

Chapter - 1

Unity in Diversity

A River Sutra by Gita Mehta presents various myths about one of India's holiest river Narmada along with several instances of spiritualism associated with it. Indeed myth and spirituality have always attracted so many people from not only India but all over the world, irrespective of their of their social, cultural and religious backgrounds.

In this particular 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. To accomplish this, she presents six different stories in the novel, stories about Hindu and Jain ascetics, courtesans and minstrels, diamond merchants and tea executives, Muslim clerics and music teacher, tribal folk beliefs and the anthropologists who study them. She has focused on the depth of spirituality that the people of India, irrespective of their religion or faith, have always felt. It depicts the life and culture on the banks of India's holiest river Narmada. Indians have a belief in the myth that a single sight of this holy river would free mankind from the burden of the recycle of life and death. It is this belief and the sense of spirituality associated with this holy river that has made the people of different faiths come to the same spot for worship and thus the holy Narmada River has been a spot which has brought these diverse people in one place, and this particular point—the Narmada being the reason and spot for the 'unity' of such 'diverse' people—is the point which I am to explore. The words "unity" and "diversity" are themselves in contrast. If the former term connotes the act of bringing together, the latter stands for the differences of things, but the crux of my whole research is to bring these contrasts together.

When there is unity there prevails harmony, which, in turn, can give rise to many positive thinking leading a family, a society, a nation and consequently the whole universe to become a place where one can live his/her life in peace and freedom. Unity is the demand of the whole universe today where so often calamities occur. The diversities of thoughts and beliefs have also contributed a lot to the mishaps around. The differences should be bridged so as to ensure peace in the world where people are lured to spend their lives in their own terms. The preference of one may mismatch with the other, there by, causing a lack of harmony which takes the form of crisis that sometimes becomes an incurable disease contaminating everything around. It is very difficult for one to cast aside one's belief and go on to believe the things that others do. The same is true about the religious belief which the 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 past and there is no exception in the present day as well, as people are not likely to think in the same line. Each individual has a different vision, a different thought and a different perspective which differentiates one from the other.

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). No history has a proof that any philosophy, belief or any thought could bring such diverse people together and it is 'alone' the spiritual synthesis that could do

such a miracle. Spirituality has a direct connection with religion. All the world cultures have faith in the Almighty who is one but is given different names. The purpose of religious path is to reach the One Almighty who is the centre of belief of every human being.

Matlal opines that spirituality can go as far as to ensure internationalism—a concept that could bring not only different castes, different nations but the whole world together. He adds, "... Life must be a never-ceasing flow of spirit. If we live the life of love and harmony, internationalism does not remain a thing to be attained but is in our grasp" (169). 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 people and have given them a new outlook of life; makes them forget their materialistic 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).

Overview of Thesis

This research is divided into four chapters. The First chapter brings the Introduction. The introduction highlights 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 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 myth and spirituality present in the text itself, and endeavors to explain how myth and spirituality has played a vital role to "unite" the "diverse" cultures.

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

Plot Overview

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. Triq Mia tells the narrator about the miserable life of a music teacher, Master Mohan, 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 ill-ness 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 despairs 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.

The Author and Her Works

Gita Mehta is a versatile writer and she has not confined herself unto it; she has proved her talent equally well as a journalist, documentary filmmaker, and promoter of Indian experiences. Her openness to new ideas and experiences is evident in her writings of non-fiction books and novels in which she often brings forth something new out of her varied experiences.

She was born in Delhi in 1943 to a family extremely active in the struggles for Indian liberation from Britain. She is the daughter of Biju Patnaik, a famous Indian freedom fighter who later became the major political leader of the Eastern state of Orissa. Only several weeks after Mehta's birth, her father was imprisoned for his political activity. Growing up, she was surrounded by her parent's active struggle for Indian liberation.

She was educated in India and the United Kingdom. While attending Cambridge University, she met fellow student Ajai Singh Mehta whom she married. Mehta and her husband "Sonny," the president of Alfred A. Knopf publishing house, currently maintain

residences in New York, London and Delhi, spending at least three months of every year in India.

