

## The Theme of Spirituality in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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### Abstract

Gita Mehta is one of the most significant writers in Indian Writing in English. Her writing mainly deals with Indian reality of social, cultural, spiritual, traditional, and political condition of India. Indian women are confined in the name of religion, customs of spirituality, society and tradition. Mehta's female protagonists want to break such social taboos and establish an identity in the society. *A River Sutra* is her novel which was published in 1993. Mehta has touched up the sense of male dominance, racial discrimination and one's continuous search for spirituality in this novel. This article will show how the novel *A River Sutra* can be read from a spiritual perspective. The key argument of the paper deals with ancient India's social, cultural and spiritual reality are a highly advanced knowledge society from which the sublimity of Indian thought could be comprehended.

**Keywords:** religion, social, culture, spiritual, morality, tradition

### Introduction

Gita Mehta includes every aspect of Indian culture as they represent the uniqueness of spirituality of India. The beliefs, familial relationships, the tradition of guru sishya, the true 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, social, cultural, and spiritual, despite a staggering pluralistic society." (4) The narrator longs very much to withdraw from the world because his wife is passed away. His desire is to spend his rest of his life at the banks of a spiritual 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. Her narration and relates India's spirituality and heritage to all the characters in the story.

The novel *A River Sutra* highlights India's spiritual and heritage which has been an indispensable feature of the people living in India. Our country is a secular state and its

culture reality 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.” Mehta imbibed all its essence and 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. 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, and some of the important aspects of the lives of the Indians.

Mehta brings out the real essence of India’s spiritual heritage, tradition through her 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 of spirituality. It is also an answer to many of the challenges and possibilities 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 (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 Mahabharata* (the great epic) and *The Bhagavad-Gita* (the sacred text) teaches us that survival can only be in terms of quality of life. It provides a framework of values to make the Indian spirituality well groomed.” (1) India has given birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. The influence of these religions on the world is quite apparent for spirituality. In India other religions such as Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism etc. are equally respected for morality and spirituality.

In India, Hinduism is a secular religion. It believes in the lofty concept that all paths lead to the same goal, the goal of uniting the soul in the supreme power. This real 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 real life. So Hinduism is a way of spiritual 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) Mehta connects the beginning of the story with the Hindu convictions of life and the importance reality of social, cultural, spiritual and traditions in everybody’s life. The 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. (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 socio, cultural, and spirituality 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 and husband, distinction between the rich and the poor, mother and son, 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 tradition and spirituality, culture and 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. (31)

The spiritual speaker, Ashok expresses his desire and feeling 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 begin 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. (36) Another aspect of Indian tradition and spiritual is tutelage. *The Musician's Story* discusses the relationship between a music teacher, Master Mohan, (Hindu) and a small blind boy Imrat, (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 soft voice. He teaches him the spiritual songs of Kabir, a mystic and spiritual 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 spirituality very great. Kabir Das is a mystic and spiritual 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. (72) Chandi Das is a Vaishnavite poet. Mehta prefaced the novel with one of his songs. Throughout the novel the deeper sense of the spiritual song is justified. Though these belong to different religious and spiritual 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.(74) The song itself advocates the religious and spiritual harmony among the people. With their poetry they made visible the spiritual 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 socio-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 spiritual reality teaches us universal brotherhood. South Asian countries believe in superstitions.

The novel 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 spirituality and heritage, whoever has little knowledge of this, really understand the appreciable quality of it. Indian spirituality has another important feature of religious harmony of life. 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. Mehta describes a mother's agony with a pathetic life. The reader can feel 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. Mehta astounds the reader with her immense knowledge of music. *The Musician's Story* is a comprehensive study of music. It is a story 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 real music in real sense of spirituality. 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. (197) "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. (208)

The narrator with her amazing knowledge educates the readers about the true spirit of spirituality about 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. Mehta tries to bring back the glory by gently explaining the ideology of our visionaries (spirituality) 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 spirituality and tradition, culture and heritage are 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 regains 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. (214)

Normally, the river plays a role cleaning many, providing a place for suicide, a place for rebirth, and a place for extreme piety. It is a goddess and people respect of spirituality. Another important aspect of Hindu social, cultural, and spiritual 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 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 references of book the *Mahabharata*, Kipling's *Jungle Book*, Kalidasa's *The Cloud Messenger* and *Shakuntala* mirrorize Indian culture and heritage at the Narmada River bank. Mehta finally understands the bare fact that man is the greatest truth, nothing beyond. She concludes the novel 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 Hindu religion as a way of life. By practicing religion, a person can understand the real meaning of real life and attain salvation. All religions preach the same but paths are different. 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.

## Conclusion

Thus, in India, the Hindu religious 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. Knowledge of belief, that if we are able to practice meditation without continuous stream of thoughts, we are able to reach spiritual enlightenment. This spiritual 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. 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. Finally, 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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