

A Soul's Exploration for identifying its Cultural uniqueness: Gita Mehta's 'A River Sutra'

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High Lights:

- Indian culture is unique with its multifarious systems, attitudes, practices and expressions.
- Indian epics teach the principles of life by which the individual could lead a successful life.
- The rivers importance need not be clearly explained. But universally and locally its role is clear.

Abstract: This paper emphasizes on Gita Mehta's views on Indian culture and heritage. "A River Sutra" is an exploration of a soul for the cultural identity through which the heritage of India could be viewed. Its unity in diversity is so great and every Indian heart is invigorated by its power. As a Secular and ideal State, India taught its children the Utopian principles from which everybody could visualize the inner channels of the mind and soul. Abdul Kalam says, ancient India is a highly advanced knowledge society from which the sublimity of Indian thought could be comprehended. India's Secularism, Idealism, literature, traditions and its cultural background make it stand at the zenith. Gita Mehta as a Diaspora, extracts the nectar from its culture and kindles the taste buds of the readers to taste it. The reader takes a dip in the ocean of diversified flavors. The writer's great insight into the Indian sage's vision and the writer's skill in showcasing different features of Indian culture and heritage is praise worthy. India is unique in each and every aspect and its influence on the globe can be felt in every walk of life.

Key Words: Gita Mehta, Culture, Mahabharata, Kumbh Mela, Utopia.

A River Sutra highlights Indian culture and heritage which has been an indispensable feature of the people living in India. India is a secular state and its culture is an amalgamation of varied religions. It represents multifarious systems, attitudes, practices and expressions. "It refers to the intellectual development evolved out of the physical and mental training acquired in the course of the ages in a country." Gita Mehta imbibed all its essence and thoroughly discusses the relevance of it in order to understand the inner self. India has taken deep roots of its culture from its glorious past. "Indian civilization is a combination of both Indus valley and the Aryan civilizations. But, the Europeans, the Turks, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs etc. have left their strong impression on Indians. Many authentic sources state that Indian culture as the first and the supreme culture in the world."(1) It constitutes a multitude of languages, religions, arts, cuisines and some of the important aspects of the lives of the Indians. Gita Mehta brings out the true essence of Indian culture and heritage through her skillfully designed stories.

Indian culture is not an artifact, but something that is ever changing and still has a very important role to play in shaping the country's identity. It is also an answer to many of the challenges that the world faces today. India's more than one billion people have descended from a variety of races. The oldest ones are the Negroid aboriginals called the Adivasis or first settlers. Then there are the Dravidians, The Aryans, the Mongols, the Semites and innumerable inter-mixtures of one with the other. Valmiki's *The Ramayana* upholds the values that men should acquire, in order to be righteous. To this day, Lord Sri Rama serves as a role model for mankind. "The great epic, *The Mahabharata* and the sacred text, *The Bhagavad-Gita* teaches us that survival can only be in terms of quality of life. It provides a framework of values to make the Indian culture well-groomed." (1)

India has given birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. The influence of these religions on the world is quite apparent. In India other religions such as Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism etc. are equally respected. Hinduism is called the oldest religion in the world and is often referred to 'Sanatana Dharma' which means 'eternal law'.(2) It dictates some rules all Hindus have to follow irrespective of caste, creed or sect. It is a fusion of different cultures and traditions. Hinduism is a secular religion as it believes in the lofty concept that all paths lead to the same goal, the goal of uniting the soul in the supreme. This quality of accommodating other cultures has allowed people of different religions to live in total peace and harmony in India for centuries together. The meaning of the word 'religion' in true sense is a way of life. So Hinduism is a way of life as it is a collection of thought of several great masters over a period of time.

