

An Environmental Sutra in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*

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ABSTRACT

The work 'A River Sutra' bears and imbibes the themes and motifs relevant to environment concerns. The main narrator comes to the banks of the Narmada, at a rest house near Rudra town. He meets many people who come to pilgrimage, but it's not spiritual one, as the narrator reminds himself that 'the purpose of the pilgrimage is endurance.' The narrator's conversation and the Monk's story is nothing but a way to harmonise the life with nature. 'The Executive's Story' brilliantly displays the environmental concerns that Mehta has woven underneath. 'The Courtesan's Story' refers that the Nawab of Shahbag was a Muslim but he honoured the river's holiness'. 'The Musician's Story' isn't a remote one. Whenever we are in tensions, or in troubles music has always relieved us. We all know that music is also a therapy, and we also know that music is nothing but imitation of sounds of creatures and that of nature's rhythm. In 'The Minstrel's Story', Naga Baba puts into practice the education of nature. Thus in all the stories this environmental thread - a sutra is case to cop up with the horrible contemporary situations. The moral, though hidden, is really the art that she has achieved, and it is priceless, peerless to us.

Key words : Nature, Environment, Forest, Narmada River, Contemporary Problems

Huge natural calamities round the world have compelled us to rethink our concern for the environment. Though all of us are talking much and worry less, and science and technology helping (?) us, the root causes are neglected or haven't eyed at all. Social science or science may bring forth mankind some solutions, but till our own responsibilities to responding nature aren't met with, everything would be nullified automatically. My view is that we have to be sensible and sensitive. This is where Mehta comes to the scene: 'We cannot solve the problems of the world, we can only help those within our reach.' (p.25)

The work 'A River Sutra' (1) bears and imbibes the themes and motifs relevant to environment concerns. Mehta has shown how the Narmada, and her surrounding forest has influenced the life upon her bank and to the people far away from her. People continue to come to her for their problems and on their solution they are satisfied. It's not that Mehta deals with mythological, spiritual, religious significance but she also shows her concern to environment, and that's my concern in this article to see how significantly she has harmonized her work. Way back our life matched to nature but our progress (?) detached us to pay the price.

The main narrator - as the narrators are changing according to different stories, comes to the banks of the Narmada, at a rest house near Rudra town 'situated halfway up a hill of the Vindhya Range.'(p.2) He is a 'Vanprasthi, someone who has retired to the forest to reflect.' (p.1) In the past our education also took place in the forest, and our learning and retiring matched to it. The narrator's purpose isn't to wander 'and become a forest hermit, surviving on fruit and roots.'(p.1) On his morning walks he often meets tribal women from Vano village and learns about deity who cures snakebites, madness, and 'liberates those who are possessed.'(p.6, 105) People come to pilgrimage, but it's not spiritual one, as the narrator reminds himself that 'the purpose of the pilgrimage is endurance.' (p.8) He also finds that morning walks cools his body.

On his return he comes across a Jain monk. The narrator's conversation and the Monk's story is nothing but a way to harmonise the life with nature. How minutely and closely we cared for nature and the web woven around it! The Monk has covered his mouth with a mask 'to prevent from killing some blameless insect by sudden inhalation.' (p.11) The Monk always looks down while walking for fear that 'I may step on an ant. Even plucking banana becomes an act fraught with danger. Who knows what small creatures live in the leaves or trunk of a banana tree?' (p.11) Even the banana skin is placed neatly at the base of

a boulder, not thrown anywhere even though it's a forest.

The Monk in his youth realized that men consider material as the soul thing. They run after it, not knowing that the material isn't the life. They don't understand that it's a shadow but not life itself. Disgusted with it, as he himself has overjoyed the possession of materialistic life, he wishes to adopt Diksha. The Jain philosophy brings forth the environmental issues, and Diksha is one of them. It's a lesson to live life with minimum requirements. Our greed for more and more has harmed nature, so it's there that this greed needs to be restricted. Whatever the Monk's father did in business we are doing it in our daily life: 'to negotiate, manipulate, intrigue, bargain.' (p.22) Armed with this knowledge we think we get success but our path turns violent. That's why the Jainism considers faith in ahimsa, practice of non-violence is important. The Monk tells the narrator, "That is why we are bankers or merchants. There are so many activities we cannot undertake for fear of harming life. If we were farmers we might unknowingly kill creatures under our plows. In industry the earth is drilled for oil, iron, coal. Can you imagine how much life is extinguished by those machines?" (p.24) Here's the contemporary issues, blended naturally, without harming our interest in the story. Though ironically told to the young man (the Monk) by his father it's quite true for us 'the

West has destroyed your peace of mind!' (p.27) When Diksha is given, out of some, one advice is: 'You will protect life.' (p.41) The word 'life' should be paid attention to. Life includes all living things: bees, birds; flora-fauna; plants, herbs, trees; men- animal; insects and creatures- on the earth, above the earth or below the earth. Are we really sensitive to them?

