

# The Unchaste Narmada: River of Penance and Lust

JULIE BANERJEE MEHTA

The stream took on the form of a woman—a beautiful virgin, innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl...<sup>1</sup>

From Shiva's penance you became water.  
From water you became a woman  
So beautiful that gods and ascetics  
Their loins hard with desire  
Abandoned their contemplations,  
To pursue you...  
The Terrible One was moved to laughter.  
To watch you the Destroyer said,  
Oh damsel of the beautiful hips,  
Evoker of Narma, lust,  
Be known as Narmada  
Holiest of Rivers.<sup>2</sup>

“Did you know ‘narmada’ means a whore in Sanskrit?”<sup>3</sup>

This project examines the treatment of foundational Hindu myths embedded in the novel *A River Sutra*, in order to explore how they coax out of the religious tradition, a cluster of both sacred and profane trajectories that either reflect or distort the archetypes. I argue that Gita Mehta represents the Narmada River as a bridge between the worlds of myth and reality, as an ideological consensus

between Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism, and sutures her narrative to the pressing issues of ecological destruction to this river.

The plot is deceptively simple: the Narrator, a retired Indian civil servant, thinks he has escaped life in the city by seeking refuge and spending his twilight years managing a government rest-house overlooking the sacred Narmada. Almost instantly he realises his folly and finds himself encountering life in the raw, more so than he had as a bureaucrat. Strategically located near the sacred sites along the river, the Narmada rest-house represents a confluence of sacred and secular spaces. The inn becomes the crossroads of the lives of the many guests that flow, like Narmada's own tides and indeterminate geography, in and out of its doors. As the ascetic Professor Shankar points out to the Narrator, "You have chosen the wrong place to flee the world my friend . . . too many lives converge on these banks."<sup>4</sup> The ex-civil servant becomes the storyteller as his life collides with those of ascetics, minstrels, tribals, and monks who all have their stories to tell. The six stories, loosely bound together by an active Narrator who performs the function of a *sutradhar*<sup>5</sup> or a storyteller, are about a young and wealthy diamond merchant who becomes a Jain monk, the murder of an innocent singer with an exceptional musical talent, the seduction of a tea plantation executive by a tribal woman who possesses his spirit, the tale of a courtesan abducted by a bandit and finally driven to suicide, the story of a musician who cannot come to terms with her physical disfigurement and consequent abandonment by her betrothed, and the tale of an eminent anthropologist who becomes a mendicant of the *Naga* cult (followers of a *tantric* band of Siva worshippers), and subsequently returns to his profane existence after saving a child from being sold into prostitution. The Narrator serves as a link between the sacred and the secular spheres "by inhabiting an autonomous cultural space that allows him religions and mythologies."<sup>6</sup> The Goddess Narmada, in this novel, is referred to as "Her holiness,"<sup>7</sup> and "a whore".<sup>8</sup>

## MYTHS: BRIDGING EAST AND WEST

In the first part of this paper, I explore the nuanced ways in which author Gita Mehta creates the six stories that reflect and re-present the myth of the river goddess Narmada. Hidden among these six narratives is yet another myth—that of the Aryan immortal who slumbers on the banks of the river Narmada,<sup>9</sup> in deathless sleep—which I unpack in the course of my analysis. And in the course of my interrogation, I unpack the myth of the *Naga* that has a strong pan-Indian presence, connecting East and West—not just Assam and Gujarat, but India and Greece as well.

In *A River Sutra*, one of the characters, Dr. Mitra, points out that the Alexandrine geographer Ptolemy wrote about the Narmada: “The ancient Greeks would probably have sympathised with the river’s mythology but at least they only had to deal with one set of myths, whereas Indians have never been prepared to settle for a single mythology if they could squeeze another hundred in.”<sup>10</sup> In Mehta’s novel, the story of Nitin Bose and Rima reveals how patriarchy must ultimately learn to respect the power of the divine feminine that resides in a myriad manifestations: in the sacred waters of the Narmada, in the serpent cult of the Vanos, and in the character of the tealeaf-picker, Rima.

Since *A River Sutra* incorporates both oral and written traditions of mythmaking (including myths from Hinduism as well as those based in folk cults) these narratives lend themselves to my analysis of how sacred myths evolve in a profane framework.<sup>11</sup> In *The Positivity of the Christian Religion*, Hegel maintains, “Every nation has its own imagery, its gods, angels, devils, or saints, who live on in the nation’s traditions, whose stories and deeds the nurse tells to her charges and so wins them over by impressing their imagination.”<sup>12</sup> Although he was critical of the domination of the Indian family by patriarchy, it is easy to connect Hegel with postcolonial theorists

