Chapter –IV

A Focus on Indian Cultural Values, Art Forms and Ethos

*A River Sutra* makes an excellent use of Indian myths, folklore, rituals and even superstitions, and enshrines the ‘collective unconscious’ of the Indian psyche.

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Indian fiction writers who draw the attention of international critics and readers have used Indianness as a favourite essential obsession for their academic writings. Indianness is conveyed through their works in more than one ways including themes, images, myths, symbols and linguistic nuances. Typical Indian themes are said to be: “The caste system, social attitudes, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions of superiority and inferiority” (Kachru 131). Even more important issues pertain to socio-cultural ethos and philosophical heritage.

With the emergence of ‘the great trio’ Raja Rao made a remarkable triad in the choice of theme. He adopted the traditional Indian style of narration intermittently referring to the events of ancient history and of the present times. The fusion of tradition and myth which grasps the diversity of Indian reality through the portrayal of ordinary common people can be acclaimed in all his writings. Religious and philosophical elements reflect Hinduism as the core essence of Raja Rao’s writings.

Another novelist Arun Joshi uses Indianized English language and Indian ethos to express the national psyche and cultural consciousness. Among his novels *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and
The Last Labyrinth are a class by themselves. In The Last Labyrinth the author has used the basic principles of Hindu life as a frame work and derives its roots from the Upanishads. It is unparalleled in the treatment of Hindu religious philosophy as advocated in the Holy Scriptures like the Gita and the Upanishads. Mani Meitei has assessed The Last Labyrinth as:

The book is about man confronted by the four paths of life: dharma (duty), artha (wealth), kama (desire) and moksha (liberation). It is based on karma yoga, the attainment of liberty by the soul by abandoning kama (desire), krodh (anger), lobha (greed), moha (Allurement), maya (lust) and aiswarya (pride), the six enemies of man. The book is so deeply influenced by the Hindu religious scriptures that all that happens in the book is guided by the principles of Hindu Sastras and thoughts. (161)

Great Indian playwright Girish Karnad also presents myth and folklore in his plays. In his plays we see the problem of fullness crops up again and again which reflect his canon that purushartha links the dharma with moksha; and kama is the road to liberation.

Among the brilliant writers who probe into the world of Indian metaphysics and spiritual beliefs through excellent use of Indian myths, symbols and taboos; stands Gita Mehta with her works A River Sutra and Eternal Ganesha. Both the works attempt to establish
the faith in Hindu philosophical fundamental law “The Unity in Diversity.”

On publication of *A River Sutra*, Chandmal acclaims Gita Mehta that the novel enables the novelist to lose “… her amateur status and … became a writer lionized by the world … has created a new language of literature and has recreated India for Indians” (30-31). The author has opted Indian traditional style of story-telling between a narrator and a listener. Ramachandran has compared her technique with “… long narratives as *Kathasaritsagara, Panchatantra, Kadambari* and *Dasakumara Charita*” (2), which was earlier experimented by Raja Rao. In the novel, the author has presented a set of six different stories through six different people. These stories being different are tracked altogether through the River Narmada and a Sutra. A “Sutra” literally means “a thread or string” but here it is “the theme of love” which follows the tradition of stringing stories. Such traditional technique of narration has a longer history in India from the first century A.D. in the form of *Brihatkatha* but for the Western readers it was a later adoption in the late 14th century used by Chaucer. Similarities can be traced in between Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra*.

As Canterbury was a place of pilgrimage so is river Narmada where many lives converge; just like the travellers told their stories to the owner of the Tabbard Inn, six different stories are narrated to a bureaucrat by different people. Charu Verma evaluates:
Chaucer’s characters are never shadowy and lifeless and his Prologue is an introduction to the cross section of the 14th century society. But Gita Mehta’s characters are mysterious and her novel is an introduction to a social set-up interwoven with the rich threads of Indian mythology, philosophy, religion and music. (105)

In *Eternal Ganesha* Gita Mehta has opted myths as a medium of expression. Myths originally are the words of mouths rather than written form and are orally transmitted through generations. Therefore, myths always mirror the people’s images and need in-depth survey of people of different origins and beliefs. In *Eternal Ganesha* the author has diligently worked at the associated philosophies and myths regarding the origin of Lord Ganapati, his head, his body and his relevance in this world of evil. Other than this, Gita Mehta has made her sincere attempt out to provide a new perception to Ganesh Chaturthi celebration for varied people and worshippers.

*A River Sutra* begins with the epigraph, “*Listen, O brother. / Man is the greatest truth. / Nothing beyond.*” from *Love Songs of Chandidas* which allocates readers with metaphysical speculations of man and his existence in his temporal world. The world presented by Gita Mehta seems to surround the river Narmada. The unifying thread other than the river in the novel is a bureaucrat who denied his senior bureaucracy “… the army of waiting clerks, the especially reserved train compartments, the
supplicants” (RS 268) and opted to become a “… vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest” (RS 1). Unable to dwell like a forest hermit, he chooses to take up the vacant post of manager at a government rest house. He has opted this as he became accentuated with the death of his wife, felt lonely as he had no children and exhausted with worldly affairs. He states “Often I had seen my colleagues succumb to corruption and how, each time, my urge to leave the world had grown stronger” (RS 268).

The Narmada rest house, a double-storeyed Victorian building with three suites of rooms, is situated halfway up a hill of the Vindhya Range. On one side of the rest house there is a garden and amidst the copse of mango trees lives the manager and on the other side is a stone terrace overlooking the Narmada which flows seven hundred feet below. The beauty of the location can be visualized as a forest and him as a forest dweller. Miles of fertile lands can be seen till the shadows of Satpura hills. The river bank is towered with dense forest and bamboo thickets. On the bend of river near the town of Rudra a temple complex of Mahadeo is situated which is regularly visited by the devotees and pilgrims. Here, river Narmada spans a mile from bank to bank and widens as it goes towards the Arabian Sea measuring nearly seventeen kilometers wide at its delta.

Mr Chagla, the clerk of Narmada rest house resides nineteen kilometers away from the place and looks after the rest house and its guests. Although an assistant, at some places he appears more knowledgeable than his manager; another person who remains in life
throughout the novel is the mullah of village mosque, Tariq Mia, whom he claims as “… the wisest of all my friends” (RS 7) and at the time of need also explains the meanings; he fails to understand. In the beginning, the narrator remains passive and unintelligible who gradually develops a better understanding as the novel progresses.

The Narmada is one of the holiest pilgrimage sites in India. Scores of white-robed pilgrims can be seen on the river bank going through the arduous Narmada pilgrimage. The pilgrims cover a distance of eight hundred kilometers walking from the river source at Amarkantaka to the mouth of the river at Arabian Sea in about two years. The bureaucrat reveals that the purpose of their endurance is to generate the heat, *the tapas* that links men to the energy of Universe, as the Narmada River is thought to link mankind up the energy of Shiva.

The river Narmada is worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva. It is believed that Shiva is both destroyer and creator and unites the opposites. The myth that the Narmada is originated from the penance of Lord Shiva is very popular among the tribal natives:

> It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman—the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue
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her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the Delightful One, blessing her with the words “You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible.” Then he gave her in marriage to the ocean, Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors. (RS 8)

The natives of nearby Vano village worship the river Narmada in the form of a stone image. The image of their deity is a half woman with the full breasts of fertility symbol but the torso of a coiled snake. The tribals believe that they had been ruled by a great snake kingdom till the establishment of Aryans. They were saved from the complete destruction by the divine personification of the Narmada River. The grateful tribals confer on river with the gift of annulling the effects of snakebite. The pilgrims can be heard reciting the invocation: “Salutation in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada! / Defend me from the serpent’s poison” (RS 6).

Around this setting the novel progresses between a narrator and a listener like the ancient technique of story-telling. Each story is narrated from a point of view and later on discussed, analyzed and commented upon like the teacher–pupil relationship or Upanishadic narration. In the beginning of the novel, the writer has mentioned it through a dialogue
between the narrator and the Jain Monk. The narrator says, “We Hindus revere the spiritual teachings contained in our Upanishads. Do you know what the word Upanishad means? It means to sit beside and listen. Here I am, sitting, eager to listen. As a monk, can you deny my enlightenment?” (RS 13)

All the six stories in A River Sutra are a perfect work of art bringing out the eternal expression of “love” through diverse cultures which culminates around river Narmada.