Mehta's books have been translated in twenty-one languages and have been in the best seller lists in Europe, the US and India. The subject of both her fiction and non-fiction is exclusively focused on India, its culture and history. In her previous works, *Karma cola* (1979) and *Raj* (1989), Mehta has focused on the interactions between India and the western world. Her yet another novel is *Snakes and Ladders*, first published in 1998. In *A River Sutra*, Mehta has changed her focus and explores the diversity of cultures within India.

Mehta's book *Karma Cola* is a series of interconnected essays, in it she weaves the impressions of India's mysticism with the impressions she receives from other people. The book brings forth the western image which defines India as a land of mysticism and spiritualism. These were and are the images which are still the factor that attracts thousand of Westerners to India. *Karma Cola* concerns India and spirituality. In it she has contrasted the eastern and Western view of life and death. It is the blending of humor and wit on which she constructs this book that presents her impressions through the experience of many. Another novel *Raj* is a thorough historical story that follows the progression of a young woman born into Indian nobility under the British Empire. With the course of young Jaya Singh's story, Mehta presents a portion of how a slim segment of high-cultured Indian society is adversely affected by the passage of British India's early struggle for independence. Through Jaya's story, Mehta paints a picture of colonial life in India from an Indian perspective. The novel contains colorful pictures of Indian culture. Mehta has been able to present a comprehensive story without any prejudice and

bitterness. She leaves it to the readers to form an independent position to observe the history that she offers. However, she does not press her political impressions onto her readers, but takes a chance in gently presenting the historical facts along side the story of her female protagonist. Yet in another book *Snakes and Ladders* Mehta presents a well-rounded picture of multitude of cultures, civilizations, and attitudes represented by the very divergent people of India. While the reader is totally occupied, Mehta exposes the veil of myths in India and precisely presents a picture of this important world culture. She exposes the ancient and modern history of India with great sense of humanity mingled with witty observation and good humor. She retraces the movement of people against the colonized empire. She also justifies the fact that most of the Indians view each other as foreigners because the territories, races, languages, and customs of India have less in common with each other. The scavengers of garbage dumps are also portrayed with much dignity as Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian Nation. Mehta also makes use of lively and colorful anecdotes to illustrate her analysis and invites the readers to explore and discover the many faces of India.

Literature Review

Several critics have various opinions about the author and the book itself. *A River Sutra* has established Mehta as a serious and a prolific writer. The book is very important one that could have a strong influence on the later developments. The book has various instances about the Indian religions which was in practice from time immemorial and have been followed till date. The force of spirituality has been focused here which is also one of the characteristics of the society. The book has even been termed a masterpiece and has been praised to be the mirror of spirituality. The novel's background is set in the

bank of the Narmada River which is still in existence with its continuous flow from time immemorial. Thus the stories and their development are compared to the continuous flow of the river itself.

Asit Chandmal has praised Mehta pointing out that after she finished *A River Sutra*, she "has lost her amateur status and has become a writer lionized by the world," and that "She has created a new language of literature and has recreated India for Indians" (30). She has been able to give a modern view of the culture and people of India. In the words of Salman Rushdie, "Mehta's *A River Sutra* is an important attempt by a thoroughly modern Indian to make her reckoning with the Hindu culture from which she emerged" (2). About the setting of the novel, Kirukus Associates in *Editorial Reviews* says that the book is filled with "profundity in a beautifully evoked setting" and at the same time is powerfully understated." It is a simple novel and addresses the workings of the human heart.