The narrator is disturbed by the Monk's story. He can't forget him, and to dispel his morbid thoughts he 'loiters under the trees' and 'admire the red blossoms shaken from the flame trees by clambering monkeys.' (p.43) He pauses 'between the branches rooted in the soil around an immense tree' (p.43) 'There is a placidness to the scene that suggests the calm of simple lives ordered only by the passing of the seasons.' (p.44) The narrator is reminded of Kabir's coming to the River Narmada; and his tooth brush of a banyan twig becoming Kabirvad. Different people and opinions are united in such a place.

Destruction and creation both are parts of nature and to match them desire and satisfaction. And hence we find both these aspects: sex leading to life and sex leading to death. Nature has her own devise whether we see or don't see, and it's continuously going on. When the narrator's returning from his jungle walk, he watches, 'The Vano village women were collecting fuel by the sides of

mud path.' And he saw 'the saris sliding from their shoulders, barring their waists and the curve of their full breasts.' (p.92). He finds relief from his mood and greets the women. They are surprised. One of them says, 'The Sahib finds your face pretty today, Rano.' and soon she tells her 'It must be the season. Spring rouses even old tigers from their rest.' (p.92) Did you mark this response? Nature doesn't spare anything. Nothing is unmoved by Nature. The woman continues to point out the effect and advises her, 'Be careful not to walk alone, Sisters. The mango trees are in bloom.' (p.93) The narrator feels 'the scent of flowers, leaves, and trees realizes a mood of longing in the jungle. The call of the koil bird, that strange imitation of a woman's cry at that moment of sexual fulfillment, hung suspended in the air.' (p.93) The narrator is sure of Kama's victory as 'Kama might call on his friends- Spring with his ruthless hands and his beautiful body clothed only in lotus buds, or the Malayan wind carrying the aromatic perfumes of the south, or most dangerous of all, Amorous Mood.'(p.94). Kama is doing nature's work, the work done with his 'five flower tipped arrows - the Enchanter, The Inflamer, The Parcher, the Paroxysm of Desire, the Carrier of Death.'(p.99) Against such a thing it is difficult for a man to resist. Modern world has accepted wrong ways to cop up with the desire of sex and sex itself, and perversion hence around us!

'The Executive's Story' brilliantly displays the environmental concerns that Mehta has woven underneath. The Executive Nitin Bose comes to the Narmada to cure his madness, and his encounter with the narrator reveals his story. He worked in a Calcutta tea company. He finds the city as 'crumbled under the weight of neglect, exploitation, poisonous humidity, traffic jams, power failure, and roads plowed up like rice fields to make an underground railway... the devastations of nature that daily drew the desperate to a great metropolis itself desperately surviving as if a war had just ended.' (p.110) And what is our response to all such things? Nothing. Like Nitin we are mute spectator to it, and experience 'only claustrophobia.' (p.110). It is also a great irony that the new generation, the part of the tea- estates of Darjeeling and Assam, has misjudged their own existence and has come down to destructive road of pleasure. Nitin says: 'We listened to their boasts of rogue elephants tracked, man- eating tigers shot, hot blooded women tamed.'(p.111) These young men consume bottles of whisky and never know 'their careless self- destruction.' (p.112). If they have come to such a dangerous mode of life, are they to be blamed? And instead of alarming them, we have drawn them to the so- called civilized (?) life of 'drink, shoot and fuck.'(p.112) Nitin thinks his going to tea- estates would be boring, lonely and make him alcoholic but