The first story is about a Jain Monk who is going to meet his mendicant brothers at Mahadeo and asks about the route to the narrator. To know about the sect the narrator starts talking and asking about their beliefs and vows. The monk tells him, “A Jain monk seeks to free himself of the fetters of worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy and non-violence” (RS 11). He also explains him the purpose of covering the mouth with muslin mask and shaven head. Being an ardent follower of non-violence they wear mask to prevent killing of blameless insects by sudden inhalation and shaven heads to avoid human vanity. When he is asked about his past life, the Monk reluctantly narrates about his Business Empire and family.

The Monk, earlier known as Ashok, was the heir of Multi-Millionaire Empire of Diamond business and his father “… owns one of the largest diamond companies in the world” (RS 15). After
completing his education from England he was spending holidays to explore the secret of business wealth at the squalor of markets. During his travelling he experienced that the cardinal doctrine of Jainism taught to him during childhood was entirely different from the practical approach. He was told:

> The most important thing in our faith is ahimsa, the practice of nonviolence. That is why we are bankers or merchants. There are so many activities we cannot undertake for fear of harming life. If we were farmers we might unknowingly kill creatures under our plows. In industry the earth is drilled for oil, iron, coal. Can you imagine how much life is extinguished by those machines?

> “Diamonds are mined from the ground,” I had argued as a child. (RS 24)

The inhuman nature of his father’s philanthropy forced him to ask, “How can you worry about a dead insect more than you care about a human being?” (RS 25) Over the years he started feeling “although we did not perpetrate physical cruelty ourselves, our wealth was sustained by violence” (RS 28). Disenchanted with the experiences of life he decided to yearn for a pleasure, the state of bliss that could be sustainable, if it exists.

On his renunciation ceremony his father spent sixty two million rupees which was a mere replication of Mahavira’s renunciation function;
the great teacher of Jain faith. Through discussion between him and his father the author has very nicely described the finer aspects of Jain culture and their beliefs. He said:

Our ascetics don’t believe there is any purpose to endurance. They only endure increasing pain, until they no longer fear it.…

Do you know how that serene old monk hopes to die? Starving himself to death. He observes respect for life when all the time he is working toward the goal of denying his own life.

… the lesson of ahimsa must be learned by the heart, not the mind.…

The human heart must conquer many hurdles to recapture that vision until ahimsa can become a way of life. (RS 34-35)

During the renunciation ceremony the family’s wealth was carpeting the alleys. The stadium was packed and exploded in applause when he performed the last ritual of pulling hairs. During this procession the monks encircled him and chanted:

You will be free from doubt.
You will be free from delusion.
You will be free from extremes.
You will promote stability.
You will protect life. (*RS* 41)

After the ceremony he became a mendicant member of their brotherhood to endure and conquer social outcast, insult, hunger, heat, thirst, sickness, pain, loneliness and human desires.

After telling this the Monk ends abruptly stating that his brother monks are waiting for him. He cannot stay longer to answer his questions. If he is late they would leave him and he would have to join a new set of mendicants. He says, “Don’t ask me to do this, my friend. I am too poor to renounce the world twice” (*RS* 41).

Unable to understand The Monk’s Story and his words “I have loved only one thing in my life” (*RS* 47), the bureaucrat visits the old Mullah Tariq Mia to make him understand. Tariq Mia explains that it is “The human heart, … Its secrets….The human heart has only one secret. The capacity to love” (*RS* 48). He tells that the monk finally feels connected to the world only after renouncing the world. Thus renunciation can be stated as his celebration of the connection with the world.

To enlighten the narrator, Tariq Mia offers him another story; The Teacher’s Story, to show the secrets of the human heart. The teacher was known as Master Mohan and acquired this name as a child singer when he had filled concert halls with admirers applauding the purity of his voice. He was unfortunate to establish himself as a recording artist because his voice had broken at the eleventh hour of consigning the record contract.
The ill-fated Master Mohan led a hard life with his wife who was an arrogant materialistic woman and the children also despised their father and his music. Suddenly, his barren life took a turn; he found a blind boy of perfect voice at a concert. The Quawwali singers from Nizamuddin were performing a concert in the premises of the mosque and the tent was crowded with the passionate devoted listeners. At that place a young woman was pleading singers to keep the blind boy; Imrat, with them until she manages to take her brother back. Unable to convince, she requested Master Mohan to keep the blind boy with him. Deeply impressed with the boy’s unscalable pure voice; he decided to take with him.

Master Mohan’s family completely rejected Imrat and also created many problems in his life. In order to continue his singing practice, they decided to go to the great park in the centre of Calcutta city. Master Mohan taught him all the songs he knew. He instructed Imrat the songs of Kabir and Mirabai, of Khusrau and Tulsidas, and of Chisti and Chandidas along with their mysticism and significance. The disciple responded to the lyrics with great perfection and produced his extraordinary divine singing.

His singing gathered a large mass of listeners and within weeks he received a recording contract. Master Mohan selflessly helped to carve out the boy’s singing career seeking no financial gain from him. He signed a recording contract on behalf of him and settled it for one thousand rupees. The little boy’s record immediately became popular and the record shop always experienced shortage. This enraged Master Mohan’s wife and out
of revenge she forced the boy to sing for a wealthy patron “The Great Sahib” for five thousand rupees. Master Mohan refused for the rich man’s request of private concert but his wife made him sing. Imrat’s singing created a blissful devotional atmosphere as he started with the poem of the great Sufi Saint Amir Rumi:

In the very spasm of death I see Your face.

O, the wonder of my submission.

O, the wonder of Your protection....

The heat of Your presence

Blinds my eyes.

Blisters my skin.

Shrivels my flesh. (RS 87)

His singing filled the hall with mystic raptures and suddenly, the Great Sahib rose from his place and Master Mohan thought that the Sahib, like the Sufis, was going to dance to the Music of boy but he moved towards Imrat and slit his throat stating; “Such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judges us?” (RS 89)

The murder of Imrat made Mohan feel guilty. So, the devastated Master made his pilgrimage to the Muslim Saint Amir Rumi’s tomb, where Imrat had dreamed of singing and instead of going back to his family, he committed suicide by jumping in front of a train.
The story generates few questions in bureaucrat’s mind like minds of the readers that “Why Imrat’s throat was slit?” and “Why Master Mohan committed suicide?” To explain this Tariq Mia elaborates it as the human psyche of “jealousy” and questions the narrator “Why does a man steal an object of worship so no one but himself can enjoy it?” (RS 90) and to answer on Master Mohan’s suicide he remarks: “Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child. I don’t know the answer, little brother. It is only a story about the human heart” (RS 91).

To narrate another theme of love Gita Mehta has provided “The Executive’s story” wandering around the tribal beliefs and customs. The protagonist is a boarding-educated young executive Nitin Bose, who voluntarily exiles himself to a tea estate at the foot of the Himalayas. Being exhausted with the regular hustle life in a metro and experience of claustrophobia he chose the job of the tea estate. Isolation forced him to choose Puranas, Vedas and Upanishads as his companion; sent to him by his grandmother. Reading and re-reading tales of demons, gods, sages, lovers, cosmologies etc. gave him immense delight and also an instinct to discover the mythological tales associated with the kingdom of the God of Love—“Kamarupa”. He discovered a myth about the tea estate: “… 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” (RS 119).
Gradually, he became the essential part of the tea estate family and enjoyed respect. For the two consecutive years they harvested a bumper crop and the executive was offered to return back to Calcutta on a promoted post as a director. His friend Ashok tried to persuade him and on his continuous refusal he remarked that he flickered insanity. With this comment the serene darkness of his mind turned out to be restless and he started feeling the need of a companion to use his unused manhood. Fully obsessed, when he opened Rigveda to get an escape, found himself more in the grip of loneliness: “At first was Death. / That which did mean an utter emptiness. / And emptiness, mark thou, is Hunger’s Self” (RS 123).

