

## I. River as Sutra or, the Binding Principle

Gita Mehta is a well known writer, a journalist, and documentary filmmaker. In this regard, Mehta is a versatile personality. *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta explores the diversity of cultures within India to promote the Indian culture, art and her own individual experiences to the world. To accomplish this, Mehta presents seemingly unconnected stories in her novel, stories about Hindu and Jain ascetic, courtesans and minstrels, diamond merchants and tea executives, Muslim clerics and music teachers, tribal folk beliefs and the anthropologists who study them. Once in an interview she regarded herself to “a camera and the reader can see through her eyes”(53). Besides these she has brought the issues of Indian cultures, communities, traditions in her novel.

In this novel the writer touches the life of various people of different faiths and beliefs, who are from various ethnic groups and have their own way of religious lives. She has focused on the depth of spirituality that the people of India, irrespective of their religion or faith, have always felt. It exposes the life and culture on the bank of India's the holiest river Narmada, the Narmada is an active “participant in the action of the novel. All who come to her banks “woo” her in a hope to feel emotional security. Characters like Nitin Bose, Master Mohan and the Music Teacher experience “a sense of loss” in their lives, but on the bank of the river they are purged.

The river is “an ambivalent symbol since it corresponds to the creative power both of nature and of time.” On the one hand the Narmada signifies fertility and progression in life of men and women coming to her banks; and on the other hand it stands for irreversible passage of time. The time gone is gone forever and there is a sense of loss and oblivion. Mythologically, Mehta contemplates the river thus: “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.... Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the Delightful one, blessing her with words: 'You shall, be forever holy, forever inexhaustible.'(8-9)

It is this belief and the sense, that has made the people of different faiths come to the same spot for worship thus, the holy Narmada River has been a spot, which has brought these diverse people in one place. And the specific point- the Narmada being the reason, 'Sutra', 'Binding Principle' and spot for the 'Unison' of such 'diverse' people-which I am to explore.

Of course, where there is diversity in a family, a society, a nation the 'Sutra or, a Binding Principle' like river Narmada helps to reunite them then one can live his/her life happily in peace and freedom. Unity is the demand of the whole universe where very often troubles occur due to the diversities of thoughts and beliefs. The differences should be bridged so as to ensure peace in the world where people are very much eager to spend their lives in their own terms. The likes or dislikes or preference of one may mismatch with other, there by, causing a lack of harmony that takes the form of crisis which sometimes becomes an incurable disease contaminating everything around. It's a very tough job for one to cast aside one's belief and go on to believe the things that others do. Its truly the same about the religious belief which people have, it becomes their lifestyle, habit and what not; and to shake their religious belief is next to impossible. These sometimes have an adverse effect on the family, society and consequently the whole nation. Society has come across various conflicts in the part and there is no exception in the present day as well, as people are not likely to think in the same way. Each an individual has a different vision, a different thought and a different perspective which differentiates one from the other.

The story of a Jain Muni whom the bureaucrat meets perchance near the guest-house and questions the monk about his past life. The monk reluctantly confesses about his multimillion dollar international empire, which his family took centuries to build. He had relinquished it to seek the ultimate truth. He is now free from “doubt”, “delusion” and “extremes.” According to Mehta, Gandhi’s theory of non-violence is the only hope left for man to save the world from further violent destruction. The narrator impressed by Jain muni’s story, goes to meet Tariq Mia, tells him the story. Mia extends his point of view: to have complete self-realization man ought to experience life himself and should not escape from it by just renouncing the worldly things, because one knows “so little of it.” Then he plays an old arm record for the bureaucrat to listen:

The turn-table revolves, then a high voice pierces the morning silence. “I prostrate my head to Your drawn sword. O, the wonder of Your kindness. O, the wonder of my submission.” The clarity of the voice, even through the hissing of the old record, is so extraordinary, each note hanging in the stillness like a drop of water that it is sometime before I decipher the savagery of lyrics. (49)

The narrator in the book is introduced as the manager of the Narmada rest-house and reproduces the stories of the people who goes on pilgrimage to this holy river. The first story describes the life of a man who becomes a Jain Monk whose father is a wealthy owner of a diamond company. As a result of this their life was carefree. The Jain’s cardinal doctrine teaches them the highest rule, the practicing of non-violence. Wealth excised father’s emotions and he does not comply with this rule, which disappoints his son, who then wishes to renounce the world and decides to become a monk by the act of renunciation.

The solution to such problems is not that easy though not impossible as well. The search for such a thing that could solve this problem is the only way out to cope with this matter. Dr. Matilal Das in his book *The Soul of India* has emphasized on the force of spirituality that binds the people in one knot. He writes, “A higher harmony of life is necessary. A spiritual synthesis alone can avoid the conflict, and can ensure peace in the world” (166).

In ‘The Teacher’ Story’ the narrator has been woken up by a man who is accused of murder and who tells him a story. Although the music teacher, called master Mohan, is unhappy about his life, he has a gentle nature disposing him to small acts of kindness. He has been engaged in marriage with a rich woman by his father because he has lost his money. During a Quawwali concert with the singers from Nizamuddin he meets the blind boy Imrat, who has a voice like an angel, with his Islamic sister. Because his sister has to go to North India the boy has to stay with master Mohan and sings a recording contract. The offer to sing for a rich man has been rejected by Master Mohan but in the end he is forced to sing for him by Mohan’s wife. The man is jealous because “such a voice is not human” and he cuts out Imrat’s tongue. At the end of the story Master Mohan commits suicide. He adds, “...the significance of the raga, initiating Imrat into the mystery of the world’s rebirth, when light disperses darkness and Vishnu rises from his slumbers to redream the universe”(70). He further explains the relation of spiritualism to the human salvation and universal liberation in these words, “To unfold the true nature of man, man should live a dedicated life using his activities for human good. Thus alone can there be individual salvation and universal liberation”(168). The human salvation is the core of the religious practices, like pilgrimage, and for this salvation of one’s soul people are ready to take any kind of strenuous path. We have various examples of Saints who

have undergone various life threatening fasts and physical activity. For instance, lord Gautam Buddha attained his salvation only after several hard penances-he sat under a tree for such a long time that his whole body was covered with termites, fasting for uncountable days.

Pilgrimage is considered to be one of the key medium to reach the Almighty for one's salvation and to free oneself from the supposed sins ever committed in the materialistic world as the fundamental purpose of religion is to bring man near God. Various rivers, temples and the like places that are conferred with religious importance are the places for the pilgrimage. There one can come across various people who come from different countries regardless of their social, cultural and economic backgrounds. they are present in such religious places with all devotion and reverence to the Almighty. These places, having a religious and spiritual importance, have always attracted different status and endows them with spiritual thought, thus uniting the diverse cultures as they become only the pilgrims with one intention of being united with the Almighty. In this pilgrimage spot they are away from the indulgence of the materialistic Matilal strongly suggests that spiritual life is "not passive indolence but is fullness and intrepid activity" (168).

This research is divided into four chapters. The First chapter brings the Introduction. The introduction deals with the concept of the hypothesis; it has some discussions on the author and her works and what different critics or writers have to say about the same. It also has a brief plot of the novel.

The aim of the Second chapter is to discuss the different interpretations available regarding Myth, which is the integral element of the entire research. The chapter also contains some of the many Myths and the sense of Harmony, Unity, and Spirituality with which the 'water' is associated, along with the several symbols that

the water stands for. There is also the discussion on some of the holiest rivers of India including the Narmada River-their origin and the powers they are supposed to have within themselves.

Chapter Three is all about the text and its analysis in the light of the methodology discussed in the Second chapter. It separately discusses the ‘river’ and ‘sutra’, myth and spirituality present in the text itself, and endeavors to explain how river has played the role of “sutra” to “unite” the diverse cultures, communities, and traditions.

The research will terminate bringing forth the Conclusion in the Fourth chapter.