Hindus worship formless in the form, the ideal in the idol. (2)

Gita Mehta connects the beginning of the story with the Hindu convictions of life and the importance of culture and traditions in everybody's life. The nameless narrator of the story is a bureaucrat reflects upon the third stage of human life, vanaprasthi, as he is retired from his worldly obligations. He says,

I am now a Vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect. (ARSp-1)(3)

He longs very much to withdraw from the world because his wife is passed away and he is no longer a bureaucrat. His desire is to spend his rest of his life at the banks of a river as they are symbolic of nature's beauty which brings solace. So, he applies for the post of a manager of the Narmada Rest House. He is the mouth piece of the writer and narrates the stories in the first person narration and relates Indian culture and heritage to all the characters in the story. The writer brings into light the cultural heritage of India which illustrates Indian customs and traditions. There is a mention of 'Amarkantak', the birth place of the Narmada River and the meeting place of Vindhya and Satpura ranges. It is also called Teerdharaj or king of pilgrimages. The sanctity of Amarkantak is associated with the Narmada River as it is more than a hundred and fifty million years older than the Ganges and so it is considered the most sacred of all the rivers. 'Rudra', Jwaleswar Mahadev is a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. 'Rudra' is the town of Mr. Chagla, the clerk of the Narmada Rest House.

Gita Mehta includes every aspect of Indian culture as they represent the uniqueness of India. The beliefs, familial relationships, the tradition of guru sishya, the relationship between a man and a woman and beyond these, the relationship between the creator and the creation are well defined. "India's culture tended to become tolerant, accommodating, open-minded, deeply but not ostensibly spiritual and concerned with the common human welfare, and then it is due to the great and relentless efforts of our great ancestors and leaders. Thanks to them our country has achieved a common culture, despite a staggering pluralistic society." (4)The Vano village stands for the Hindu beliefs as they solve the problems and diseases can be cured. They believe that the Narmada River has the power to suppress the effect of a snake bite. The villagers recite the invocation of the Narmada,

Salutations in the morning and at night to thee,

O Narmada!Defend me from the serpent's poison.(ARSp-6)(3)

All the stories the Monk's, the Teacher's, the Executive's, the Courtesan's, the Musician's and the Minstrel's reflect the culture of India by which the reader could explore the deeper channels of Indian ideology of life. The relationship between man and nature, monk and his family, material aspects of life, teacher and student, wife an husband, distinction between the rich and the poor, mother and daughter, lover and the beloved, father and daughter, man and art, and more importantly, the ephemeral nature of life is focused. In Indian culture, religion plays a very vital role. The Jain monk depicts the true character of life. His wisdom is not momentary. After leading the life at full length i.e. enjoying all the pleasures as a diamond merchant's son, the first and the second ashramas of his life are completed. The remaining ashramas i.e. vanaprastha and sanyasa are completed in his monkhood. The discourse between the old Jain monk and Ashok, who renounced the world at an early age, reveals the unmistakable philosophical outlook of our great saints. The old monk clarifies his doubts when he asks him about mortals and suspects some upheaval awaits him. He says,

Mortals long to be free. Many men die before they learn the desire for freedom

lies deep within them, like dammed river waiting to be released. But once a

man has had that momentary glimpse of freedom, he needs to be instructed further.(ARSp-31)(3)

When Ashok expresses his desire to renounce the world, the old monk says,

Oh my innocent young friend, can you overcome your disgust at all the things from
which your father's wealth has protected you? Can you beg in the filth of the bazaars?

Can you eat what has been discarded? Until you can do these small things, you

will understand neither the nonviolence of ahimsa nor gain freedom from the world.(ARSp-36) (3)

Another aspect of Indian tradition is tutelage. 'The Teacher's Story' and 'The Musician's Story' discusses the relationship between a music teacher, Master Mohan, who is a Hindu and a small blind boy Imrat, who is a Muslim. Master Mohan, a very kind hearted man, decides to help the blind boy by teaching him songs as Imrat is blessed with a heavenly voice. He teaches him the songs of Kabir, a mystic poet who influenced Bhakti movement in the north. Mirabai and Tulsidas are also associated with this movement and they too played a pivotal role in making Indian culture great.

Kabir Das is a mystic poet and a saint and greatly influenced Bhakti Movement, Sikhism and Sant Math.

Kabir sings,

O seeker, find God

In the breath of all breathing.(ARSp-72)(3)

Chandi Das is a Vaishnavite poet. The writer prefaced the book with one of his songs. Throughout the book the deeper sense of the song is justified. Though these belong to different religious faith, their quest is for the God, the unknowable.