The feeling of loneliness changed his behaviour and he always remained irritated, shouting and drunk. In drunken state, his obsessed mind started feeling the presence of a lady who woke him up in low voice and left him sleeping. Her pleasures left him both satisfied and delicately dissatisfied. Night after night he imagined her like a half serpent woman:

… her small teeth pierced my skin again and again like the sudden striking of a snake, and I heard the hissing of her pleasure against my throat. But when she left my bed I was already asleep, dreaming I still held a creature half serpent in my arms, my sated senses pulling me into the underground world of my grandfather’s legends. (RS 125)
Finally he came to know that the lady with whom he fell in love was not mythical but a Coolie’s wife named Rima. This made him feel as “Waves of disgust engulfed me and I wanted to vomit with shame” (RS 130).

Rejecting Rima, he accepted the post of a director and determined to go back to Calcutta but Rima was not really willing to leave him. So, she played a trick on his beliefs which she spoke of earlier, “She spoke to me of charms that gave men the strength of elephants in rut and of magic performed during the eclipse of the moon when a man’s soul could be captured inside the two halves of a coconut” (RS 127).

Before his final departure, she lured him deep into the jungle calling his name in the night of ill omen; the moon eclipse. Following the folk beliefs she triumphantly captured his soul into the two halves of coconut and left him with lost senses. The tribals believe that “… a man can become fatally ill or mad if he walks outside during the eclipse of the moon” (RS 135).

The tribal priest performed some rituals to lessen the ill-effect of the magical spill as the physician found him perfect in his health. The priest explained, “Someone has taken possession of you. The magic you are under is stronger than my powers. It will start exerting its strength again. Your memory will be affected. You will believe yourself to be someone else” (RS 136). And for complete relief he had to worship the Narmada
“If your sahib wants to recover his mind he must worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. Only that river has been given the power to cure him” (RS 137).

During the spells of madness he believed himself as Miss Rima Bose and only said:

- **Bring me my oil and my collyrium.**
- **Sister, bring my mirror and the vermilion.**
- **Make haste with my flower garland.**
- **My lover waits impatient in the bed.** (RS 134)

At the government rest house, Mr Chagla arranged Nitin Bose’s visit to the shrine which was nothing but an old banyan tree; along with the native tribals. There at shrine the priest told Mr Bose to prepare a mud idol of the goddess and was taken to the river bed to immerse it in the river, chanting, “Salutations in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada. / Defend me from the serpent’s poison” (RS 145).

Following the rituals, he was finally cured. During his three weeks’ stay at Narmada rest house he used to visit the river bank in morning and in evening in her salutation which brought him back to his good health.

Again, the bureaucrat is unable to grasp its meaning as the story makes no sense, to him. But his assistant Mr Chagla understands and explains intuitively, “The goddess is just the principle of life. She is every
illusion that is inspiring love. That is why she is greater than all the gods combined” (RS 142).

He elaborates Rima as a symbol of desire without which the world has no meaning. He says, “But, sir, without desire there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact sir, be dead” (RS 142). And the person who denies this power of desire; is said to be possessed. For thousands of years tribals have worshipped the goddess chanting, “Save us from the serpent’s venom....The serpent in question is desire. Its venom is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire” (RS 143). In an article Uma Parameswaran has mentioned the mantra for annulling the effects of snake venom, which can be traced in Vishnu Purana (IV: 3), “Salutation in the morning and at night to thee, O Narmada! Defend me from the serpent’s poison” (265).

After this enigmatic tale; the narrator comes across an elderly courtesan who describes about herself and her stolen daughter in The Courtesan’s Story. The story is about the eternal love which a furious bandit Rahul Singh had experienced from his past life.

An old courtesan told all about the age fifty years ago when they were well-known and recognized for their culture. In the Royal India the courtesans of Shahbag were in great demand to educate the heir of India’s mightiest kingdoms with all the sixty four arts of Vatsayana’s classic, the Kamasutra as well as painting, music, flower arrangements, language,
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philosophy, zoology, architecture, jewellery, literature and even mathematics. As a teacher they were forbidden to give voice to their instructions and were very often allowed to be touched.

With the extinction of Kingdoms and establishment of democracy; the famous courtesans turned into common prostitutes as the politicians believed in the power of money. Everyone was soiled in the coarseness of the visitors but the old courtesan raised her child safely according to the old aspirations and cultural norms. Her daughter became famous not only for her beauty but also for her modesty and was permitted to appear only at household gatherings. Once she was requested to perform at an election meeting by a Member of Parliament; which she agreed anticipating protection from the powerful leader.

At the age of seventeen she magically overpowered the crowd and on their way back home she was kidnapped by Rahul Singh, the bandit of Vindhyas. After kidnapping they took her deeper and deeper into the jungles and the leader of the gang, Rahul Singh always stared at her “… like a panther stalking a goat” (RS 179). After a pretty long period Rahul Singh revealed her the reason of her abduction. He told that she had been his wife in so many lives before this and stated, “Don’t you know you are mine? You have been mine in many lifetimes but each time I lost you. This time I have unsheathed my dagger before Fate. I will not let you go” (RS 184). Unable to believe his words she pleaded the villagers to help her escape from the murderer’s grip on which they explained:
‘Rahul Singh is no murderer!’... He has the highest decorations for his valor 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 to 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 honor 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. (RS 182)

They also showed all the presents he had bought for her. To check the intensity of his love she employed all her art to make Rahul Singh desired her and observed. She recalled, “He endured my hatred and my insults. Each time he went on a raid he returned with a gift for me,…And when he was in the camp he sat outside my cave like a dumb brute enduring my worst cruelties” (RS 183).

After the revelation of truth, she fell in love with him and both of them got married at the temple of Supaneshwara and she also started believing in his belief, “Guided by his touch, I learned I had known his body in a hundred lifetimes before he took me again a virgin on the thin cotton quilt which was all that shielded our bodies from the ground” (RS 184).
They experienced a very short happy life together and when Rahul Singh was killed by the police, she lost her carrying baby. Having lost everything she appeared before the bureaucrat and narrated everything about Rahul Singh and her. She also met her mother, comforted her and drowned herself in the river. The old courtesan witnessed the drowning of her daughter and remained unmoved. On this Mr Chagla comments “Only that she was happy her daughter had died in the Narmada because she would be purified of all her sins” (RS 190).

On one leisure day, the narrator happens to meet a girl in the market place, the daughter of a master musician who is explained by her father the significance of desire and love in music. The girl has a well-carved physique but her face reflects extreme ugliness. The narrator notices a large tilted nose on the masculine face and the thin lips mingled in chin. Observing the changes in expression she says, “People are always alarmed the first time they see me” (RS 195) and reveals her cause of being there, “I am on a pilgrimage....I am not making a religious pilgrimage. This is the part of my musical education” (RS 199). She further explains that the cause of her pilgrimage is dejection by love on desire of love.

She starts telling happenings to the narrator about her tough musical training under the guidance of her father; world’s finest Veena player in The Musician’s Story.
At the age of six, she began her music lesson; singing the seven notes of scale *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha,* and *ni* for several months. The musician made her understand the inspirations, which are the real causes of creation of music. He said, “You see, despair is an emotion, and the emotions were like shoals of brilliant fish swimming through his melodies. Or colored gases floating through the ether in which his music dwelt” (*RS* 202).

Through his teachings he also made his disciple aware of the relation between nature and music. He compared the notes of scale with the sounds of birds and animals. The first note of scale *sa* is from the peacock’s cry, the calf calling its mother is *re*, the bleating of goat is *ga*, the cry of heron is *ma*, the song of nightingale is *pa*, the neighing of a horse is *dha* and the trumpets of elephant is *ni*.

She was given practice of these notes until the nature of the notes became her second nature. After learning the basics she practised on the pillars of all music; the six mighty ragas with their explanations:

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 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....Each raga is related to a particular season, a time of day, an emotion. But emotion is the key that unlocks a raga’s soul. (RS 206)

After practising the moods of raga for few months, her father started instructing veena under his direction. He stated; “… the veena is only two gourds attached by a piece of wood and a handful of wires. But when they are united, and you create a composition from their union, it must speak the language of the soul” (RS 208-209).

Through music her father always tried to free her from the burden of ugliness. She had learnt to feel beauty even if it was not present in the mirror. Her father was oblivious of it while her mother always remained upset and seldom spoke.