The novel has sixteen chapters in two hundred and eighty-two page numbers, and six seemingly unconnected stories. Chapter Two has “The Monk’s Story”, Chapter Four has “The Teacher’s Story”, Chapter Seven has “The Executive’s Story”, Chapter Ten has “The Courtesan’s Story”, Chapter Thirteen has “The Musician’s Story”, Chapter Fifteen has “The Minstrel’s Story”, and the chapters in between deal with the narrator’s preoccupation. The narrator of the novel is a Hindu who is unnamed throughout the whole novel and we are given very few information about him. He was a bureaucrat and now the caretaker of the Narmada rest house, with an overall helper Mr. Changla. He has befriended Tariq Mia, who is the Mullah of the Muslim village tomb on the next range of the hills. The narrator comes across a Jain Monk who has come to the Narmada River to join his friends. He has retired from the materialistic world in an early age because he was obsessed with the excess material indulgence; he relates his life of extravagance, and the lavish ceremony, which his wealthy father performed, at the time of his renunciation. Tariq Mia tells the narrator about the miserable life of a music teacher, Master Moan, who was never at peace

with his wife and children because of the poverty which the wife presumed, was the outcome of his unlucky fate. He, one night, is compelled to bring home a blind child-singer, Imrat, to add to his misery. He starts giving lessons to the boy away from his house and thus is able to get him a recording contract, but because of the greed of his wife to earn some money, Imrat is taken to a rich man for singing, who, in his jealousy murders the blind boy. Accusing himself to be responsible for the boy's murder, he comes to Tariq Mia to hand over a record of the blind boy to be played in the Amir Rumi's Tomb; he stays with Tariq Mia for some days and suicides on his way back home. Another story is about a tea-executive named Nitin Bose who is to visit the Narmada River in order to cure himself of madness. Nitin has supposed himself to be possessed by a woman named Rima, who he had an affair with. The narrator reads Nitin's diary where he had written all the accounts of what went with him in the faraway tea estate-how he was in love with Rima and how she possessed his soul on an ill-fated moonless night. So, he has come here to get rid of this life-threatening madness. There is Dr. Mitra who thinks it is nothing but just a supposed illness which has occupied Nitin's mind. Dr. Mitra, who is also a good friend of the Narrator, has been living in this area running a six-bed hospital in spite of a lucrative job which he was capable of.

The narrator also happens to meet a courtesan and her daughter who was kidnapped by a bandit. The courtesan relates the whole events of her family-history and how her tender daughter was kidnapped. Later through the daughter, he learns about the awful story of her marriage to the bandit whom she believed was her husband in every birth. One day the narrator comes face to face with an ugly girl-musician, the daughter of the musician of genius. She tells him about her miserable past where she found her father cruel enough not to notice her despair and her pain;

the mother unsympathetic towards her feelings; and above all, the young man's betrayal at the last moment of their marriage. So, she was at the bank of Narmada River to get rid of all those unhappy past. Tariq Mia tells the narrator another story about a Naga Baba (The naked Saint) whom the Mullah met when he was young. He tells him about the entire arduous path that the ascetic had to take in order to get the title of Naga Baba. He also relates the story of a river minstrel, Uma, whom the Naga Baba rescued from the brothel, taught her to read and write, and teaching her the songs about the river Narmada, had turned her into a river minstrel. On his way back to the rest house from Tariq Mia, the narrator finds several guests in the rest house. They were there for the archaeological dig in the Narmada. Dr. Mitra introduces Professor Shankar, who was the foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada in the country. Later he finds out that Professor Shankar was the Naga Baba himself who has re-entered the materialistic world. This comes as a great shock to the narrator, and with the perplexed thoughts of the narrator the novel ends.



## II. Multicultural Ethos

### Culture

The term culture by now has become somewhat controversial in social anthropological circles because of the multiplicity of its referents and the studied vagueness with which it has all too often been invoked. In any case, the culture concept to which this thesis will refer to has neither multiple referents nor any unusual ambiguity. It will denote to historically transmitted pattern of meaning codified in symbols. This system of inherited conceptions is expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions. Such actions are internally related with the structure of the society and the people.

The study of culture within sociology, anthropology and literature has different aspects. According to Williams “Culture is constituted by the meaning and practices of ordinary men and women. Culture is lived experience: the texts, practices and meaning of all people as they conduct their lives” (4). During 19<sup>th</sup> century, culture was accepted as a whole and distinctive way of life, and as the form of human civilization-reading, observing and thinking the means toward moral perfection and social good. Culture is the high point of civilization and the concern of an educated people. Culture also plays an important role in the field of ‘art and literature’. For Tylor, “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1). Culture is also a matter of creativity and change. It shows the specific social relations of reproduction. It gives a moment of meaningful production in society. Culture forces us to engage

with, incomplete production of meaning and value in the act of social survival. As Hall rightly observes, “Culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world” (Representations 2). It creates broad sense in the study of culture. Now a days, culture is both the ‘arts’ and the values, norms and symbolic goods of everyday life. A culture has two aspects: the known meaning and directions and the new observations and meaning.

But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of culture has totally changed. It has become an issue of literary writing basically in English literature, Postcolonial criticism and the postcolonial theory of discourse, made culture a most contested space. Culture by now borrowed the terminologies of other fields of criticism. Often cited terminologies, these days in the study of culture are Foucauldian notion of ‘Power’ and ‘Discourse’ and Gramsci’s concept of ‘Hegemony’. Postcolonial perspectives emerged from the colonial testimony of ‘Third World’ countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south.

### **Cultural Studies**

It is difficult to define Cultural Studies because it has no referent to which we can point. It is a set of practices constituted by the ‘language game’ of Cultural Studies. It is not a tightly coherent unified movement with a fixed agenda but a loosely connected group of tendencies, issues and questions. The study of culture has taken place in a variety of academic disciplines like sociology, anthropology, literature etc. in a range of geographical and institutional spaces; this is not a Cultural Studies. But Hall observes “By culture, here I mean the actual rounded terrain of practices, representation, languages and customs of any specific society. I also means the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to

shape popular life” (Gramsci’s 439). So, Cultural Studies would not warrant its name without a focus on culture.

Cultural Studies is a language game. It has not a specific meaning but it is related with the different issues like ideas, images and practices of the intellectual minds. Cultural Studies is composed of elements of Marxism, new historicism, feminism, gender studies, anthropological studies of race and ethnicity, popular cultural studies, culturalism, structuralism, post- structuralism, psychoanalysis, politics and post-colonial studies. In this context, Bennett defines, “ It is concerned all those practices, institutions and system of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular value, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct” (28). Cultural Studies is a multi or post-disciplinary field of inquiry between itself and others. It is concerned with issues of power in the signifying practices of human life. It is an exciting project which tells us stories about our changing world. On the whole, Cultural Studies has favored qualitative methods with their focus on cultural meaning. Guerin and others explain, “It is committed to examining the entire range of a society's beliefs, institutions and communicative practices including arts” (241). Cultural Studies is associated with a particular topic, social activity, society and with the related people. Cultural representation plays important role within the Cultural Studies, to show the representation of people and society. Thus a good deal of Cultural Studies is centered on question of ‘representation’, that is on how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us. Chris Barker defines, “Cultural Studies is a body of theory generated by thinkers who regard the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice” (5). It means Cultural Studies is the representation of different intellectuals and their concepts in the present moment. In this sense, Cultural Studies is a ‘discursive

formation' which provides ways of talking about the forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activities in society.

In the present, modernism and postmodernism are cultural and epistemological concepts. As cultural concepts, they concern the experience of day-to-day living and artistic movements of human beings. Cultural Studies explores the concept of gender, race, class, colonialism etc. and it shows the connections between these concepts of power to develop ways of further thinking that can be utilized by agents in the pursuit of change. Cultural Studies has been centered on questions of power, knowledge, ideology and hegemony as well as the different cultural stages including ethos.

### **Multicultural Ethos**

Since its launch in the 1970s, the movement known as multiculturalism has taken two distinct directions. On the one hand, multiculturalism celebrates the diversity of cultural groups. Sometimes called ethnic revitalization, this multiculturalism seeks to preserve the cultural practices of specific groups and to resist the homogeneity of assimilation. While on the other, it sees the identities of individuals as primarily cultural, determined by their membership in a group, and not as the expression of a unique self-consciousness. Oriented by identity politics, this multiculturalism rejects the individualistic model of personhood and instead stresses the analysis of communal expressive traditions. Hall writes:

There are many different kinds of metaphors in which our thinking about cultural change takes place. These metaphors themselves change. Those which grip our imagination and, for a time, govern our thinking about scenarios and possibilities of cultural transformation, give way to new metaphors, which makes us think about these difficult questions in new terms. (For Allon 287)

Multiculturalism celebrates differences between the cultures, race, caste, rituals and in other social activities. The multicultural or cross-cultural ethos shows a distinct and a deep awareness of the social, economic and cultural realities. It forms the multiplicity in thematic patterns and represents the multicultural ethos. A multicultural perspective that widens and enlarges the frontiers of thought and which is therefore considered a very important literary characteristic by most critics and thinkers. 'Multicultural' forces reconsideration of many issues that were presumed to be settled under enlightenment or post-enlightenment auspices. In important ways, this consideration inserts itself in to the contemporary questioning of the "modernity".

Multiculturalism, that is, to the tension between liberal- western universalism and cultural loyalties in a worldwide setting. The tension is clearly evident in many of the developing societies with the tradition and cultural beliefs. Thus, one common factor that emerges here is that of the multicultural ethos. The main thematic concerns are the questions of a distinct identity.

