Chapter – III

Social Realism in *A River Sutra*

The second novel that is subjected to this study is Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* (1993). The novel develops through six subsequent stories narrated by people who come on Narmada pilgrimage. The novel is a rather novel approach to present an array of social realities of India together; such as, human greed and hypocrisy, widening chasm between rich and poor, women suffering, child abuse, as well as repercussions of modern life style. Along with, it presents “the mysteries of the East” (Kothari 47). In fact, the novel creates “a miniature India”, and talks about the myths, philosophy and religion in India (Bande 152). Riesman appreciates its range of subject matter that takes into account a number of subjects like Classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu mythology, and Sufi poetry. He holds that for all its substance of ancient Indian tradition and thought, *A River Sutra* is a modern work that acknowledges the difficulties faced by modern India while taking the reader on a journey into a resonate culture (02). Likewise, Shubhashree opines:

Gita Mehta makes us travel centuries in order to re-interpret what it means to be a man especially in a country where the past lives
on into the present although obscure and mystified
unrecognizably. (145)

According to her, in this novel Mehta tries to bring mythological time,
historical time, contemporary time and narrative time all together in the flow of
the waters (146). Despite its multiplicity of subject matter the novel presents
that in India there is unity in diversity. This multiplicity has not affected the
integrity; instead it has added colours to the beauty of rich culture of the
country.

But, the novel is rather different from other Indian English novels.
While other novels are full of hardships of daily life, *A River Sutra* talks also
about renunciation, salvation, and human love. It is only in India where people
renounce the world and all the worldly things to achieve salvation. Though
Gita Mehta apparently does not discuss the familial and social sagas, yet there
are some indirect references that need to be dissected. The novelist has aptly
chosen an Indian method to articulate the themes and stories of her novel: “The
form is as the tales of Vikram and Vetal” (Doctor 26). Moreover, the title of the
novel echoes titles like Jaimini’s *Mimamsa Sutras*, Badarayana’s
*Purvamimamsa Sutras*, Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, or Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra*
(Eakambaram 210).
The novel starts with the introduction of a bureaucrat who works as a manager of a rest house at the bank of Narmada, situated halfway up a hill of the Vindhyā Range. Since he has no other duties to perform so that he decides to go in search of salvation, therefore he can be free from the cycle of birth and death. For the rest of the novel he plays the role of *sutradhaar* or a storyteller. He shares his experiences that come to him from his daily encounter with the pilgrims and his friend old Mullah Tariq Mia. According to Hedgie:

> In the course of the work [he] meet[s] people of many different religions – Hindu, Muslim, Jain – and a broad spectrum of social and class backgrounds, from the most learned and wealthy to the least educated and poor, and gain[s] at least a glimpse into the complex society that makes up India. (02)

While going through his daily routine he is inspired with six stories, which constructs the novel. These stories present some characteristics of Indian sensibility. Every story is simple and embodies a unique face of India. Greenlaw observes that the stories in the novel are brief but present intense human dramas that not only explore the desire for enlightenment but also expresses the complex roots of India’s cultural and political heritage (23).

The first social reality that the novel reveals is Indians’ deep faith in the theory of renunciation. But, the sordid fact that the novel adheres to it is Indian
elites’ pseudo-philanthropic approach, which mars the very spirit of the
philosophy, towards it. Indian psyche is deeply imbued by this philosophy
propagated by Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. All these philosophies
consider that the contemporary state of man is a fallen one and everybody
should strive to get rid of it. They consider that renouncing the world to
practice the penance is a way to attain the salvation. This particular social
belief is illustrated by the story of narrator himself. His decision to be the
manager of the rest house is an outcome of his decision to pursue salvation. It
is also illustrated by monk’s tale. One day while going for his morning walk he
meets a Jain Muni “a slender figure robbed in white muslin” with saved head
and holding a wooden begging bowl and a stick tied with woollen tufts. Being
curious, the bureaucrat asks many questions about him and his religion. The
Monk calms his interest by answering his questions one by one. He tells him
that like his fellow monks he shaves his head to avoid human vanity and
practices austerities and non-violence in order to attain salvation. On the
request, he tells about his previous life. He tells that his old name was Ashok
and before giving up the world, he lived a very luxurious life. It was full of
friends, fun, drink, and women. However, later he was unable to get any
satisfaction from his former habits and his life became monotonous. He reveals
that though his father believed in non-violence and did a lot of charity by
distributing much of the company’s profits in charitable trusts, yet he was
unmoved by the conditions under which the diamonds are mined, or the
distressing poverty of the miners. He says that during tour with his father “for
the first time I had recognized that wealth had excised my father’s emotions,
freeing him to examine people as if they were abstractions. His benevolence
had a cold mathematics that left him unmoved and without curiosity about
those he helped” (25). He further says: “the inhuman nature of his philanthropy
had frightened me . . . . I had felt an undercurrent of fear that inheriting my
father’s business acumen I might also inherit his inhumanity” (25-26).

