

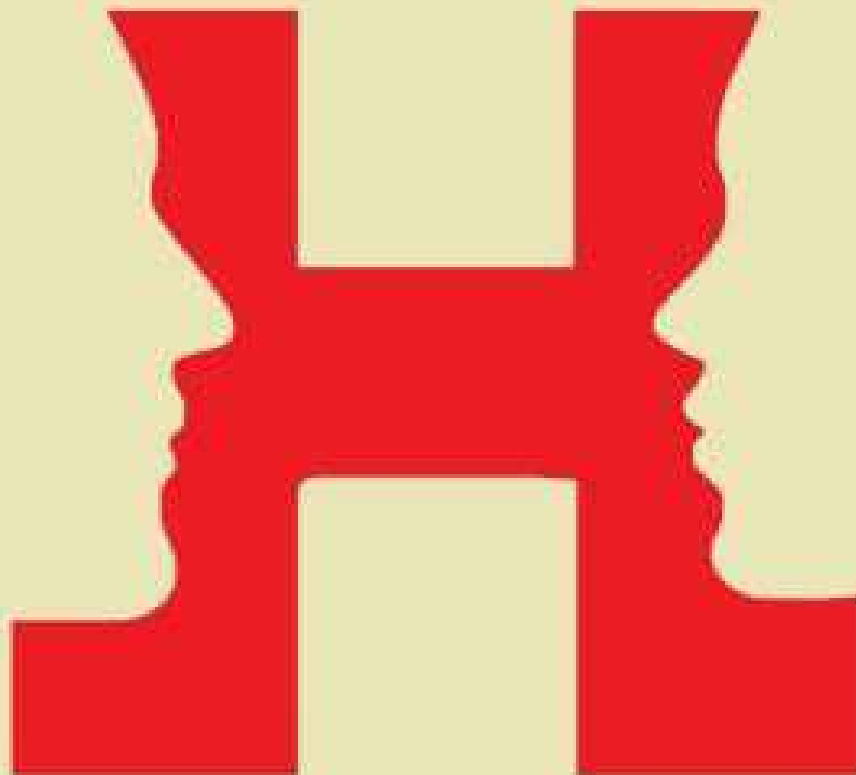
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**Dr Kalyan Gangarde**

# CHRONICLE OF HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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**EXPLORING THE MULTIFACETED TAPESTRY OF INDIAN CULTURE:  
GITA MEHTA'S 'A RIVER SUTRA'****Dr. Raheel K. Quraishi**

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**Abstract:** *Gita Mehta's* second novel, 'A River Sutra', published in 1993, holds significant importance and delves deeply into its subject matter. The novel's central theme revolves around India's sacred Narmada River, around which the stories are intricately woven, akin to modified Sutras. The novel's vitality flows through the rich cultural and mythological veins of India, drawing inspiration from classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu folklore, Sufi poetry, Indian classical music, and various other cultural elements. It serves as a reflection and celebration of India's profound humanist traditions.

While the novel encompasses various facets of India, it is the timeless essence of the country that captures the author's and readers' interests alike. The Narmada River symbolizes a sense of unity, and the novel explores the harmonious integration of different religions and philosophies within the river's geographical context. By intricately detailing the elements of ancient Indian culture, 'A River Sutra' emerges as a modern Indian work that addresses the challenges faced by contemporary India.

**Keywords:** Indian, Culture, River, Story, Narmada, Love, Place, Human, Novel, Hindu.

Gita Mehta's 'A River Sutra' represents a significant effort by a contemporary Indian writer to reconcile her relationship with Hindu culture, from which she hails. The novel serves as a spotlight on the diverse facets of Indian culture, exploring various perspectives associated with Indian religions, folklore, and more. The story is narrated by a protagonist who encounters different individuals, each with their unique stories. These narratives are anchored by three core themes: love, death, and the Narmada River.

Initially, 'A River Sutra' might seem like a straightforward account of the protagonist's belief that renunciation involves physical withdrawal from the world, typically in a remote place. However, this perception is far from accurate. The novel delves into Indian Metaphysics, with the word 'Sutra' in the title signifying a set of principles. In this context, the principles of life are imparted by the Narmada River. The river plays a central role in teaching about human life, the material world, the spiritual realm, and the essence of existence. Gita Mehta thoroughly explores its significance in the quest for self-understanding.

India draws deeply from its rich cultural heritage, which includes diverse languages, religions, and arts. Through 'A River Sutra', Gita Mehta effectively captures the essence of Indian culture and heritage, revealing how it continually evolves and shapes the nation's identity.