All societies today are culturally heterogeneous in different degrees. The influence on their language, aspirations, and patterns of consumption, life-styles, self-understanding and innermost fears is often so subtle and systematic that they do not even notice it. A culturally homogeneous society whose members share and mechanically follow an identical body of beliefs and practices is today no more than an anthropological fiction. In some societies cultural heterogeneity is not a result of contingent external influences but communally grounded. These societies include several more or less well-organized cultural communities, each held together by a distinct body of ideas concerning the best ways to organize significant social relations and lead individual and collective lives. Such societies are called multicultural ranging "from domestic contacts to global interactions", and "between hegemonic

western culture and developing non-western societies” (Dallmayr 14).

Cultures derive their authority from different sources, of which two are currently the most important. Some cultures are based on and derive their authority from religion, and demand respect deemed to be due to religion. Some others are ethnically based, and demand respect because they are bound up with the life and history of specific ethnic groups. In yet others ethnicity and religion are integrally connected and provide a complex source of legitimacy. This means that multicultural societies could be multi-ethnic or multi-religious or both. Since ethnicity and religion are different in nature, multi-ethnically constituted multicultural societies raise different kinds of problems to those raised by multi-religiously constituted multicultural societies. As Graff and Bruce writes, within cultural studies, “The aim of cultural criticism is something more than preserving, transmitting and interpreting culture or cultures. Rather, the aim is to bring together, in a common democratic space of discussion, diversities that had remained unequal largely because they had remained apart” (434-35). However since they are both multicultural, albeit in their own different ways, some of the basic problems they raise are broadly similar in nature.

Multiculturalism is not new to our age, for many pre-modern societies such as the Roman empire, medieval India and Europe, and the Ottoman empire included several different cultural communities and coped with the diversity in their own different ways. Contemporary multiculturalism is both wider and deeper. It is wider because cultural diversity covers a much larger area of human existence than before, and deeper because it is grounded in profound differences about the conceptions of the good life. Whatever their differences, most pre-modern societies were religious,

and shared in common many of their important moral beliefs and social practices. This is not the case today.

Contemporary multiculturalism occurs in the context of the increasing economic and cultural globalization. Globalization is a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, it leads to homogenization of ideas, institutions, ideals, moral and social practices, and forms of life. On the other hand it also encourages heterogeneity. It encourages migrations of individuals and even whole communities, and diversifies every society. It arouses fears about the loss of society's identity, provokes cultural resistance, and stimulates the rediscovery or invention of indigenous traditions to underpin and legitimize its sense of difference. Since a society is more likely to succeed in global competition if it has something distinctive to offer, globalization also encourages it to devise new ways of defining and distinguishing itself. Contemporary multiculturalism is thus embedded in an immensely complex dialectical process, and heavily bound up with global economic and political forces. During argues that "One of the ways in the area of multiculturalism is to be very alert to what is happening with the various immigrant groups in terms of cultural politics" (198-99).

Multiculturalism begins in identity politics-in the conflation of personal and cultural identity-it should not end there. Taking multiculturalism personally is a way to move in, through, and beyond identity politics, while respecting the conditions that make those politics a recurrent necessity. We may want to challenge the centrality of "identity" itself in arguments about culture, for example, by considering the difference between "having" an identity and living by an ethos. Living by an ethos implies an important degree of agency, freedom, and responsibility in the way a person responds to the various claims of multiple and contradictory identities. While

the notion of having an identity tends to reinforce deterministic scenarios, in which persons become prescribed categories, the notion of ethos holds open the future of persons. In this way, the relationship between person and cultural identity becomes more effective in the future.

### **Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity is the central theme of Cultural Studies. An identity builds on what we think we are now in the light of our past and present circumstances. We live our lives in the context of social relationships with others. This social relationship is commonly understood as socialization or aculturalization. Without aculturalization we would not be persons as we understand that notion in our everyday lives. In Balibar's words "Identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity or by an erasing of identities" (186). Identity is meant the idea that is not fixed but created and built on, always in process, a moving towards rather than an arrival. But cultural identity reflects towards the social position. Identities are wholly social constructions and cannot exist outside of cultural representations and aculturalization. There is no known culture that does not use the concept of cultural identity. But identity is a matter not only of self description but also of social ascription. Giddens argues:

Social identities are associated with normative rights, obligations and sanctions which, within specific collectives, form roles. The use of standardized markers, especially to do with the bodily attributes of age and gender, is fundamental in all societies, notwithstanding large cross-cultural variations which can be noted. (282-83)

There is no essence of identity to be discovered; rather, cultural identity is continually being produced within the similarity and difference. Cultural identity is not an essence



but a continually shifting position, and the points of difference around which cultural identities could form are multiple. They include identifications of class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, political position, morality, religion etc. and each of these discursive positions is itself unstable.

The meanings of different aspects are changing but never finished or completed. According to Hall:

Persons are composed not of one but of several, sometimes contradictory identities. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent self. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continually being shifted about if we feel that we have unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a confronting story or “narrative of the self” about ourselves.  
(The Question 277)

Thus, identities are wholly social constructions and can not exist outside of cultural representations. Identities are constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities, thus, are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or future, which are made, within the discourse of history and culture. After colonialism, there emerged a new transformation of social consciousness, which exceed the rectified identities and rigid boundaries invoked by national consciousness.

### **Contact Zone**

The idea of contact zones was first developed by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal book *Imperial Eyes*. Contact zone is a social space marked by the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjuncture and whose trajectories now intersect. “Contact zones”, Pratt writes, “are

the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination- like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). A contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizer and colonized self and other, native and the non-native, not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within asymmetrical relations of power.

In such spaces people historically and geographically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, racial inequality, and intractable conflict. Numbers of other vocabularies are closely related to the idea of ‘contact zone’ like ‘transculturation’ ‘autoethnography’ and ‘safe houses’. Along with ‘transculturation’ and ‘autoethnography’, ‘safe houses’ are the phenomenon of the contact zone. The term refers to the “social and intellectual spaces” Pratt writes, “where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degree of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (Mass Culture 71). Where there is a legacy of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, Knowledge’s, claims on the world that they can bring in to the contact zone. Contact zones include identifying with the ideas, interests, and histories of the other. It involves transculturation and collaborative work, comparison between elite and vernacular cultural forms.

## Hybridity

In the study of English literature, the meaning of hybridity is totally different. It does not follow the traditional meaning and definition. It defines hybridity as a colonial experience. Hybridity is the result of the orientalist project of the west. The colonial settlers, once they arrived in an alien land, they felt the necessity of establishing new identity since they were displaced from their own point of origin. In a colonized society there emerged a binary relationship between the peoples of two cultures, races and languages and such relation produced a hybrid or cross-cultural society.

The foundational discourse of hybridity lies in the anthropological and biological discourses of conquest and colonization. The modern move to deploy hybridity as a disruptive democratic discourse of cultural citizenship is a distinctly anti-imperial and anti-authoritarian development. The antecedents for this discourse lie in an intricate negotiation between colonial objectness and modernity's new historic subjects, who are both colonizer and the colonized.

Hybridity at best can be understood by referring to Bhabha's notion of 'ambivalence'. For Bhabha, it is the 'cultural cross-over' of various sorts emanating from the encounter between colonizer and the colonized. Ambivalence is the mixture of the colonizer and the colonized, where colonized people work in the consent of the colonizer. Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, and Tiffin had defined ambivalence along Bhabha's line as "It describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizers and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simple and completely opposed to the colonizer" (12). Hybrid cultures do exist in colonial society where people occupy

an 'in-between' space by the 'mimicry' of the colonizer. Hybridity, thus, is an expression of everyday life in the post-imperial era.

### **Diaspora**

Diaspora studies is an academic field established in the late twentieth century to study dispersed ethnic populations, which are often termed diaspora peoples. At first the term Diaspora was connected narrowly to the migration of the people. But, in the present, areas of research in the field of English and cultural studies has been the study of diasporas. In the English literature, "diaspora" came to be a very cultural-specific term. The new concept of diaspora insists the idea that it details the complexity, diversity and fluidity of migrant identities and experiences in a more realistic way than does the older concept of the term. It, therefore, relates the idea of uprooting of migrants from their societies and cultures of origin, and thereby filling into them a sense of alienation, as do displacement, dislocation and exile. A great bulk of literature reflects this situation to show the cultural form of behaviors.

