CHAPTER SIX

“A MATTER OF ALLEGIANCE TO GOD OR MAN”

A STUDY OF THE CITY AND THE RIVER

Chronologically The City and the River, the fifth and final novel of Arun Joshi, succeeds The Last Labyrinth, examined in Chapter Four. Readers who have had to make their way through the suffocating, labyrinthine twilight world of Som Bhaskar in The Last Labyrinth may feel somewhat relieved to enter the world of The City and the River, published after a gap of nine years, breathe some fresh air and catch a glimpse of new light despite the surrounding darkness. It is not certainly naively optimistic, and it does not shut its eyes to the harsh realities of life. In fact it dwells on to what lengths man’s egocentricity, reckless ambition, lust for power, and unscrupulousness can go. However, it holds the possibility of a dawn, the promise of a better future for man provided he has the will, makes the right choices and acts according to them. In content, form and technique, it is different from Joshi’s earlier novels, and marks a clear and significant departure from his previous practice. As seen already, the first four novels of Joshi are concerned with the complexities of the lives of idiosyncratic individuals and their predicament. Caught in the maze of life in contemporary India which is full of uncertainties and confusion of values because it seems unhinged from its heritage and spiritual moorings, the protagonists of these novels feel lonely, isolated, and estranged mentally from their society, their world, and even from themselves. They have to struggle hard and strain every nerve to find the meaning and purpose of life and attain self-knowledge. Their endeavour becomes a spiritual quest. The novels record faithfully their anguish efforts, and take the form of protagonistic confessional narratives. They probe the inner man, and therefore look at the larger, outside world and society from the viewpoint of the individual and how he relates himself to it.
In *The City and the River* Joshi breaks new ground and widens his canvas. He shifts his focus from self-conscious and perplexed individuals in isolation and estrangement to groups of people who constitute the larger society, of which individuals are an inseparable part. The well-being of individuals is viewed as depending upon the well-being or otherwise of the community, the society to which they belong. In a sense, Joshi looks at the self-society relationship in this novel from the end of society. Society itself is viewed, not as an abstract idea, but as a coming together of many individual men and women to live in peace and harmony together. In *The City and the River* Joshi is concerned with the predicament of a whole community of people connected with the “City” and the “River”, and by further extension, with that of a race and of the entire human society itself. This extension of meaning of community is implicit in the suggestive and meaningful title chosen for the novel. The “City” and the “River” of the title are not given any specific names. It may be assumed that they stand for all cities and rivers, past and present. Further whatever meaning the novel conveys is expected to be relevant to the whole of mankind. There is yet another suggestion in the title. In the history of civilisations, cities and rivers have been very closely connected. Some of the great ancient civilisations had their origin, growth and development in river valleys and the riparian cities, as long as the civilisations flourished, received their sustenance, material and spiritual alike, from the rivers on whose banks they were built. And hence rivers were regarded as sacred, worshipped, and celebrated in song, legend and myth. This worshipful attitude towards rivers continues in India even today, and the river Ganga in particular draws millions of people for a holy dip. But with the increasing secularisation of life, cities and rivers in general have drifted farther apart. If this fact is borne in mind, it may be possible to surmise why Joshi has given this
particular title to his novel which at a deeper level of meaning enacts the ever recurring conflict between material and spiritual forces.

The City and the River tells "a strange sorry tale", as the narrator the Great Yogeshwara puts it.¹ It is a sad story of rulers and the ruled who instead of living in harmony and mutual respect for the benefit of all, are involved in an unresolved conflict and struggle, for which the megalomaniac ruler and his henchmen are responsible. History is replete with such instances. Joshi is chiefly concerned with the motives, ambitions, choices, and actions of all those involved in the conflict, and the cumulative effect they have on the life and destiny of individuals and the society as a whole. In the novel those who rule wielding power and authority are the city. They are egotistical, shortsighted, and ambitious of retaining as well as increasing their power regardless of the unscrupulous means they employ. Intrigue and corruption in high places are rife in their world. The beleaguered people who resist them and their ways courageously against all odds and despite their undeserved suffering, are close to the river and belong to the lowest rung of the society. Finally disaster and a deluge overtake them all.

In telling this story, Joshi seems to have moved out of the private world of spiritual questers into the public world of real-politik. In The Apprentice he was apparently concerned with the pervasive corruption and moral degeneration of the post-Independence Indian society, in which all including politicians, big and small, were involved, and did enough damage to the society and nation. In The City and the River, he seems to deal with the same issues in the public world, on a much larger scale, and stridently expose the corruption and malpractices of political leaders, businessmen, police and army chiefs. The
title of the novel seems to lay stress on this public theme. But Ratan Rathor of The
Apprentice, who knew what was happening to him and his society, poses the question
which suggests its own answer: "The wide world and me. Me and the wide world. But
how can one separate the two". It indicates Joshi's own view of the matter. Wherever his
focus be, neither the world of the individual nor the public world (ie. society) is lost sight
of. He never compartmentalises the two realms.

Political issues being so conspicuous in The City and the River, it seems most
natural if one is tempted to read it exclusively as a political novel or satire. The blurb of the
printed text itself describes it as "a political fable" which presents "a startling vision of
everyday politics". Brahma Dutta Sharma has asserted at some length that it is a political
novel. He lists the many malpractices of politicians presented in the novel. In the novel
the sinisterly benevolent dictator the Grand Master who wants to become the all-powerful
King of the city faces stiff opposition from the boatmen who refuse to pay their allegiance
to him. With the help of his Council of Advisers, and by subtle manipulations he creates a
conspiracy against him out of nothing and makes the skinny Mathematics teacher Master
Bhoma the kingpin of conspirators. Then he uses the so-called conspiracy to eliminate his
opponents and consolidate his power and authority in the city. These and other strategies
he employs with the help of his chief adviser the Astrologer, are much too familiar
strategies in the circles of power politics today to be unaware of. The calculated and cold
blooded ways by which the Grand Master eliminates or makes ineffective his opponents, the
boatmen, their Headman, the Professor, Bhoma, Dharma and several others, remind one of
the diabolic methods used by many a despotic and ambitious ruler, past and present.
The City and the River is not a political satire though there are grim comments on the corruption and horror of politics. Echoes of the Emergency that Indira Gandhi imposed on the country may be heard, and parallels with the gross abuse of power and authority during the period may also be seen easily in the novel. But Joshi must have had in mind much more than that dark chapter in the contemporary history of the nation, while writing this novel. Moreover, by the time Joshi began writing this novel, more than a decade had elapsed since the lifting of the Emergency, and it had become a thing of the past, and whatever topical interest it might have had, more or less had faded out. Further even in its political aspects, the novel implicitly covers several climes and times. Therefore it is not necessary to press the parallel between the Emergency and some of the events of the novel.

The chief characters of the novel are all archetypal in the sense that in the world of politics whenever there is a confrontation between those who are in power and rule and those who are powerless and are ruled, such people appear at all times and in all climes. This confrontation engages Joshi's attention. The distinction of The City and the River is that it transcends the limits of geography and time. The evil that temporal power can become, its destructiveness as well as self-destructiveness in the hands of megalomaniacs preoccupies Joshi’s creative imagination.