Imrat, the blind boy sings,
Some seek God in Mecca,
Some seek God in Benares,
Each finds his own path and the focus of his worship.(ARSp-74) (3)

The song itself advocates the religious harmony among the people. With their poetry they made visible the soul of India. The writer perhaps sings with full throat the devotion of these saints in order to pay tribute to them. Imrat wants to sing before Amir Rumi's tomb. But he dies singing in praise of God. Master Mohan takes the recorded songs of Imrat to Tariq Mia, an acknowledged Islamic scholar. Thinking that, his songs can be a valued offering to Amir Rumi. Master Mohan feels guilty of the death of Imrat and commits suicide. The culture point is the guru-sishya relationship. The guru is a Hindu and the student is a Muslim and so with Tariq Mia and the bureaucrat. Though, the bureaucrat is a Hindu, he goes to him and shares his views with him. Our culture teaches us universal brotherhood.

South Asian countries believe in superstitions. '**The Executive's Story**' is the story of a young manager at a tea estate is believed to be possessed by a young woman's soul. But some critics say that, the young man is greatly influenced by his grandfather's books and suffers from some psychic disorder. He feels that, he spends the night with a lady Rima. When he has to leave that place, he takes leave of her and from that night, he hears a song,

Bring me my oil and my collyrium. Sister, bring my mirror and the vermilion.
Make haste with my flower garland. My lover waits impatient in the bed. (ARSp-128)(3)

The executive wants to meet Rima and he goes in pursuit of her. But he falls to the ground when he tries to catch her. She escapes and disappears. Next day the guard finds him in woods lying in the mud. So, he is taken to the doctor and later to the priest. The priest advises him,

Worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. Only that
river has been given the power to cure him.(ARSp-137) ((3)

Only the creator can rescue the suffering. The Vano village people say that the young man has denied the power of desire. When the village people take the idol of the goddess in procession along with the young man, the bureaucrat gets confused. His clerk Mr. Chagla explains him the ritual the village people follow is, the young man has to immerse the idol in the Narmada River. And then the young man will be cured. The writer's intention is to emphasize on the point that rituals have become an integral part of Indians life. Chagla explains,

Desire is the origin of life. The serpent in question is desire. Its venom is the harm a man
does when he is ignoring the power of desire.(ARSp-143)(3)

So, desire has to be fulfilled. But, one should deserve it before desiring for something. According to Hindu Dharma, a person must undergo all the four stages without fail. Perhaps our sastras define the duties and responsibilities a person should fulfill. Shakespeare speaks about seven ages of man in 'As You Like It'. Whether they are seven stages or four stages, the philosophy of life is same. It depends on the cultural background of a country.

A River Sutra attracts everybody's attention across the globe as it sketches a clear view of the river's principle and man's dependence on nature. Though they may not have a clear idea of the Indian culture and heritage, whoever has little knowledge of this, really understand the appreciable quality of it. Indian culture has another important feature of religious harmony. 'The Courtesan's Story' portrays the character of the courtesan who narrates the first half of the story and the remaining story is narrated by her daughter. The writer discusses British Imperialism and how Muslim rulers honored the sanctity of the rivers. The courtesan recollects the echoing sound of the words of their Nawab of Shahbag saying,

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.(ARSp-163) (3)

Kings used to patronize courtesans. Gita Mehta gives a vivid picture of the havelis of the courtesans, the houses of aristocrats and the broad streets. The courtesans are believed to be wealthier than the wives of the Nawabs. In those days, courtesans' role is very special as they have to teach a prince, the subtle grading of a

colour, the microtones of melody, to teach a young man's palate to make him an epicure, the alchemy of scents. This is the most demanding part of their skill. The courtesan says,

The courtesans renowned not just for their beauty but for their learning, they were in great demand to educate the heirs to India's mightiest kingdoms. And really, the essence of all our arts was a single art only: to teach noblemen good manners.(ARSp-164)(3)