Under her father’s tutelage, the daughter learned to become a great musician. But with the advancement of training as per the traditional beliefs her music necessitates to complement a man’s stronger notes. As it was apparent that no one wanted to marry his daughter, her father made a deal with an aspiring young musician by accepting him as his disciple on one condition, he asked, “If I teach you, will you take my daughter as your wife?” (RS 218)

The training of both the students went altogether without hiding shame from each other. Both of them were forced to understand the
meaning of being a man and a woman to impart the exact feelings of ragas. Slowly they became perfect complements to each other and created beautiful harmonies. With this the girl seemed to convince herself with the power of their love and desired him as her bridegroom.

On the night of Shiva, like every year, the house was filled with musicians to praise the god with their genius. On that day, both of them sang raga Bhairav and filled the place with mystic rapture. Listening to this, the musician rose to his feet and announced, “Tonight I gave my daughter in marriage to music. I have fulfilled my duties as a father. Now I free this young man from our bargain. But if he still wishes to marry my child, the wedding can take place whenever my wife wishes” (RS 224).

After completing his training the stranger left the house and her mother engaged herself for the preparation of marriage. At last a messenger arrived with gifts from the bridegroom’s family stating, “Your student thanks you for granting his freedom. He is betrothed in marriage to my daughter” (RS 225).

From that treacherous moment, the girl vowed never to play music again. So her father took her to the river Narmada so that she could “… understand that I am the bride of music, not a musician” (RS 226) and achieve understanding by meditating on the waters. The girl expresses that her father desired:
I must meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva’s penance, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga….it is an impossible penance that he demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside.  

(RS 225-226)

In the last story “The Minstrel’s Story” Tariq Mia tells the narrator of a Hindu martial ascetic, Naga Baba and his disciple-Uma who taught her the songs of Narmada.

Years ago, just after becoming a Mullah, Tariq Mia used to practise singing Sufi poems on the river bank. Suddenly he heard chanting and reached closer to the waterfall. There he resolved two sitting figures behind the fall, the Naga Baba and a seven or eight year old girl. They were reciting songs of Narmada which was explained to him, by Naga Baba. On which Tariq Mia thought, “The elegance of his translation made me wonder what he had been before he became an ascetic–an academic perhaps, or even a scientist with his grasp of the botanical terms he was using to explain the plants mentioned in the ancient poem” (RS 235).

To tell more about the little girl and the Naga Baba, Tariq Mia started telling the Minstrel’s story.

For becoming Naga Baba, he endured harsh disciplines and extremes of heat and cold. He spent many days at Himalayan passes, into a small
stone temple to overcome cold, at desert to survive without water to overcome heat. Gradually he learned which plant could suppress thirst and hunger, which yogic exercise would decrease metabolism and increase tolerance. He also learned meditation to become a professed Naga Baba.

Being an ardent follower of Shiva and to celebrate the night of Shiva, he underwent fasting of nine days and nine nights chanting:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Shiva-o-ham} \\
\text{I that am Shiva} \\
\text{Shiva-o-ham} \\
\text{Shiva am I. (RS 241)}
\end{align*}
\]

It’s a ritual that on the night of Shiva; Shiva’s follower broke their fasts by begging at the houses of unclean, untouchable and profane. To accomplish the ritual Naga Baba moved towards the house of Dom where he drank two pitcherfuls of water to quench his nine days’ thirst.

From there he moved to sweepers’ colony for alms. The sweepers were already waiting with their offerings of food. The ascetic smeared ash on their forehead as blessings and accepted their food.

His last destination was a brothel from where he could return to the forest. At the brothel’s gate he pounded with trident and the door was opened by a man and then appeared a woman. Suddenly Naga Baba noticed a cowering child in the grip of a man inside the brothel. Watching
this, the Baba asked that child as alms on which the woman became hesitant and said:

… but I paid five hundred rupees for her. It was a great charity I did her father. When I bought her there was no flesh on her at all. See how well I feed her, and still there is not enough of her to satisfy a man. Why not accept the sweets instead? (RS 246)

Feared of the ascetic’s rage she agreed stating: “And do not curse me later when you find what trouble she brings. She doesn’t even have a name. Her own father calls her misfortune” (RS 246).

Naga Baba led her with him. To protect from bazaar toughs of brothel they moved towards the river Narmada. On the river bank he gave her a new name “Uma” which meant “peace in the night” and also another name for the goddess. He also introduced a new mother to her; the Narmada river. “The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of the Narmada” (RS 254).

From Naga Baba the girl learned reading and writing as well as techniques to survive in adverse conditions. He taught her to drink fresh milk from the wandering cattle, use ash as an antiseptic, as mosquito repellent and also as insulation against heat and cold. The girl observed that the food was always divided into four equal parts, one for animals, one for stranger and two for themselves. To settle they selected places
according to seasons, a cave behind waterfall for summer and a house made up of banana leaves and bamboo for winter and monsoon. At their dwelling place Uma started her lessons under the tutelage of Naga Baba. Around beautiful surroundings of river Narmada and Vindhya Mountain range, Uma stepped into her spiritual life. She learned Shankaracharya’s the song of the Narmada and wandered singing minstrel’s songs from temple to temple attaining higher enlightenment.

By saving the girl from brothel and raising her into a river minstrel, Naga Baba became a true Naga. At the academy he had learned, “… the arts of a protector sadhu. He had been taught to wield his iron trident as a weapon….practiced mind control to disarm an opponent without touching him, and he was called a Naga” (RS 242-243).

In the last chapter of A River Sutra Gita Mehta has discussed The Song of the Narmada. In this chapter, Naga Baba surfaces again, after many years, as Professor V.V. Shankar; the head of Archaeological authority on the river Narmada.

Professor Shankar came at Narmada rest house along with a group of archaeologists to excavate Narmada basin, financed by the Indian Preservation Trust. He became renowned with the publication of his remarkable book The Narmada Survey.

During talks, the bureaucrat reveals that he joined as a manager of rest house on being exhausted with power, wealth and corruption. He
expresses that he is enjoying his “Vanprastha”. This makes Professor Shankar to remark: “You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world, my friend....Too many lives converge on these banks” (RS 268).

Influenced by the thoughts of Professor Shankar, bureaucrat starts missing pleasures of his older days and also the archaeologists who are on the Narmada basin.

Before the departure of the archaeologists a river minstrel comes holding a one stringed instrument and recites the songs of offerings for bureaucrat and as Professor Shankar appears, she touches his feet for blessing.

Bureaucrat is shocked to know that Professor Shankar is none other than Naga Baba and the young woman is Uma, and starts asking many questions about his life. On which he says: “I have no great truths to share, my friend ... I told you, I am only a man” (RS 281).

Unsatisfied with his revelation, the narrator demands a further explanation but Professor Shankar remarks: “Don’t you know the soul must travel through eighty four thousand births in order to become a man? ... Only then can it reenter the world” (RS 281).

Professor Shankar’s reincarnation as the Naga Baba and then reverting to his earlier self sets an example of a truly enlightened person whose experiences have made him view things and life in the proper perspectives.
Through the Song of the Narmada, Gita Mehta has established a link between the stories and also provides us with a scope to understand Narmada as a river and as a symbol of feminine power. The immortality of river Narmada is explained through Professor Shankar in these words:

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

It shows that the author has evaluated every belief with her rationalistic approach. She has also produced some archaeological evidences to support the holiness and immortality of the river. Rocks around the river Narmada show dating from Stone Age and of the successive ages—Neolithic, Iron and Bronze. Archaeologists feel that these must be the oldest evidences of human life witnessed in India by the river.

She has also accounted that thousands of years ago famous Hindu epic the Mahabharata was dictated by the sage Vyasa on the bank of this river. Twelve hundred years ago Shankaracharya composed a poem on this river. One of the greatest play Shankunlata of Kalidas and his poem “The Cloud Messenger” (Meghduta) show the settings of Satpura hills. A few
other poets like Baz Bahadur and Rupmati have described Narmada as a spring under a tamarind tree, in their works. Even a Western writer of Modern Age, Rudyard Kipling has chosen Narmada as a setting for his book *The Jungle Book*.