Within cultural studies it is used to describe a dynamic network of communities without the stabilizing allusion to an original homeland or essential identity. That is, Diaspora, these days has been used in the studies of race and ethnicity to describe a range of cultural affiliations connecting other groups who have been dispersed or migrated across national boundaries. People of the diaspora have access to a second tradition quite apart from their own racial history. To live in diaspora is to experience the trauma of exile, migration, displacement, rootlessness and the life in a minority group haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back. As Rushdie writes, "I've been in a minority group all my life— a member of an Indian Muslim family in Bombay, then of a Mohajir- migrant - family in Pakistan and now as a British Asian" (4), creating an 'Imaginary Homeland' and

willing to admit, though imaginatively, that s/he belongs to it. People in the diaspora have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths and their identities are at once plural and partial. Though, people in the diaspora feel torn apart between two cultures and though the ground is ambiguous and shifting, it is not an infertile territory to occupy. As Hall argues:

The diasporic experience . . . is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'Identity' which lives and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new, through transformation and difference. (Cultural 119-20)

Thus, the concept of diaspora helps critique the essentialist notion of identity in the name of innovation and change by promoting ethnic sameness and differences- 'a changing same'. Moreover, it is used to describe a dispersed intellectual formation or the spread and interlamination of ideas. Because of this the global development and variety of forms of cultural studies itself has been described as 'diaspora story' and cultural identities are represented as hybrid or Diaspora identities.

### **Representation**

The concept of representation is connected with the basic issues of Cultural Theory. The concept of representation is always related to the notions of "memory" and "interpretation" which pervade each and every cultural phenomenon. In all cultural representation and promotion, the role played by content organization as well as by the use of specific techniques and forms of representation, is of great significance in the distinction between the "original" or the "authentic" and the

“copy” or the “simulacrum”. Representation is a direct expression of social reality, depends on cultural values.

In contemporary postcolonial theory, ‘representation’ is closely related with the Foucauldian concept of ‘discourse as representation’. Foucault takes discourse as inseparable from power. And the knowledge of the other according to Foucault is a form of power over that other. Following Foucault's point, Said argues that images and stereotypes about the east are formed by western discourses aimed at governing and controlling the orient. Said's *Orientalism* explores how the east - the ‘Orient’, is created through western discursive practices, which can however, be known by the dominant discourse of the west and thus assimilated in practices pronounced as inferior or as ‘the Other’ as it does not come up to these representations. As Said argues:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the orient. (*Orientalism* 3)

Orientalism is a discourse by west about the east, a discourse that does not find truth but rather creates the truth of east or orient. Orientalism, according to Said, is not an airy European fantasy about the orient but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been considerable material investment.

Orientalism is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological text. This geopolitical awareness is distributed through multiple texts or representations about the orient. Postcolonial criticism, which attempts to re-examine the colonial relationship, emerged in

resistance to colonial perspectives employed in discourses of cultural representation and the texts dealing with colonial relations.

The encounter between east and west, especially, India, on the one hand, and Britain, America and Europe, on the other, is a recurring theme in Indo-English literature. The encounter is viewed from different perspectives by Indo-English writers, and possibilities of mutual understanding between the two sides have been explored in their works. The theme is given a rich variety of treatment in poems, short stories, novels and dramatic works. Kamala Markandaya, Manohar Malgonkar, Raja Rao, Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, are among the writers exploring the theme of cultural encounter in their works. Their main concern is the encounter caused by love, sex, marriage and the alien social milieu. They represent the problems and prospects of establishing intimate and meaningful relationships between two racial and cultural groups.

### III. River as a Troop in *A River Sutra*

The novel *A River Sutra* is set on the bank of the river Narmada, one of the holiest rivers of India. It is believed that a mere sight of this holy river would relieve a man from the burden of life and death, whereas other holy rivers, like Ganga, cleanse the sin of people only after a dip into its waters. Such myths about rivers have, ever since, made the people to revere them. The rivers are said to be the incarnation of deities-the deities that, from time immemorial, are worshipped. The custom of worshipping rivers is common not only in one community, class or religion, but almost all the world's religions worship the rivers in one way or the other. From cradle to grave, people are, directly or indirectly, associated with the worshipping of river. Be the people of any caste or creed, or any country, the river is worshipped for its holiness and the sense of spirituality it is associated with.

People in their old age go for pilgrimage to cleanse themselves from the sinful life, they suppose, they have led during their stay in the materialistic world. Some who are fed up of the busy and corrupt city life and want to escape its tyranny are also on the way to pilgrimage and their pilgrimage sites are the holy places, temples or rivers. The characters in *A River Sutra* who are thus either fed up of the materialistic indulgence or frustrated in life or who have no one besides them, who think they have committed some crime have come to the holy river Narmada to get rid of all these. They have all come to the same spot Narmada, though, they don't all belong to the same caste or community, and the holy Narmada has become the holy solace to their aching heart. Here they have found their peace of mind and a reason to live.



*A River Sutra* consists of several myths that play a vital role in unification. The exchange of myth leads towards unification; it unites the diverse cultural beliefs and brings harmony between and among different people of diverse cultural beliefs. In the novel, we encounter various types of myths and beliefs related to the society, caste, places, and the river Narmada itself-the river supposed to be created by Lord Shiva. It is taken as a ritual that people in their old age go to pilgrimage to get rid of their sins and thus book a place in heaven; so on the bank of Narmada, as elsewhere in religious places, we find people, mostly in their old age, come to worship, and in fact, make a pilgrimage to the holy river which is supposed to be “one of the holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva” (Mehta 2). There are several occasions when people are seen bathing in the holiest rivers. Certain cultural beliefs and several rituals associated with the rivers convey a belief that bathing in the waters of these rivers would cleanse us of all our sins or even the sprinkling of the water is enough to purify us; but when it comes to Narmada, it has a different myth which states that a single sight is enough because “bathing in the waters of Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Araswati in three, in the waters of the Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with the single sight of her waters” (163).

There exists several cultures regarding the origin of Narmada River, the culture has it that Lord Shiva in his ascetic trance created the River and named it Narmada as he was amused by her various form and blessed her to be a holy one;

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 the form of a woman- the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as 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. (Mehta 8-9)

Another myth has it that the Narmada River has a capacity to annul the poison of the snakebite. The following invocation of the river states the belief in the culture or tradition, "*Salutation in the morning and at night to / thee, O Narmada! Defend me from the serpent's poison*" (6). According to another belief, the river is believed to have a capacity to cure the madness of the person who is possessed. Nitin Bose has supposed himself to be possessed by a tribal woman named Rima and his activities are beyond comprehension-talking nonsense and singing the songs that the tribal women sang – then a priest advises him to worship "that goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. Only that river has been given the power to cure him"(137).

Another cultural aspect in the novel goes to the extent of the rebirth of the people. A courtesan's daughter was kidnapped by a bandit who supposed that she had been his wife in every birth and later when the girl also happens to realize that it was their re-birth, she gets married the bandit. Later, after the death of the bandit- the most

wanted man- she kills herself by drowning in the waters of the Narmada in order to escape the police. The mother was “happy that that her daughter had died in the Narmadam because she would be purified of all her sins” (190). There is a strong belief that every sin is purified if one’s life ends in the waters of the Narmada. The religious suicides at Amarkantak --- people fasting to death or immolating themselves on the Narmada’s banks, or drowning in her waters --- is all based on the myth that the river releases us from the cycle of birth and rebirth (152). Not only the lay men but even the ascetics who have undergone hard penances to wash away sins are also found to have a wish to end their lives in the waters of Narmada because “Even the corpses of the Ascetics are floated in the waters of Narmada “with a burning coal in its mouth” so that they can be free from the burden of the cycle of rebirth and death (43).

Uma, the river minstrel, who appears at the end of the novel, was ‘baptized’ by the Naga Baba in the waters of the Narmada. She was given a new name and an identity dipping her in the river; thus purifying her from the previous life where she had to live in a brothel, and providing her an Eternal mother, “The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become the daughter of the Narmada” (254). The story of Uma also brings out the myth of fortune and misfortune; she was named misfortune by her family because her mother had died giving birth to her. Such beliefs are still in existence in some parts of India and in some other parts of the countries of the world where girls are still taken to be a burden because of the ritual of giving them away in marriage with a huge amount of dowry; they are brought up in the household as the property of others and are thus treated in a very miserable way. They are never sent to school nor given proper attention in comparison to the boys who are considered to be

a property in themselves--- the ones to look after the family and to get a huge amount of dowry in marriage. This discrimination is well brought out in Uma's story that she never got enough food and was even sold to a brothel (249-50). But this discrimination is fading away in the families that are well-educated and have a well-to-do status where both their son and daughter are treated equally and given the same opportunity. The story of Naga Baba is one of the most amusing and astonishing that conceives the myth which states that "the soul must travel through eighty-four thousand births in order to become a man" (281). Professor Shankar, is non-other than the Naga Baba himself. This comes as a great surprise to the narrator who had earlier heard from Tariq Mia about the ascetic's life-threatening hardships to attain the title of Naga Baba--- he had lived in extreme weather conditions which was really a task that needed guts and patience, had spent nine long days and nights before the funeral pyre and had broken his fast begging in the house of unclean persons. And now he has become a sophisticated Professor who believed only in the river's immortality. To the query of the perplexed narrator, he answers that he had reentered the world after all those hardships (281).