Mother and daughter relationship is universal. Nobody can be a substitute to a mother. Mother and daughter relationship is described in '**The Courtesan's Story**' and '**The Musician's Story**'. After her mother's death, the courtesan loses her protection from the clutch of the ruffians. She speaks about her daughter. She never permitted her to go out except for weddings, or the birth of a son, or before families celebrating the head of their household. She has to become famous not for her beauty but for her modesty. The courtesan's story highlights the wise actions of our ancestors and perfectly planned system of life. The courtesan becomes nostalgic and feels sorry for their fate as their glory has been faded away and they have become a mere play thing. She says,

Perhaps we were not as educated as the ladies of the Kama Sutra, but we were certainly more accomplished than any other women in India.(ARSp-164)(53)

In '**The Musician's Story**' the daughter feels sorry for the deprivation of physical beauty. Her mother too feels depressed for her child's marriage. Gita Mehta describes a mother's agony with a pathetic tone. The reader feels both sympathetic and empathetic with the mother as well as the daughter.

In Indian culture one can find the emphasis on the knowledge of all the sixty four arts. It is considered that music is the language of God and also has the power to cure mental ailments. Gita Mehta astounds the reader with her immense knowledge of music. '**The Musician's Story**' is a comprehensive study of music. It is a tale of a true guru and a student. The reader gets surprised to realize the feeling of taking a dip in the ocean of music. The writer tries to awaken the soul to experience the sounds in nature, the true music in real sense. The musician's daughter explains the meaning of the first sound of the creation 'om' and the seven notes, the first sounds of music which are described in our classic texts. She unfolds the secrets of music by saying that,

Om is the three worlds.
Om is the three fires.
Om is the three Gods.
Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva. (ARSp-197)(3)

'Om' consists of three and a half sounds. The first sound of 'om' is the apparent world that awakens the consciousness, results in loathsome experience. The second sound of 'om' is the vague world which is like consciousness in our dream out of which we get subtle experience. The third sound is the non manifest world brings sound sleep with which man gets the inherent capacity for coming into being. The half syllable of 'om' is silence, the sound of the unmanifest world from which man experiences the inner peace when he gets the spiritual awakening. This is the ultimate goal and the incomparable target of man. The reader gets the answers for the un-comprehensible questions such as the origin of the sound, its union and the endless joy of the soul. The musician is a genius. He teaches his child the humbleness which is required to master the art, the creation of God. He says,

Always treat your musical instrument with humility. The Veena is only two gourds attached by a piece of wood and a handful of wires. But when they are united, and you create a composition from their union, it must speak the language of the soul.(ARSp-208)(3)

"The oldest preserved examples of Indian music are the melodies of the **Samaveda** (1000 BC) that are still sung in certain Vedic Śrauta(hindustani) sacrifices; this is the earliest account of Indian musical hymns." (5)The writer's objective is to bring into light the importance of art and its origin. Man is a social animal and he should know all the traits to lead a harmonious life. Music teaches us both life skills and core skills which are latent in a person. Music is present in nature itself. The musician takes his daughter to the woods and explains the cries of the animals and relates them to the seven notes of music. It is said that,

"The ancient Greeks had their music confined to four notes. An account of seven notes is found in the Manduki Siksha of Adharva Veda. The seven notes are Shadja, Rishaba, Gandhara, Madhyama, Panchama, Dhaivata and Nishada abbreviated to Sa, Ri, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni, respectively. It is stated that the note produced by the peacock at the highest point of rapture is the note Shadja. Rishaba is said to represent the sound that is made by the cow while calling her calf. Gandhara is the bleat of the goat. Madhyama is identified with the cry of the heron. The nightingale of India the koel sings always in Panchama. Dhaivata is the neighing of the horse. Nishadha is the trumpeting of the elephant".(2)

There was no art until Shiva danced the creation. Music lay asleep inside a motionless rhythm – deep as water, black as darkness, weightless as air.(ARSp-205)(3)

The writer further explains the birth of 'melody', ragas and raginis. A raga is not composed of notes. It is composed of the silence between the notes. The musician says to his daughter,