Along with the archaeological facts, Gita Mehta has also presented mythological beliefs in which the river is imagined as a woman blessed with healing powers.

In the Executive’s story; Rima was always singing:

*Bring me my oil and my collyrium.*

*Sister, bring my mirror and the vermillion.*

*Make haste with my flower garland.*

*My lover waits impaitent in the bed.* (RS 134)

Listening to this, Gita Mehta has brought forth her imagination about the river through the narrator of the book. During dawn the refraction of rays in a rainbow gives an image as if the river is a woman adorning herself with jewellery. The still dark water provides scope to feel a woman lying with stretched limbs, oiled loosened black hair and outlined eye in collyrium. Slow reddening of water portrays the image as if the river has painted her palms and the soles of her feet with vermillion getting ready to meet her lover.

In the Courtesan’s story the Nawab of Shahbag has been depicted with great respect for the holy river Narmada. Uma Parameswara has
quoted references from Padma Purana (Ch. 13), “Saraswati purifies us in three days and Ganga in one day, but the moment we see Narmada we are purified” and from Agni Purana (Ch.113), “The waters of the Ganga will purify the bather in the course of a single day, but the mere sight of the Narmada absolves a man from all sins” (264). Nawab too recites the same and believes, “Bathing in the waters of the Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Saraswati in three, in the waters of the Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. Salutations to thee, O Narmada” (RS 163).

Healing and soothing effect of the Narmada is produced as a feminine power. About the river’s water it is said that it nullifies the evil effects of Saturn and all types of epileptics, depressives and unfortunates rush to her bank to seek refuge.

A brief historical account of the river’s purity is also mentioned by the author through Dr Mitra. He says that Greeks and Alexandrians always had much affinity towards the Narmada. The great Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy had written about the Narmada and the religious suicides at Amarkantak. He says; “… people fasting to death or immolating themselves, on the Narmada’s banks or drowning in her waters–in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth” (RS 152).
In another incidence Tariq Mia rightly asks the bureaucrat, “For years you have been admiring the Narmada as if it is a woman. But what has all your adoration taught you?” (RS 229) and explains himself that woman is not just the subject of admiration but is much more than this.

Woman is the counterpart of man, woman an important force in the whole creation is one of the corner stones of Mehta’s novel....The difference between the man and woman is just this: a man is explicit and woman, implicit a man is extrovert and a woman is introvert and therein lies her power. She is the integral force in the whole process of generation and regeneration. (Verma 110)

These thoughts about Narmada which the author has established are also present in Shankaracharya’s song, sung by the river minstrel; “You were present at the Creation. / By Shiva’s command you alone will remain. / At the Destruction” (RS 277).

After studying A River Sutra; the reader can easily able to trace the threads of narration from the last chapter, “The Song of the Narmada”. Here we see the Myth of Narmada’s birth is composed, which has been discussed in the beginning of the book:

\[
\text{Once and only once} \\
\text{In the turning wheel of Existence} \\
\text{The terrible One was moved to laughter.}
\]
Looking from his inward contemplation

To watch you The Destroyer said,

*O damsel of the beautiful hips,*

*Evoker of Narma, lust,*

*Be known as Narmada*

*Holiest of rivers. (RS 274)*

The sages of various religious cults are shown meditating on the river banks, like the Jain Monk; who was going to meet his mendicant brothers at Mahadeo and the great saint Kabir who started a new discipline bridging the Hindu and the Muslim faith. On the river bank, a huge tree known as Kabirvad had always been a place of communal harmony even at the treacherous hours of communal frenzy. They all share common allegory of Narmada’s origin and believe that:

*The sages meditating on your river banks say*

*You are twice – born,*

*Once from penance,*

*Once from love. (RS 275)*

The holy river Narmada has always been hailed as “Soother of Desires” for her supernatural relieving power as mentioned in the Executive’s story whose protagonist Nitin Bose freed himself from being “possessed”:
Then he changed you into a river

To cool the lusts of holy men

And called you Narmada,

Soother of Desires. (RS 275)

Life around the river is expressed in Shankaracharya’s composition which establishes the relation between nature and human desire. In the same way the real cause of music’s creation has been discussed in the musician’s story:

Leaping antelopes
Chart your course.

Birds throng the sacred trees
Shading your village squares.

Rose apples darken your water.

Wild mangoes fall into your coiling current
Like flowers in a maiden’s hair. (RS 276-277)

In the last story, the Minstrel’s story, Naga Baba who later appears as Professor Shankar might have learned philosophy of “meeting” life only through Shankaracharya’s the Song of the Narmada. Throughout the story he had always been reciting these lines along with his disciple Uma and has also expressed the narrator that “Too many lives converge on these banks” (RS 268). He says;
Turtles and river dolphins find refuge in your waters

Alighting heron play upon your tranquil surface.

Fish and crocodiles are gathered in your embrace.

O holy Narmada. (RS 279)

Like the holy river Narmada, Gita Mehta has great regards for the Hindu deity Ganesha. In India he is worshipped everywhere and is loved by all. This can be assessed by the appearance of Ganesha images on rickshaws, cyber cafes, village walls, handbags, trucks, front doors of Hindu houses, offices, working places, and many other places including ancient temples. In Eternal Ganesha Gita Mehta has offered a value text describing the meanings of Ganesha’s various names as well as his delightful physical form. She has used mythological, historical, religious and realistic facts to elevate the talismanic power of Ganesha.

Lord Ganesha is worshipped differently according to variance in habitation and beliefs. It is prevalent that Lord Shiva had acknowledged him as the Lord of Beginnings after restoring his life and accepting him as his son. It is believed that Ganesha was beheaded by Shiva and later on revived by placing an elephant’s head. To amend his mistake Goddess Parvati demanded Shiva to grant him a boon. She demanded that the boy Ganesha should be worshipped first, before any other gods and should be known as The Remover of Obstacles. According to a myth, the elephants were the first who cleared the jungle of wild animals and trees for
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agriculture, helping mankind to establish their faith in Ganapati the original *Remover of Obstacles*.

Back from 3000 B.C. the families of the Indus Valley Civilization started offering grains of rice to Lord Ganesha worshipping him as the *Pitcher of Prosperity*.

The farmers’ community worships him as the *Lord of Farming* symbolizing his trunk as a plough and belly as a bursting granary. In the anticipation of plentiful harvest farmers also adore him as the *Lord of Water*.

The devotees of business community praise him as the *Lord of Prosperity* to ensure success. The Lord is emblemed on the first page of account book to deviate all his sympathetic intercessions towards them.

Students worship him as the *Lord of Learning*; to acquire the power of judgment and discrimination like his wisdom. They pray by saying, “Great Lord, I stand before you not knowing which way to turn. / I lay my confusions at your feet. / Fill me with judgment and discrimination” (*EG* 15).

Ganesha’s delightful appearance contributes a lot to make him very popular among children. He is often adorned as the *Lord of Story-tellers*. India’s greatest stories and mythological tales of Lord Ganesha can be enjoyed from Ganesha Purana, Ganesha Upanishad and Ganesha Gita which were composed long ago.
According to yoga texts, the human body is identified with seven chakras. The energy of the basic i.e. Muladhar Chakra is controlled by Lord Ganesha. The person, who can uncoil the *Kundalini* is only through the blessings of Ganesha. Uncoiling means success, so Lord Ganesha is also known as the *Guarantor of Success*.

The Lord is acknowledged differently by different intellectuals. Grammarians acknowledge him as the power of language; as he is the first word. Mathematicians acknowledge him as the power of numbers and Philosophers acknowledge him as the power of thought for being “the consciousness” the first principle of philosophy. He is the only god who provides us with the tools of recognition viz speech, consciousness, perception or anything else without which nothing can exist.

Lord Ganesha can be explained by dividing into *Ga-Na-Esha* syllables. The last syllable “*Esha*” means Lord, while *Ga* and *Na* mean “entrance” and “the goal.” Together they become “*Gana*” or Category. Thus, Ganesha can also be identified as the *Lord of Categories*.