While he was frightened by his father’s business expertise and not
happy with his life, at that time his father gave him the proposal to get married.
He tells to the narrator, “at age of twenty-six I had already becomefatigued by
the world, knowing that even at the moment of gratification, the seed of new
desire was being sown” (29). He found the proposal as the prospect of ceasing
to find new means to amuse. Nevertheless, his life after marriage and his office
and domestic routine too could not keep him happy for a long time.
Incidentally, at this moment an elderly Jain monk visited him. He got
impressed by the monk’s treatment and attitude towards life and teachings of Mahavira. But what overwhelmed him more was monk’s air of contentment.

From here, the seed of his becoming a monk was sown. He wanted that satisfaction and moral peace in his life. This urge led him to decide to leave the world like a monk. For his grand renunciation ceremony his father spent sixty two million rupees. He tells:

> My father owns one of the largest diamond companies in the world, and [that] day’s procession [was] only the culmination of a dozen ceremonies already held all over the world when limousines filled with members of the international diamond trading community followed the Rolls-Royce in which I rode beside my father to distribute our charity at the offices of the Red Cross and UNICEF. (Mehta 15)

On inquiring the purpose of the display, the monk tells that that his father was duplicating the procession with which Mahavira, the great teacher of the Jain faith, renounced the world (20).

On carefully analyzing the psyche of monk’s father it is well evident that he is an egocentric man. While the philosophies advocates renunciation because they consider that a man’s wealth and social position water his ego, which is the only obstacle in self-realization, the monk’s father takes the
occasion to display his wealth. Critiquing this mentality of rich people,

Surendran writes:

[India is] a land of contradictions. A country which boasts of ancient civilization, India has her own weaknesses. There is no dearth of hypocrisy and the rich exploit the poor. To show their vanity people never hesitate to spend even millions. What takes the back seat here is the concern for the toiling masses, who would continue to lead a miserable life when the rich becomes richer by hook or crook. (40-41)

Moreover, the son, the monk, is not different from his father. He keeps on boasting about his grand ceremony and feels a kind of pride in it. Milan Swarup Sharma holds, “In actuality Ashok has no urge for salvation or to get rid of doubt, delusion and extremes, but it is merely a passing whim, a psychological imbalance” (124). Rama Nair also raises question on his understanding of Jain philosophy:

[C]lassical Jain philosophical literature emphasized not physical renunciation but the attitude of renunciation. The attitude of non-attachment does not imply a change of status as in embracing asceticism. It would imply that the mind must be completely free of evil intentions, and this would be possible only if the act of ahimsa or non-injury emanates from love of other beings. (186)
Thus, Jain Muni misunderstands asceticism for renunciation. But it is only a badge of renunciation that helps the people to attain a state of egoless-ness. Since both Ashok and his father, despite their asceticism and philanthropy, are ego-ridden; both are nothing but hypocrites. They represent the class of rich and so-called ascetics in Indian society who seem to be very pious; but, in fact, hardly have any regard for human beings.

Like its preceding novel, the novel deals with the plight of women in contemporary Indian society. The issue is well apparent in at least three out six stories in the novel. The courtesan’s story deals with the condition of women in the profession of prostitution. It tells that women in this trade have had a magnificent past but with the passage of time their importance has decreased in society. Those days are gone and now they live a pathetic life. Because of poverty, they are still forced to be in it. In order to sustain their family they adopt this job. But people treat them as means of pleasure and exploit them for their constraint. It is not all but they are abducted, seized by robbers and in case they are found by police, they are put in jail.

