

River *Narmada* – A Symbol of Secular Unification: A Study of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

Mamta Bhatnagar

Assistant Professor, GLA University, Mathura (India)

Email: mamta.bhatnagar@gla.ac.in

Abstract

India is a land of various religions, faiths and cultures and the adherents of all the beliefs live together in harmony. Indian constitution also assures equality amongst all the followers and this aspect has come to be known as 'secularism' - deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Indian people. Gita Mehta, a well-acclaimed writer of fiction and non-fiction, has celebrated India and her spirits in her works. Her book, *A River Sutra*, is an unprejudiced account of the Indian spirit of secularism. It depicts all the religious minded people of Hinduism, Islam, Jainism or Tribal sects performing pilgrimage on the banks of the river *Narmada* and share the same beliefs, myths and rituals related to the holy river. The present research paper, 'River *Narmada* – A Symbol of Secular Unification: A Study of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*' aims at studying how a holy river like *Narmada* can act as a unifying force and a symbol of unity in diversity.

Key words: *Secularism, beliefs, pilgrimage, Narmada, consciousness.*

Introduction

India – the land of peace and harmony – has always been known as a land of peaceful co-existence of all religions since ages. Even the people in old times had the choice of religion, and no discrimination was done to anyone whether someone followed Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam or any other religion. Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka, about 2200 years followed this practice and patronized different religions. He was successful in creating an ideology of *Dharma* which may have been viewed as "...toleration, non-violence, (where the emperor himself forswore violence and force as means to an end), respect for others..." (Thapar, 42). At that time, it was considered an idealistic approach because he even created a group of people who were given the responsibility of disseminating his ideology and looking after the wellbeing of the people. In "Ellora caves temples built next to each other between 5th and 10th centuries, show a coexistence of religions and a spirit of acceptance of different faiths" (Detha). India has always had a history and tradition of "*Sav Dharm Sambhav*" i.e., "all religions are equal and they are different ways to attain the same goal (God)" (Detha).

Secularism in India

As per Indian constitution, no religion is made official for the state and, therefore, every citizen living in India has a right to follow, preach and spread the religion he or she believes in. Secularism is "the belief that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country" (Cambridge). In other words, secularism suggests that there should be no interference of religion in the organization of society, education, government, etc. "Correct Hindi word for secularism is '*Panthnirpekhshta*' meaning 'indifference towards matters of faith'" (Kaushik, 26). It means that Indian government assures equal rights and reverence for the people of all castes, creeds, convictions and cultures and no intrusion of government on the basis of religion. It is an essential part of Indian cultural background as well as the beliefs of the people. "Every religion is at liberty to practice its tenants, to follow its own principles, so long as those principles do not outrage the moral consciousness of man or endanger the security of the country" (Kaushik 26). Secularism throws light on people's combined unconscious; hence, it is a powerful tool for understanding psychology of a particular group. Secular beliefs are mingled with experiences and emotions of the followers. Almost all the major religions of the world have flourished in India and their followers have lived in harmony since ages. "Secularism (the term added to Indian constitution through 42nd amendment in 1975) undoubtedly helps and aspires to enable every citizen to enjoy fully the blessing of life, liberty and happiness, but in the pursuit of this ideal, those who believe in secularism must be inspired by a sense of ethical purpose in dealing with their fellow citizens" ("Secularism and Constitution of India").

To understand secularism, we should know what is religion? Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary defines that religion is "one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods, or in the teaching of the spiritual leader" (1307). Though our constitution does not define the term 'religion' but the meaning given by the Supreme court of India can be referred here – "Religion is a matter of faith with individuals or communities and it is not necessarily theistic. A religion has its basis in a system of beliefs or doctrines, which are regarded by those who prefer that religion as conducive to their lay down a code of ethical rules for its followers to accept, it might prescribe rituals and observances, ceremonies and modes of worship, which are regarded as integral parts of religion and these forms and observance might extend even to matters of food and dress" ("Secularism and Constitution of India"). Our country believes that true religion

does not exist in principles and rules. The aim of all religions is to realize truth i.e. God. "There is one universal truth in all religions, I place it here – in realizing God. Ideals and methods may differ, but there is one central point" (Vivekanand).

Gita Mehta and Indian Sensibilities

Gita Mehta, a prominent author of the Indian Diaspora, is one of the biggest champions of India and its culture. It goes to her credit that she has been able to use her writings as a medium to highlight the cultural environment of India and illustrate it from her own unique angle. Her works display a preoccupation with India's heritage and susceptibilities. India is the centre of her works and she does not shift the focus. Usha Band e rightly asserts that Gita Mehta "observes India in all its colours; and with keen insight and by the flow of her language she is able to make the familiar appear unusual(1)." The author's exposition of the Indian cultural values has reinterpreted India's age old culture and tradition not only to Indians but also to the Westerners.