The most popular and loving god Ganesha exhibits a pleasantly unified physique. Images show that he has head of elephant, single tusked, big belly of man entwined by a serpent, multiple arms and rides on a mouse. This fascinating figure perpetuates deep philosophical thoughts and religious values to Hindu pantheon.
Before exploring Ganesha’s amusing structure, it is important to come across the story of his origin. Once Goddess Parvati wished for an undisturbed bath. So she moulded a beautiful boy out of her body’s scrubbed clay and sandal wood paste and instructed him to guard the chamber prohibiting entrance of outsiders. Following the instructions, the boy stopped Lord Shiva, unaware of the fact that he was her husband. Annoyed Shiva, tried to remove him but couldn’t succeed. Being unable to overcome loyal valour of boy, enraged Shiva beheaded the child with trident, sending his head spinning into space.

Revealing fact; Parvati became inconsolable and demanded to bring her son back to his life. When the child’s head was not found Shiva instructed his Ganas to bring the head of the first seen living being. They came along with the head of the wisest beast; an elephant and was implanted over the boy’s body. Recognizing the child’s valour, he was named Gan-esha, Gan-pati and the Chief of Ganas. After being restored, Lord Shiva accepted him as his son and blessed him to be acknowledged as the Lord of Beginnings. From that day Ganapati is worshipped first with recitation of "Om Ganapati namaya, / Om, I bow to Ganesha" (EG 36).

In Indian divinity, three beastly animals: elephant, snake and tiger get an honourable mention. Elephant is self-evidently a symbol of power and exhibits the characteristics of benefit to humanity. So, Ganesha bearing the head of an elephant is much loved Indian God.
One of the tribal myths explains that the primal descendant to earth were two elephants Matanga and Matangi who roamed with their son Ganesha in the Universe.

Historians suggest that beheading of Ganesha is a mythical version of Aryan conquest of tribal inhabitants and the elephant god has been accepted into Hindu pantheon as the subservient son of Aryan deities.

Anthropologists suggest that it is easier to worship and accept the god, which exhibits familiarities with human race. Even a Roman General Pompey Cicero has written in *Familiares* about the experiences of a bloodthirsty mob towards elephant, “… a kind of feeling that the huge beast has a fellowship with the human race” (*EG* 46).

Biologist and Naturalist Charles Darwin has reported through his experiments conducted on animals that the Indian elephants exhibit emotions similar to men when distressed by the removal of young ones. According to him, “The Indian elephant contracts the same muscles as are used for the shedding of tears in man” (*EG* 51). In *Natural History* Pliny has written:

> Of all animals the elephant in intelligence approaches the nearest to man ... and to a degree that is rare among men even, possesses notions of honesty, prudence and equity. It has religious respect also for the stars, and veneration for the sun and the moon. (*EG* 51)
Getting over to Ganesha’s physique one can notice the head of Ganesha with single tusk. A tale is there to explain how he became single tusked.

Once sage Vyasa agreed to dictate Ganesha the story of great India and its relation with mythology, history and philosophy, only if he could write without halting. For the sake of civilization he started taking dictation of the world’s longest poem weeks after weeks. When all his pens were exhausted he broke one of his tusks and used it as a pen. In this way the great Hindu epic the Mahabharat and the teachings of Bhagvad Gita came into existence and god is presented with a broken tusk.

Along with the broken tusk, the trunk of Ganesha is always curled forming the shape of OM; symbolizing the origin of the Cosmos. Ganesha worshippers believe that resounding of OM creates the Cosmos. As energy escaped from darkness to become light, Lord Ganesha appeared as “Nritya Ganpati” the Dancing Ganesha. Through vibrations of OM he summoned the Hindu Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and provided them with the tasks of Creation, Preservation and Destruction of the Universe.

The followers of Sanatan Dharma i.e. the eternal search relate different arguments about it. They believe that creation has no beginning and no end; it is perennial in nature like the theories of modern physics. Physicists explain that the energy escapes from the Black Hole to form
another universe, which in time collapses in the dark and thus the cycle regulates creation and destruction both.

In India it has been calculated that Hindus are meditating on 330 million different forms of God, therefore, the philosophers are struggling to produce a sole image to illustrate infinite attributes of truth. To fulfil this Ganesha appears to be a complete form to meditate upon. Ganesha’s head symbolizes supreme reality of existence while body symbolizes the illusion of existence or *Maya*. The protruding fat belly indicates that physical appearance is an illusion and must be overcome by truth. A serpent entwined around his belly symbolizes divinity to hold all contradictions and entire Universe.

On the meditating figure of Ganesha; he always has multiple arms sometimes four and sometimes six. The scholars who meditate upon six armed Ganesha treat arms as a symbol of six schools of Indian philosophy while the meditators of four armed Ganesha depict arms as the four categories of life forms: land life, aquatic life, amphibian life, and avian life. Some also believe these four arms as the stages of language learning. All these hands can be viewed holding different things which provide scope for philosophical ponderings. In one hand he holds a nooze; symbolizing the bondage of desire but in another an axe; to break the ties of desire which bound men to materialism. The sweets held in the third hand indicate the pleasures of knowledge and spiritual wisdom while the
fourth hand symbolizes enlightenment which comes through liberation from all desires.

Above all, Lord Ganesha has a unique structure composite of four separate animals. His head is of elephant, the body of man; a snake binds his belly and he rides on a mouse.

The contradictory creatures elephant and mouse; serpent and man are contained within a single image propagating the supreme goal of Hindu Metaphysics “The Unity in Diversity”. It also promotes the moral imperative to live peacefully in co-existence. A human body encircled by snake connects the elephant to a mouse illustrating the union of the microcosm with the macrocosm.

Like Ganesha’s body, his mouse, on which Ganesha rides represents the lowest form of consciousness; the ego. Some philosophers believe that it represents a thief who roams in the darkness of the subconscious desires and Ganesha’s supremacy symbolizes the conquest of self-annihilating power of desire. Some believe Ganesha’s mouse as “Agni”; the sacrificial power of Hindus. It is believed that Agni once disguised himself as a mouse to evolve the consciousness from the lowest point to the highest. Hindus believe Agni as the mediator among the three worlds, the world of ignorance, materialism and enlightenment. In another myth, the earth presented mouse to Lord Ganesha in order to reveal her innermost secrets.
Out of these the best myth representing mouse is the restless intellect within human beings to explore the dark mysteries of things.

In the modern context the accession of knowledge is available with electronic clicking of mouse to explore the mysteries. Here the author has mentioned computer; an electronic machine through which any information can be accessed by simple clicking of mouse.

Presence of serpent around Ganesha’s belly has a very interesting story. Once Ganesha was riding on his mouse with lots of sweets in his trunk. Suddenly mouse raised upright because of the glance of a snake which was crossing the way. Ganesha fell off from the mouse’s back and on landing his belly burst wide open with the impact of thrust. Everything spilled including internal organs. Ganesha with his divinity gathered everything, pushed into the belly and tied it up with the snake. So to express gratitude of his divinity he is shown along with serpent around the belly.

The serpent is a symbol of Kundalini Shakti which remains coiled at the base of the spine. Coiled serpent of Ganesha represents vast field of energy of an individual that seeks union with undifferentiated universal energy. The Kundalini yoga meditators practise the awakening of the serpent power. In an ancient text, Kundalini Upnishad it is written:

*The divine power,*

*Resting half asleep*
Like a snake coiled upon herself

At the base of the body. (EG 85)

On Kundalini Shakti, Carl Jung has observed, “In India the serpent is at the basis of a whole philosophical system ... the kundalini serpent ... known only to a few specialists” (EG 85).

In yoga texts, the human body is identified with seven chakras. The energy centers at the base of spine, the Muladhar chakra and moves upward to the skull while performing yoga. Yogis sit cross-legged on the ground as in this position the spine is closest to the earth. They believe that the energy of Muladhar chakra is controlled by Lord Ganesha and cannot be uncoiled without the power of his blessings.

After awakening of kundalini energy it rotates upwards through spine activating each energy centre until it explodes into the core of pineal gland which Tantric mystics call “The Third Eye.” This third eye releases energy from the crown of the skull with an experience of self-dissolution into thousand petalled lotus of light and mingling of individual consciousness with universal consciousness. On this yoga kundalini expresses, “… all illusions of separateness dissolve and That alone remains which is soundless, formless, and deathless, which has neither beginning nor end, which is without decay” (EG 91).