The story of music teacher and her daughter also suggests an undercurrent of women’s plight in Indian society. There is something cryptic
between the lines in the musician’s story. Though primarily it deals with the
enrichment of music, yet it also treats with human desires. The story is of a girl
who has a grotesque feature because of which she is ashamed of her
appearance. She is the cause of her mother’s trouble: “My ugliness upset her.
When other children stared at me, sniggering at my ugliness, my mother’s eyes
filled with tears” (Mehta 210). A girl with an unattractive feature suffers a lot,
especially in India. She is humiliated outside as well as even by her friends and
relatives; and at the age of marriage hardly gets a marriage proposal. She
recalls:

I was not gifted enough for my mother to feel secure about my future. She had lived so long with genius that she could recognize it like a bazaar fruit seller recognize a fine mango from a merely good one even though he has not grown it, and she believed that a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband in a harsh world designed for men. (Mehta 212)

Her mother’s stressed face follows her everywhere. She is less sympathetic
towards her and like other mothers she does not stretch her arms to console her.
All this cause despair in her that is further multiplied by the inconsiderate
behaviour of her father. Her agony is that she gets shelter neither from her
mother nor from her father. She expresses as: “I struggled to please my father
inside the music room, and then outside the music room consoled my mother for my ugliness” (Mehta 213). As far as her father is concerned he seems oblivious to her ugliness as well as her misery because “genius stands at a strange angle to the world of humans, careless if its own cruelty” (Mehta 218). Therefore, she is deprived of all the natural affections which a child innately enjoys. She craves for mother’s care and father’s affection but finds no moorings. All this leads her to learn music so that with the help of it she can forget her anguish for some time. Her story raises the issue of beauty and dowry, and shows that in Indian society beauty holds more importance than talent.

Naga Baba’s story gives another facet of the women exploitation in India. It is a case of child abuse. In the story the small unfortunate girl is sold for only five hundred rupees. Her father calls her misfortune because her mother died giving birth to her. For this very reason, he dislikes her. In such situation when a motherless child should be treated affectionately, she is scolded and beaten. Things go like this and one day a woman comes pretending to be her new mother. She promises the family that she will arrange some job for her and will treat her like her daughter, but pushes her in prostitution. But
she is saved and taught by Naga Baba. Commenting on it Gita Doctor states that the story re-enacts the Shiva legend in today’s context, as a naked Sadhu rescues little girl from a brothel and transforms her into a beautiful minstrel-woman who travels about, completely free and liberated to ask her own way in life (27).

Another social reality subjected by the novel is failure of Indian administration to protect the interests of poor and weaker, as well as people’s lack of confidence in the system. The social reality of administration’s apathy towards the weaker is well apparent in Rahul Singh’s episode. Through his story, it is obvious that he like several other brigands is not born but made. By nature he is very kind hearted and understands people’s problem. He does not hurt them rather punishes the persons who do so. For this very reason, people respect him. The novel reveals that he has been a government servant and after the end of his commission, when he returns back to his village, he is shocked to see that some people have captured his land. He gets infuriated at this injustice and seeks help from police, but is informed that since his land is grabbed by an influential person, police cannot help him. The incident forces him to become a bandit. The novel describes:
He has the highest decoration for his valour in two wars with Pakistan. When his soldier’s commission ended and he came home, he found his family dead and his lands stolen. No one dared help him. The man who took his land had the protection of the local politicians. Denied justice, Rahul Singh only did what any man of honour would do. He swore vengeance on his family’s murderers and killed them all. Of course he has become a hunted man. But he has never harmed anyone who did not deserve it. (Mehta 182)

It is visible in the story that how social machinery works. His land is stolen by someone and instead of taking action against the culprit the local politician provides him the shelter. This reveals the ugly side of politics. The corrupt politicians often harm underprivileged people for their personal gains.

Along with politicians, the novel also presents the corruption and hypocrisy in Indian police system. The police are not loyal to their responsibilities and do not perform their duties properly. What the police are supposed to do is to be the protector of law-abiding citizen, to curb corruption and violence but in reality they do otherwise – lawbreakers and influential persons are supported and protected by the police. Their inefficiency is apparent in their failure of searching the courtesan’s daughter. Afraid of the bandits, it abandons the investigation unfinished. Instead of making the bandits afraid, they themselves are afraid of them. While they should have shown their
prowess by getting the girl released from bandit’s captivity, they give up the enquiry. For this very reason the courtesan requests the narrator not to inform the police. Perhaps she knows very well that they are not capable of protecting her and her daughter. She does not want her daughter’s life in danger again. Moreover, when she gets her daughter back by chance her daughter requests the narrator to keep her identity a secret:

That I am Rahul Singh’s woman. It will not be long before the police find out, and some ambitious policeman accuses me assisting my husband’s crimes. Can you imagine my fate then? Locked in a cell? A girl known to be a courtesan and a bandit’s wife? (Mehta 187).