In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta depicts the River, *Narmada* as a symbol of Indian culture, its variety, creed and myths as well as an exposition of tribal lore and of man's quest in pursuit of life. It deals with mythological symbolism and mythological stories related to lord *Shiva* and the *Narmada* which is depicted as an eternal inspiring power. Gita Mehta constructs her narrative with the help of devout invocations, poetry and discourses. Salman Rushdie justly claims, "Gita 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" (xxii).

Secularist Beliefs of People in the Narmada Region

All the cultural beliefs related to *Narmada* are shared by the people of all religions. The holy river *Narmada* unifies all the local religions and the people living in and around that region. The river is the centre of pilgrimage for all religious minded people whether they are the followers of Hinduism, Islam, Jainism or Tribal religion. Mehta uses the elemental Hindu myths and creates an ideological consensus among Hinduism, Islam, Tribal religion and Jainism using *Narmada* as a *sutra*, a common link. All the stories – "The Monk's Story," "The Teacher's Story," "The Executive's Story," "The Musician's Story" and "The Minstrel's Story" are divided into sixteen chapters and the last chapter, "The Song of Narmada" – are narrated one after the other by different people but they have a common link, i.e. a '*Sutradhar*' (a narrator). All the characters, in every story, appear only once but the same theme – the river myth – transfers from one story to the other. The novel is located on the banks of the river *Narmada*. People of all the creeds and beliefs have full faith in the faiths related to the river myths.

The river, *Narmada*, is loved as a mother because she nourishes all the people of the vast region around her. For this reason, people regard her as the most respectful and endearing. "Across the sweep of water, I can see fertile fields stretching for miles and miles into the southern horizon until they meet the gray shadows of the Satpura Hills" (*A River Sutra* 3). Puranic sources – *Padma Purana*, chapter 13 and *Agni Purana* chapter, 113 – describe her as a very holy river (Parameswaran 151). She is one of the holiest of the five sacred rivers – the *Ganga*, the *Yamuna*, the *Godavari* and the *Kaveri* – of India. Gita Mehta uses the description of *Padma Purana* when she narrates, "Bathing in the waters of the *Jamuna* purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the *Saraswati* in three, in the waters of *Ganges* in one but *Narmada* purifies with a single sight of her waters" (*A River Sutra* 163). Or in other words, a mere quick look of the *Narmada*'s water is presumed to purify a human being of generations of sinful births. "According to *Puranic* Scriptures, there are supposed to be four hundred billion" (151) sacred spots on her bank. Revered as the daughter of Lord *Shiva*, the river is glorified as the most sacred pilgrimage sight. According to Dr Mitra, a character of *A River Sutra*, the great Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the *Narmada*, "...even the Greeks and Alexandrines had heard about *Narmada*'s holiness and the religious suicides at Amarkantak – people fasting to death or immolating themselves on the *Narmada*'s banks, or drowning in her waters – in order to gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth" (152).

Hinduism and Islam

Gita Mehta represents Hinduism through the Narrator and Mr. Chagla, his assistant. The Narrator has a practical approach as he has walked away from his routine life due to its obvious monotony and not because of complete dedication to Hinduism. He appears to be ready to adopt Hinduism enthusiastically but is unable to take the strict step of asceticism. Contrary to the narrator, Tariq Mia is a well-known scholar of Islam and the narrator calls him, "the wisest of all my friends" (*A River Sutra* 7). He is a philosopher who shows light to those who lack proper vision. The narrator's observations about the incidents and the characters are superficial whereas, Tariq Mia, a Sufi Muslim, studies each story in detail and tries to clarify the philosophy of life. Moreover, like a friend, philosopher and guide he explains to the narrator the ways of human heart. Not that everything the old Mullah explains appeals to his rational mind but they share their thoughts, beliefs and ideas with each other. Though they appear to be the ideal representatives of Indian ethos. They are different in their ways and practices; they are united in souls. Tariq Mia takes all pains to clarify the doubts of the storyteller when he is greatly disturbed by the disconsolate thought about the dead austere. Tariq Mia says it is an unavoidable end for all. He tells him the crucial end is the same for everyone no matter how important, remarkable or wealthy person one is. Tariq Mia's remarks, sometimes serious and

meaningful, sometimes vague or teasing, prick him. Indian tradition suffused with the lessons from Islamic tradition, provides clear answers to his queries.