According to Hindu scriptures, there are several stages that a person has to travel through his lifetime---- the infant, the student, the householder and the vanaprasthi. A child is born and is totally dependent on his parents until he is a student which is the second phase of his life, then comes another phase where he is the responsible person with a wife, parents and children to look after; he is the one to earn and to fulfill all the necessities of his family members; then after fulfilling all his worldly obligations, he retires from this materialistic world in quest of the spiritual world where he becomes a Vanaprasthi. 'Vana' is translated as 'forest' in English,

where a person is away from the material world towards a very spiritual quest in which he fully detaches himself from his home and family, and survives on fruits and roots of plants. He has nothing to do with wealth, has no greed in mind, and is supposed to cleanse himself of all the negative forces of life, and lead a pious, controlled and peaceful life, remaining away from every sin that is a common phenomenon of the materialistic world. The unnamed narrator of this novel has already lived the previous three stages and as well fulfilled all his worldly obligations. So he is in the Narmada in course of following the fourth stage. He has renounced the material world and has come to live near by the Narmada River paying his services to the pilgrims to the Narmada River as the care taker of the guest house which is situated on its bank (2-3). The novel also states another myth about people taken to be lucky or unlucky. There is a music teacher named Master Mohan, whom his own wife takes to be unlucky because he is not able to provide her with a well-to-do living standard. She blames that her being devoid of her own father's property was because of Master Mohan's unlucky fate. He was denied happiness from the very childhood; he was a talented singer as a child, and one day when finally he got the chance to record his song, only weeks before the record was to be made his voice had broken down (55). And then to ease his life and give a second chance to his fate, his father arranges Master Mohan's marriage to a girl of a wealthy family just to make his life more miserable forever. He was fed up of life to such an extent that he commits suicide on his way back home from his short stay on the banks of the Narmada with Tariq Mia (91).

The Heart-rending story of the girl-musician, her crush on the handsome young man who denies marriage with her at the last moment, is also not devoid of myth.

After the boy's denial for marriage, she had stopped playing the music; the sound of the music was 'hateful' to her ears. Her father believed mediating in the waters of Narmada would relieve her, so he suggested her that she "must mediate on the waters of the Narmada, the symbol of Shiva's penance" until she had cured herself of her "attachment to what had passed" (225). Her father believed in the powers of the Narmada to cure her of her aching heart and so wanted her to mediate on its waters so as to free herself from the unpleasant memory of the past which was about to drive the young girl towards the hurricane of depression. On the other hand, the myth designed for the patriarchal society was inherent in her mother's psyche; she was well aware of the weakness of her daughter and believed in the myth that "a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband in a harsh world designed for men" (212). This very concept that a woman is vulnerable without a man is a common thought inherent even in the societies of today where the women have already proved themselves to be equally talented and well-equipped as men. They have shown their excellence in the sectors which was initially thought to be meant only for males.

According to the Puranic scriptures, there are supposed to be four hundred billion sacred spots on the banks of Narmada. All the pebbles in the Narmada River have gained the form of the Shiva-Linga because of its erosion which has given the Narmada River a sacred form where devotees from all over the world are attracted. The Narmada River, apart from mythical and cultural importance, is also entangled in the thread of mythology, archaeology, anthropology. Even the geographer Ptolemy wrote about Narmada's holiness (152). Not only mythology but the astrology has also a strong belief in the powers of Narmada. As Dr. Mitra explains, "Her holiness is believed to dispel the malevolent effects of Saturn so all manner of epileptics,

depressives, and other unfortunates rush to her banks” (153). There also exists a myth that even after four thousand years, the war fought here between Aryans and Pre-Aryans is still unresolved, and because it could not die, an Aryan immortal named Avatihuma, still lies asleep in the banks of the river; there is also a temple named Supaneshwara (153, 156). It is believed that honey bees circle the Immortal’s head whose sting could make any men immortal.

Narmada River is all concerned with religion--- not one but many, and is taken to be the daughter of God Shiva; so people from all over the world come to its banks for worship.

Some kilometres away from the Narmada River, there is a temple of Mahadeo (Lord Shiva, Lord of all the Lords), where one can see people from different walks of lives who have come with all the devotion to worship. At sunset hundreds of pilgrims are seen descending the stone steps that lead to Mahadeo’s many temples to the river’s edge. They float the clay-lamps in the water as devotion, “With twilight, the water at Mahadeo starts flickering with tiny flames as if catching fire from the hundreds of clay lamps being floated downstream for the evening devotions” (4). There are “crowds” of pilgrims seen on the Amarkantak’s temples who are “swarming” for the morning worship (5). So one can ever find the bank of the Narmada River full of pilgrims worshipping it all the daylong till late in the evenings. People not only of Hindu faith but of almost all the religious beliefs are found worshipping on its banks. They come to this religious spot full of spiritual significance from all parts of the world.

The guards of the rest house are from the Vano Tribal race who also reside here enjoying “the reputation for fierceness as descendants of the tribal races that held the Aryan invasion of India at bay for centuries”, and with a strong belief in the

Narmada river that it “annuls the effects of snakebite” (6). They believe that even the venom of the poisonous snake is ineffective before the power of this river. They also confer on the river the gift of curing madness and liberating those who are possessed. This belief has made them stay near and worship this river that is taken to be the incarnation of deity. Even the pilgrims who have no relation with any tribal and who have never ever met one of those are also aware of the fact that the Narmada river annuls the effect of snake bite which highlights the widespread spirituality of the Narmada, and that is clearly stated in the invocation to the river Narmada.

There is a small mosque adjoining the tomb of Amir Rumi, a Sufi saint of the 16<sup>th</sup> century beyond the valley, on the next range of hills. There is not a single day when the pilgrims are not seen on the river banks. Among them are elderly people who have taken retirement of the worldly affairs and are on their way to personal enlightenment--- the stage of Vanaprasthi. The Narmada pilgrimage is an arduous task but despite it, the pilgrims do not give a second thought to travel as long as nearly two years to complete the pilgrimage. They have a deep respect for Lord Shiva which gives them the capacity to endure such an arduous affair. The narrator remarks:

I am always astonished at their endurance, since I know the Narmada pilgrimage to be an arduous affair that takes nearly two years to complete. At the mouth of the river on the Arabian Sea, the pilgrims must don white clothing out of respect for Shiva’s asceticism before walking eight hundred kilometres to the river’s source at Amarkantak. There they must cross to the opposite bank of the river and walk all the way back to the ocean... (7-8)



Any pilgrimage activity is performed with a spiritual thirst and is supposed to be the way to God. The way of salvation is the way of devotion. This path satisfies the longing for a more emotional and personal approach to religion. It is self-surrender to one of the many personal Gods and Goddesses. Such devotion is expressed through acts of worship, pilgrimage etc. The whole two years of pilgrimage around the Narmada River can be accomplished only when one is dedicated and had the capacity to endure any obstacle that comes in his/her way because “the purpose of the pilgrimage is endurance. Through their endurance the pilgrims hope to generate the heat, the tapas, that links men to the energy of the universe, as the Narmada River is thought to link mankind to the energy of Shiva” (8). The Narmada is supposed to be created by the Lord Shiva so it is believed that the Narmada could link the mankind in His energy.

Suicide is generally taken to a crime but if it occurs in the waters of the Narmada, even the law has nothing to do as “the criminal offense of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of the Narmada” (2). Due to the sense of spirituality that it is associated with, it is believed that death in the Narmada releases one’s soul from taking another birth. The main reason behind people’s pilgrimage is to get rid of all the sins they have committed in life--- deliberate or not.

The hardships undergone by the Naga Baba is a proof that Indians are ready to take any arduous path in the name of culture. The people are ready to fast for the whole month or go through a long pilgrimage. The Naga Baba spends his life in a very harsh manner. He lives in an extreme weather conditions as a part of his way to

asceticism; he remains hungry nine days and nights before a funeral pyre and breaks his fast begging in the houses of the unclean people. As the ritual demands it, there is no hesitation in the people to go through any of the strenuous paths assigned by the culture they have been following.

### Myth and Spirituality, the Reason for unity in A River Sutra

There are several instances in the novel that provide a basis to the fact that myth and spirituality play a vital role in leading the people towards unification; and here the unification spot being the bank of the river Narmada.