Ultimately, she commits suicide because she finds it better to die than to face police’s interrogation and tortures. This is the confidence that the people have in social machinery. At the time when police should come forward to help victims, they too victimize them.

The next social reality is the societal apathy and opportunistic attitude towards the poor but talented people. The novel illustrates how a child prodigy born in a poor family is bound to die without reaching to zenith. Sometimes, it is crushed by poverty and sometimes it is nipped in bud by people in the upper strata of society. The case is well illustrated by Master Mohan’s story. He was
an excellent singer in his childhood and due to his talent had acquired name as a child singer. He was praised for his voice in concert halls filled with his admirers. His father who himself was a music teacher aspired to see his son as a successful singer and tried his best to establish him:

But it takes a very long time for a poor music teacher to cultivate connections with the owners of recording studios. For four years, Master Mohan’s father had pleaded for assistance from the wealthy families at whose houses his son sang on a wedding or a birthday. For four years he had stood outside recording studios, muffling his coughs as tuberculosis ate away at his lungs, willing himself to stay alive until his son’s talent was recognized, urging the boy to practice for that first record which would surely astonish the world. (Mehta 55)

But his fate denied to favour him and when the recording contract was finally offered, only weeks before the record was to be made, Master Mohan’s voice broke down (56). His struggle with his fate ultimately resulted in failure. After it Master Mohan is bound to live poor. As a music teacher, he earns meagre amount on which his family is raised. But his canker wife adds more difficulties. She not only troubles her husband by her bitter taunts, but has included children also in this mission. They complain that because of his poverty they are deprived of amenities of life. After giving music lessons to children all the day, he cooks his meal himself.
While leading a monotonous life, one day he meets a nine-year old poor blind boy Imrat. He gets impressed by the quality of his voice:

\[\text{At that moment a sudden belief took root in Master Mohan’s mind. He was convinced God was giving him second voice, greater than he had ever heard, greater than his own could ever have been. He was certain such voice must only be used to praise God, lest fate exact a second revenge by robbing him of it.}\]

(Mehta 72)

He decides to teach that poor child, in order to fulfil and re-live his own dreams again. He starts his teaching and soon finds that the boy has a very good learning skill. In order to avoid the conflict with his wife the music classes are held in a park. Their audience increase day by day and the boy becomes popular among the morning walkers, vendors and the dwellers of the park vicinity. Being aware of their popularity one day a man comes to him with a singing contract and offers him a good amount of money.

Everything seems to go well and Mohan and his pupil’s dream is about to be get fulfilled, but his fate never proves kind to him and suddenly his dream shatters again. Knowing the boy’s popularity an influential man, Mohammad Sahib – a so-called lover of music, invites Imrat and his teacher at his place on
the prospect that Imrat could get a chance to sing in the Calcutta Music Festival. Master Mohan gets amazed by the fate of the boy:

   The music teacher felt dizzy even imagining that his blind charge, who had been no better than a beggar only eight months ago, might be invited to sing in the company of India’s maestros. The great singing teachers always attended the festival. One might even offer to train Imrat’s pure voice, taking it to a perfection that had not been heard since Tansen himself sang before the great Moghul. (Mehta 81)

But, instead, the poor blind boy is killed by Sahib on the pretext: “such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judged us” (Mehta 89). The narrator of the story Tariq Mia considers it as stealing “an object of worship so no one but [Mohammad Sahib] can enjoy it” (Mehta 90). It is the problem of the Sahib, perhaps he holds that good things belong to him only and to nobody else. Therefore, he kills the boy.

