similarly, Lucy in Tatvamasi wants to achieve fame with a report on her visit to India and the forest around the Narmada. According to her what the narrator and her father are doing, is mere study of a culture which actually has no value as it does not bring any name to them. In A River Sutra also Professor Shankar is a famous archaeologist because of his intense research work and a book on the Narmada. However, he renounced the world and again joins back in search of further truths. This is how, many foreigners visit India with the fascination of becoming famous by selling the poverty, culture and tradition. It does n’t make any difference whether they come with the purpose of understanding the culture or just with an excitement of getting published by extracting few facts and making them stories.

IV) Ecological Issues

Along with social and religious life on the rivers, ecology begs the similar importance. Ecological aspects are not fictional but their narrations and concerns depicted in the novels connect readers with the real life problems. As such the environment related issues are mostly not paid much attention because putting efforts for their solution would bring collateral effects for the government, NGOs or local groups of people. Like the Chipko Movement where the people in the hills prevented government contractors from chopping down the trees by physically hugging them. As it is rightly believed by the agitators, cutting trees will bring a chain of hazards like deforestation which will make the soil infirm and cause landslide and they block rivers and cause floods. When the flood-waters break through the sand, they sweep away houses, cattle and villages. Rather than appreciating the participation, if the
government finds their employee involved into this act, like character of Mohan in *Jaya Ganga* a government servant then and now a porter in the hills, was interrogated and jailed which made him lose his job. Also local people are dissatisfied with the extrication of water from the river on the name of producing electricity which does not however benefit small villages around the river and the river keeps suffering.

River connects people living on her banks with the nature. Tribal folk around the Narmada belt are very careful about the preservation of the nature and beauty of the river. They indulge in the activities related to nature. During his stay, the protagonist in *Tatvamasi* takes part in many such events where he directly gets connected with the nature like planting rice-saplings and preparing a garden of flowers where the land was ruined by forest-fire. In all these incidents, he has to be one with the local people and slowly and gradually he gains knowledge – about himself and the meaning of his existence – other than materialistic achievement like the data he was to collect from the journey. He himself gets surprised and convinced that it is the effect and mysterious inspiration of the river which lead them to perform activities that in turn connected him to nature.

Connection with the nature establishes a mutual trust between human and non-human entities like animals and Nature. The human hunger of taking away things or dominating the other breaks the chain of mutual trust. *Tatvamasi* is a story of symbiosis – living together with the men, nature, the river and the entire culture. That is why the relation with the nature is not only the need but it becomes a part of their existence. The Narmada having more forest around has different issues related to coexistence. The entry of a tiger in the residential areas of the forest is natural but fatal for the living beings. The forest life survives on the mutual trust but a tiger turns out to be man-eater when the chain of trust of coexistence is broken. But, people like
Banga sympathizes with the animal that had killed his brother Bittu and lets the animal free from the clutches of the forest officers, though after committing this act, Banga considers himself to be a culprit of his brother who might not be knowing the reason why he released the tigress and wanted to visit Confession Box in the church. Tribal folk of the forest is still more sensible regarding the natural asset as they constantly be with the nature than people constantly rushing in the urban areas for their progress.

As people in the Narmada forest do not get convinced to confine the nature, the government tries to take steps of reforming them and bringing in the contact of the modern world by establishing skill based centres and imparting the knowledge which may earn them some income. Forest dwellers in Tatvamasi were not ready to keep bee in the boxes. The narrator and few government experts tried to develop bee keeping centre to get more amount of honey but it took long for them to convince local tribe and share their expertise in catching particular type of bee and convince how these centres can be a source of income without damaging environment much. Even there is no facility available in a government school for the students. A committed teacher like Vishnu Master and his wife have to go to each house to bring children to the school by offering them food from their own household for the day. The Board was ready to close the school and shift Vishnu master at some good place but Vishnu Master fought against the Government Board for the allotment of the land for the development of the new school which was buried during the fire in the forest for the betterment of the poor tribal children. Thus symbiotic living balances life and tries to keep human and nature connected for the betterment of both.
V) Narrative Techniques in the Novels