The unnamed narrator has been living on the banks of the Narmada River for several years now and is happy with his task as the caretaker of the Narmada rest house. He had spent his youth as a bureaucrat--- deputy secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture; he had always realized that, “desire to withdraw from the world grew more urgent when I aged” but he also knew that he was not at all “equipped to wander into the jungle and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots” (1). So he had family, after the death of his wife, and since he has no children as well, applied and got the job as the manager of the Narmada rest house “situated half way up the hill of the Vindhya Range” and is living a peaceful life for several years (3). Though, till date, he is paid by the government, he no longer thinks himself to be a bureaucrat because he has forsaken the material world and has retired to the forest, “The Government still pays my wages but I no longer think of myself as a bureaucrat. Bureaucrats belong too much to the world, and I have fulfilled my worldly obligations. I am now a vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect”

(1). The Bhagavad Gita, an upshot treatise of all works concerning Hinduism, also has the idea that there should be the complete suppression of the world of becoming in which all actions occur. While talking about the redemption of man it says, “the wise free themselves from the cycle of birth and death by renouncing the fruits of action in the material world (Prabhupada 136). It further emphasizes and accepts the existence of the supreme power ruling the world and concludes that, everywhere are his hands legs, his eyes and faces” (636).

The Narmada River has become his retreat, after there was no one he is to look after; his parents and wife are not alive and he has no children. He was alone and felt an urgency to retire from the worldly affairs, and since it has been some years he has spent on this river bank the river has now “become the object of my reflections” (3). He spends his time worshipping, talking to his friend--- the old Muslim cleric--- whom he consider to be “the wisest of all my friends”, and taking care of the rest house and the guests who stay there (7).

The belief that the Narmada River cures a person if he is possessed, has brought the tea executive Mr. Nitin Bose to the Narmada, “They say there is a shrine to a goddess in these jungles. A tribal goddess, who cures the madness of those who are possessed” (105). He had answered that his name was Rima Bose, which surprised the police because “he is most certainly a man” and that he is possessed, “The prisoner told to the doctor that he is possessed” (101,102). This was the reason of Nitin’s arrival to the Narmada River. He is in danger of losing his mind forever if he is not cured of this madness and his life itself has become a nightmare for him. He has no other means than to come to Narmada to save his life.

The tribal Vano people, who were, no doubt, very different in caste from Nitin Bose, were the ones to help him out of the madness. No wonder, when the narrator learns that Nitin Bose had headed to the shrine with the Vano people, he asks with an alarm “How has Bose gone with them? He is not a tribal” and Mr. Chagla, who is the overall helper of the narrator answers “They say he has been touched by the power of the goddess so he is not an outsider any more” (141). This instance in the novel clearly states how different people are united or how diverse cultures have been united by the power of myth and that the place of their unification is non-other than the spiritual Narmada River. The tribal are supposed to beg for Mr. Bose, “The tribal will beg the goddess to forgive Mr. Bose....” (141). They are no different persons now, neither do they care about their culture or social status, they are one and the same in this very spiritual task and the reason being the myth regarding the spirituality of this holy river Narmada, and the narrator could hear them chanting the invocation to the Narmada along with Nitin Bose.

The Jains are no exceptions who are in the list of pilgrims that visit Narmada River. The narrator shares his experience of meeting two naked Jain Monks who had even given up speaking as a part of their asceticism, “Once I met two naked Jain mendicants, members of the Sky Clad sect whose rigorous penances include the denial of human shame. To my great disappointment they indicated by signs that they no longer even spoke” (10). So the Narmada River has no boundaries for its devotees, be it of any caste or creed. One day on his way to Tariq Mia, the narrator was asked by a Jain Monk the way to Mahadeo, “If I continue on this road will I reach Mahadeo?” (10). He is here in Narmada though he admits “I am not of Hindu faith. I

am joining my fellow Jain Monks in Mahadeo..." (11). During his conversation with the Monk, who was perhaps "not more than thirty years of age", the narrator learns that, "A Jain Monk seeks to free himself of the fetters of worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy, and non-violence" (11). The Jains are the followers of Mahavira, the great teacher of Jainism in the present age, who lived at the same time as Buddha and like him was a Kshatriya caste. He differed from Buddha, however in that his parents were already Jains, worshipping Lord Parshava, whose enlightenment resembles that of a Buddha, though its message was different--- for its core was the resistance to the urge of kill.

He had spent a luxurious life in the west with lots of wealth and girls around him; but in his early age, this life of pleasure had stopped providing him the satisfaction he actually sought for because one desire was pursuing the other without letting him relax for a fraction of second, "Gradually my life of unremitting pleasure ceased to satisfy me, having me exhausted from the last indulgence while anticipation the next. At the age of twenty-six I had already become fatigued by the world, knowing that even at the moment of gratification, the seed of new desire was being sown" (29). Then gradually he comes out of the luxurious life and starts leading the life of an obedient son and a house holder following a set routine which was but only one face of his personality. A monk, from whom he was taking a discourse, happened to remark "Do not trust the tranquility of your present mind... some upheaval most certainly awaits you" and that "I can see you are suppressing something. And what is suppressed will erupt" (30). This was the end of his materialistic life; this spiritual path he chose, led him to the Narmada River, thus proving Narmada to be a spot for the unification of diverse religious people.

So as to fulfill Imrat's desire, who was residing with him and was murdered by a Sahib, to sing at Amir Rumi's "...My father said that one day he and I would sing it at Amir Rumi's tomb together" (71); and his promise "You will still sing at Amir Rumi's tomb I promise you. And your father will hear your voice from heaven..." (71), master Mohan, the miserable music teacher, comes to the 'Amir Rumi's tomb and hands over Imrat's record to Tariq Mia. He was supposed to do just that much but he stayed there with Tariq Mia for several months, "Oh, he lived here with me for several months"; perhaps he found a sort of spiritual satisfaction on the bank of the Narmada River and so decides to stay there for months. This peace of mind was something which he always lacked at his house where he was never at peace with his family. Later, when Tariq Mia is able to convince that he should not feel any guilt about the death of Imrat, he leaves, "Eventually I convinced him he was not responsible for the boy's death" (91). But perhaps because he thought that he would not survive the life of hatred and chaos after living a peaceful and spiritual life at the bank of the Narmada, he suddenly throws himself before a train and suicides, thus giving an end to a very unsatisfied family life. Had he not made up his mind to return to Calcutta, he would have perhaps survived more years leading a spiritual life on the bank of the holiest river Narmada.

A courtesan from Shahbag happens to come to the Narmada rest house. She has been there in search of her kidnapped daughter who had been kidnapped some two years ago by a bandit "Oh, sir, my daughter was kidnapped two years ago" (160). The daughter later comes to the same rest house; she even suicides at the waters of Narmada. She was married to the most wanted man in Shahbag; so to get rid of the

prison life and so as to purify herself of all the sins, she suicides into the waters of Narmada (190). Instead of leading a miserable life in the jail for being charged for assisting the bandit-husband she decides to give her life in the waters of Narmada so that she would be pure. The mother is satisfied that her daughter has done so because she is well aware and has a strong belief that the suicide in the waters of Narmada means to free oneself from the burden of the cycle of birth and death.

The ugly girl-musician, the daughter of the musician of genius, has also come to relieve herself from the memory of the past events so as to get back to her normal life of music. She says, her father wants her to “meditate on the waters of Narmada, the symbol of Shiva’s penance, until I have cured myself of my attachment to what has passed ...” (225). She had been taken as a student by her father when she was six; that was a very rare thing and came as a strange thing for all as he had “never accepted a student from all the great musicians who had begged to sit at his feet, stretched out his hand...and offered to teach me” (202). He did so only because he happened to notice the despair in her, “...he did not notice me. But he noticed my despair” because her father was not sensitive “to the presence of other human beings unless they intruded in his music” (202).

Her father made her practice the veena in such a way that she had developed calluses on the cushions of her fingertips, she was full of tears but the father did not mind it and continued complaining on her imperfection.

I was only a child but my father wanted me to understand that music was the mathematics by which the universe could be comprehended. Morning after

morning, month after month he made me play ...until my fingers bled. He ignored my tears and forced me to continue practicing until the cushions of my finger tips developed calluses. But still he was not satisfied with the clarity of my notes. (210)

Her father was so very tough and unfeeling who did not care about the pain and sentiments of other human beings. The girl admits that it is “hard to be the child of genius” because “Genius stands at a strange angle to the world of humans, careless of its own cruelty (201,218). To add to this misery of her, was her mother; she was not sympathetic either, did not talk to her much did not soothe her aching heart when others made fun of her ugliness, instead ashamed of the mother’s eyes full of tears, the girl locked herself in the bathroom and examined herself in the mirror to see if her ugliness was fading with time just to find that it was worsening, which in turn, disheartened her more (210).