Imagine a raga as a riverbed. The grace notes are the water of the river. It is written in the **Ragavivodha** that a raga without grace notes is like a night without moonlight, a river without water, a creeper without flowers, a woman without a garment.(ARSp-215)(3)

'And where does all the music go?'(ARSp-207)(3)

He answers her by saying that all the music 'returns to the sound that is so all-encompassing it is silent, the sound we call the secret of the Gandharva Veda. The Vedas say that by playing the veena with the correct rhythm, keeping its notes and its character intact, a man can hear that sound and attain salvation.' (ARSp-207)(3)

Geeta Mehta with her amazing knowledge educates the readers about the true spirit of the Vedas and the awesome wisdom of our ancestors. The vision of the great sages showed the way to the world to understand the real nature of the existence of living beings and its purpose. Those who understand the undeniable concept of this philosophy of life, feel distressed to view India in her dirt filled clothes. The writer tries to bring back the glory by gently explaining the ideology of our visionaries with the help of ordinary characters. They could foresee the present state of Indians. By the time we comprehend their foresight, we may damage ourselves. But hopefully, that can be reparable to some extent.

The parental care as it was discussed earlier, the sad plight of the musician and the wise solution that her father shows by asking her to take refuge in music, features the parent's guiding spirit in freeing the child from the unendurable pain of deprivation of physical beauty. Indian culture and heritage is matchless to any other world cultures as it teaches endurance and understanding god's traits. When she is depressed about her ugliness, her mother's despair of her uncertain future loomed before her as mysterious as the changes of her body, she begs her father to continue her musical education. Her father warns her by saying,

Remember, if I teach you the raginis I will be giving you as wife to gods, the gods of music. Such a contract cannot be broken. It will be a marriage sealed by Shiva himself.(ARSp-214)(3)

In each story, the writer deals with the impermanence of life and how the Narmada rescues all the characters. The musician's daughter is deprived of physical beauty and she is disappointed as her bridegroom is betrothed in marriage to someone else's daughter. She explains the bureaucrat her father's wish. He says,

I must understand that I am the bride of music, not of a musician but it is an impossible penance that he demands of me, to express desire in my music when I am dead inside. Do you think it can be done? Do you think this river has such power?(ARSp-225,226)(3)

The musician's daughter is on a pilgrimage to the Narmada River as she has to meditate on the waters of the Narmada, the Shiva's penance, until she has cured herself of her attachment to what has passed and can become again the ragini to every raga. Almost all the characters seek the refuge of the Narmada River. The courtesan's daughter jumps into the river in order to purify herself of the sins. The Executive, the Jain Monk and the Naga Baba too were rescued by the holy river. In the story, Dr. Mitra and the bureaucrat discusses the power of the River Narmada when they learn about Nitin Bose's case. Through their conversation, the reader comes to know about the stories related to the Narmada. Dr.Mitra says,

You know, the great Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the Narmada. I suppose even the Greeks and the Alexandrines had heard about the Narmada's holiness and the religious suicides at Amarkanthak-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. Her holiness is believed to dispel the malevolent effects of Saturn so all manner of epileptics, depressives, and other unfortunates rush to her banks.(ARSp-152)(3)

The rivers importance isn't written into the traditions of the religions but locally its role in society is clear. The river plays a role cleaning many, providing a place for suicide, a place for rebirth, and a place for extreme piety. The river itself is a goddess and people respect it as such.

Another important aspect of Hindu culture is, Kumbha Mela. "Kumbh Mela is the most sacred of all the pilgrimages. Thousands of holy men and women attend, and the auspiciousness of the festival is in part attributable to this. The sadhus are seen clad in saffron sheets with Vibhuti ashes dabbed on their skin as per the

requirements of ancient traditions. Some, called naga_sanyasis/sadhus, may not wear any clothes even in severe winter.” (6)

Gita Mehta writes about the Naga Sadhus to evince the Hindu culture from which the reader can have a clear picture of a true ascetic life and its secrets. About twenty thousand Naga ascetics participated in the Indian Mutiny to battle with the red-coated Englishmen.