such as Dipankar Gupta<sup>13</sup> and Gopal Balakrishnan.<sup>14</sup> The Hegelian idea of metaphors that inspire and enliven the national imagination, sparking and awakening the “sacred” and the “secular,” is reiterated by both these postcolonial theorists. As suggested by Gupta’s root metaphors, which posit: “A multivocal regnant set of meanings of root metaphors allows us a perspective on culture that is neither individualistic nor consensual. The multiple saliences in the regnant set of meanings arises from varying locations of actors and groups in society,” Hegel’s claim too seems to support the argument that “gods and nation’s heroes and myths are all linked with public spheres of national events, memorials and temples.”<sup>15</sup> A useful lens to view the idea of root metaphors is to turn to Stephen C. Pepper’s *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence*. Written in 1942, the seminal study presents four relatively adequate world hypotheses (or world views or conceptual systems) in terms of their root metaphors: formism (similarity), mechanism (machine), contextualism (historical act), and organicism (living system). In *World Hypotheses*, Pepper demonstrates the error of *logical positivism*, that there is no such thing as data free from interpretation, and that root metaphors are necessary in epistemology. In other words, objectivity is a myth because there is no such thing as pure, objective fact. Consequently, an analysis is necessary to understand how to interpret these ‘facts.’ Pepper does so by developing the “[root metaphor method, ...] and outlines what he considers to be four basically adequate world hypotheses: formism, mechanism, contextualism, and organicism.” He identifies the strengths and weaknesses of each of the world hypotheses as well as the paradoxical and sometimes mystifying effects of the effort to synthesize them.<sup>16</sup>

I argue that the sacred and the profane are constantly blurring boundaries and borders because by their very nature they are “two faces of the same coin” and cannot be contained within paradigmatic geographies. And Eliade fits well with my own argument about the boundless fluidity in the physicality of water, which by its very nature

resists constraint and containment. Moreover, *A River Sutra*, with refreshing contemporaneity, echoes Eliade's multiple theory of cluster myths, where the principal myth of the ascetic Siva and his daughter Narmada is echoed in the profane canvas of parent-child relationships that punctuate the many tellings. These tellings include the story of the musician who was deformed and stood up on her wedding day by her betrothed, but was vindicated by the love of her father; the story of Shankar, the archaeologist-turned *Naga* ascetic and Uma, the female infant whom he rescued from an abusive brothel-keeper; the story of the beautiful young woman who fell in love with the bandit who forcefully abducted her, and her meeting with her weary mother after years; and the story of the exceptionally talented infant, the singer Imrat, who was murdered because he had a melodious voice, and who left an inconsolable teacher-father grieving for him. Thus, Eliade avers in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*: "The sacred is significantly different from the profane, yet it may manifest itself no matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural object into a paradox by means of a hierophany" (the manifestation of the sacred).<sup>17</sup>

Postcolonial activist-writers such as Gita Mehta, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy concur that their politics and their fiction are affected by the myths they heard during their childhood. Arundhati Roy acknowledges that "listening to stories, or reading them as a child—I read voraciously as a child—made you think deeply. We didn't have television so hours were spent in contemplation when we went fishing".<sup>18</sup> Later, the stories "drove" her to write about Velutha and Ammu: "I had two options: writing or madness." Amitav Ghosh, on the other hand, celebrated the oral repository of stories that he had heard right from the time he left Dhaka, in 1965, when he was only seven years old: "All that I heard and saw became a part of a strange and moving experience and I remembered the details when I was working on *The Shadowlines*".<sup>19</sup> But it is Gita Mehta, perhaps, who most succinctly concedes how inspirational myths have

invigorated her as a writer:

Myths are extremely powerful tools and can convey a whole range of meanings. As I say in my preface to *Karma Cola*,<sup>20</sup> since East and West increasingly meet under such unlikely circumstances, it might be wise to remember two myths—one Eastern, one Western—which provide a cautionary note to the human race. The Indian myth maintains we are living in the age of Kalyug which presages the end of the world. Kalyug is characterised by speed. Speed, being the enemy of reflection, will spread fantasy with such velocity that humans, in their pursuit of escape, will ultimately destroy themselves. The Western myth, as expressed in Goethe's *Faust*, introduces the devil as a poodle, welcomed as something harmless and amusing until it turns into the implacable force that exacts damnation as the price of greed.<sup>21</sup>

### THE NARMADA: BRIDGING THE SPACE OF MYTH AND THE SPACE OF REALITY

In the course of this interrogation of the flux between the sacred and the profane I pose a string of questions: Does the sacred permeate the profane? Is the private appropriated by the public sphere? How do the stories created by human beings become mirrors in which the myths of the divine are reflected?

The river, like the government-run Narmada rest-house, where the nameless Narrator resides, and through which a motley brood of hustlers, bandits, ascetics, archaeologists, civil servants, and tribals constantly transit, becomes what Foucault terms heterotopia. In "Different Spaces" Foucault uses this term to refer to actual locations that can both reflect and challenge the stratifications of other social spaces or times in a single locale.<sup>22</sup> The Narmada, as a river, becomes an "excellent"<sup>23</sup> heterotopic space since the Narmada River<sup>24</sup> and its

surrounding areas are both a sacred crucible (where people fasting unto death or immolating themselves on its banks, or drowning in her waters, gain release from the cycle of birth and rebirth), and a profane space (where child prostitution, abject poverty, larceny, and killings are a part of everyday existence, as the six tales bear testimony).