   The story suggests that there are two groups of people: the first are the people of hypocritical and materialistic nature like Master Mohan’s wife, Mohammad Sahib, and the owners of music recording company. These people do not miss a single opportunity to take advantage out of it. While initially unwilling to let Imrat live with her, when she gets the opportunity to cash the
money she sends him to Sahib, which results into the murder of the child. The other examples of opportunism are music company owners. They want Imrat to sing for free, but with Master’s intervention they agree to pay him one thousand rupees only. Later foreseeing his bright future in music industry, a company owner offers him and his sister to stay with him:

I played this record for the director of the radio station. He thinks Master Imrat has great promise, and must be taught by the best teachers available. A talent like his should not be exposed to the dust and germs in the park. There are empty rooms above one of our garages. He must live there. (Mehta 82)

The other group includes the people who are honest, kind and ready to help people in their times of need; like Master Mohan, Imrat and his sister. Though Master Mohan earn small amount of money yet he is very honest, patient, and hardworking. His kindness is very much visible when he takes a roadside boy and decides to help him despite knowing anger of his wife and his financial condition. It is true that he wants to see his own dream come true in the form of boy’s voice but he does not expect anything more than this. He does not want to achieve any material success. Like him are Imrat and his sister who are poor but are honest and they do hard work. With their diligence and noble aim, they
try their level best to accomplish their mission, but unfortunately are ultimately
gnawed away by the people of first group.

Another social reality that the novel subjects to illustrate is the
monotony of city life and repercussions of it on youths. It is illustrated by Nitin Bose’s story, nephew of the narrator’s friend. Nitin is an executive in a tea company of Calcutta. He is sent to the guest house to be cured from his own belief that he is possessed. He comes there to perform some rituals at some shrine near Narmada. With his diary it is revealed that he is a city grown up, convent educated man. Like, most of modern educated young people, he also believes that success lay in imitating the western life style. All this leads him to drinking and adultery. But, soon he gets fed up of hustle and bustle of Calcutta’s daily life, describing which he writes:

Outside our office Calcutta crumbled under the weight of neglect, exploitation, poisonous humidity, traffic jams, power failures, and roads ploughed up like rice fields to make an underground railway, while a whole generation stoically waited or trainloads of refugees arrived to sleep on railway platforms already overcrowded with refugees from the partition of India fifty years earlier, the war in Bangladesh twenty years earlier, the devastations of nature that daily drew the desperate to a great metropolis itself desperately surviving as if a war had just ended.

(Mehta 110)
At this juncture he gets two alternate proposals from his company; either to manage a tea estate, or to go for an executive training course. To the surprise of his colleagues he prefers the former. He writes: “to me, suffocated by the sheer weight of Calcutta’s inescapable humanity, the solitude of the tea estate [seems] its most attractive prospect” (Mehta 114) because “life on the tea states [seems] a real man’s life” (113). His friends warn him against the dangers of loneliness, because of which he may get crazy and addict to drinking, smoking, adultery and all other debaucheries. But he insists and finally reaches there and finds the atmosphere much better than his imagination.

Recharged with the change he starts working with new energy. Being devoid of any other engagements he starts exploring Indian philosophy and mythology. He gets fascinated by the stories of gods, sages, demons, and endless legends contained in the Purans. He writes:

I even discovered mythological tales dealing with the very area in which my tea estate was situated, legends of a vast underground civilization stretching from these hills all the way to the Arabian sea, peopled by a mysterious race half human, half serpent. Naturally, I viewed the legends through the prism of anthropology. (Mehta 119)
He finds himself a changed person showing the mannerism of an elder. While working, he does not even realize passage of two years. He realizes it only when his friend Ashok comes to meet him, and to intimate him that, since the chairman of the company is pleased with his performance, he has been promoted to the directorship of the company. But being content with his present situation he refuses the proposal. But hereafter he finds it difficult to concentrate in his works because the talks with Ashok have rekindled the deep buried animal instincts in him:

[His friend’s] words left a mark on [his] mind as if he had dropped a bottle of ink across a favourite book. Like some small night animal sexual restlessness began to gnaw at the edges of my content . . . . The darkness that had always seemed to serene now mirrored my restless mind. For the first time I was lonely, and when I entered my bedroom I felt the massive bed sneering at unused manhood.  (Mehta 122)

Under its influence he starts drinking. Compelled by his need and urgency of his desire, while his brain still intoxicated by heavy drinking, he falls in physical relation with a lady named Rima. He continues it for many nights. Meanwhile, the management of the company again asks him to return to Calcutta, owing to which he returns and takes the charge of directorship there. In order to organize things for his successor he comes to the tea state for a sort
while, but Rima does not come to meet him. Instead, every night he hears the song she used to sing. Realising his guilt and knowing that she is married to a coolie, before leaving he wants to do some favour to her. For the purpose, one night he comes out of his room to talk to her, but Rima makes him to follow her in the forest. At dawn the guard finds him unconscious in the forest muttering her name. Consulting a priest he is told that he is possessed, and is advised to worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River.