In the present age of Evil, kalyug, enlightenment is not easy to be achieved. Some Hindus believe that the world has reached nadir of
wickedness and it’s the time for Ganesha to reappear. Gita Mehta, the author of *Eternal Ganesha*, believes that Ganesha has incarnated among us to cleanse the world. She has reported that on 21st September, 1995 Lord Ganesha started drinking milk since dawn. It was first noticed in a temple at the outskirts of Delhi and became a common phenomenon not only in India but also in other countries. She has accounted incidence of Hong–Kong where a small silver statue drank more than 20 liters of milk. In London’s Vishwa Temple and the Geeta Bhawan Temple along with a home of U.K. witnessed the same incidence of idol drinking milk.

The worshippers believe that a new god had born to save the world from evil while the rationalists tried to describe it logically. On this incidence *The Manchester Guardian* reported:

*The media coverage was extensive, and although scientists and ‘experts’ created theories of ‘capillary absorption’ and ‘mass hysteria’, the overwhelming evidence and conclusion was that an unexplainable miracle had occurred ... while the media and scientists still struggle to find an explanation for these events, many Hindus believe they are a sign that a great teacher has been born. (EG 102)*

In India Lord Ganesha’s birthday, Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated as a festival which culminates with the immersion of idol to enact the cycle of death and re-birth. During the freedom struggle Indian national leader
Lokmanya Tilak customized the immersion of Ganesha’s idol publically, defying Imperial bans on public gatherings. Before that, immersion of idols had taken place in the privacy of homes. Thousands of people joined on Tilak’s call and gradually the festival became more political and stirred the whole continent with religious and national fervor.

Since then the festival is celebrated with great zeal but the forms of idols have completely been changed. Nowadays idols are produced according to the theme of cricket, football, Olympics or any other sports in which the god is presented holding the related property. These fancy models have become a menace for the environmentalists to overcome and save the environment and under water aquatic lives. The fancy idols are made out of Plaster of Paris, industrial colourants, nylon, plastic, glass and other materials, out of which many are non-biodegradable and cause chemical poisoning affecting the aquatic life adversely. To overcome this situation Gita Mehta has urged everyone to become eco-friendly. The idol should be made out of humble mud and vegetable colours so that it becomes harmless to the aquatic life and dissolves easily in water bodies.

Along with this she has also suggested not to treat this god lightly as he is the god of virtues. It is more fruitful for Indians to concentrate their minds on Ganesha’s names, his lovable form, his bursting belly, his benign smile, his curling trunk, and many more rather than ornamenting wealth on his image.
In both the books, *A River Sutra* and *Eternal Ganesha* Gita Mehta has focused on Indian cultural values. In *Eternal Ganesha* she has discussed Hindu philosophies associated with Lord Ganesha while in *A River Sutra* she has dealt with Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and tribal culture. In *A River Sutra*:

Narmada symbolizes life in general and Indian culture and society in particular. The river flows, with Shiva and Supaneshwara temples on one side, the Muslim mosque and the tomb of the Sufi poet, Rumi, on the other and many Jain, Buddhist and tribal temples and shrines scattered over its course, symbolizes the culture that is both ancient and modern, both monotheistic and theistic, and both Aryan and non-Aryan. (Ramachandran and Khan)

In *Eternal Ganesha* Hinduism is the core philosophy. Gita Mehta says that the word Hinduism came into description only in the nineteenth century and became distinguished from others only after being Republic. The Indian constitution separated it from other faiths like Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism describing as the religion of million gods. These million gods are an attempt to represent the aspects of a single truth as defined in Atharva Veda as; “The One, the one Alone. / In him all deities become One Alone” (*EG* 71).
Unlike Hinduism, the word Hindu is quite old in origin and came from ancient Persia to describe the people living by the Indus valley. Hindus are thought to be much associated with philosophies and philosophical discussions. An Indian historian Irfan Habib quotes an ancient Persian definition of Hindus as, “… those who have been debating with each other within a common framework for centuries. If they recognize another as somebody whom they can either support or oppose intelligibly, then both are Hindus” (EG 66).

Such an expression is also exhibited by the Jain Monk on Hindu narrator in A River Sutra, “You Hindus. Always disguising your greed with your many-headed gods and your many-headed arguments” (13).

The prominent symbol of Hinduism in A River Sutra is Naga Baba who reenters the world as Professor Shankar learning that the greatest enlightenment comes from being a man performing one’s “karma” while managing the rush of life i.e. “dharma”. Probably the songs of his disciple Uma and traditions of the river lead him back to his old profession of archaeologist. It’s only love through which the Naga Baba regains the world and becomes once again the renowned Professor Shankar.

Other than this, various myths of Hindu gods and a few characters also denote Hinduism like the Narrator, the Minstrel, the Courtesan’s daughter, Mr Chagla and the Musician. The narrator has been depicted as a Hindu hermit, who after renouncing the world has been seeking
enlightenment on the river bank of Narmada. He becomes an observer and collects the stories of love and suffering. He listens to the stories of religious love, familial love, sexual love, musical love and eternal love to understand its meaning. The musician, being a hard task-master, taught both his pupils to experience the bliss of music which transcends the physical and unites them in a spiritual world of sound. When his daughter failed to sustain her love, he instilled in his daughter her own love for music and tried to make her fall in love with music once more. In this story, Indian music training progresses with the myth of Shiva, Narmada and their relation with nature.

The Minstrel, Uma rescued from the brothel by the protector Sadhu Naga Baba is a symbol of devotion. She devoted herself to the river Narmada and learned singing all her praisings. Through Naga Baba’s care and love she realized the essence of her life and surrendered completely to the river Narmada; daughter of Lord Shiva.

The Courtesan’s daughter and the dacoit Rahul Singh both produce the symbol of eternal love. Both of them complemented each other and sacrificed life for other’s sake. Rahul Singh’s power of love and belief in previous life convinced the courtesan’s daughter to think the same and she too passionately fell in love with him. It’s quite pathetic that Rahul Singh was shot dead while he was buying gifts for his wife and his wife drowned herself in river Narmada; unable to live without his love.
Islamic Culture is represented in the novel through Tariq Mia, the Mullah of the village mosque and friend of the narrator. The author intends to focus on the similarities among all the cultures. Tariq Mia being a well-versed Muslim, always talks of the capacity to love. Again and again he returns to the theme of love explaining the narrator the meaning of life. He also talks about the Sufi Saint, Amir Rumi and his devotional love songs. Another character Imrat, the disciple of Master Mohan has also been shown singing mystic Sufi songs and has always wished to sing at Amir Rumi’s tomb.

Gita Mehta’s both these characters are liberated from the limits of specific revelations. At Naga Baba’s cave Tariq Mia listens to Shankaracharya’s hymn in Sanskrit, learned its meaning and always paid his regards to it. He also tells the narrator about Kabir; the great saint who started a new discipline bridging the Hindu faith and the Muslim faith. Imrat has been portrayed singing songs of Kabir, Mirabai, Khushrau, Tulsidas, Chisti and Chandidas, the greatest devotional composers whose music are the fruits of their eternal and spiritual love.

In one more Muslim character, the Nawab of Shahbag, always shows great regards for Narmada and even chants, “… the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. Salutation to thee, O Narmada” (RS 163).
Through the Monk’s story, Gita Mehta has highlighted the renunciation ceremony and the cardinal doctrine of non-violence of Jain cult. She has discussed two sects; the sky clad sect who opts for the rigorous penances including the denial of human shame and the other sect who wears three pieces of white Muslin cloth, keeps shaven head and exercises endurance. The theories of Jainism are exhibited through the character of Ashok who renounced the world and became a monk to experience the state of bliss. According to Gita Mehta the monk finally experienced bliss by developing his connection with the world.

The most highlighted and interesting culture dealt with in the book is the culture of Vano villagers who reside on the river bank and affects the lives of the characters depicted in the novel. Gita Mehta has brilliantly used the form of “Sthalapurana” which presents the culture and cultural rhetoric of the natives. Raja Rao was the first writer who articulated the anxieties of the Indian novelists in English for the claims of language and culture. Gita Mehta has presented several evocations in the native form of communication which get much attention by the reader. The tribals of Vano believe that they are the Pre-Aryan people who had been living peacefully before the Aryan invasion. The Aryans were restless nomads who used to learn everything through reasoning of mind.