The City and the River, however, is a novel of rich texture, and has more than one level of meaning, and lends itself to more than one legitimate interpretation. The interpretations are inter-related rather than mutually exclusive. The novel works mainly on two levels of meaning, political and spiritual. On both it moves simultaneously. Tapan Kumar Ghosh uses the term “metaphysical” but in the context of this and other novels of Joshi and his own preoccupation with the spiritual values and heritage of India, the term
emmetaphysical'. Even at the political level, the novel cannot be called a 'political novel', going by the criteria suggested by M.K. Naik, on the basis of the definitions available to him. Naik says: "--- the term, political novel, may denote either (a) a piece of fiction devoted to a presentation of political ideas, or (b) a species of fiction in which action, characters and setting are firmly grounded in politics".6

The City and the River clearly does not at all aim at presenting political ideas or promoting any particular political ideology either directly or indirectly as, for instance, some of the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, George Orwell's Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty Four, and Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, and others do. Though it gives expression to the corruption prevalent in the domains of power and authority, it neither projects nor aims at projecting an alternative type of government or power structure which would be corrupt free. On the other hand, it is deeply concerned with the values that ought to govern those who are engaged in governing. Whether it is a Grand Master with an Advisory Council or a King with a Supreme Council of Ministers that rules the city, or someone else, what is most important is that he should be less self-seeking and less ambitious. The Hermit of the Mountain, one of the most significant characters in the novel, makes this idea clear without mincing words to the Minister for Trade who secretly aspires to become the Grand Master of the city and because he believes that he would be a better ruler: "A man aspiring to rule this city must first learn to be the slave of the city. Only then can he claim precedence over the present Grand Master. The rest is words".7 The Hermit actually insists on readiness for responsible, non-egocentric action.
The City and the River does not fit into the second category of the political novel either. Though it has obviously a political setting and describes several of the manoeuvres of politicians, it lays the greatest stress on the choice that individuals and groups have to make between man and God for their allegiance. In the words of the Yogeshwara, it is "a matter of allegiance, to God or to man". It is a moral choice that the self has to make, even when one is a member of a group. R.S. Pathak has said, that in this novel "Joshi poses significant questions about identity, commitment and faith. But these questions are approached from the standpoint of politics". But any moral choice concerns the whole person and covers every aspect of life. In the novel politics is viewed not in isolation but as an inseparable part of the whole of life, which includes the self, society, humanity and God. The choice one makes in politics cannot be seen in isolation but has to be an integral part of one's life, one's view of life, and should reflect his self-awareness, awareness of his duty and responsibility to others and society and also the extent of his moral and spiritual development. The emphasis is on the ethical basis of all action, personal and public not excluding political. Tapan Ghosh expresses the same idea in different words. He says: "--- it would be a mistake to read the book simply as a political novel. Politics becomes in Joshi's hands a useful means of presenting a vision of life which is, by all means, a spiritual one --- it transcends the realm of politics and explores some fundamental truths about human life with its spiritual destiny, and --- its ultimate world view is not political ---".

By what has been said in the foregoing paragraphs, it should be obvious that though The City and the River appears different from Joshi's earlier novels, it actually continues and in some ways improves upon his major and recurrent thematic concerns. Most noteworthy it continues to lay particular stress on the need for a spiritual anchor and a still
spiritual centre in the midst of the confusion of life. Questions of man's self-absorption, self-deception, blindness to truth, confusion between appearance and reality, ambition and greed, engage Joshi's attention as before as his chief concerns. He looks at them with the same gravity and seriousness as before and explores them in the context of politics, and presents a view of life relevant to both individuals and the nation.

The novel presents a simple and readable story full of events, which take place in a nameless city, a wholly imaginary place, "a Nowhere and hence Everywhere City" as Anup Beniwal puts it, to suggest that the tale is imbued with "universal and eternal significance". The tale itself blends facts, fantasy and stark realism. To suggest that it transcends the limitations of space and time, disparate elements both ancient and modern are mingled. The huge untamed river which symbolises endless time, and the modern city with structures of brick and mortar, steel and glass exist side by side. Hermits, yajnas, sacrifice, and primitive people with bows and arrows, who worship the river as their goddess, coexist with men who have modern weapons of war - self-loading rifles, tanks, helicopters, ultra-modern lasers, surveillance equipment - and also shopping arcades, cigars, card-clubs, conveyors run on electricity, newspapers, lottery-stalls, etc. There are also pyramids to remind us of the despotic pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

Joshi has devised a narrative strategy appropriate to his subject and artistic intention. As the city is the protagonist and its destiny is the focus of attention, and not any particular person, he employs for the first time third-person omniscient narration. The story is actually found in "a book of yellowed sheets". Having read it several times over and deeply moved by it the Great Yogeshwara, a grey-bearded old man who appears ageless, narrates it
to his young disciple "the Nameless-One", in his cottage. A "Prologue" and an "Epilogue" are added to the narrative which are spoken by the omniscient authorial narrator. This mythical narrative framework and pattern resembles that of the traditional Puranas in which an old wise teacher, a guru or sage, tells his keen disciple a fairly long story of significance to prepare him for a quest and a mission. The story that the Yogeshwara narrates also has a story within a story, to resemble the traditional narrative mode. Almost in the middle of the narrative "the story of the naked king" (which Joshi seems to have drawn from the tales of the Danish storyteller Hans Anderson) is introduced by one of the characters to elucidate the meaning of the critical situation. Both the narrating Yogeshwara and the listening Nameless-One are mythical figures.

The narrative is direct and straightforward, and the events of the tale are chronologically presented. To suggest its deeper meaning Joshi uses certain recurrent images and metaphors which acquire symbolic significance in the context in which they appear. The aged narrator and the young listener appear to be symbolic figures. The city and the river, very concrete in their presence, also serve as opposed symbols, symbolic of opposed attitudes to life and values. The pyramids which mark the crest of the tiers of structures in the city not only recall the ancient Egyptian emperors, but symbolise the incorrigible self-centredness, cruelty, greed, vanity, and megalomania of the latter day rulers regardless of the system of government to which they belong. Thus symbolically the pyramids thematically link the present of the narrative with the remote past of the pharaohs. Music is one of the profoundest of symbolic images. The boatmen play on a one-stringed musical instrument which suggests their unqualified devotion to the river. The Nameless-One after drinking the elixir given by the Yogeshwara hears unearthly music and dance
probably suggestive of the cosmic harmony and order which man must not disturb but
threatens to do because of his egocentricity. The Grand Master who wants to become the
King has no ear for music, and that speaks volumes about his discordant nature. The
Professor, whose favourite pupil Master Bhoma happens to be and in search of whom he
goes from place to place at great risk to his own life, is a passionate student of astronomy
lost in wonder at the cosmic order. He tends to connect earthy occurrences with the
cosmic. His involvement in astronomy gives the story of the city and the river a larger
dimension. It is implied in the novel that the little world of man which appears to him to be
so big when seen by itself, is nothing more than a speck in the vast universe. Man in his
egocentric pettiness and myopia forgets this fact. In the “Epilogue”, the Yogeshwara tells
his disciple before they part: “--- we are only instruments – both you and I – of the great
God in the highest heaven who is the Master of the Universe. How perfect we are as
instruments is all that matters. His is the will. His is the force ---”15 In anticipation of the
conclusion, it may be pointed out here that Joshi earlier novels are chiefly limited to the
man-centred temporal world, though their protagonists strive in different ways to reach out
to the transcendental and spiritual. Now The City and the River moves towards the God-
centred universe, as the words of the Yogeshwara cited earlier establish firmly.