India is a land where there exists myths of several kinds and it is associated with almost everything. Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* asserts the importance of mythology as it is the requirement of not only the individual but of the whole race and age, in his exact words, "...mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age" (382). Smith reviews *A River Sutra* as an elegant piece of work in Indian mythology. She opines that Mehta "blended Indian mythology with piercing depictions of love in its many aspects" (53). According to her, Mehta highlights and presents the myths of India in a series of short individual stories to show how a disenchanted bureaucrat learns about love and life. Mehta shows that people in India Worship Rivers, revere holy

men, participate in extravagant rituals and ceremonies and take great pains in the name of faith and religion. The swiftness and simplicity of Mehta's writing of the stories in the novel is very much applauded by Rahul Jacob of the *Los Angeles times*, he writes how "every yarn begins the lazy circle again, another variation on the novel's central theme. Each story ends with a beguiling turn into the next one. The simplicity of Mehta's writing nicely complements the novel's profound concerns." The craft of Mehta's story telling and her explicit description of the caste system as practiced in India has also been praised here and the fact that Narmada is the daughter of Lord Shiva is brought into account, as a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* describes how "this novel of India beautifully embodies the art and craft of storytelling as Mehta portrays diverse lives touched by river Narmada, a holy pilgrimage site worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva." The same reviewer praises Mehta for "not avoid[ing] the controversies of life in her homeland, including the caste system and political/ religious rivalry as" nothing that "she willingly exposes its complexities" (33).

Indira Bhatt views that Mehta attempts to present a view of life in her chosen aspects of Indian society: "Gita Mehta selects aspects of traditional spiritual heritage of Indian society. These are aspects which the western critics and readers consider to be an essential image of India" (67). Eric Wilson observes that *A River Sutra* is a seamless story. He views that Mehta weaves a number of accounts around the narrator's experience to form a tapestry of life, spiritualism and relationship. Wendy Smith observes, the book that Mehta thought would not be easily digested by the western readers received the warmest reaction. Ironically, it became "the one people have responded to most" (54).

Chapter - 2

Myth and River

Myth

In an attempt to present various definitions of “Myth”, Wilfred L. Guerin and others write in *A Handbook of Critical Approach to Literature* that, “... the study of myths reveals about the mind and character of people” and that “myths are the symbolic projection of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations” (159). They state that “Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities” (160). The importance of “Myth” is very well highlighted here: it does the work of uniting not only the different ethnic groups together but the whole nation. This task of unification is easier done with construction of myths.

Myth and culture are inevitable in Indian society. All the religions, in one way or the other, have their roots in them. The various rituals performed have a long story from which they have come down and those stories are termed “myths”. Though myths are considered to be false stories, they are not so in the real sense. Max Muller, as quoted in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is of the opinion that myths are misunderstood by succeeding ages (382). In *The Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate, Philip Wheelwright explains, “Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living” (11).

Myths are the only medium which links the present to the traditional knowledge. Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* writes that myths have

certain functions and an "understood function is to serve as a powerful picture language for communication of traditional wisdom" (256).

Mark Schorer explains further that, "Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend" (29).

Relating the mythological figures with spiritual principles, Campbell writes, "...the mythological figures that have come down to us, we must understand that they are not only symptoms of unconscious but also controlled and intended statements of certain spiritual principles, which have remained as constant throughout the course of human history..." (*The Hero* 257). The sense of spirituality has remained constant through the entire episode of human history which has been in existence from time immemorial and myths are the integral part of this whole. C.G. Jung in his book *Man And His Symbols* opines that myth is the means to know about the ancient history of man. In his words, "The ancient history of man is being meaningfully rediscovered in the symbolic images and myths that have survived ancient man" (106).

It is apparent that society is directly connected to myth and Joseph Campbell has expressed the same kind of view in his book *Myths To Live By*. He opines, "For since it has always been on myths that the moral orders of societies have been founded" (11-12). He strongly believes that the foundation of morality, above all, is myth. Again, in his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell asserts the importance of mythology as it is a requirement to not only the individual but also to the race and age, "...mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and

requirements of the individual, the race, the age" (382). Further he elaborates that, myth is the manifestation of something that is beyond our eye, he writes

Myth remains, necessarily, within the cycle but represents this cycle as surrounded and permeated by the silence. Myth is the revelation of a plenum of silence within and around every atom of existence. Myth is a directing of a mind and heart, by means of profoundly informed figurations, to that ultimate mystery which fills and surrounds all existences. Even in the most comical and apparently frivolous of its moments, mythology is directing the mind to this unmanifest which is just beyond the eye. (267)

There also exists a relation between literature and myth, which is obvious in many works. C.G. Jung elaborates this point:

...the analogies between ancient myths and the stories that appear...are neither trivial nor accidental. They exist because the unconscious mind of modern man preserves the symbol-making capacity that once found expression in the beliefs and rituals of the primitive. And that capacity still plays a role of vital psychic importance. In more ways than we realize, we are dependent on the messages that are carried by such symbols, and both our attitudes and our behavior are profoundly influenced by them. (*Man* 107)

Yet another writer, Alan W. Watts is in the process of defining myth. He says "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact and some fantasy—

which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (7).