Some four thousand years ago the Great War was fought between Pre-Aryans and Aryans. It is said that Aryan warriors were granted immortality and one amongst them is still sleeping in the forests of the
northern bank near Supaneshwara temple. They even acknowledge him as “Avatihuma” and believe that his head still lies in the forest sleeping. The bandits of the forest believe that if they are stung by the honeybees encircling the Immortal’s head, cannot be killed in a police shoot out. In the Courtesan’s story Rahul Singh and the Courtesan’s Daughter got married at Supaneshwara temple and Rahul Singh was believed to be stung by bee encircling the immortal’s head.

The tribals believe that long before the Aryans arrived, there had been a great serpent kingdom inches below the soil. They show their ardent belief in the philosophy of nature and the interdependence of life. To pay obeisance they worship the Naga; the snake. The night of the lunar eclipse is considered full of bad omens by the native tribes. They believe that black magic is performed during the lunar eclipse to capture a man’s soul inside the two halves of a coconut. This gives the performer immense strength of elephants. In the Executive’s story Nitin Bose thought himself to be a victim of this magic.

Tribals have great respect for the river Narmada and they worship her as a stone image that is half woman and half snake with full breasts. They believe that this divine personification of Narmada saved them from complete destruction during the struggle with Aryans. The grateful tribals conferred on the river the gift of annulling the effects of snakebites. This belief is justified by Nitin Bose’s visit at their shrine and performing the
immersion of mud idols into the river Narmada which relieved him from the “possessed” soul of Rima.

One more myth prevalent among the tribals is about love God Kama, spring season and Goddess of Allure. The season of spring is said to bring with it the desire of love and the love God Kama seems to wander with his sugarcane bow, honeybee sting and five flowered arrows of desire. Anytime Kama might draw his bow and release an arrow on a wanderer turning her into the Goddess of Involuntary Allure. To ensure the victory Kama might call his friends spring or Malayan wind to generate the most dangerous, Amorous Mood. Even the sound of koel bird is compared with a woman’s cry at the moment of sexual fulfilment.

Another myth prevalent among the inhabitants regarding desire is of an ascetic who was meditating in the world of desire. He was warned about Kama but the ascetic denied and underestimated his power. But till Kama had unleashed all the five arrows, Maya, the illusion had appeared with her power of arousing lust. Being disturbed, the enraged ascetic opened his third eye and reduced Kama to ashes, as he himself was being consumed by the Desire. On this the Goddess of Allure burnt the ascetic and since then she has been worshipped with the names such as “… the Terrible One, The Implacable Mother, the Dark lady, the Destroyer of Time, the Everlasting Dream” (RS 97).
The followers of Kabir sect, who were the inseparable part of Vano village, too hold a myth for “Kabir vad”, a tree born of Kabir’s tooth brush. The great sage Kabir was once sailing down the Narmada cleaning his teeth with a twig. After brushing he threw it on the river bank. The twig developed roots and grew into a huge tree known as Kabir vad. Later on this Kabir vad became a pilgrimage for the poets, singers, mystics and a place of communal harmony even at the most difficult hours of communal frenzy.

Through discussions on different cultures, their beliefs, and prevalent ethos Gita Mehta has allured her book with various art forms. The art forms which can be traced in the book are music and religious myths.

In *A River Sutra* there is a musical motif running throughout the narratives. The tales are surrounded by different songs and sometimes by chanting of mantras. The initiation of book can be marked by the lines from love songs of Chandidas. The music that echoes throughout the tales is devotional music and hymns of Shankaracharya. The Monk’s Story is full of Jain vows’ chantings while the Teacher’s Story has poems of Amir Rumi and songs of Kabir which provide reader with the feeling of Imrat’s divine singing. The mystery of tribal songs clinches the Executive’s Story. Chantings of OM, songs of Hindu Trinity, recitation of musical notes and practise of raga overshadow the musical training of disciple in the Musician’s Story. In the last chapter the Shankaracharya’s song’s offerings
to the river Narmada have been sung by the river Minstrel, Uma. Thematically this continuous narrative exhibits the unity of all religions.

*Eternal Ganesha* also produces various musical forms like, chantings of Ganesha, Shankaracharya’s hymns, Sanskrit invocations and hymns from Ganesha Upanishad, to impart value readings to the text.

*A River Sutra* and *Eternal Ganesha* both the books can be estimated as the mythical outcome of Shiva. The books delineate with the origin of Narmada and the origin of Ganesha; daughter and son of Lord Shiva. Both of them are the fruits of Shiva’s penance. They came into existence only by his rage and became eternal through his blessings as a father. All the Indian myths dealt with in both the works, revolve around Lord Shiva. As Rama Nair quotes:

> Siva is a deity with a complex and polarized personality. An outsider to society by nature, he unites ascetics and erotic, creative and destructive, male and female aspects of existence, into a divine character....In Siva, the denial or death of one virtue permits the generation of another. All opposites are really complements, each requiring the other’s sacrifice for its own existence and growth. In death lies new life, and in denial, renewal. (150)

The myth of Narmada’s origin tells us that once when Lord Shiva was in ascetic trance his flowing perspiration took the form of a beautiful
woman. She was named as Narmada by Lord Shiva and blessed to be forever holy and forever inexhaustible. Then he gave her in marriage to the ocean, Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors.

Lord Ganesha the son of Shiva was blessed by him to be worshipped as “Lord of Beginnings” but originated as result of his fierce rage. While guarding his mother’s chamber, Ganesha was beheaded by Shiva and later on revived with the elephant head, to be known as Ganesha.

In the Musician’s Story the myth of veena’s origin and creation of music have been elevated according to the musicians’ belief. Once Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati made love whole night which equals thirty thousand years of mortal days. In the morning Shiva rose earlier and the goddess was still asleep. While sleeping her slender arms were rested on her firm round breasts, with each breath her fragile bangles slide up and down creating sound. Moved by the tenderness, Lord Shiva created an instrument to immortalize his wife’s beauty, the first instrument of music, the Veena.

As musician explained to his disciples, “Look, the two globes that provide the veena’s resonance are the breasts of Parvati. The neck of the veena is her slender arm, the frets of the veena her glass bangles, and the music of the veena the expression of Shiva’s love” (RS 196).
It is a ritual to chant “OM” before playing veena. “OM” which seems a single word is originally three and half sounds. Om is believed as:

\[\text{Om is the three worlds.}\]
\[\text{Om is the three fires.}\]
\[\text{Om is the three gods.}\]
\[\text{Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva. (RS 197)}\]

The musician’s daughter explained the meaning of OM to the narrator, as the sound of consciousness to experience the world, which depicts the author’s obsession for Lord Shiva:

\[\text{The first sound of OM is the manifest world.}\]
\[\text{The sound of waking consciousness.}\]
\[\text{The sound of gross experience....}\]
\[\text{The second sound of Om is the unmanifest world.}\]
\[\text{The sound of dreaming consciousness.}\]
\[\text{The sound of subtle experience....}\]
\[\text{The third sound of OM is the nonmanifest world.}\]
\[\text{The sound of dreamless sleep.}\]
\[\text{The sound of potential experience....}\]
\[\text{The half syllable of OM is silence.}\]
\[\text{The sound of the unmanifest world.}\]
\[\text{It is the ultimate goal.}\]
\[\text{The incomparable target. (RS 198-199)}\]
The philosophical theme of *A River Sutra* resembles Arun Joshi’s *The Last Labyrinth* in which the novelist emphasizes on the practical philosophy of *Karmayoga* which unlike *Sanyasa* does not aim at “… giving up worldly affairs but continuing to perform them in such a way that they do not create any difficulty in the matter of obtaining Release” (Tilak 82).

In the same way the climax of *A River Sutra* establishes the very famous teachings of Bhagvad Gita on *Karmayoga* as the enlightened narrator starts longing for his past life being illuminated by Professor Shankar; Naga Baba of the past life, who “meets” life not “retires” from it to achieve liberation of soul.

On the other hand Gita Mehta’s *Eternal Ganesha* can be estimated as a book of prayer and her obeisance to Lord Ganesha.