To revert to the narrative strategy in the novel briefly, the bulk of the story is told by
the Great Yogeshwara in a controlled and compassionate voice. The disciple’s voice which
is heard only on two occasions, at the beginning and at the end of the narrative, respectful,
subdued and eager. There are several other voices heard in the course of the narrative
ranging from that of the Grand Master who is said to have a sweet and soft voice, though he
is averse to music, through the hushed voices of the conspirators, to the loud clamour of the
beleaguered and suffering boatmen. The subtle and clever Astrologer speaks as a demagogue when necessary. Music heard now and then forms another but impersonal voice. The Hermit of the Mountain, a true disciple of the Yogeshwara, speaks his master’s language but has a distinct voice of his own. These and other voices heard prevent the narration becoming monotonous. The novel has elements of an allegory or a parable, though it cannot be strictly called an allegory or a parable, if one adheres to their definitions. If it is to be called a parable, as the “blurb” does, it is certainly much more than “a parable of the times”, as its significance extends far beyond the present times. Among the Indian novels in English of the recent decades, this novel can be called a *tour de force*. As a highly skilled performance it is much more successful than O.V. Vijayan’s *The Saga of Dharmapuri* which covers a similar ground and employs a similar strategy.

There are a considerable number of characters in *The City and the River*. A familiar criticism levelled against it is that it does not have individual and psychologically-realised characters, that its characters do not develop and lack psychological depth. Answering this criticism Usha Bande makes the pertinent observation that the author is “more interested in depicting archetypes than individuals so as to give mythic proportion to his work”. It should also be noted, however, that Joshi has in mind groups of people rather than individuals in this novel. Though he does recognise that the groups consist of individuals, there is not much scope for him to develop characters individually in the kind of story he has set out to tell. That is why a majority of the characters are not given names. The Grand Master and his chief adviser the Astrologer, do strike as individuals. But they too, like others, become types rather than fully developed individuals for the reasons already given.
The story of the novel is told sequentially in nine sections. Preceding the beginning of the narrative there are a few lines of verse announcing a prophesy which serve as an epigraph to the narrative, and the “Prologue”. There is “the Epilogue” at the end of the narrative, in which the prophesy is repeated. “The Prologue” and “The Epilogue” are linked together and thus they join the beginning and the end of the story. As Usha Bande puts it, “The story ends where it begins and begins where it ends”.17 The entire story is concerned with the rise and fall of the city, and the possibility of it rising again, depending upon what its citizens choose to do. The narrative opens thus: “The city over the years has grown. It has spread along the river ---”.18 Having passed through ups and downs, the city at the end is ruined by the stupidity of its ambitious ruler: “Of the Grand Master and his city nothing remained”.19 The possibility of its rising again is hinted in the timing of “The Prologue” and “The Epilogue”. At the midnight hour on a day in spring, the Yogeshwara tells the story to his disciple. It is morning when the story ends.

Before sending out the Nameless-One on his mission into the world to fulfil his destiny, the Great Yogeshwara himself explains to him this phenomenon of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and thus makes explicit in the manner of a traditional purana, the meaning and significance of the story he has narrated:

On the ruins of that city, as always happens, a new city has risen. It is ruled by another Grand Master, which, of course, need not always happen. In the new city is another Professor, another Bhumiputra, another tribe of boatmen. There is also another Council and another set of Councillors. The men have other names but the forces they embody remain unchanged. And into all this when you go you will, perhaps, be
known as another Hermit of the Mountain. And it is possible you will have a disciple whose name will be Little Star --- Another new Era of Ultimate Greatness is about to begin. The Grand Master’s army is equipped as never before. The tanks are bigger, the lasers sharper, the planes fly faster than the speed of sound. The conflict that shall come will also be the same: a matter of allegiance, to God or to man.\textsuperscript{20}

This continuity gives a circular movement to the novel. The entire passage in its content and spirit reminds one of the \textit{Gita}. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that the Yogeshwara is named after the appellation given to Lord Krishna at the conclusion of the \textit{Gita}. And the Nameless-One resembles Arjuna. “In fact, an enveloping cosmic vision, which is close to that of the \textit{Gita}, pervades the novel”.\textsuperscript{21} There are several passages in it which recall this great scripture. One of them, which is particularly relevant to the self-society theme, may be pointed out. The brevity of human life and the eternity of the soul is stressed by the \textit{Gita}. Master Bhoma, who is innocent but made the kingpin of a non-existing conspiracy, inspires the boatmen with a similar message:

\begin{quote}
The guns can kill your bodies, yes. Are you, then, afraid to die? --- What is man, howsoever powerful, that he so fills you with dread, that you let him come between you and your understanding. What is a Grand Master if not a wisp of the morning mist that for a moment dances upon the river’s deep waters. What do you choose, then, this wisp of the mist or the great river herself?\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

It should be noted that Master Bhoma speaks to the boatmen as a group of individuals and makes an appeal to their understanding. Joshi in the novel stresses the supremacy of the individual’s pure, unclouded and stable understanding.
The story proper begins as a realistic narrative from the section “The Grand Master’s Dream”, in which the strained relations between the ambitious Grand Master and his recalcitrant subjects, his Council of Advisers and their attitude to the people are detailed. The story in a nutshell, consists of the determined and unscrupulous but vain attempts made by the Grand Master to become the king of the city enjoying the allegiance of all people, and inevitable destruction and ruin he brings upon himself, the people, and the city itself. The Grand Master and his men belong to the city, and the people, especially the river populace, the boatmen as they are called, belong to the river, and they constitute the chief opposition group to the power and authority of the city’s rulers. The narrative receives dramatic tension from the opposition between the city and the river, which appear to be two opposing symbols. But “in the totality of Joshi’s vision they are not irreconcilable”. In fact the novel suggests that it is in the hands of men to achieve their reconciliation. Only they must choose to do so. The Astrologer and the Hermit of the Mountain are disciples of the same guru, the Yogeshwara. But they become adversaries because they choose sharply opposed paths. Therefore they also interpret the prophesy about the return of the king differently, each according to his nature and presuppositions. The city is estranged from the river upsetting their harmony and balance, by the different choices that the Grand Master and the boatmen make.