River

Rivers are revered to be holy, and are taken to be the incarnation of deities. There are several archetypes images, social, religious, and day to day affairs related to it. People all over the world and of different religious faiths have the same regard for it. People from far and diverse walks of life have come to its refuse in search of the peace of mind, away from the pretense and the tyranny of town. River is a religious symbol and thus, as Jung says:

It is the role of religious symbols to give a meaning to the life of man. The Pueblo Indians believe that they are the sons of Father Sun, and this belief endows their life with a perspective (and a goal) that goes far beyond their limited existence. It gives them ample space for the unfolding of personality and permits them a full life as complete persons. (*Man* 89).

The river is associated with the mysteries like rebirth, and as it has been flowing till date since time immemorial, it is even termed as time's flow into eternity. Since it is considered to be the incarnations of gods and goddesses, it is revered as holy. People from afar come to it for pilgrimage and purification. There are several "archetypes and the symbolic meanings" with which the rivers "tend to be widely associated" and at the same time, it is considered to be the image of "death and rebirth (baptism)" (*Guerin et. al.* 161). Baptism, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is "a Christian ceremony in which a few drops of water are poured on somebody or they are covered with water, to welcome them into the Christian Church and often to name them." Joseph

Campbell opines, "The popular interpretation of baptism is that it 'washes away original sin'". He further writes, "Symbolically, the infant makes the journey when the water is poured on its head; its guide and helpers are the priest and godparents. Its goal is a visit with parents of its Eternal Self, the Spirit of God and the Womb of Grace. Then it is returned to the parents of the physical body" (*The Hero* 251). About the rite of baptism he opines "the sense of the rite of baptism" is "initiation into our Church" (*The Hero* 251).

The river is further associated with "the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of the life cycle; incarnations of deities" (*Guerin* 161). Guerin and others also points out that it can be associated with the mystery of creation; purification and redemption; fertility and growth and also that according to Jung, water is also the commonest symbol for the unconscious" (161).

Again, with different images of river, the colors are associated. The common colors associated with the river are Blue and Green. The colors "Blue" and "Green" stand for "highly positive, truth, religious feeling, security, spiritual purity"; and "growth, sensation, hope, fertility" simultaneously (*Guerin* 161). So we can as well assume that the rivers could also be associated with those images.

There are several instances of spirituality associated with water; spirituality connotes the quality of being related with the religion. Jung even calls it "God" but is aware of the fact that it is not easy to explain what spirit really means. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* he writes,

The word "spirit" possesses such a wide range of application that it requires considerable effort to make clear to oneself all the things it can mean. Spirit, we say, is the principle that stands in opposition to matter.

By this we understand an immaterial substance or form of existence which on the highest and most universal level is called “God”. We imagine this immaterial substance also as the vehicle of psychic phenomena or even of life itself. (208)

He further writes about the “objective spirit” which he describes as “the whole stock of man’s cultural possessions with particular regard to his intellectual and religious achievements” (209).