I also draw attention to how the divine feminine, as reflected in the geo-body of the goddess Narmada, actually encourages analysis of fluidity, and in turn infects the reading of the text itself by releasing fluidity: a profound subject is explored with effortless ease, and enables the prose of *A River Sutra* to flow like a sacred stream. The lucidity of the narrative style has a certain luminosity about it that reminds the reader of the  *jyoti*  or light that is associated with this river in related myths where she becomes the space where immortals pass through the mortal plane. This encourages the reader to dissolve the rigid binary of boundaries, ultimately enabling the Narmada's powers to infiltrate the text.<sup>25</sup>

Mehta's novel deploys transformability (which occurs when the profane is represented in the sacred, and the sacred in the profane) in order to resist colonial and nationalistic projects to contain women in the making of a postcolonial nation. Here masculine identity is represented as a "flight from the feminine," and male asceticism and penance is represented as an escape from involvement with human relationships: the archaeologist V.V. Shankar who becomes an ascetic comes back to a "normal life" when his asceticism is touched by the plight of Uma, the female infant he rescues from a brothel. Theweleit's argument that male fear stems from women's overwhelming capacity to arouse male desire, and makes the male perpetually anxious about the loss of agency and ego, is appropriately applied to Mehta's narrative.<sup>26</sup> The dread of women and the fear of subjugation by the female directly affects male agency in all six narratives that make up the novel. With versatility and intertextuality, Mehta employs the argument that there is a deep-seated fear at the

heart of patriarchy of this uncontainable quality of feminine power, through each of the six short narratives. This *sutra*, or thread, as reflected in the title of the novel, forms a link or a bridge across the narratives. In each story Mehta sources, targets, narrates, and unpacks male anxiety about female sexuality and its latent power. The process of exploration may be different every time, but the underlying message is a series of echoes of the original Narmada myth, which are reflected in the question the Narrator asks repeatedly through the novel: “I imagine the ascetics sitting in the darkness like myself, their naked bodies smeared in ash . . . with the waves of the Narmada gently lapping at their thighs. And I wonder what their thoughts are about this loose-limbed seductress, the beautiful Narmada, Siva’s daughter?”<sup>27</sup> The reader is constantly persuaded to wander between the sacred, mythical world and the profane, mundane world, and to ponder “whether the ascetics are threatened by the beauty of the river from their meditations,” which is their path to ultimate power, and the key to release from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The invocation of the Narmada finds articulation in the pre-colonial *Skandapurana* and in the *Ramayana*. The Siva myth and Shankar’s tale are simultaneously told in contemporary fiction and undergirded by a common philosophy of renunciation, a pivotal principle in Hindu and Jain thought. They echo the story of renunciation of Ashok, the Jain monk in Mehta’s novel. These two tales of Siva and Shankar signpost the myth of creation of the River Narmada from Lord Siva’s meditative energies, which are evident in Jain ideals of asceticism and giving up worldly pleasures. In the myth of the Narmada’s creation, Siva’s intense meditation gives rise to beads of sweat. The sweat, in turn, is transformed into a rivulet, which becomes a turbulent torrent—the river goddess Narmada. What is striking is Mehta’s strategic placement of the story of the Jain monk’s renunciation that is used as a curtain raiser to the six compelling narratives. The Jain faith’s name derives from the word *Jina*, meaning conqueror or liberator. And as Pratapaditya Pal states in *The Peaceful*

*Liberators*: “Jains believe that an immortal and indestructible soul (*jiva*) resides within every living entity, no matter how small. Passions such as desire, greed, and hatred render the soul vulnerable to the effects of former deeds (*karma*), which cause the soul to suffer from repeated rebirth . . .” Pal posits that the “final goal of a Jain—like that of a Hindu or Buddhist—is to sever the chain of rebirth and achieve a state of liberation known as *kaivalya*, *moksha*, or *nirvana*.” Some members of the Jain faith, as well as Buddhists and Hindus, become homeless wanderers in search of truth and liberation. Such people are known as *sramanas*, and their tradition *sramanical*.

In her choice of the Jain monk’s story and its juxtaposition with the story of the Muslim boy Imrat and the Hindu teacher Master Mohan, Mehta signposts the heterogeneity of the Narmada which is a pilgrimage centre, not just for followers of the Hindu god Siva but also those of other faiths. In this way, Mehta represents the river as possessing a multiplicity of identities, and affording the river a certain intermediacy, in-between-ness and interchangeability, that challenges any purist reading of these stories. All the tales echo the running theme of pilgrimage on the banks of the Narmada, and each narrative underscores the importance of this river as a centre for pilgrims of many faiths. As Phyllis Granoff points out:

The medieval Jain ritual of pilgrimage did not develop in a vacuum. It clearly reflects religious preoccupations that we might call pan-Indian, for we find similar tendencies in Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>28</sup>