The city has a three tier social structure. The boatmen and the nameless ones, so called because no one knows their names outside their colonies, form the lowest stratum. They live in squalid mud huts along the green banks of the river. The brickhouse people, who form the next tier, consist of the educated, and the so-called intellectuals of the city, with their own shopping complexes, schools, hospitals and avenues. The Grand Master and
his circle of advisers who actually rule the city and form its creamy layer, live in the Seven Hills, full of glass and steel structures but no greenery. The Grand Master believes that the brick-people and the mud people too can be “talked to, cajoled, distracted, and, if necessary, threatened”, but not the boatmen who are “most unreasonable”, “incomprehensible and stubborn”. The river populace are devoted to the river which is the source of their physical and spiritual succour.

The characters in the novel can be brought under two heads: those who are selfish, corrupt, and abjure their social responsibility towards the city in their overweening ambition; and those who either know their responsibility and to the city from the start or realise it in the course of the novel. The Grand Master, his sycophantic advisers and henchmen, the bureaucracy with no back-bone belong to the first category. The boatmen and their Headman, the Hermit of the Mountain, Master Bhoma, the Professor, Dharma Vira, Vasu and others like them come under the second. Joshi uses the city and the river as two major symbols in the fictional context to suggest the differing attitudes of these two groups of characters to society and life itself. As noted already, there is no irreconcilable opposition between the two. In the longer view both the city and the river are manifestations of God but because of human beings’ shortsightedness become antagonistic to each other. The city becomes symbolic of “egoism, selfishness and stupidity” because of the selfish ambitions of the ruler and his advisers. Those who are involved in the city’s administration are seen to be self-seeking, forgetting their dharma, and acting against the interests of the community. The river at one level is a source of income and the means of livelihood for those who depend upon it. At a higher level, it is symbolic of ever-renewing life and for God himself. The boatmen, Bhoma and the Professor and others like them who
realise their 'dharma' see in her a guide who can deliver them from the tyranny of the 
Grand Master. But to the Grand Master the river is nothing but "a stream of water" which 
brings him gold.

The Grand Master, the supremo of the city, is the "son and grandson of Grand 
Masters". He believes that he loves the city and rules it as best it allows him to rule. Living 
in luxury in a huge palace with cellars of gold underneath, he feels that the starved, half-
naked boatmen, who in mud huts in narrow tortuous streets, are "unreasonable and 
mutinous". With the help of the Astrologer, he tries from time to time new formulas and 
slogans to win back the allegiance of the people. This reminds one of the familiar fable of a 
king who devised from time to time new clothes for himself to retain the attention of his 
subjects. Joshi uses this tale in the narrative to call the bluff of the Grand Master and 
expose his hollowness. In the novel, this story is first told by Master Bhoma to his students 
under intense inner compulsion. Later on Shailaja's brother continues the practice and 
narrates it to the boatmen. The implication of the fable changes in the course of its repeated 
narrations. Thought to be, a mere joke told by Bhoma, it gradually becomes an indicting 
satire on the Grand Master's rule, and then an expression of the boatmen's protest. As the 
atrocities of the Grand Master increase it becomes the expression of the boatmen's self-
respect. Ultimately it symbolically suggests in the narrative context their meaningless, 
estranged existence under the Grand Master's rule.

One of the formulas devised by the Grand Master to win the unquestioned allegiance 
of his people is the "Triple Way or the Way of the Three Beatitudes" declared in "The Era 
of Ultimate Greatness": swearing allegiance to the Grand Master, having one child to a
mother and two to a home, and treating those who do not take the oath according to "the law of compassionate righteousness" (which is a euphemism for ruthless punishment). The motive underlying the declaration of the new Era and later his tyrannical rule is his ambition to become the king of the city. It is significant that even before he comes to know about the prophecy regarding the advent of a king, from the Astrologer, he has already dreamt that "he had become a king".28 "The dream had merely upturned the top layers of his consciousness and revealed to him what his heart in its secret aspirations already felt, that he was the chosen of the lord to rule his city".29

That there is nothing absolute about the prophecy is stressed by Joshi again and again in the novel. The Hermit of the Mountain who has studied the prophecy "now and again", is very clear about it in his mind: "The prophecy---did not subscribe to such inexorable laws of fate and left the matter open. It had been drawn by a hand that only believed in the great law of Karma under which men and cities, by their own hand, survived or died".30 It may be noted here that the principle of Karma as propounded in the Gita is heard as an undertone throughout the novel. As the Great Yogeshwara remarks, "it is what you are inside that governs how you read the outside".31 Joshi uses the device of prophecy to expose the secret ambitions and motives of people. The overweening ambition of the Grand Master makes him see himself as the "king" of the prophecy. It never occurs to him, blinded as he is by his self-absorption and self-centred ambition, that "God too is a king".32 In sharp contract to him are the truth-seekers like the Hermit of the Mountain, Master Bhoma, Shailaja's brother to whom the prophecy is a reminder of their duty to the city.
The Grand Master, in the name of controlling the asuras who are disturbing the peace of the city, settles his score with the boatmen for refusing to swear allegiance to him. He knows that Master Bhoma is no more than "a scrawny harmless teacher out of the mud-huts"\textsuperscript{33}, and not a conspirator at all. He sees in him "the key - not only to his own dream but also to the hidden secrecies of his councillors who must one day, each one of them, play their hand before the game was finally over".\textsuperscript{34} Therefore he uses Bhoma and his so-called conspiracy to serve his power game. He sees to it that Bhoma is not taken into custody and allowed to be free, but his whereabouts are kept a secret, so that he can use the myth of his conspiracy to inflict hardships on his opponents. Once he manages to become the king, he loses no time to eliminate Bhoma.

That the Grand Master uses every possible opportunity to promote his selfish interests becomes amply evident during the occasion of the annual Festival of the Great River, which has its beginnings in the hoary past. "It began when a mighty king, possessing all, approached a sage and sought from him the gift of wisdom". The sage said that wisdom was not "gifted" but "earned" by celebrating Time "which alone (was) immortal", while all including the king and his subjects were "mortal". The sage told the king to celebrate Time by worshipping "the great river which was Time's consort and Time itself".\textsuperscript{35} The ambitious Grand Master uses this Festival, which is a symbol of man's quest for Truth and ought to be a means to acquire wisdom, to coronate his son as his successor and to sing the praises of the "king" he hopes to become. Thus he turns the sacred Festival into a mockery, a joke, as the Little Star puts it.

The New Era declared during the Festival "an audacious double attack" the Grand Master plans on his subjects and councillors, to change "the balance of power". The Grand
Trader, who senses that this ruse is sure to lead the mutual suspicion and struggle for supremacy, is arrested. It is a part of the game of the Grand Master to project "a shining image" of himself "in everyone's eyes including the eyes of the boatmen". The Gold Mines, which once had gold, are now turned into "makeshift prisons for men whose eyes had become too bold or tongue too free, or who, like the Hermit, considered the pyramids an abomination". The Mines become "the domain of permanent night" where the Grand Master's men ensure that "the idea of the self" of those who resist is "suitably destroyed".