On looking through the case of Nitin Bose, it is easily evident that it is a story of a modern city brought up man, deeply imbued in materialistic pattern of life. But in deep corner of his heart he aspires some mental peace; but, instead, gets possessed by a tribal woman. However, several critics hold that Rima is an imaginary being; and they consider that it may be possible that his loneliness, desire and the effect of his grandfather’s books would have made him to assume a woman who was nothing but his own creation. He himself asserts: “perhaps my loneliness cause[s] my mind to create its own enslavement. Or perhaps I [have] really become the victim of my grandfather’s books” (Mehta 122). But, A K Chaturvedi considers it real, and sees it as an
evidence of spiritual superiority of villagers who live with nature over the city dwelling people who are devoid of any touch of nature:

Thus, a tribal lady of bewitching beauty fascinates Nitin, a man of the civilized world, and keeps his soul under her control. Despite being well educated Nitin falls a victim to the magical power of an uneducated woman. Wielding this invincible power on a man’s life is not an unusual thing for Rima, but to avoid its effect is beyond the capacity of Nitin, an executive with the treasure of knowledge acquired from the study of a large number of books on varied subjects. This reflects the defeat of a man’s intellect by the magical power of an uneducated woman.

(34)

The next story presents another social reality of India. It tells a lot about classic Indian point of view regarding art. The story of a musician and his unappealing daughter is a musical story. It is full of music. The characters in the story talk nothing but music. Music is their life. There is a renowned musician who has enormous knowledge of music. He is one of the musicians whose music is not confined to his music room only but he sees it everywhere. He makes her daughter to sit next to him to observe how birds sing. He considers that music is god’s gift and nature is a great teacher. She can learn a lot in its company. Therefore, initially he does not permit her to sit in the room and touch musical instruments. She is even not “permitted to sing the seven
notes of the scale: the *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni* that are the *do, re, me, fa, so, la, ti* of western music” (Mehta 203). He tells that these notes are present in nature as: peacock’s cry produces *sa*, calf’s calls for his mother is *re*, bleating of goat *ga*, cry of the heron *ma*, the song of the nightingale *pa, ni* when the elephant trumpets, *dha* the neighing of a horse. He tells his daughter that birds sing at dawn and sunset because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music.

Simultaneously, he expresses his resentment on men and says:

> [M]en are fools. They think only human respond to beauty. But a feeding deer will drop its food to listen to music, and a king cobra sway its hood in pleasure. Listen. Do you hear that peacock’s cry? It is the first note of the scale. *Sa.*  

(Mehta 204)

He explains how melody was born:

> There was no art until Shiva danced the Creation. Music lay asleep inside a motionless rhythm – deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything started to tremble with the longing to exist. The universe erupted into being as Shiva danced. The six mighty ragas, the pillars of all music, were born from the expressions on Shiva’s face, and through their vibrations, the universe was bought into existence.  

(Mehta 205)
Along with this he describes to her the richness of music and what are the factors which it is made up. He tells:

The melodies of these six ragas sustain the harmonies of living things. When they fuse together, they become the beat of Shiva’s drum that brings the universe to destruction. But they are all male. And music can never be still, it can never be without desire. Life must create more life or become death. So each of the six ragas was given six wives, six raginis to teach them love. Their children are the putras, and in this way music lives and multiplies. (Mehta 206)

It does not finish here he states that each raga is related to particular season, a time of day, an emotion. According to Vedas, power of music is so great that even with the help of music salvation can be obtained. Therefore, it should not be treated lightly but rather with grand attention and respect.

Her musical practice goes on, but one day suddenly her father tells her that that the practice is over. At this, she gets upset and requests him to continue the practice. First, he refuses, but finally he agrees on a condition that the greatest gift a man can give is to give her daughter in marriage so by teaching her raginis he would give her to god of music. Knowing that no one would accept her as bride he agrees to his condition, and resumes the practice. One day at evening when her father is singing to gods, when no one disturbs
him, she passes through his room and sees a very charming boy playing veena at her father’s feet. Despite knowing that he has never accepted anyone his student except his daughter, the boy urges him to accept him as his student.