The reader is induced almost immediately into realising the importance of celibacy for the male aspiring to achieve spiritual power. In the passages that trace Ashok’s evolution from playboy to priesthood, the reader is confronted by stringent rituals, even violent scenes of horror as in the plucking out the hair from his head in the initiation ceremony into monkhood. The monk relates the essence of his vow

to the Narrator:

You will be deprived of the ministrations of any woman lest she arouse your desire.<sup>29</sup>

Only austere asceticism and shunning of sexual desire, domination, and pleasure of women would allow the Jain monk to possess new powers. In order to gain spiritual powers, the Jain monk, like the *Naga* ascetic, would have to give up the “ownership” of women. Mehta’s account reiterates Klaus Theweleit’s theory that in order to be free of the fear of feminine domination, men must first relinquish the desire to possess and dominate women.<sup>30</sup> Mehta fictionalises the *diksha*, or ritual, of renouncing the world in order to become a Jain monk in the first story about the Palanpuri Gujarati monk Ashok.<sup>31</sup> According to James Laidlaw, this ceremony replicates the renunciation of the spiritual leader of the Jains, Mahavira, who “took a year to give away his vast wealth (*varshi dan*) before renouncing”.<sup>32</sup> Laidlaw explains the *diksha* ceremony:

Mr. Atul Kumar Shah, a twenty-nine year-old bachelor and a diamond merchant based in Bombay, renounced his very considerable fortune to become a monk of the *Tapa Gacch* order. According to newspaper reports of this event, Mr. Shah rode in a chariot in a procession of seven elephants, fifty horses, forty camels, and hundreds of dancers and acrobats, and threw handfuls of silver coins, diamonds, and pearls into the crowd,

just as Mehta’s unnamed Narrator does, in his recounting of the Jain monk Ashok’s induction into abstinence and asceticism.

The story of the Jain monk Ashok underpins the main *sutra*, or thread, of the male fear of being dominated by woman’s sexual powers, weaving all the stories into a seamless tapestry of tellings. It also

mirrors the influence of the sacred myth of Lord Siva's asceticism—and the immaculate conception of his beautiful daughter the river goddess Narmada—on the lives of monks, bounty hunters, pilgrims, retirees, archaeologists, ascetics, prostitutes, doctors, hustlers, and tribals who inhabit the banks of the long and winding Narmada. Ashok, the virile diamond merchant turned celibate Digambara<sup>33</sup> ascetic, admits to his earlier need to dominate women in his youth in order to feel empowered:

For a while it seemed my father had calculated accurately. Knowing my years of pleasure in Europe were limited I had seized on my irresponsible life with hectic delight. Beautiful women were lured by my fast sports cars, the wealth I squandered in fashionable discotheques, and by myself—for I was thought to be handsome with my aquiline features and my slender, muscular body. Then too, the family maintained luxurious holiday homes and I was generous with my invitations.<sup>34</sup>

In his conversation with the novel's nameless Narrator, the monk further confesses an impulse to "own" his women:

If the indolent starlets from the film studios of Bombay, the ambitious secretaries from the European diamond companies, the bored girls who haunted the discotheques, sometimes felt I used a little too much force in our love-making, they soon laughed it off when they received my lavish presents, even boasting to their friends that I suffered from an excess of virility.<sup>35</sup>

Later, of course, he realises the truth after an elderly Jain monk instructs him about sexual and fiscal appetites, and the great Jain saint Mahavira's philosophy: that men "long to be free," but, "Many men die before they learn the desire for freedom lies deep within them, like

a dammed river waiting to be released. But once a man has had that momentary glimpse of freedom he needs to be instructed further.”<sup>36</sup>

### THE RIVER AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS BETWEEN HINDUISM, ISLAM, AND JAINISM

Mehta’s melding of Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam in her multi-narrative, multi-genre work reflects the fluidity of the river itself. Mehta uses poetry, religious invocations, journals, letters, and the oral tradition of storytelling to construct her narrative. And her stories are all punctuated by multiple manifestations of the divine from several religions. Thus, Tariq Mia’s account of the young, dispossessed Imrat’s murder at the hands of the landed gentry, is narrated through the eyes of a Muslim cleric; the reformed playboy-turned- monk’s story is told within the principles of Jainism; tea plantation manager Nitin Bose’s story of offering prayers and performing penance to the Narmada for his mistreatment of the tealeaf picker Rima, is anchored in animistic beliefs; and archaeologist-turned-*Naga*-ascetic-turned archaeologist Shankar and his “adopted daughter” Uma’s story is grounded in the Hindu myth of Siva and Narmada. Mehta’s approach reflects her oft-stated idea of a tolerant, all-embracing India, not unlike the “universal” India of Tagore’s imagined nation where he upholds a hybridised template of a modern India. In “*Hey mor chitto*” (Oh, My Soul), Tagore invokes the pre-colonial, hybridised concept of the “Nation” that he wanted the “new” India to represent, where all religions would co-exist in harmony:

No-one knows from where it flows or  
 who set in motion,  
 this wild flood-force of Humanity’s course, to  
 mingle in mid-ocean.  
 Here are Aryans and non-Aryans,  
 Moguls, tribes-of-East,

and Huns and Scythians, Pathans, Dravidians,  
 all in a body pieced.  
 Now the West has opened its door—  
 and bringing gifts all through it they pour, To  
 give, to take, their mixed mixing make . . . their  
 way they will not retrace,  
 where India's greatness reigns, before the  
 ocean's space.<sup>37</sup>

Mehta's account is embedded with the magical qualities of the divine, not unlike the way Ngugi waThiong'o presents the Honia River in *The River Between*: "A river flowed through the valley of life . . . The river was called Honia, which meant cure or bring-back-to-life".<sup>38</sup> Trevor James argues that the Honia River has, "what we might call divine functions, it is seen as the creator and giver of life, the ground of the soul, the source of what is common to all. In ritual terms, the river is the place of cleansing, initiation and baptism".<sup>39</sup>

I argue that *A River Sutra* draws on the divine feminine embedded in the sacrality of the myth of the Narmada—which is inextricably yoked to the phallogocentric creation myths of the ascetic-erotic male deity Siva. Drawing on these myths, Gita Mehta's representations of the feminine as sexually empowered and self-reliant converge with contemporary Western theorists. Klaus Theweleit, Angela Grooten, Maja Pelikaan-Engel, and Lynda Nead have explained how myths of sexuality and male fantasies perpetuate patriarchal desire to possess and rule, often "robbing the feminine of both metaphorical and even morphological agency".<sup>40</sup>

This chapter also demonstrates how Mehta, in her attempt to blur the lines between the profane and the sacred landscape, confronts the religious divide between Hindus and Muslims. Mehta inserts the unstable Hindu myth of the Narmada into the vexed, subversive battlefield of post-imperial identity, where wounded civilisations

of the Muslims and Hindus find confluence. Thus she situates her narratives within the expedient politics of divide-and-rule practiced by India's British rulers, and a reality of ruthless and unethical governance in postcolonial India. There is a religious plurality that runs through *A River Sutra* with a nameless Hindu acting as the principal Narrator, and a Muslim cleric Tariq Mia playing the role of secondary Narrator. What was Mehta's intention in locating a Muslim narrative on the banks of one of the most sacred rivers of the Hindus? Was it Mehta's imaginary of a cohesive India, or is there a reality that informs her idea of a cohabiting of multi-religious elements in India? In an interview, Mehta explained the influence of religion on her:

I come from a multicultural, multi-religious background. My mother's side of the family was from Kashmir and could read the *Bhagavad Gita* in Persian. They resided in Lahore (in undivided India) and even though they were Hindu girls, they would go out during the *Moharram* and give *sherbet* (cold drinks) to the Muslim *Tazia* carriers. I married a Sikh and we never thought of us being different in India as Sikhs and Hindus. Politicians in India create religious rifts.

Look at the Ayodhya issue. I feel like saying, 'I own that soil too' when they kill themselves over temple and mosque. Rabindranath Tagore called it 'sacred geography.' It's a sorry comment on our heritage when the very seduction of our civilisation, which is the massive philosophical leaps of imagination we took at any point in time of our history, has got lost in the politicising of religion.<sup>41</sup>

*A River Sutra* shows that it is possible to reconstruct an identity of what it means to be an "Indian" from a fractured, violent neocolonial present where Hindus and Muslims are in conflict. It is possible to do so by looking past the fractured present toward a glorious

past that some scholars consider “the golden years of harmonious coexistence when the Sufi saints with their poetry and song captured the imagination of the common people.”<sup>42</sup>

It is no accident that it is Tariq Mia, a Muslim Sufi poet and teacher with a deep and abiding friendship with the Hindu Narrator of the novel, who introduces the river goddess Narmada’s mysteries to the reader at the outset. On the secular bank of the river, Tariq Mia reveals *Bhakti* philosophy: “The human heart has only one secret: the capacity to love”.<sup>43</sup> The scholar Ashis Nandy posits that in India there are 116 communities that are both Hindu and Christian, and at least 35 communities that are both Hindu and Muslim.<sup>44</sup> He argues that these communities “define their Hinduism or Islam or Christianity in such a way that the symbols of sacredness of another faith acquire specific theological, cultural and familial status.” Further, Nandy’s argument about the need to protect less familiar faiths such as animism and indigenous cults strongly supports Mehta’s project of empowering animisms practiced by Van tribals giving them voice and agency. Nandy fears that “South Asia will be poorer if its rich, intricate tapestry of faiths gets destroyed through neglect or shrinks into six or seven standard, mutually exclusive faiths because, in the contemporary world, only such standard faiths enjoy respectability and political clout.” The result will be “a modern tragedy” that will “simultaneously impoverish Hinduism, Islam and the other South Asian faiths”.<sup>45</sup>

Mehta signposts the inextricable ties that bind Muslims and Hindus with India’s complex history by employing and reinventing the memory and language of the sixteenth-century mystics, and representing them in diverse forms, in every story in the novel:

Some seek God in Mecca,  
Some seek God in Benares,  
Each finds his own path and the focus  
of his worship.