The Grand Master gets several chances to see the truths, to see himself in relation to his subjects, and change himself for the better, but he lets them go. The Professor's death is one such opportunity. As the Hermit tells Patanjali the Little Star, "It is the will of God that the Grand Master must choose. Men like the Professor force the choice even more finely on his consciousness". But blinded by his megalomania, he uses this too as a means to further his own schemes. He issues a decree to accept the Professor's last wish "that all prisoners shall be told their crimes, or, set free". But he does not mean to implement it. Issuing the decree and implementing it are two different things. It is issued, to present a clean image of himself: "If there is to be a king---he must come with clean hands---The city must see them to be clean." The Astrologer reflects on this idea of the Grand Master: "In the city ugly things had been done. Thanks to the dead Professor here was an opportunity for the Grand Master to wash his hands of all the ugliness." As expected, the decree brings a lot of popularity to him. But by the choice he makes and the course of action he adopts the ruin of the city and its perdition are guaranteed.
The Grand Master’s councillors are as ambitious and self-seeking as he himself is. The declaration of the New Era, as expected by him, throws them into confusion. Yet each in his own way tries to use it to his advantage. The Commissioner of the Police sees in it an opportunity to teach a lesson to his rival the Education Adviser. And a “veteran conspirator” himself, the Education Adviser knows that conspiracies are double-edged weapons and would cut him or help him to cut someone else. So, far from being downcast about a conspiracy in his own constituency, he sees in it an opportunity either to overthrow the Grand Master himself if the conspiracy is strong enough, or to retain the constituency by blackmailing the Grand Master.

The Minister for Trade, a close relative of the Grand Master, aspires to become the Grand Master and if possible even the king, despite the warnings from the Hermit of the Mountains: “No good can come of it, that is certain—it is bad enough that one man wants to become a king. Two such men can only spell chaos. While the two of you struggle for the crown, the city—must burn.” The Minister suspects the Grand Master’s hand behind the alleged conspiracy of Bhorna. So to protect his own interests, he negotiates deals with other Councillors to support his candidature for the Grand Mastership if the present Grand Master becomes the king. That the Minister is no better than the Grand Master even though he claims that he would be a better ruler, is proved by the two deeds of National Partnership he signs with the Education Adviser and General Starch of the army.

Bureaucrats like Dharma’s father, who have ignored their duty and helped the self-seeking Grand Master in exploiting the poor, find themselves estranged from the society in which they live. The estrangement gradually leads to their losing grip over their body, mind
and soul. Dharma's father suffers from a peculiar disease. He feels that his “insides are rotting”. Outwardly, “everytime he faithfully executed a directive of the Grand Master or if the Council a new patch appeared” in his reflection⁴³, so that in course of time the mirror shows only the bare outline of his form. An additional symptom is that his joints go rusty and become stiff. He cannot even weep if he wants. At times his mind goes blank and his will is reduced to a zero. In short, he loses all that is human in him and he becomes an automation with no sense of his self. The doctor diagnoses it as “the Three Truths Syndrome, stasis of the soul. Atrophy of the brain and locomotor functions”.⁴⁴ The doctor's advice is. “Exercise your soul, take it for walks. Let it speak when it wants to speak. Let it rip”.⁴⁵

A conspicuous feature of the Seven Hills, the seat of power in the city, is the absence of vegetation. There is not even a blade of grass. The astonished Professor exclaims, “so much of water and yet no grass or flowers”.⁴⁶ Even the Grand Master's palace is all “brown and yellow”, without trees, flowers or even a patch of green. It reflects the spiritual dryness and sterility of the Grand Master and his Councillors, and also their estrangement from their society, nature and the universe itself. In contrast the poor half-naked boatmen who feel one with nature and the universe, live amidst rich mangroves. Their green surroundings reinforce the idea of their being spiritually rich. Quite different from the ambitions, self-seeking egoists like the Grand Master and his tribe, are the boatmen who in spite of their poverty do not “believe in personal possessions”.⁴⁷ They are like the tribals in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, who have no ambition or the itch to possess. They bring gold into the city on their boats to fill the cellars of the Grand Master, but are indifferent to that wealth. It is this unselfish, non-materialistic attitude of the boatmen that the Grand Master finds very disconcerting. He remembers his father's words
about the boatmen: "Don’t let their poverty mislead you into believing that they can be bought".\textsuperscript{48}

It is the boatmen’s sweat that brings wealth into the city and it is their blood that has saved it from annihilation for ages. But yet they are always short of food, clothing and shelter. Sometimes they are seen running here and there fighting over trifles. But in matters of allegiance and loyalty they have no second thoughts. For them the river is “a symbol of divine mother and of God Himself”.\textsuperscript{49} They refuse to salute the Grand Master as the brick-people do, for their consider themselves to be the children of the river, and to the river and river alone do they hold allegiance. Their commitment is such that “they believe—with their hearts and for their beliefs they are willing to die”.\textsuperscript{50}

Under the tyrannical and humiliating reign of the Grand Master, the boatmen find themselves estranged from their city and as they are unable to contribute constructively to the city, they feel estranged from their true nature. To make known the agony of this estrangement they organise “the display of soul” only to be silenced by the lasers of the Grand Master’s helicopters. The Festival of the River further separates them from the city and the Grand Master who dubs them as the fellow conspirators of Master Bhoma and sends them to the Gold Mines for months. The only respite they get from this humiliation is from Master Bhoma’s tale of the naked king, which Shailaja’s brother narrated to them. The Headman reflects:

After months of humiliation it was the young bard’s recitations that she and other boatmen had at last felt some of their self-respect restored.
She did not know how it came to be but they had always walked away from the stalls holding their heads little higher than when they came.51 In the narration of Shailaja’s brother the story becomes a ballad out of the city’s hoary past to remind the city a long forgotten truth. But before the fable could restore their self-respect and communion with the city, the Headman and the Professor are arrested and sent to the Gold Mines.

The boatmen feel that they have become “orphans in an evil world”. With the arrest of the Headman their backs are broken. One after another men, women and children are found missing. In a few weeks the number of the missing becomes frighteningly large. In their frustration they decide to capitulate and take the Astrologer’s oath if things do not improve.52 The return of Bhoma and his recital of the “king’s parable” brings them some hope for a while, and lifts the shadow enveloping their hearts momentarily. But its grip is back on every heart before long. They lapse into helplessness: “Even if the king is naked, the parable tells them, nothing, nothing whatsoever, can be done about it, because to be ruled by a naked king is their only fate”.53 The despair of the boatmen gets out of hand, and much against Master Bhoma’s advice, they take the help of the shock-brigades of the Education Adviser and take to violent protest. The news of the hunger strike by the Professor and his consequent death in the God Mines worsens matters. The massacre of the silent protesters in the Boat works by the Captain of the Flying Patrol adds fuel to the fire. The betrayal of the shock-brigades shocks them but does not change their intentions. The boatmen display enormous courage of spirit in resisting the automatic weapons of the Grand Master. Death does not frighten them. They know that death is inevitable and in fighting against the forces of the Grand Master and helping the city to free itself from his evil grip,
they find a good reason to die. "Death is certain for all and here is a reason to die". exhorts the Headman. When the Grand Master turned King succeeds in wiping out the boatmen's rebellion, the river rises and engulfs the city as if to take into her arms her children and obliterate the victory of the king over the boatmen.