Story telling is an age-old activity with each generation of storytellers/writers adopting different techniques. Modern works of literature are especially marked by different narrative techniques. Every novelist has used a unique style to express his thoughts and philosophy. Chapters are titled in one word in Jaya Ganga including a chapter with the title but no content, few Hindi dialogues in a chapter put and arranged in asymmetrical way and there are absurd dialogues in the form of poetic lines. In Deep River the chapters are divided as cases to be analyzed matching the problem (of disturbed self) each character in the novel has. Whereas, Tatvamasi just numbers the chapters and has a peculiar circularity of the opening and the end in each. In A River Sutra chapters read as if they are different short stories but as a whole they are bound together as one. Technique of writing a diary is commonly used by all the novelists. All the wandering protagonists and even some minor characters in all four novels are in the habit of maintaining a diary. In Tatvamasi, the river is reading the story from the diary of the protagonist which was maintained to take down the information regarding the tribal life but at the end it turns out to be the pages full of experiences that changed the perception of the narrator regarding Indian culture at the end. Diaries mention the date in the story in between, which indicates the passage of time and course of the events taking place.

Writers have also tried to employ various points of narration other than the routine technique of using the third person narrative in the novels. Jaya Ganga has different narrators like the porters, pandas and local people other than the protagonist who make the readers familiar with the life at different points on the Ganga. Deep River also has their separate stories by each character to share which gives different peep into the situation or the psyche of each character every time. The narrator’s diary
in *Tatvamasi* involves many narrators like anonymous narrator himself, Supriya, Gutaji, Shastriji, tribal people and many others, each revealing some or the other peculiarity of the life around the river and Indian culture. In *A River Sutra*, Mehta has tried to employ varying narrative techniques like characters narrating stories themselves, others narrate stories to the main narrator and also the story is narrated through entries in the diary to avoid monotony of telling the tale and presenting freshness and myriad polarities of viewpoints. The narrators of the stories converge on the banks of the Narmada and enjoy the peace and mental serenity by telling their experiences and by residing on the banks of this mythical-canonical river. As Tariq Mia says, “Such people are like flowing water through our lives… We learn something from the encounter, then they are gone. We never find them again.” (Mehta 259) Like the water of the river is never the same, the narrators keep changing leaving behind their voices that impart knowledge of various aspects of life.

Technique of flashback is effectively used in all the four novels. Nishant moves back and forth in the memories with Jaya and his present moments with Zehra but in anticipation of coming of Jaya at Baneras, he keeps travelling in future with the plans how his life then would be with her. All four major characters in the *Deep River* have to travel to India to get away from the past misdeeds or suffocation in their lives. They constantly recollect their past as they travel in India trying to get rid of their mental burden which finally happens only on the Ganga *ghat*. The anonymous narrator of *Tatvamasi*, considers it to be weak to remember past and get emotional by indulging into it. Even he dissuades his colleague and school friend to visit the closed school of their childhood on returning to India. But unknowingly his stay on the river bank, leads him to his good old memories of his childhood and the passage of the time makes his stay and relation with the Narmada forest more pleasant. In *A River Sutra*
all the stories are of past events which are being told in the present to the narrator. So the narrator of each tale travels back to the incident in the past and shares in the present. Listening to such stories, the unnamed protagonist of the novel enriches himself with the worldly knowledge which he had intended to forsake when he took the charge of the manager and settle on the river banks.

Although fiction is primarily regarded as an imaginative genre, the writers of these novels considered here depict real issues about the two rivers – the Ganga and the Narmada – well nigh corresponding to the geographic/topographic and cultural realities about these rivers and life on their banks. Metaphorically therefore these novels not only mirror life (of the rivers and its people) but also critique it.
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