Each of the rivers carries its own value and is revered equally by its pilgrims. Some of the famous rivers in India are Ganga, Jamuna, Saraswati, Kavery, Godabari and the like. Wendy o’flaherty, in his book *Hindu Myths*, has described the river Ganga as "The Ganges, best of rivers, born of all sacred waters..." (120). A site named *Wikipedia* titled *pilgrimage* states about Sarasvati River that:

Although the river does not have a physical existence today, there are numerous references to it in the ancient Indian literature of the Vedic period. A part of the river exists now as Ghaggar in Haryana. The present dried bed of the Ghaggar was thus part of a major river, known as Sarsvati. The history calls Sarasvati as the seventh river of the Sindhu Sarasvati river system. Hence it has the name 'Saptsindhu' in the region bounded by river Sarasvati in the east and Sindhu (or) Indus in the west. The river Sarasvati originated from the Har-ki-Dun glacier near Yamunotri in West Garhwal. It was considered as a mighty river in the ancient times. (1)

The river Godavari is also one of the famous rivers where people have gone for pilgrimage from a long time. The same site states about the river that:

The Godavari that starts at the Western Ghats and flows towards the Eastern Ghats, flows in the southern India and is considered to be one of the seven sacred rivers. This river originates from the hills situated at the back of the village Tryanibak, located at Nasik district in Maharashtra. A large reservoir is situated at the hill from which the river originates. At 'Daulekhram' it merges into the "Bay of Bengal", making a delta.

According to the Hindu religion, the river Godavari is considered to be one of the very sacred rivers. The people believe that taking a holy dip in the river relieves them from all the sins. (3)

Yet another river is the Cauvery / Kaveri River which is also revered as holy and pilgrimage is common in this river. Again the same site points out that:

It is considered to be a very sacred river of southern India. It originates from the Brahmagiri Hill in the Western Ghats in Coorg district of Karnataka state. The river flows through the states Karnataka and Tamilnadu in the southeastern direction. The holiness and the fame of the river have been written in Tamil literature. Along its lower course where it sweeps round into Tamil Nadu from Karnataka occur a magnificent series of temple towns. (4)

Likewise the Narmada River is also considered to one of the holiest rivers of India. The river is also one of the pilgrimage sites, worshiped as the daughter of the god Shiva. It is also believed that a mere sight of this river is enough to cleanse a human

being from his sins and is thus rid of the recycle of birth and death. A site named *Wikipedia* titled *Narmada River* states that:

The Narmada is considered extremely holy by Hindus. It is a river in central India in Indian subcontinent flourishing mainly in Madhya Pradesh. It forms the traditional boundary between North India and South India, and is a total of 1,289 km long”. Called Namade by the Greek geographer Ptolemy in the 2nd century AD, it has always been an important route between the Arabian Sea and the Ganges River valley. It is a pilgrimage route for Hindus who regard it their most sacred river after the Ganges. It is one of the three major rivers in India that run from east to west, along with the Tapti and the Mahi River. It is the only river in India that flows in a rift valley. It rises on the summit of Amarkantak Hill in Madhya Pradesh state, and for the first 320 kilometres of its course winds among the Mandla Hills, which form the head of the Satpura Range; then at Jabalpul, passing through the 'Marble Rocks', it enters the Narmada Valley between the Vindhya and Satpura ranges, and pursues a direct westerly course to the Gulf of Cambay. It flows through the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujrat. The river has beautiful ghats built on its banks in Hoshangabad. Its longest tributary is the Tawa, which joins the Narmada at Bandra Bahn in Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh. After leaving Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the river widens out in the fertile district of Bharuch. Below Bharuch city it forms a 20 kilometer wide estuary where it enters the Gulf of Cambay... (1)

One can come across scores of pilgrims on the bank of the Narmada River worshipping it from the morning to the evening.

The water being a means of washing away the sin is well brought out in one of the ritual performed in New Zealand where the sin is floated in the water. Sir James George Frazer, in his book *The Golden Bough* writes,

In one part of New Zealand an expiation for sin was felt to be necessary; a service was performed over an individual, by which all the sins of tribe were supposed to be transferred to him, a fern stalk was previously tied to this person, with which he jumped into the river, and there unbinding, allowed it to float away to the sea, bearing their sins with it. (629)

Myth about Narmada River

There are several myths related to the origin of the River Narmada. The site named *Wikipedia* titled *The Narmada in Hinduism* states this myth about the Narmada River:

The Narmada River is one of the most important sacred rivers, believed to have descended from the sky by the order of Lord Shiva. It is said that the mere sight of the river will make a pilgrim pure because of its sanctity. As a result, the river represents an important pilgrimage site and one of the highest acts a pilgrim can perform is to walk from the sea to the source of the river, in the Maikal Mountains and back along the opposite bank, a process that can take one to two years to complete. The town of Maheswar is a particularly important pilgrimage site along the route of the river. The Narmada is closely associated with Lord Shiva. Naturally formed smooth

stones called *banas*, made of cryptocrystalline quartz, are found in Narmada which is known as Shivalingas; the rare and unique markings on them are regarded by Shaivaites as very auspicious. (1)

The site named *mapsofindia* Titled *Facts and figures* states yet another myth, under another heading *Mythology*, which goes this way:

The Narmada River is considered the mother and giver of peace. Legend has it that the mere sight of this river is enough to cleanse one's soul, as against a dip in the Ganga or seven in the Yamuna. The Ganga is believed to visit this river once a year, in the guise of a black cow to cleanse herself of all her collected sins. The journey along the river Narmada is in some sense similar to famous parikrama (taking round) of the river, except that the parikrama is of life in the valley of the Narmada. Narmadakund in Amarkantak has an ambience that makes a pilgrim spot out of this small place. Young Narmada falls in love with male river Son and asks Juhilla (a tributary of the Son) to convey the message of love. Juhilla entices Son herself. The disgust and anguish of the lovely Narmada compels her to jump off the western cliffs of Amarkantak. A mere six kilometers from her genesis, the Narmada hurtles down 150 feet at Kapildhara, a gorgeous waterfall. Named after the saint Kapil, this fall is soon followed by Dudhadhara. (1-3)

The myths have, thus, highlighted the power that the rivers are capable of and the sense of spirituality that they are bestowed with. Consequently, the people who have a

strong faith on the myth about the river, come to its banks to worship in order to get rid of their sorrows.

Chapter - 3

Unity in Diversity 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 only solace to their aching heart. Here they have found their peace of mind and a reason to live.

Myth in *A River Sutra*

A River Sutra involves 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 River, 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 Saraswati in three, in the waters of the Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with the single sight of her waters” (163).

There exist several myths regarding the origin of Narmada River, the following myth has it that Lord Shiva in his ascetic trance created the River and named it Narmada as he was amused by the its various form and blessed it 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 myth, “*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 myth 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 marries 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 her daughter had died in the Narmada 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 Shankhar, 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 forth 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 meditating in the waters of Narmada would

relieve her, so he suggested her that she “must meditate 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 meditate 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 a 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.

Spirituality in *A River Sutra*

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 kilometers 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 16th 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 kilometers 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 has 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 to 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 finally, 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 considers 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 nonviolence" (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 Kshatrya

caste. He differed from Buddha, however in that his parents were already Jains, worshipping Lord Parshava, whose enlightenment resembles that of 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, leaving 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 and 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 the 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 now 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 spirituality 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.

Chapter - 4

Conclusion

The myth regarding the Narmada River, though different, emphasizes its spirituality and the power that people confer onto it. Cultures have a faith that the water of the Narmada contains in itself the power to wash away all the sins of life time only by a single sight which is the way to liberate oneself from the burdensome cycle of rebirth and death. True liberation means the liberation of the individual soul from the cycle of births and deaths. The single goal is to get united with the supreme lord. Though the goal is the same, the way towards achieving it differs from different major religions of the world. The main objective of human life is self realization and the specifics of the manner and the method in which it is to be attained depend on the wisdom of the scholars, philosophers and individuals themselves. There are several instances of people fasting unto death on the banks of the Narmada River so as to escape another life. The pilgrimage is one of the widespread instances of people's way towards salvation.

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 Courtesan 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 taker of the Narmada rest house and spend rest of his life there itself. Tariq Mia has been living on the bank of this 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 Uma and conferring her the honor of being the daughter of the holy river Narmada. He also has a deep respect for the spirituality 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 river bank 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 myth 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

only binding force of all the different castes and religions is the myth and spirituality regarding Narmada, which has played such a vital role in uniting the diversities.

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