Some worship him in Mecca,  
 Some in Benares,  
 But I centre my worship on the eyebrow  
 of my beloved.

—Imrat, singing a hymn by the mystic Sufi saint, Kabir.<sup>46</sup>

Mehta's liberal use of the poetry of the Sufis—who suffered persecution under some Mughal emperors of India—is more than a tool for embellishment and aesthetics.<sup>47</sup> It is significant that Mehta prefaces the novel with a couplet from the poet-mystic Chandidas:

Listen, O Brother.  
 Man is the greatest Truth.  
 Nothing beyond.<sup>48</sup>

It reverberates through the novel in many forms, through the words of many characters. The refrain from Kabir, the Sufi mystic, punctuates the tale of the blind young singer Imrat:

O servant, where do you seek Me?  
 You will not find me in temple or mosque,  
 In Kaaba or in Kailash,  
 In yoga or renunciation.  
 Sings Kabir, “O seeker find God in the breath of all breathing.”

—Imrat reciting a Kabir hymn.<sup>49</sup>

*A River Sutra* provides the reader with rare and hypnotic lyricism through the conjugation of oral and written traditions embedded in the cacophonous storytelling techniques that quite clearly resonate with the gentle and thunderous flow of the River Narmada. The reader is exposed to the recurring theme of the power of human

emotion over barriers of hate and destruction through enchanting stories of overwhelming pain and mysterious joy that unravel like the river's own journey. Like the divine feminine that is the River Narmada, Rima, the Vano tribal woman and the wandering minstrel Uma, signpost the importance of salvaging lost traditions of multiple religious heritages, and their potential to serve as a compass to find new identities among different religious communities that continue to cause communal strife in India.

## NOTES

- 1 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 8.
- 2 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 259. The invocations to the goddess Narmada in *A River Sutra* are from the *Narmada Ashtakam*, composed as a stuti (hymn of praise) by Hindu philosopher, mystic and poet Adi Sankaracharya (788-821CE). Gita Mehta confirmed in a telephone conversation as well as an email exchange with the author on 25 May 2010 that the many invocations to the river goddess in her novel are from Sankaracharya's *Narmada Ashtakam*. I have referred to Sankaracharya's works in two different collections: *Sri Sankara Granthavali: Complete Works of Sri Sankaracarya* in the original Sanskrit, v. 1-10, revised ed. (Madras: Samata Books, 1998), originally published by Sri Vani Vilas Press, Srirangam, 1910. And also *Sankaracarya Granthamala*, v. 1-4 (Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandira, 1995).
- 3 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 143.
- 4 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 254.
- 5 In the Sanskrit tradition, the *sutradhar* (*sutra*: thread; *dhar*: one who holds), like the chorus in Aeschylean or Sophoclean tragedies, is a narrator of events, a commentator on characters and one who holds the plot together.
- 6 Coupe, *Myth* 139.
- 7 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 145.
- 8 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 143.
- 9 See, Geoffrey Waring Maw, *Narmada: The Life of a River*, ed. Marjorie Sykes (Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh: Distributor, Friends Rural Centre, 1991) 3. Geoffrey Maw was an English Quaker who spent nearly forty years (1910-1949) working in the Hoshangabad district in Central India, on the South bank of the Narmada River. In this compelling travelogue Maw maintains: "In the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* the river has another name. She is Rewa 'the

leaping one'...she dances down her rocky bed in countless rapids and waterfalls. She is holy throughout her course, whether inhabited or uninhabited."

- 10 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 145.
- 11 See, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000). *A River Sutra* follows Frye's idea of the metamode. For Frye, romance is the metamode of all literature. Halfway between myth (the abstract forms of an ideal world underlying all literature) and realism (the concrete necessities of life in the real world), stands romance—a genre where magic can happen. The stories of the immortal Aryan warrior, Rima and Nitin Bose, and the courtesan and the bandit, are built on this model.
- 12 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania P, 1971) 67.
- 13 See, Dipankar Gupta, *Culture, Space, and the Nation-State: From Sentiment to Structure* (New Delhi and London: Sage, 2000). 175
- 14 See, Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1996).
- 15 Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," *Early Theological Writings*.
- 16 Pepper, S. C. (1942). *World hypotheses: A study in evidence*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pages 151-185)
- 17 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska P, 1984)
- 18 Arundhati Roy, Interview with Julie Mehta, Feb. 1998.
- 19 Amitav Ghosh, Interview with Julie Mehta, *The Nation*, Bangkok, Feb. 1998. See, Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadowlines* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 20 Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola* (London: Heinemann, 1979).
- 21 Gita Mehta, personal interview, Nov. 2004. When asked about where she sourced her stories, Mehta said: "I read the autobiography of the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. At one point he had to make twenty films a year to survive. There is an image in his book about how he used to close his eyes to recollect his earliest impressions. That stuck with me. I literally closed my eyes and tried to recall my earliest memories, stories my aunts and mother used to recount about the Hindu myths; incidents that occurred with people I knew when I was young, strange stories I heard from friends. And they unfolded in front of me."
- 22 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 176.
- 23 See, Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, C. Gordon, et al, ed. (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1980) 78-108.
- 24 Foucault, "Two Lectures." Foucault refers to the boat as a place of heterotopia 'parexcellence,' because it is already afloat on a heterotopic space like water which is a repository of many movements and peoples and becomes a heterotopic space