She was never at peace regarding her ugliness, she was aware and at the same time ashamed of it. Her father was oblivious about it, he was on with his teachings of music but she wanted him to provide her with something that could make her beautiful, “I wanted him to give me a sacred saying, a goddess who would grant me beauty” (211). Her mother had developed a kind of insecurity for her future because of her ugliness and since the daughter was not a genius she believe that “a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband in a harsh world designed for men” (212). And so the girl was made to endure the indifference of the boys who come to select her for marriage weeks after weeks, but no offers were made for her hand. Later a boy, who promises to marry the girl, was made her father’s student; the



girl had started to dream of their married life and was thus busy in preparation of the marriage ceremony only to find out that he was no longer interested in marriage to her. This came as a great shock to the girl, and on her father's advice, she was on the bank of the Narmada River to meditate so as to free herself from the unpleasant memories of the past events.

The Naga Baba, believing in the powers of the Narmada to purify any sin of a life time and having a strong faith in baptism, has brought a girl child, whom he had rescued from a brothel, to the Narmada to baptize her; thus relieving the child from all the unpleasant experiences she might have undergone in the brothel. He performs the ritual of baptism by dipping her into the holy waters of the Narmada, giving her a new name--- Uma, an identity, and letting her enter into a pious and respected life away from the life of brothel. She has no a physical mother---Narmada---Worshipped as one of the holiest and who "claims all girls as hers" (254). The belief that the Narmada is always welcoming more of her children in her lap, has made the Naga Baba come and stay near the bank of this holy river.

As such the bank of the holiest river Narmada has become the conversing point of all the characters of the novel who belonged to different castes and have ever since carried a different belief. The several myths and spiritually associated with the holiness of the river have made all the characters of this novel come across each other. The myth in one way or the other has been a means to unite the several people of diverse cultures, thus proving the power of the myth to unite diverse cultures into a single knot.

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta applied the same idea as she used in her previous works, *Karma Cola* (1997) and *Raj* (1989), the various cultures, communities, and traditions. Her concern in writing is always focused on racial harmony, unity, peace, and prosperity of the people of various ethnic, cultural group.

Her lack of complexity, and well-organized propelling narrations have provided sustenance to her 'craft of fiction.' In *A River Sutra* the author passionately and persuasively shifts her concern to the 'River' which is the ultimate source for harmonize people from various culture. She offers authentic interpretations to Indian cultural values, music, art forms and heritage. Concerns and contexts in *A River Sutra* are as varied as they are complex. Mehta's major involvement is with human subsistence in modern times.

The novel has a setting on the banks of India's holiest river-the Narmada, amid "the constant traffic of pilgrims, archaeologists, policemen, priests and traders." A bureaucrat retires to the sacred river as a manager of a small guest house. As Asit Chandmal writes, "He is the narrator, the sutradhaar who recounts the stories strangers tell him." He comes to the banks of the Narmada in search of tranquillity, instead he confronts "the powers of mythology, religion, music and philosophy. There are six stories: "The Monk's," "The Musician's," "The Teacher's," "The Executive's," "The Courtesan's" and "The Minstrel's." if on one hand these stories depict complexity of human emotions, on the other they illuminate the paradoxes of India. They are like "worthy offerings to the holiest of Hindu rivers." Mehta

unravels the deep feelings of man specially in an era of growing fretfulness over issues of faith and value. Her thesis is: “Man is the greatest truth. There is nothing beyond.” Her “Sutra” voices her philosophy: “The diversity of the people provides me with a constant source of interest and I often fall into conversation with pilgrims. Across the river the solitary lights of my bungalow shine like a light house in the blackness of the jungles, inviting me to return and consider what I have learned.”<sup>3</sup>

In each story the point of concentration is the theme of survival. The narrator narrates “the dangerous lives of characters” objectively to his assistant Chagla, his friend an eighty-year-old mullah, Tariq Mia and Dr. Mitra, a local doctor. Almost all characters in different stories converge for one or the other reason near the banks of the river to attain renunciation and tranquillity.

The first story is of a Jain muni whom the bureaucrat meets perchance near the guest-house and questions the monk about his past life. The monk reluctantly confesses about his multimillion dollar international empire, which his family took centuries to build. He had relinquished it to seek the ultimate truth. He is now free from “doubt,” “delusion” and “extremes.” He promotes “stability” and protects “life” around him. He even tells: “The most important thing in our faith is Ahimsa.” Gita believes Gandhi’s theory of non-violence is the only hope left for man to save the world from further violent destruction. The narrator impressed by Jain muni’s story, goes to meet Tariq Mia, tells him the story. Mia extends his point of view: to have complete self-realization man ought to experience life himself and should not escape from it by just renouncing the worldly things, because one knows “so little of it.”

Mia tells “The Teacher’s Story”: “Perhaps it will help to understand the ways of the human heart.” It is about a man, Master Mohan, who led “as unhappy life in spite of his small acts of kindness.” Finally, the Master and the disciple had no idea of the inevitable. The owner slits Imrat’s throat. The end is gruesome, drives the Master to the verge of madness. He comes to the banks of the Narmada in search of some “peace,” and lives with Tariq Mia for few months. Later, on his way back he commits suicide because “he could not exist without loving someone as he had loved the blind child.” The story indicates a distrust in the goodness of human beings. It has a sensitive emotional unfolding, which consequently mark the ways of the world and generates tolerance towards in human acts of man.

“The Executive’s Story” is a case study of an executive, Nitin Bose, who loses his mental balance after falling in love with a tribal girl during his stay in a tea estate. Unable to bear life in the humdrum of Calcutta, Nitin Bose takes up a field job in his company. A voracious reader as he is, he has a sound knowledge of legends, myths and anthropology of tribals but is unable to overcome his loneliness. One day he reads the *Rig Veda* which accurately describes his state:

At first was Death

That which did mean an utter emptiness

And emptiness, mark, thou, is Hunger’s Self. (123)

Then comes a break-through, a tribal woman offers herself to BJose. He breaks the cocoon around him and enters the brave new world of sensual pleasures: “As that musky fragrance enveloped me, calming me and exciting me at the same time..... stretchin out my hands, I grasped the swelling firmness of a woman’s breast.....

maddened by the fragile barrier of her ornaments, I crushed her in my embrace”(124). For the first time, he knew “the contours” of a woman’s body. He is “mesmerized” with the whole concept. His company at this juncture plays villain, it calls him back to Calcutta. A tormented soul, Bose often dreams of the tribal woman. Ultimately he takes refuge on the banks of the Narmada; as if “Only that rive has given the power to cure him.” The author draws an interesting archetypal parallel from Indian mythology. Mehta describes the meditating Shiva aroused by Mays, the illusion of the world: “Enarged at the destruction of his meditation the Ascetic had opened his third eye, the Lotus of Command and reduced Kama to ashes, even as he himself was being consumed by Desire”(97). The story suggests that man suffers from emotional and spiritual limitations but despite these there is a realization of achievement.

The concurrent theme runs in “The Musician’s Story.” It is both dramatic and tragic and also gives insight into the music of India. The descriptive passages create “atmosphere of astonishment.” The music teacher wants his daughter to: “Listen to the birds singing. Do you hear the halfnotes and microtones pouring from their throats.... Do you know why birds sing at dawn and at sunset? Because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music.” (203) he explains to her that arts are Shiva’s gift to mankind. There is a purpose in teaching music to his ugly daughter; through music, he tries to free her from her own image so that she could love beauty wherever she finds it. He tries to make her look into the intricacies of music from her individualistic point of view-“in a light of Truth.” Though one of his disciples promises him to marry his daughter he never fulfills it. The music teacher brings his daughter to the river banks, to meditate and cure her of her attachment of the physical world. Thus the power of

the holiest Narmada is the ultimate source not only for a group of people but also for the people who have worsen their outer and inner looks. He desires her to become a ragini to every raga. In this story there is blending of humane and compassionate qualities in a man.

“The Minstrel’s Story” is the most interesting and mystifying story. It is about the Naga Baba who saves a girl from the clutches of a prostitute. He takes the child with him, meditates in a cave, makes the girl sing in the praise of the Narmada-a minstrel is born. Baba renames her ‘Uma’ -the peace of the night.

“The Song of the Narmada” is the last narrative in *A River Sutra*, in which the Naga Baba reappears in a different role and Uma as the Minstrel. The narrator is intrigued to discover Prof. Shankar, Chairman of the Indian Preservation Trust, who had renounced the world to penetrate into the heart of the Naga tribal culture, to understand the spirit of the river. Prof. Shankar tells: “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” (264). On the banks of the Narmada the Mahabharata was dictated, it provided setting to Kalidasa’s poem “The Cloud Messenger” and the play Shakuntala. It also inspired Kipling to set his Jungle Book here.