Tariq Mia also recounts many stories to the Narrator, one of which is that of Master Mohan and his disciple, Imrat. Master Mohan, a music teacher who was scorned by his wife and children, adopted a blind Muslim boy, Imrat. He taught him all the songs he knew and at the same time ensured that the boy got Islamic education. The novel shows how these two different faiths coexist in harmony. Master Mohan was transported by Imrat's voice: "In the very spasm of death I see your face./ O, the wonder of Your protection./ O, the wonder of my submission" (*A River Sutra* 61). The words of this song contain the core concept of *Islam* and they also prove to be prophetic in a very literal sense. Master Mohan devoted his life to the devotional songs sung before God. The voice of his disciples made people feel nearer God almost as if they were in His presence. Gita Mehta also shows that the Muslims of the *Narmada* area are religious and they are dedicated to learning the words of God from Tariq Mia. The relationship between Hinduism and Sufi Islam does not appear to be tense, rather, it is friendly. Gita Mehta herself asserted, "Many, many moderate Muslims have been asking for the Uniform Civil Code since independence. Muslims are not a monolithic force" (India Star Review of Books: Gita Mehta, an Interview).

The author traces this Hindu-Muslim relationship in history as well as in the poems and works of sixteenth century *Sufi-Bhakti* follower. *Kabir* was one of the greatest poets of India and his poems according to Tariq Mia "made a bridge between your faith (Hinduism) and mine (Islam)" (*A River Sutra* 46). J. L. Mehta has also affirmed, "Kabir was free from religious practices against either (Hindu or Muslim). Though intensely religious in outlook, he was not a slave of either Hinduism or Islam. He rubbed shoulders with *Bhakti* reformers as well as Sufi saints" (193). There is one thing which seems to be common among all the religions of the area that is the significance of the *Narmada* river. *Nawab of Shahbag* would come to honour the river for her holiness and sing in her praise: "Bathing in the waters of the Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of the Saraswati in three, in the waters of Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. Salutations to thee, O Narmada" (*A River Sutra* 163).

Jainism

When the narrator came across the Jain Monk, he became very curious to know his story probably because he often meets Jain followers but he lacks proper understanding of their beliefs. He stops the Monk and requests him to share his experiences how he could give up the materialistic world and choose the life of poverty and suffering. The monk narrates a great story of grand celebrations his father and his family had at the time of his renouncing the world. He also informs the narrator, "A Jain monk seeks to free himself of the fetters of worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy, and non-violence" (*A River Sutra* 11). The Monk is a mirrored figure of *Mahavira* and through him the author has built the picture of *Mahavira* in the mind of the reader. Through the Monk's story, the author explains the philosophy of Jain religion and its basic principles such as non-violence which is regarded as an important feature of *Gandhian* philosophy.

Tribal Religions

The followers of the tribal religion are represented fascinatingly by Mehta as all tribal religions are different and each one has to be understood independently. Mehta does not exhibit all the facets of their religions but portrays some of their beliefs, rituals and superstitions related to the *Narmada*. Nitin Bose meets the villagers and he seeks the spiritual powers of their goddess to regain sanity in a special shrine possessed by them. Although the Narrator tries to understand some of their rituals and beliefs, he fails to understand their attraction for *Narmada's* influences. He shows admiration for them from afar and gives them their space and peace. Throughout the novel, he maintains an effective dialogue with the followers of each of those religions – Islam, Hinduism, tribal religion and Jainism – and meets Tariq Mia repeatedly to seek explanations of the underlying symbolism.

Narmada as a Unifying Force

The river's importance is not written in the traditions of these religions but locally it plays a crucial role in the society purifying many, offering a place for suicide, providing an opportunity for rebirth, along with being an extremely pious place. In this way, Gita Mehta shows how different religions share the same myths, traditions, forests, space, river and they still maintain their multiplicity. The religious preaching of all the religions is parallel to each other as all the religions are centered on a particular goal that is the purity of human heart, equality of all mankind and universal brotherhood. The great Indian philosopher, S. Radhakrishnan also states, "All religions spring from the sacred soil of the human mind and are quickened by the spirit" (*East and West in Religion* 19).