After interaction with him and get impressed with his passion for music and knowing that he would do anything to become his disciple, the musician asks whether he will marry his daughter. The boy gets surprised at this proposal, because he does not find anything uncommon and difficult in this offer. But he gets shocked when he sees the girl. Though he does not say anything, yet the girl reads his apprehension in his eyes.

However, after their introduction their music classes starts. During the course the musician tries to teach his pupils true meaning of music, but he gets very upset with their response. He is happy neither with his daughter, nor with his new trainee, because both do not understand the requirements of true music:

Five notes, seven, if you add some halftones, may be twelve. It is only a skeleton of melody. And the veena is only two gourds attached by a piece of wood and a handful of wires. But when are united, and you create a composition from their union, it must speak the language of the soul. You see, a raga has its own soul. Without its soul, its rasa, a raga is only a dead thing. (Mehta 208-09)
He beseeches the god: “‘what am I to do with these lumps of clay? From the outside, they look like a man and a woman. Why are they not alive?’”. He bewails that they do not understand the meaning of being a man and a woman. Under his intimidation they learn how to be silent and to enjoy it. This enjoyment later leads them to care for each other. They learn to anticipate each other’s mistake before it is made. Finally, they develop feelings for each other and perhaps understand the meaning of being a man and a woman. According to the musician as melody cannot be produced without unity of notes. Likewise, unity of man and woman is necessary for the creation of the world. Since they are going to be husband and wife, they should know it.

The similar passion, not for art but for a scientific discovery, is apparent in the story of Naga Baba. Along with, it reveals one of the typical social realities of India – the long established tradition of asceticism in India. This ascetic of Lord Shiva belongs to the martial ascetics, the one they call the Naga Sadhus, the protectors. He is called Naga because he wears no cloth, instead smears ash on his body, and carries a human skull bowl to drink water and to take what people offer him to eat. He also carries an iron trident wrapped in saffron cloth. Some of the locals can tell by looking at his saffron covered
trident that he belongs to one of the great Naga academies renowned for the
wars they have fought to defend their faith. People also narrate the story of
Naga’s struggle with British during the Indian Mutiny when twenty thousand
Naga ascetics, naked, ash-covered, with matted locks, came down from their
caves in the Himalayas to do battle with the red-coated Englishmen ambitious
to establish an empire (Mehta 241). Tariq Mia enlightens the narrator that a
Naga leads a life of voluntary hardships. He keeps on moving from place to
place and does not stay anywhere for very long. He spends his nights in
cremation grounds, where he meditates, and survives on roots, berries, and
plants in jungle. He does yogic exercises to overcome human limitations and
slow down the metabolism to endure the extremes of heat and cold. Before
meditation it is mandatory for an ascetic of his cult to meet a Dom who tends
the funeral pyres and is forced to live at outskirts because he is considered
unclean. While for the ordinary people the very shadow of the Dom is an evil
omen, for Naga ascetics a Dom is a kindred spirit, facing death daily as he does
in meditations. Before the nine days that proceed the night of Shiva, a Naga
ascetic does some special rites. He takes bathe and applies ash of cremated
bodies over his hair and body to increase the power of his meditation. After it,
he starts his meditation, which continues for nine days and nights. Finally on
the ninth day, on the arrival of the night of Shiva, he breaks his fast by begging
at the houses of those who are unclean, untouchable, or profane (Mehta 240).

Following the tradition, the Naga Baba in the story also, like every year,
go to the house of a Dom and hears the litany of cruelties endured by that
society counted untouchable. The novelist writes:

The Dom complain[s] bitterly about being an outcaste as he
poured water into the Naga Baba’s bowl, but it did not prevent
the ascetic from drinking two pitcherfuls of water to quench his
thirst. (Mehta 242)

After quenching his thirst, he moves to sweepers’ colony where they are
waiting in front of their colony with offerings of food. They know how much
the ascetic honours them by eating from their hands. When he marks their
foreheads with ash, they touch his feet in gratitude. At last, he progresses to his
third and final destination that is to a brothel. There he denies accepting any
offering by the woman but asks for a girl child who is there with a man inside
the house. Initially the woman tries to convince him to take something else
instead of the girl. But being afraid of his resentment, finally she agrees to give
the child to him. The Naga Baba seizes girl’s hand and carries her with him in
the jungle.
While distancing from the city and going deeper into the jungle, the girl narrates her saga. She hails from a poor family, and is considered as misfortune by her father because her mother died giving birth to her. She further tells:

[Then this woman came to the slum where we lived, saying she needs young girls to work as servants for her clients. I believed my father when he told me god had given me a new mother. I was happy when he sold me to her. But that woman never treated me like a daughter. She just kept me in that house for those men.](Mehta 250)

The Naga Baba gives her a new name, Uma – another name for the goddess.