In the novel, all the characters find resolution and enlightenment through their interactions with the Narmada River. The river's significance is deeply ingrained in religious traditions, and its role in society

is profound. It serves as a source of purification, a place for contemplation and meditation, a site for acts of devotion, and even a location for tragic acts of self-sacrifice. The Narmada River is revered as a goddess by the people who hold it in the highest esteem.

As the narrative shifts focus towards Indian culture, its diversity, and its multifaceted connection to Indian religions and folklore, the protagonist encounters various individuals, each with their own unique stories. Although these stories may appear disjointed when examined individually, a common theme of love threads its way through the text, unifying the tales. Furthermore, the narratives are bound together by three fundamental elements: love, death, and the Narmada River.

While 'A River Sutra' may initially appear to be a simple story of the narrator's belief in renunciation as physical withdrawal from the world, it transcends this surface-level interpretation. It serves as a piece of Indian Metaphysics and, from another perspective, as an exploration and representation of Indian culture intended for Western readers. Some critics have characterized it as a pseudo-philosophical endeavour, but it primarily aims to reconnect with cultural heritage and assert cultural identity.

The novel consists of six stories: The Monk's story, The Musician's story, The Executive's story, The Courtesan's story, The Naga Baba's story, and the Minstrel's story. These stories vividly depict Hindu and Jain monks, courtesans, minstrels, diamond merchants, tea executives, Muslim priests, music teachers, tribal folklore, and anthropologists. While drawing inspiration from classical Sanskrit drama and Hindu mythology, the novel also touches on themes such as Indian classical music and the legends of Shiva-Parvati and the birth of the Narmada. Repeated references to Kamadev, the God of Love, and the mysteries of the human heart add depth to the narrative. Despite drawing from ancient Indian traditions, ideologies, and folklore, 'A River Sutra' is ultimately a modern work of fiction that explores the nature of life and its complexities.

For the casual reader, 'A River Sutra' presents a collection of colourful stories that flow seamlessly through the narrative. Initially, the novel introduces a bureaucrat-narrator who contemplates renouncing the world and living a secluded life along the Narmada's banks. However, as each story unfolds, the novel evolves and reveals diverse facets: it becomes the story of the Narmada River, a symbol of Indian culture; Shiva's penance and the birth of the Narmada; an exploration of tribal traditions; and an individual's quest to comprehend life's meaning. Ultimately, the narrator also comes to realize that detachment is best achieved through experience. The author explores various human desires, including Nirvana, love, peace, wealth, devotion, and immortality. Thus, the novel serves as an exploration of life and its philosophical underpinnings.

In essence, 'A River Sutra' can be interpreted on multiple levels: as a treatise on Indian concepts of animism, materialism, and spirituality; as a work depicting a mythical India; and as a text that celebrates the oral tradition of storytelling. Nearly all the characters in the stories converge on the banks of the Narmada River for various reasons, be it renunciation, seeking tranquillity, or contemplating life and death.

Overall, Gita Mehta's 'A River Sutra' is a rich tapestry of interconnected narratives that illuminate different facets of Indian culture, spirituality, and the human experience.

### **Conclusion:**

The story is brimming with ancient beliefs and superstitions, offering glimpses into tribal legends, such as the tale of the tribal hero and the bee sting. It also explores the tribal faith in a goddess capable of curing the possessed and the superstitious notion that venturing into the jungle during a lunar eclipse can drive a person mad. One intriguing aspect to examine is Nitin Bose's journey into the jungle on a dark night during an eclipse and the involvement of Rima, a tribal woman from an Assam tea garden who casts a black magic spell on him. Even more fantastical is the belief held by a remote Assam priest that the Narmada River possesses the power to heal the mentally ill and the possessed. Surprisingly, the civil servant character in the story appears unperturbed by these tales and superstitions, neither questioning them nor appearing to hold any belief in them.

Another superstition woven into the narrative revolves around a green oval stone found in the river, believed to be a Shiv-lingam. Professor Shankar, who remains sceptical about the river's divine qualities, might possess a scientific or archaeological explanation for this phenomenon, but unfortunately, he never pursues this inquiry.

In 'A River Sutra', Gita Mehta skilfully weaves elements of her cultural heritage, folklore, history, and geography to encourage readers to view her homeland through the perspective of a migrant. This narrative embodies the nostalgic framework of immigrant writers, aiming to reconcile the tension between the concept of 'home' and that of 'not home'. Through these richly textured stories and superstitions, Mehta invites readers to explore the intricate tapestry of India's cultural and spiritual diversity, presenting it as a land where ancient beliefs and modern realities coexist.

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