The Professor belongs to the brick people and not to the boatmen. Yet he regards the river as his mentor guiding him to his life's purpose. Once when he was still a student the great river had spoken to him and had widened his horizon, and helped him to see in the stars and planets wheeling in the high heavens, "peaceful and infinite and free", a feeling which he could see only in the river till them. The Professor is brought out of the seclusion of his laboratory from where he tracked the mighty planets, with the sudden disappearance of Bhumiputra or Bhoma who was one of his former prized students. In his self-imposed seclusion in his laboratory, the Professor is in a way estranged from the city, his immediate environment. When he comes out, everything appears new to him: "A city of wonders --- And all these years I never knew". Significantly his anguished search for his vanished student Bhoma turns out to be a search "for some lost bit of himself". In his search "the Little Star" becomes his constant companion. With his help and with the active participation of Shailaja's brother, the Professor sets up the lottery stall to tell the truth about Bhoma. That he has realised his life's purpose in waging a war against the falsehood spread by the Grand Master, is evident from the fact that he does not return to the seclusion of his telescope to which he has glued himself till them.
For his so-called subversive activities and propaganda the Professor is consigned to the Gold Mines, where a most depressing spectacle awaits him, of which he was not aware at all:

He was astonished that the great galaxies had never given him a hint that places such as this existed on the face of the earth; or, that men who worshipped the planets and stood in terror of them, had the audacity to bury other men in dungeons of unending night.

The spectacle of emaciated boatmen huddled together and lying like heaped animals moves him so much that he starts crying, and makes him lose faith in his city and civilisation. He cries out to the men:

Forgive me, I have spent my life in sleep. My life has been a joke, even as the lives of brick-people are a joke. God gave me life that I might serve the earth. I have squandered it on baubles.  

He sets himself to the task of uplifting, the depressed and sinking souls of the imprisoned boatmen, though he is not one of them by birth. Along with the Headman, Little Star and Shailaja's brother he goes from dungeon to dungeon and tries to lighten their burden by reciting to them the story of the naked king. It lifts the boatmen's hearts even though it promises nothing. He embarks on a protest fast on the inhuman blinding of the Headman by the Astrologer. He remains unperturbed though he sinks. He assures his friends and associates: "This evil cannot last. There must be a new beginning --- There will be no Grand Masters. There will be a new world, a new race of men will be born. I shall watch from wherever I am". His duty performed, the Professor dies in peace.
The Professor’s death becomes the sacrificial fire to burn down the egoism, selfishness and stupidity in the city. A little before the Professor breathes his last, the Hermit of the Mountain tells Little Star consolingly: “This yajna of the mud-people --- burns only on sacrifice. When the fire is low, when the flame is dying, men must feed it with their own lives. Who knows, the gods now call for the Professor’s life? Who knows this be the great purpose that they have reserved for him? --- One way or the other his life will not go waste”. The Grand Master, who pretends to concede the demands of the dying Professor, cannot escape from the consequences of his death, as the many following events prove. His death triggers off the open rebellion of the boat-people against the Grand Master who no doubt succeeds in suppressing it only to be drowned in the upsurging river.

More than any other character in the novel, it is Bhumiputra or Master Bhoma that explicitly and persuasively establishes the necessary and inextricable relation between self and society and the self’s responsibility to society and the human community. Born, bred, and educated in the mud huts, Bhumiputra (son of the soil or mother earth) becomes by chance a student of the Professor because of his ability with numbers. He becomes subsequently a student and a teacher of Mathematics. Soon after the New Era of the Grand Master is ushered in, Master Bhorna finds himself relating in trance the fable of the king without clothes to his students in the university. And it fills him with dread. The Hermit’s advice to him – “You have been chosen to speak. The great river has chosen you to speak with the tongue of men what they cannot hear in her troubled lament. She commands you to speak for her, and also for her numerous children who are even humbler than you”. does not help him because, as he tells himself, he does not have “the stamina to go to prison or worse to hang”.
The self backs out from its duty and responsibility towards others because of fear and the risks involved in fulfilling them. It tends evade to them. Bhoma tells himself: “You have done your bit. It is now for others to do theirs”. He resembles a little, in his evasion, Sindi Oberoi of The Foreigner who also evades involvement. If Sindi evades because of the mental pain it may cause, Bhoma fears physical suffering. Though he knows that “this city, this world, this is the manifestation of the One, and not the shadow of the Grand Master’s ego” (as the Hermit tells him) he is still afraid. He is also afraid of the unknown future, resembling Billy Biswas of The Strange Case who is afraid of the mysterious primitive force in him. But he does feel a “deadly oppression” in his chest because he has failed to do his duty. He escapes into the mountain and hopes to go to the Yogeshwara’s hermitage. But he feels impelled to return to the city, because he feels “a force, as palpable and concrete as a living presence” which turns him towards the city. It seems to say to him that it is “the city and not the hermitage that would be the stage for the play of (his) life” and that he needs to make it “the goal” of his travels.

The Hermit observes once: “Knowledge and its realisation are different things. A moment comes when knowledge must realise itself in action or else become sterile”. That moment arrives for Bhoma, as it does to Billy Biswas, to accept the call of his soul or become corrupt. Both make their choice despite the risks in it. Bhoma ponders about his future course of action and asks himself: “If everyone did what I am about to do, will it bring ill or will it bring good to the world”. If the answer is “good”, he should not hesitate to do it. He had always felt like this but it was the Professor who really clarified the idea to him. Now he concludes that in all honesty “he could not permit himself not to ‘preach’. That would be nothing but cowardice”. The path and goal having become clear to him
Bhoma goes back to the boatmen, coming into the open from his anonymity, to urge them not to sell "the soul of the great river to a man and his son". He directs his efforts to dispel the fear of death from their minds: "If you are afraid to die then your soul is already dead". The New Decree of the Grand Master, however, preys upon him not because he fears the police, but because of the helplessness of the people before it: "The citizens call the king naked. The king knows that he is naked but does not care. He challenges the citizens to do what they will. And the citizens know they can do nothing. Willy nilly they must submit to him ---". Bhoma's apprehensions come true when the boatmen accept the shock-brigade's suggestion of violent protest, as against his advice of a non-violent agitation. The King for his part has chosen his path of containing it with formidable and sophisticated weapons. No one can stop the turning of the wheel, with Bhoma as its helpless witness.