The bureaucrat listens to the Minstrel’s songs of the Narmada, feels satisfied for “destiny had brought him to the banks of the Narmada to understand the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Rivers are regarded with love and reverence and figure prominently in the epic and folk literature of Indians. Mehta’s involvement in *A River Sutra* echoes Hermann Hesse’s “Love this river, stay by it, learn from it.”<sup>5</sup> Iyengar suggests that the river stirs” an attachment almost personal,” in the Indian: “The river in India is a feminine

power and personality and the land (and men living on it) must woo her and deserve her love if their hopes of fruitfulness and security are to be realised.”<sup>6</sup> In *A River Sutra* the Narmada is an active “participant in the action of the novel.

There are several songs on the Narmada used as structural devices in the novel. Mehta weaves her novel around the myth and ritual pattern of the ancient because it provides “emotional certitude” to her. Like Herbert Weisenger she too believes in her five-thousand-year-old tradition: “Because it begins with the need to survive, the pattern never loses its force, for it is concerned always with survival, whether physical or spiritual.”<sup>8</sup> K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar points out that rivers are regarded with veneration by writers like Kabir, Ral and Narayan: “Novels with a river background are K.S. Venkataramani’s *Murugan the Tiller* (1927), Humayun Kabir’s *Men and Rivers* (1945)... and of course R.K. Narayan’s novels centred in Malgudi-on-Sarayu. In Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*... and *The Serpent and the Rope*.”

The contemporary relevance of *A River Sutra* cannot be denied because of the nation-wide on-going protest against Sardar Sarovar Project. To Mehta it seems “learning the secrets of a river is a way to save it.” She joins hands with not only the one river but others also.

Asit Chandmal writes that in *A River Sutra* Gita Mehta has created “a new language of literature.” The choice of her characters contribute to upkeep the sanity of the river. A senior bureaucrat detaches himself from his own past, from the environment which was intolerable to him, from a background where snobbery persisted and life was bound by ridiculous codes of conduct. Stories which come to him have characters in them, making adjustments with their passions and environment. But until they make some sacrifice they do not get peace within or calm around. Asit Chandmal points out that these are stories of unsettled nature of man,

swinging between happiness and despair: “These are stories of obsession and renunciation, desperation and destruction, desire and death. Above all these are stories of sexual, sensual and spiritual longings and love. A worthy offering to the holiest of Hindu rivers.” *A River Sutra* with its metaphysics becomes a real ‘Sutra’, the Sanskrit term ‘Suta’ refers a thread or rope which binds all the people from the country or society having different culture, traditions, communities only for the unity, coexistence, homogeneity, respecting the differences.



#### IV. Conclusion

Gita Mehta has contributed to the literary world by investing her works with a multicultural perspective that widens and enlarges the frontiers of thought and which is therefore considered as a very important literary characteristic in the field of novel writings. Indian writing in English owes much to the historical phenomenon of juxtaposition of the two opposite cultures namely the oriental and the occidental. It is not unnatural that the Indo-English writers should dwell on the cultural upheavals and the reactions and responses that emerge as the result of the cultural encounter. Mehta, one of the better-known woman novelists of India, belongs to this category of fiction writers.

In the novel, *A River Sutra*, she has explored the themes of diverse culture, community, tradition and its effect within Indian culture. Here, the conflict is of an intellectual nature. It could be the dilemma of any Indian residing within India. The people of various cultures are aware of their strange status and of being unwanted. The members of different cultures are governed by the social determinants and the codification of such norms which are different from the other culture. And, these heterogeneous sensibilities which are conditioned by the intrinsic value systems of the culture of the Narmada River. Where, emphasis is given to the interplay of strategies of characterization for the multicultural ethos. She turns to the theme of interaction among the cultures that leads to the harmonized, peaceful, splendid and well cultured society where all the people can live their life happily in their own way. This is possible only due to the power of the second holiest River Narmada because the 'Sutra' is derived from Sanskrit word 'Suta' that refers thread in English which is true to the theme of the novel as Mehta explains. Furthermore, it is 'Binding Principle' as

it binds different cultured people, communities, and traditions in one spectrum for the peace and prosperity through the strong medium Narmada.

The most obvious theme in *A River Sutra* is that of love. The Narmada River itself is described as a lover, flowing to meet her bridegroom, the Lord of the Oceans. In each story that the nameless narrator hears he learns more about what his friend Tariq Mia calls the secrets of the human heart. The varieties of love that touch the heart are as endless as the stories of the Narmada River. The narrator learns of a monk's love for all living creatures. Trying to live by the doctrine of "ahimsa" or nonviolence, this Jain monk tries to empathize with the suffering of everything from the smallest insect to his own wealthy father. In attempting to utterly deny his own feelings and to take on the pain of the world, the Jain monk finds that his frozen heart has melted. Master Mohan falls in love with a blind boy singer through the purity of the boy's voice.

Mehta, by bringing into contact the people belonging to various cultures, traditions, and communities, has established mutual understanding and harmony among them from the humanistic standpoint.

People from all walks of life and having diverse cultural and beliefs are seen on the banks of the Narmada River from early morning till late in the evenings. They have different beliefs and ways of worshipping but the goal is one-the way to the Almighty, which is one but is given different names by the followers of diverse cultures.

Gita Mehta has made the spiritual Narmada River the unifying place for diverse cultures. The Hindu narrator, the Muslim cleric-tariq Mia, the Jain Monk, the music teacher Master Mohan, Nitin Bose, the Naga Baba and Uma-the river minstrel now, Professor Shankar and his team of Archaeologists, the Coutesan mother and

daughter, the miserable daughter of the musician of genius have all come to the Narmada River, believing in its power and spirituality, in order to free themselves from various suffering they have been going through in their lives. The bank of this holy river has become a place for them to rest their sorrows. The Vano people are also residing on the banks of the river since a long time believing in its powers to provide them security from all the evils of life; they have conferred several powers to the river and thus are happily living there worshipping it with all their respect.

The narrator who has by now got no one to take care of has come to the Narmada River in order to spend rest of his life in a spiritual manner, because he had always felt a need to retire from the materialistic world. He decides to take up the post of the care takeer of the Narmada rest house and spend rest of his life there itself. Tariq Mia has been living on the bank of the river as the Mullah of a small village mosque since his youth. The Hindu narrator and the Muslim Mullah have developed a good friendship between themselves and it has become a daily routine of the narrator to go and have good talks with him. The Jain Monk who is fed up of the materialistic life at the tender age of thirty is on the way to the temple of Mahadeo situated on the bank of the Narmada River. The Jains who are very different from the Hindu faith are also present in the Narmada making it a spot where every religion comes across each other. Tariq Mia and Professor Shankar are right when they tell the narrator that he had renounced the world so as to come in contact with the diverse people that pull together on the bank of the holiest river. The music teacher also stayed at the bank of the Narmada River for months in order to escape the unpleasantness of his household. The boy, Imrat, had been an opportunity for him to fulfill his long cherished dream to be a singer, but his murder made his life a nightmare because he could not free himself

from the guilt that it was him who was responsible for the death of the blind boy who was left in his custody.

Nitin Bose has been on his tour to the Narmada River so as to free himself from the possession of the tribal woman with whom he had a physical relationship for quite along time. As the Narmada River is conferred with the power to annual such effect, he is here to worship it and to get rid of this otherwise incurable disease. The Naga Baba along with the girl has come to the bank so as to give the girl a new identity, naming her Una and conferring her the honor of being the daughter of the holy river Narmada. He also has a deep respect for the unifying force of the river and as such spends time meditating near its banks, teaches and encourages Uma to sing the praise of the Narmada River who is by now a known river minstrel. Professor Shankar is the same Naga Baba who has reentered the materialistic world; he is again after a long span of time back to the same place-the bank of the Narmada River-though the mission is very different from the previous one. He is the head of the archaeological department and is here with his team members who are on this riverbank for archaeological dig.

So one can see diverse people from different places, countries, ethnic groups, social, educational and professional backgrounds assembled at one spot-the Narmada river- with all their respect. The diverse cultural backgrounds have nothing to do with at this very spot because its spirituality is so wide spread that it has no boundaries whatsoever. The one thing that has made this diverse world come together is the culture about the holiness and the spiritual power of this river. Gita Mehta has brought out several myths about the river Narmada that different cultures have faith in. they have the same reverence for the spirituality of this river. As already stated above, it is for sure that the binding force of all the different castes and religions is the Sutra and spirituality regarding Narmada, which has played such a vital role in binding the diversities.

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