The conversation between the bureaucrat and Tariq Mia introduces the characters Naga Baba, Minstrel and the song of the Narmada. The song of the Narmada is a poem by Sankaracharya, “is the most well known profounder of Advaita philosophy. It points out oneness of Atman (soul) and Brahman (the absolute) and gives a grand vision of oneness and destroys ignorance which is the root of all sorrows and fears.”(7) The song is taught to a small girl whom Naga Baba has brought from the brothel's house and names her as Uma. Later she becomes a river minstrel.

Naga Baba undergoes all the hard tests of his guru to meditate on the god of death in order to attain salvation. The writer explains the undeniable realities of the fourth stage of the Hindu dharma. The fourth stage is sanyasa, which is similar to both Buddhism and Jainism in which an individual should endure the extremes of heat and cold. He has to visit the cremation ground, live in dirt, forget shame, pain and fear to become a Naga Baba. Gita Mehta discusses the same doctrine of Jainism. The old Jain monk explains Ashok who wanted to renounce the world, the Jain religious practices. They are almost like Buddhist principles. He states that,

A Jain monk seeks to free himself of the fetters of worldly desire through the vows of poverty, celibacy and non-violence.(ARSp-11)(3)

Naga Baba is a wandering ascetic with ash smeared body; matted hair and the human skull from which he ate and drank are all terrifying reminders of death to ordinary people. But this way of life teaches us that man's inherent nature is divinity and he searches for that despite all the odds, do his duties without any expectations to lead a detached life. Finally, the soul gets united with god.

To everybody's surprise, Naga Baba appears as Prof. Shankar who has taken up the charge of the archeologist to the Narmada dig. He comes to the Narmada Rest House along with his team where he meets the bureaucrat. Prof. Shankar authored a book 'The Narmada Survey' which made a sensation in archaeological circles. Prof. Shankar speaks about the immortality of the river. Gita Mehta deals with both myth and reality to make it clear that unchangeability and immortality are not the same. Unchangeability is fixedness. Immortality is everlasting. The references of the *Mahabharata*, Kipling's *Jungle Book*, Kalidasa's *The Cloud Messenger* and *Shakuntala* mirrorize Indian culture and heritage at the Narmada River bank. The bureaucrat finally understands the bare fact that man is the greatest truth, nothing beyond. She concludes the book with the song of the Narmada sung by the minstrel Uma, whom Naga baba has trained.

Indian culture is a communion of different cultures emerged out of its secularism. Indian philosophy defines religion as a way of life. By practicing religion, a person can understand the true meaning of life and attain salvation. All religions preach the same but paths are different. Gita Mehta's noble mind fabricated the true spirit of Indian culture and heritage, secularity of thought, nature's role in a human beings life and above all, man's quest for truth and introspection of a soul. Ignorance gives birth to all the ills which lead to complete breakdown.

The Hindu concept of 'Moksha' and the Buddhist concept of 'Nirvana' may be thought of as a kind of utopia. In Hinduism or Buddhism, however, Utopia is not a place but a state of mind. A belief, that if we are able to practice meditation without continuous stream of thoughts, we are able to reach enlightenment. This enlightenment promises exit from the cycle of life and death, relating back to the concept of utopia.”(8.) A **utopia** is a community or society possessing highly desirable or near perfect qualities. The word was coined by Sir Thomas More in Latin for his 1516 book *Utopia*, describing a fictional island society in the Atlantic Ocean. The term has been used to describe both intentional communities that attempt to create an ideal society, and imagined societies portrayed in fiction. It has spawned other concepts, most prominently dystopia.(8)

The writer's strong belief in the concept of religious utopia is similar to the expression in the article 'Utopia'. Indian's philosophical outlook through which salvation is attained is clearly comprehensible. The mention of all the great saints from different religious disciplines whose goal is to attain Moksha is to highlight the unity of thought, the true religious spirit that is the highest state of mind a thoughtless state. Gita Mehta's effort in bringing out the sublimity of the Indian sages is noteworthy. They are ideal in every sense and their accomplishment in attaining salvation showed a way to the world.

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