On the way he teaches her how to live with nature:

[The Naga Baba makes] a small fire and [burns] the dung so it would crumble between his fingers into ash that he [smears] all over his body, an insulation against heat and cold. When he [rubs] the mixture on her arms she [finds] mosquitoes [do not bite] her. *(Mehta 249)*

Their company reminds the companionship of Wordsworth and Lucy. As Wordsworth teaches Lucy in his poems, he too teaches and helps the girl to learn so many things so that she can live with nature. Commenting on her emancipation in the lap of nature Mohit Kumar Ray writes:

[The story shows] the woman’s equation with nature, and her act of reaching out to nature in her crisis and despair. . . . And
coming close to nature the woman also imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged, “immortal” nature. This helps her to find fulfilment through a positive process of being and becoming.

(31)

But later in the novel the bureaucrat-narrator is shocked finding out that this Naga Baba is in fact a professor. He is Professor V V Shankar, the foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada in country. It is told to him that he has been the head of the Archaeological Department, but being fed up with the decided routine, he resigned. Thereafter, he lived secretly somewhere and after some time resurfaced with a remarkable book, *The Narmada Survey* that brought him a great success in archaeological circles. He was invited to become chairman of the Indian Preservation Trust and at present he is working on it (Mehta 262). To the narrator’s surprise, in order to do his research, Professor Shankar has even gone through perils of asceticism. This shows his dedication and involvement with his work that resulted in his discovery that the river is not holy but immortal.

Thus, Gita Mehta presents an appropriate set of stories that raise a number of indigenous social issues. Along with, these stories also present the vibrancy of Indian culture. The novel deals with both traditional and modern India, and shows that Indian people are trying to synthesize them. The novelist
subtly demonstrates the weaknesses that are gnawing contemporary Indian society. A careful study of these stories makes it apparent that the human greed is the archenemy of mankind. Subhashree has rightly recognized:

[T]he cohesive force pulling the stories of these various travellers together becomes apparent. We realize that most of these characters, after attempting to do the right thing, end up being wronged in some way by the greediness inherent in modern society. (148)

But the novel does not stop here. It goes further in suggesting a viable solution to this weakness of the contemporary society, and that too in same subtle manner. As Gita Doctor holds, in the novel, the different tales are about love; the love of money, the love of flesh, the love of truth and the search for it that can lead to a transcendence (26). The novel subtly suggests that it is only this transcendence that would give the solution to contemporary problems that springs from human greed. It would be appropriate to quote E Galle rightly, who writes:

All [the] allusions, anecdotes and descriptions are enough to draw an outline of Indian society, state its problems and locate cultural philosophical question which stands at the centre of the novel. On one hand it shows that Gita Mehta has no utopia to propose in order to solve India’s social political predicament. On the other it reveals the specificity of the life with reference to the past and
present doctrines prevailing in the country, reconciling them in humanism. (39)

In totality the novel seems to teach the lesson, as A G Khan holds, “to respect the humblest, to hate none, to find divinity even in the most depraved” (13).

Referring to Chandidas’s love poem the novelist seems to seal veneration to humanity:

Listen, O brother.
Man is the greatest truth.
Nothing beyond.

In the novel, the river Narmada is the symbol of Indian tradition, and like the river it also is immortal. Though, because of human greed in contemporary time, it seems endangered; but the novelist is hopeful that, with the dedication and endeavours of those who, like Professor V V Shankar, are indulge in the synthesis of old and new, it will resurrect itself. However, Gita Mehta acknowledges that contemporary India is suffering under the perils of harsh realities; but, she also shows the confidence that ultimately it will be able to overcome them. This is the sutra that the novel brings-forth.
Bande, Usha. “‘India of the Mind’ – A Study of Gita Mehta’s A River Sutra.”


Chaturvedi, A K. “Portrayal of Feminine Force in Gita Mehta’s A River Sutra.”


Sharma, Milan Swarup. “Gita Mehta’s A River Sutra and the Law of Karma.”