- itself, by virtue of its phenomenology of fluidity and mobility.
- 25 The Narmada is 1,250 km long, with its source in Madhya Pradesh, central India, and flows west between the Satpura and Vindhya mountain ranges through Gujarat state to the Gulf of Khambat. Because the river is turbulent and confined between steep banks, it is unsuitable for navigation or irrigation. The Narmada, sacred to Hindus, is said to have sprung from the body of the god Siva. Hindus aspire to perform *parikrama*, or a round-trip pilgrimage on foot along its entire length. Many holy baths and sites line its banks; at Marble Gorge, whose 100-foot-high (30.5 metre) walls bear inscriptions and sculptures, is a twelfth century temple dedicated to Siva.
  - 26 See Diana Eck, "India's *Tirthas*: 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography," *History of Religions* 20.4 (May 1981): 323-344. Eck, a scholar of Comparative Religions at Harvard University, argues that Siva manifested himself on earth twelve times as a shattering sheath of light, known as *jjyotirlinga*, which are sacred crossing places of the gods, and have become the preeminent destinations for Hindu pilgrims. The temples along the Narmada are especially sacred for their link with Siva's powerful manifestations. Temple towns of Amarkantak, Mahadeo and Rudra are on the route traversed by pilgrims, and form the geographical epicenter of *A River Sutra*.
  - 27 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*.
  - 28 Phyllis Granoff, "Jain Pilgrimage: In Memory and Celebration of the Jinās," *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994) 63-65.
  - 29 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 36
  - 30 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies I: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*.
  - 31 James Laidlaw, *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy, and Society Among the Jains* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 343.
  - 32 James Laidlaw, *The Times of India*, 2 June 1991.
  - 33 See, Pratapaditya Pal, *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India*, 15. Pal explains that *Digambaras* (sky-clad) are one of two original orders of monks the other was *Svetambara* (white-clad) who believe any possessions are a hindrance to achieving liberation because possessions foster attachment. Pal points out that *Digambaras*, like Ashok, "do not wear a stitch of clothing."
  - 34 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 26
  - 35 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 26-27.
  - 36 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 29.
  - 37 See, William Radice, ed. and trans., *Rabindranath Tagore, Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985); and Julie Mehta, "Tagore's Global Soul: In Flight between Nationalism and Liberalism," *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*, ed. Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati University Press, 2009) 71. The fifteenth piece in the "Swadesh Parba" ("Nation" section of *Gitanitan*, the songbook that took the

- popular imagination by storm during the Swadeshi (Independence) movement), and was an oft-quoted piece during the last century.
- 38 Ngugi waThiong'o, *The River Between* (London: Heinemann, 1965) 1.
- 39 Trevor James, "Theology of Landscape and Ngugi waThiong'o's *The River Between*," *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, 228.
- 40 Angela Grooten, "A Futile Controversy: Postmodernism and Feminism: United in Difference," *Against Patriarchal Thinking: A Future Without Discrimination*, ed. Maja Pellikaan-Engel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992) 186-187.
- 41 Gita Mehta, Interview with Julie Mehta, Apr. 2005. Gita Mehta explained: "We are the only country in the world where religious plurality is part of our birthright. *Bada din* (Christmas), *Id*, *Mahavir Jayanti*, *Buddha Jayanti*, *Diwali*—we celebrate as a nation and it's built into our genetic frame. We seem to forget that it is an obscenity to homogenise, to quote W.H. Auden. The Mughals came to India, but we absorbed them. They couldn't take us. Sure there was an Aurangzeb, but there was also a Dara Shikoh. We throw away the huge embarrassment of riches that is our great civilisation. We forget that it's our ability to embrace that has made us the great civilisation that we are. It's the greatest gift we have. Our history is very complex: Emperor Ashoka's mother was an untouchable. We have the caste system, true. But India's Constitution was written by an untouchable, Ambedkar. We are a civilisation that lives in the midst of mythology and history."
- 42 Shashibhushan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969) 178-185.
- 43 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 45.
- 44 Nandy, *Time Warps* 143-144.
- 45 Nandy, *Time Warps* 145.
- 46 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 70.
- 47 Carl W. Ernst, "Persecution and Circumspection in Shattari Sufism," *Islamic Sufism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Debate and Conflict*, ed. Fred de Jong, et al (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999).
- 48 See, Deben Bhattacharya, trans., *Love Songs of Chandidas: The Rebel Poet-Priest of Bengal* (New York: Grove, 1970).
- 49 Mehta, *A River Sutra* 69.
- <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pc/ch02.htm>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baviskar, Amita. *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Berger, Harry, Jr. "Gynophobia and Culture Change." *Luce Irigaray and Premodern*