Through the character of Dharma Vira or Dharma Joshi makes explicit the inseparable bond between social awareness and self-realisation. Dharma is a sensible police officer, loyal and duty-bound. But the New Era and the policies of the Grand Master leave him confused. "For many weeks now", says the narrator, "he had been having trouble deciding whether he was living in a city that he used to know or had been transported to the far off mysterious demesne of a dark king". Dharma also cannot quite understand the arguments of the boatmen that the king is naked and that having given their allegiance to "The Great River", who is "the Divine Mother herself", they cannot transfer it to a man. Filled with more than one dilemma, Dharma cannot understand how he could be acting against his "dharma" when he is working dutifully for the Commissioner and the Grand Master as their employee. At the same time he is troubled that the Gold Mines are
dark and have no light whatsoever. As he has no knowledge of the power game that the
Grand Master and his advisers have been playing, and being incapable of subtle tricks and
machinations, Dharma adheres honestly to his duty, the only thing he knows well and
understands. But then, as the Hermit points out to the Minister for Trade, "Loyalty is not a
bad thing --- But you must know what and who to be loyal to". Dharma's loyalty is
unaltered but misplaced. The human carnage that the Captain of the Flying Patrol
indulges in at the Boat Works at the behest of the Commissioner of Police, rouses Dharma's
conscience which urges him to decide for himself about his duty and loyalty. After a
week's slumber due to shock, Dharma wakes up to see himself as a boatmen in dress and
work. It is as if he is reincarnated. Significantly, after this dramatic transformation he
begins to look like Bhoma, his dilemmas and uncertainties resolved.

A disciple of the Great Yogeshwara, the Hermit of the Mountain, unlike his fellow
disciple the Astrologer, has been able to "keep the grain and chaff apart" consistently. He is
the only one among the many characters in the novel who never wavers in his identity,
commitment and faith, and is always sure of his role in the city. He is intended to serve as
a standard to measure others. At times, of course, he is worried about the growing egotism
of the Grand Master and the destiny of the city under his grip. He tries to look for clues in
the prophecy to ascertain what may be in store for it. But he realises that the prophecy does
not provide any since it was "drawn --- by a hand that only believed in the great law of
karma under which men and cities, by their own hand, survived and died". He knows that
his duty is to be the "Lord's instrument", and his business is to wait and "to witness horror
and stupidity" without being carried away. The Hermit is aware of his duty towards the
city, though he chooses to remain as a detached observer. He is hopeful of the potentiality
for social awareness and responsibility in others however incorrigible they may seem. There is always scope for oneself to correct and improve himself. The Great Yogeshwara tells the Nameless-One: “God resides as much in a Grand Master as in you and me”. As his true disciple the Hermit tries to convince Master Bhoma to have hope and not lose heart: “Who knows when the Grand Master sees himself with the eye of the citizen, a new light will dawn upon him and a change will mean a new life for this dying city”. Men, cities and nations have to choose. Therefore he is never tired of saying that “there is nothing inevitable about the prophecy. The hand that made it believes, above all, in man’s capacity to change his fate”.75

Because of this balanced attitude the Hermit is as much a friend of the Minister for Trade as he is of the boatmen. To this Minister who comes to him to get enlightened about the prophecy, he says in clear terms that the king of the prophecy is God Himself because He too is a king. “The world belongs to God --- Let him be the king of what is His”. And “God is the highest Truth as it is known to each one of us”.76 The Grand Master in aspiring to be king through his rule of falsehood and “a long drama of deceptions”77 is actually trying to usurp the place of God. Whether the prophesied king should be the king of Bhoma’s fable or the king of the Grand Master’s dream or Truth itself, has to be worked out by the people of the city. The Hermit tells Bhoma on one occasion, “This city, this world, all this is the manifestation of the One --- it is He who is the master of all men --- But the Almighty can manifest through men only what men allow Him to manifest. That is why men and cities and nations must choose”.78 Even though the city’s destiny depends on the cumulative effect of people’s choice, the individual’s responsibility to choose will not be a
Each individual has to make his choice and act according to it as truthfully as he can. Success or failure is immaterial.

While infusing courage and confidence into the dejected Borna the Hermit exhorts him to eschew fear. He tells him what he learnt as a young man from many wise men:

I learnt nothing enfeebled man more than fear, that nothing but fear stood between him and his liberation --- fear was the greatest ally of the kings and grand masters of the world, for without fear to freeze the hearts and limbs of their subjects many a throne would have been toppled and many a crown blown off with the breath of the oppressed --- where men had thrown off their blanket of fear there alone truth triumphed and great civilisations flourished and man had taken another step towards God ---.\(^79\)

One may catch in this exhortation by the Hermit, echoes of Mahatma Gandhi urging his followers and the nation to be fearless and to adhere to truth. Along with the *Gita* and Gandhi seems to have profoundly influenced Arun Joshi's view of life and values. The Hermit of the Mountain, because of his faith in everyone's ability to transform himself and to do his mite for the city, and his dispassionate and objective view of events and people, his sympathetic concern for the welfare of all, would seem to be the author's voice in the novel. The Hermit, apart from guiding different characters in the novel to realise their responsibility to others and themselves, and thus realise their true selves, also guides the reader's response to the major thematic concerns in the novel.

There are repeated references to music throughout the novel. It ranges from the music made by the river, the music of the boatmen on their one-string instrument, the
magical music that moves Bhoma's raft on the river, to the music of the spheres played at the cosmic level which envelops the entire universe. Joshi uses these varied references to music to suggest the involvement or estrangement of an individual from himself, his society, life, and God. The boatmen produce a particular melody on their instrument which expresses their soul. The Professor and Bhoma hear the same melody during their days of star-watching. Bhoma recalls the times when after a night of watching the sky, towards the dawn, "the telescope would suddenly be jammed with music as though the stars were singing". This fact suggests that the boatmen, the Professor and Bhoma are all kindred spirits. Shailaja's brother meditates on a "nada", that is at the heart of all things, though not everyone can hear it. He hears it played at the cosmic level when he revolts against the Grand Master, along with the boatmen, interestingly the Grand Master too hears it but he becomes very disturbed by it. The Hermit knows that the melody has always been there like the mountain and the river and that the boatmen have always known it. If to the Professor and Bhoma the melody is a reassurance that the river, "the time's consort", is with them, to the Grand Master it is a source of disturbance as though it mocks at him. His advisers and sycophants do not hear any melody at all. This fact suggests how much they are estranged from the city, the people and God.

Music is also heard when the river rises in a spate and engulfs the city. Rising to a shattering volume, it fills the four corners of the sky, with the sound of other instruments and drums added to the wild music of the occasion. In contrast the Nameless-One, when he is about to enter the newly risen city built on the ruins of the old one, hears a melody played on a one-string instrument, which rises and falls and grows in volume to fill infinite spaces.
This particular melody symbolises the cycle of birth-death-rebirth of life implied in the action of the novel.

The rose farm of the Grand Father is more than a mere garden with varieties of exotic roses. It is symbolic of a state of innocence in contrast to the Grand Master's Gold Mines which is a domain of eternal night. More evident is the parallel between the boatmen and the roses in the garden. Both are children of the river, both become victims of the Grand Master. As he takes measures against the boatmen the roses begin to wither and die, suggesting his alienation from the city and its people.

The Little Star, an archetypal figure, apart from reinforcing the relation between the individual and the community, also suggests the transcendental and cosmic level to which the action of the novel is related. The Little Star, who claims to be thousands of years old, remains a mysterious character. His mystery is further deepened by the fact that he is seen only by a few, especially by those who know the purpose of life and work towards realising it. It is under his guidance that the Professor leaves the seclusion of his laboratory to work and strive for the city's good. It is suggestive that the Little Star disappears from the narrative soon after the death of the Professor. He may be taken as standing for the Soul of Man which bound to the wheel of Karma, gets embodied in human form. Having been involved in the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, it prompts man towards self-realisation, which includes fulfilling one's obligations to the human community and God.