The river, *Narmada*, flows through the novel and itself becomes a living entity that touches the life of the Narrator, characters as well as the readers. According to Professor Shankar, a character in *A River Sutra*, the river is immortal as it has not changed its course ever. "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). From time immemorial, the sage *Vyasa's* dictation the *Mahabharata*, Kipling's *Jungle Book*, *Kalidas'* poem, *The Cloud Messenger* and his great play *Shankuntalam* and all the poems the queen Rupmati, and the king Baz Bahadur wrote were written in the *Narmada*

region or its surroundings (264-65). Then twelve hundred years ago *Shankaracharya* dedicated a poem to the river. Cave drawings, which Professor Shankar discovered near the waterfalls, prove that they were from “the Stone Age” so they must be among the oldest confirmation of human existence in India. Lower down the same cliff the archeologists were “finding implements from successive ages – Neolithic, Iron, Bronze” (267). The following verse of *Shankaracharya* also conveys the sense of *Narmada*’s eternity: “You were present at the Creation /By Shiva’s command you alone will remain /At the Destruction” (277). *Shankaracharya* also predicts when “the Destroyer dances/ All will be destroyed” it is *Narmada* alone that will “lead you (mankind) to the next Creation” (278). Thus *Narmada* has a history, a female identity and above all it has a sustained culture. The river is also “a magnet to scholars. Towns and banks of the river are renowned for the learning of their Brahmins” (153). After bringing together a variety of experiences – renunciation, suicide, love, redemption, conversion etc. – the river flows on, “At the bend of the river the clay lamps were still flickering as the current carried them towards the ocean” (282). Even today, while watching the river and its moods, one feels that nothing is ever lost. According to the author, “that is the beauty of a river view.” Thus, in *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta brings mythology, history and contemporary beliefs together.

Conclusion

Thus, The River *Narmada* becomes the source of comfort, revival and a sutra to develop conceptual synchronization among all the religions. Mehta presents the distinctiveness of India in the terms of diversity and plurality. She beautifully depicts the religious beliefs, familial ties, love, illumination and redemption associated with the river, ‘*Narmada*,’ in the religion. This clearly indicates that in India the emphasis is has not been laid on any ‘ism’ or ‘faith’ but on dharma. India is religiously plural and tolerant. “The law of Dharma proclaimed: Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides” (Shah, 31). India believes in “a theory of survival of all that was universal in Indian religion” (Coomaraswamy, 27). Almost all the characters of the novel suffer from frustration but they learn that the true religion gives man strength by imparting him/ her tenderness of heart, patience of mind and righteousness of soul. Light and law of religion is the dominant thing of human life in India. True religion in the words of Sheikh Abdullah Ansar is: “To fly in the air is no miracle, for the dirtiest flies can do it; to cross rivers without a bridge or boat is no miracle, for a terrier can do the same; but to help suffering hearts is a miracle performed by holy men” (Radhakrishnan 53). Humanism, “the most striking feature of ancient Indian civilization” (Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, 9) and cultural traditions are natural legacy of Indians who with their progressive and forward-looking spirit can contribute to the welfare of mankind in general. What is practiced in one part of the world affects the whole humanity. A multi ethnic and multi religious country like India can give a message of peace and harmony to the world because “No land on earth has such a long cultural continuity as India, since, though there were more ancient civilizations...” (Basham, *A Cultural History of India* 2).

Works Cited

- Bande, Usha. *Gita Mehta: Writing Home/Creating Homeland*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2008.
- Basham, A. L. *The Wonder that was India*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2003. --- *A Cultural History of India*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Cambridge Dictionary*. Cambridge University Press, 2022. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>
- Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *The Dance of Shiva*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2013.
- Detha, Ayushi. “India as a Secular State.” Legal Service India. <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-1141-india-as-a-secular-state.html>
- Hornby, A. S. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. Oxford: OUP Kaushik, Asha and Nitin Bhatnagar. “Secularism: The Soul of Indian Religious Traditions.”
- Diviner – A Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Vol 7, Issue2*. Chandigarh: DAV College Sector 10, 2010.
- Mehta, Gita. *A River Sutra*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 1993. -----, “India Star Review of Books: Gita Mehta, an Interview.” Interview by C. J. S. Wallia. *India Star Review of Books*. October 2010.
- Mehta J.L. *Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India*. Vol iii. Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1987.
- Parameswaran, Uma. “A River of Wisdom.” *Writing the Diaspora: Essays on Culture And Identity*. Ed. Uma Parameswaran. Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 2007. 145-54.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *East and West in Religion*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1949.
- Rushdie, Salman, Elizabeth West. Ed. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*. Great Britain: Vintage, 1997. ix- xxiii.
- “Secularism and Constitution of India.” *Legal Service India.com*. <http://www.legalservicesindia.com/article/1964/Secularism-and-Constitution-of-India.html>
- Shah, Giriraj. *Glimpses of Indian Culture*. New Delhi: Trishul Publications, 1991.
- Thapar, Romila. “Asokan India and the Gupta Age.” *A Cultural History of India*. Ed. A. L. Basham. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. 42.
- Vivekananda, Swami. *I am a Voice Without a Form*. Hyderabad: Kala Jyoti Pvt. Ltd., 2005.