- Culture: Thresholds of History*. Ed. Elizabeth Harvey and Theresa Krier. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Chakraborty, Jahnavi Kumar. *Saktapadabali o Saktisadhana*. Calcutta: D.M. Library, 1997.
- Coburn, Thomas. "The Threefold Vision of the Devi Mahatmya." *Devi: The Great Goddess: Female Divinity in South Asian Art*. Ed. Lynne Shaner with Nancy Eickel. Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Mapin, and Verlag, 1999.
- Dimock, Edward C. "The Goddess of Snakes in Medieval Bengali Literature." *The Sound of Silent Guns and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Eck, Diana L. "Ganga: The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography." *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*. Ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff. Berkeley, California: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1982.
- . "India's *Tirthas*: 'Crossings' in Sacred Geography." *History of Religions* 20.4 (1981): 323-344.
- Ganguly, Debjani. *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds: Postcolonial Perspectives*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, ed. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Granoff, Phyllis. "Jain Pilgrimage: In Memory and Celebration of the Jinas." *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India*. Ed. Pratapaditya Pal. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994.
- Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*. Ed. Grevil Lindop. Manchester: Carcanet, 1997.
- Huen Tsang, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Two Volumes. Trans. Samuel Beal. Boston: 1885.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- . *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- . *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- . *To Speak is Never Neutral*. Trans. Gail Schwab. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Jansen, Eva Rudy, comp. *The Book of Hindu Imagery*. Diever, Holland: Binkey Kok, 1993.
- Jayakar, Pupul. *The Earth Mother: Legends, Ritual Arts, and Goddesses of India*. San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, 1990.
- Kale, M.R. ed. and trans. *The Meghaduta of Kalidasa*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969.

- Kanaganayakam, Chelva. "Charting a Secular Ganges: Revisiting R.K. Narayan's Malgudi and 'Little India' in the Malaysian Fiction of K.S. Maniam and Lee Kok Liang." *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*. Ed. Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001.
- Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1987.
- Kishwar, Madhu, and Ruth Vanita, ed. *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from Manushi*. London: Zed, 1984.
- Kirk, Geoffrey Stephen. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Li, Victor. "Necroidealism, or the Subaltern's Sacrificial Death," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11.3 (2009): 275-292.
- Maw, Geoffrey Waring. *Narmada: The Life of a River*. Ed. Marjorie Sykes. Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh: Distributor, Friends Rural Centre, 1991.
- Mazumdar, Vina, ed. *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India*. Bombay: Allied Publishers Private Ltd, 1979.
- McKean, Lise. "Bharat Mata: Mother India and Her Militant Matriots." *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Ed. John S. Hawley and Donna M. Wulff. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996.
- Mehta, Julie B. *Dance of Life, The Mythology, History and Politics of Cambodian Culture*. Singapore: Graham Brash, 2000.
- . "The Ramayana in the Arts of Thailand and Cambodia." *Ramayana Revisited*. Ed. Mandakranta Bose. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- . "The Crosscurrents of Cultural Collision in the Waterscapes of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*." *Water and the Indian Worlds*. Jonzac, France: Universite Francophone d'Ete Saintonge-Quebec, 2006.
- . "Tagore's Global Soul: In Flight between Nationalism and Liberalism." *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*. Ed. Kathleen M. O'Connell and Joseph T. O'Connell. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati University Press, 2009.
- Mills, Patricia J. *Woman, Nature, and Psyche*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- O'Bannon, Brett. "The Narmada River Project: Towards a Feminist Model of Women in Development." *Policy Sciences* 27.2-3 (1994): 5-8.
- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Ramaswamy, Sumathi. "Visualizing India's Geo-Body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes." *body city: siting contemporary culture in India*. Ed. Indira Chandrasekhar. Berlin and New Delhi: Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Tulika, 2003.
- . "Visualising India's Geo-body: Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes." *Beyond Appearances:*

- Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*. Ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy. New Delhi: Sage, 2003.
- Rawson, Philip. *The Art of Tantra*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1973.
- Sircar, D.C. "The Sakta Pithas." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 14.1 (1948).
- Shastri, Shailendra Narayan. *Tapobhumi Narmada*. Kolkata: Vedic Research Institute, 1990.
- Sivaramamurti, C. *Ganga*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976.
- Smith, David. *Dance of Siva: Religion, Art and Poetry in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Stafford, Antoinette M. "The Feminist Critique of Hegel on Women and the Family." *Animus* 2 (1997): 64-92.
- Turner, Victor. *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*. New Delhi: Concept, 1979.
- Wilson, Horace Hayman. *Vishnupurana*, Vol. 2. Bibliobazaar, 2008.
- Ziolkowski, Theodore. "Religion and Literature in a Secular Age: The Critic's Dilemma." *The Journal of Religion* 59.18 (1979): 18-34.