The egotistical aspirations and evil machinations of the Grand Master turned King lead him nowhere. For, the embankment of the river, which is already rainfed, is destroyed.
by the Son’s combined armed attack, and the waters engulf and destroy the entire city along with its inhabitants. It looks as if the river is “turned into an ancient sea, like the sea that first condensed on the whirling planet a billion years ago”. After seven days and seven nights of continuous downpour, the sun rises on a vast sea of water, giving “no hint of the agitation that had gone into its making”. Nothing of the Grand Master and his city remains.

Death and destruction overtake those who are selfless and self-sacrificing as well as those who are self-seeking and ambitious. But it does not make the vision of the novel sombre, though Subhash Chandra thinks so. For death is a necessary stage in the cycle of birth-death-rebirth. The boatmen and a few others who know about the certainty of death are not frightened by it. Their deaths like their lives are purposeful and meaningful acts performed to redeem the city from the clutches of the Grand Master, and therefore form “the sacrificial fire” in the yagna of purifying the city. And for the Grand Master and his tribe of henchmen death is not only sudden but reveals the futility of their ambitions and the meaninglessness of their lives. Significantly they are made to realise this fact before they die.

Having crowned himself as the king, the Grand Master in the blindness of his bloated ego, asks cynically, “What is God? Where is He? Does He even exist? He must surely have other things to worry about than intervene in the affairs of the city where we in any case now rule”. But as his end approaches with the rising river submerging everything, he is forced to admit that all his life has been a mere “shadow”, with nothing real and substantial. The Commissioner of Police feels ashamed of himself and the things
he has been doing. He feels that he has been made a pawn in the game by the Grand Master. The realisation comes to him when it is too late. His own protégé, the Captain of the Flying Patrol, puts the handcuffs of his own designing on him. The fate of the Master of Rallies is similar. He knows that the city is “preparing to immolate itself because its Grand Master and his Council dare not lose face”. But he does not transform this knowledge into action because he is afraid of humiliation. Thus he fails in his duty to himself and to the people of the city. He is estranged from himself as well as God. He meets with an ignoble death, because he commits suicide.

In contrast to these men, the boatmen, the Professor, Bhoma. Shailaja’s brother, and the Hermit, whose lives outwardly appear to be failures, actually lead lives of purposeful activity free of selfish ambitions, and in search of Truth as they see it. When they die they have the comfort of doing their bit for the city and therefore their lives are not a waste. The Professor in the last moments of his life has hopes of a better future for his fellowmen. All these people achieve a dignity in their death. Their lives have not been in vain. The river engulfing the city puts an end to the Grand Master’s “empire of falsehood”. Paradoxically Truth triumphs in the ruin of the city. Room is made for the rise of another city, creating fresh opportunities for men to make the right choices and live purer lives.

Thus the vision the novel presents is not sombre. Every time a new city emerges on the old one, the same questions are raised about man’s allegiance to God or to man. Every time the self, enmeshed in its egocentric ambitions, vanity and pride, has to make an effort to free itself from them, become aware of itself and its duties and responsibilities to the human community and God by choosing right. Only then life will not be a charade, a joke.
The repetition of things is part and parcel of the cyclical process, which is a process of purification. And the purity is achieved only when men choose God and not man for their anchor and support. At the political level the choice before people is not between “religion and politics” as Tapan Ghosh\textsuperscript{87} contends, it would be more correct to say that it is between a purely narrow and secularised politics and a more comprehensive view of it, which is integral to a religious view of man life. Any religion worth its name takes into account all the needs of man together, material and spiritual, personal and social, and integrates them in its view of life. It lays emphasis on means and ends, on the choice of worthy means to achieve noble ends. This was Gandhi’s approach to politics. It is said of him that his politics was nothing but his religion in the open public world. The view of man’s relation to God, man’s responsibilities towards himself and society, and the moral choice man has to exercise necessarily, Joshi seems to have derived from the life and thought of Gandhi. Joshi makes these ideas emerge in the fictional context and does not graft them on the narrative. The self-society theme forms a part of the narrative which combines in itself several strands. “It offers a vision of life that has relevance to both individual and nation. It combines the two sides of religion – the personal and social – and stresses the need for spiritual commitment and collective responsibility to get rid of social and political evils”, says Tapan Ghosh.\textsuperscript{88} To serve as a complement to this statement, Usha Bande’s view may be adduced, she says:

By the time a reader finishes the story, he achieves a sense of having completed a quest. It is a universal human quest for purity through the sacrifice of the ego. The quest is not of individual success or failure but of collective effort for the common good.\textsuperscript{89}
Notes and References


3. The City and the River, Blurb; page number not given.


7. The City and the River, p. 113.

8. Ibid., p. 262.


12. The City and the River, p. 10.


15. The City and the River, p. 264.


17. Ibid.

18. The City and the River, p. 12.


284
20. Ibid.


26. Ibid., p. 17.
27. Ibid., p. 23.
29. Ibid., p. 57.
30. Ibid., p. 65.
31. Ibid., p. 263.
32. Ibid., p. 69.
33. Ibid., p. 255.
34. Ibid., p. 55.
35. Ibid., p. 60.
36. Ibid., p. 92.
37. Ibid., p. 161.
38. Ibid., p. 166.
39. Ibid., p. 167-68.
40. Ibid., p. 168.
41. Ibid., p. 113.
42. Ibid., p. 195-96.
43. Ibid., p. 133.
44. Ibid., p. 135.
45. Ibid., p. 134.
46. Ibid., p. 56.
47. Ibid., p. 16.
49. Ibid., p. 22.
51. Ibid., p. 132.
52. Ibid., p. 144.
53. Ibid., p. 176.
54. Ibid., p. 29.
55. Ibid., p. 31.
56. Ibid., p. 163.
57. Ibid., p. 167.
58. Ibid., p. 166.
59. Ibid., p. 153-54.
60. Ibid., p. 154.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., p. 156.
63. Ibid., p. 143.
64. Ibid., p. 156.
65. Ibid., p. 158.
66. Ibid., p. 145.
67. Ibid., p. 146.
68. Ibid., p. 148.
69. Ibid., p. 93.
70. Ibid., p. 139.
71. Ibid., p. 68.
72. Ibid., p. 65.
73. Ibid., p. 114.
74. Ibid., p. 157.
75. Ibid., p. 68.
76. Ibid., p. 70.
77. Ibid., p. 170.
78. Ibid., p. 156.
79. Ibid., pp. 155-56.
80. Ibid., p. 175.
81. Ibid., p. 257.
82. Ibid., p. 260.
84. The City and the River, p. 219.
85. Ibid., p. 259.
86. Ibid., p. 75.
87. Tapan Kumar Ghosh, p. 151.
88. Ibid., p. 152.