things change when he prefers to going over there, and it turns out to be 'The most attractive prospect rather than 'the sheer weight of Calcutta's inescapable humanity' (p.114) which suffocated him. Nitin on his way feels the human smallness against the gigantic, expanded nature that is below and above and his transformation begins to take place. He says, 'Long before I reached my tea estate I had gone from disbelief to tranquility, to the possessiveness by which one is oneself possessed.' (p.115) He, then, begins to feel soothing effect of nature. His civilised, bureaucratic Calcutta air seems unnatural and 'new self' grows. He would find it 'a delight to sit on the veranda in the evenings reading the labyrinthine tales of demons, sages, gods, lovers, cosmologies.' (p.119) Even rains were kind to him. He doesn't drink and 'take' no women, that is amazing. It's natural to go through such kind of process in the lap of nature. Later on his friend's visit hints him of sexual desires and this makes him aware of it, want of it. The soil, serpent, sweet songs, strength of elephants, eclipse of the moon etc. mix- up into Nitin's sensuous erotic condition. His satisfaction of sexual desire softens him from his temporary hardness. The woman Rima's body teaches him 'the passing of the seasons, the secret rhythms of nature.'(p.129) Rima becomes his part of life so much that he feels possessed only when he severs from her, he becomes helpless and almost mad and is then advised

cure with the help of snake. If nature, we think, brings contrary effect we are wrong. Snake that is erotic rouses desires and relieves from it as well. 'The serpent in question is desire. It's venom is the harm a man does when he is ignoring the power of desire.'(p.143) Nitin is asked to go to the Narmada and worship the goddess at any shrine. 'Only that river has been given the power to cure him.' (p.137). We are having scientific temper and so won't believe in such kind of a worship but it is explained: 'The goddess is just the principle of life.... she is what a mother is feeling for a child. A man for a woman. A starving man for food. Human being for god and Mr. (Nitin) Bose did not show her (Rima) respect so he is being punished.'(p.142) From this we have a simple learning: if we don't respect nature she will punish us- that is sure. Nitin's story is allusive one, and this learning can't be avoided.

Contemporary problems are nothing but our avoidance or negligence to nature, or our separation from her or our destruction to her. If we go back, our primal life was divided. Mehta has touched the issues of the Aryans and the pre-Aryans. The former put their beliefs in reason while the latter one in the tribal life. The pre- Aryan's 'philosophy was based on a profound respect for nature and the interdependence of all life.'(p.154) The Aryans placed the truths learned by the mind above all other truths, including the truths of nature.'(p.154) And it led them to a classic

conflict between instinct and reason' (154), and the result is before us. Then different people continued to come with their opinions and beliefs. Integration and disintegration, division and subdivision continued in one or the other way. But nature never divides or disintegrates e.g. a river. 'The Courtesan's Story' refers that the Nawab of Shahbag was a Muslim but he honoured the river's holiness.'(p.163) Is the story of our cities different to that of Shahbag? The narrator says, 'Where there used to be gardens now we have factories. Our gracious buildings have been torn down to be replaced by concrete boxes named after politicians. The wood that once ringed the city have been cut down for the shanty towns of labour colonies.'(p.167)

Gangopadhyay's 'Days and Nights in the Forest' (2) shows how four Calcutta boys find themselves in the forests, and here's not a different case of a Vindhya bandit Rahulsingh. When civil life around him makes him a dacoit, the jungle and the life there protects him. The jungle isn't the protection to his self but also to his virtues. He's a dacoit outside; civility, moderation and honesty in manners inside.

'The Musician's Story' isn't a remote one. Whenever we are in tensions, or in troubles music has always relieved us. We all know that music is also a therapy, and we also know that music is nothing but imitation of

sounds of creatures and that of nature's rhythm. (3) Human endeavour has prized himself this peerless gift. The father in this story makes beginning of teaching music in the evening when birds alight on trees. He asks her to listen to a peacock's singing. He himself is master but he says, 'If I practiced for ten lifetimes I could not reproduce that careless waterfall of sound.....'(p.203). He explains the bird's singing at dawn and at sunset: 'Because of the changing light. Their songs are a spontaneous response to the beauty of the world. That is truly music.' (p.207) We think we respond, but animals or birds and creatures always respond to beauty of nature. The father then explains how classical notes of 'Sa,' 'Re', 'Ga', 'Ma', 'Pa', 'Dha', and 'Ni' match to the various things of nature. 'Sa' matches to the call of a peacock and then in order other notes match to the sound of: calf calling its mother, bleating goats, heron cry, nightingale, horse neighing and elephant trumpet. And then he proceeds to teach different ragas, raginis, various moods and times to sing the ragas. The daughter is ugly and the father with music tries to free her from the outer look and to turn into inner beauty, and that beauty is scattered outside into the lap of nature. Friendship with our surrounding endows us beauty and we utilize things of nature for this purpose. The father tells the daughter various stories which vindicate our point: 'Lilavati of sixteen summers' carries a lotus, Madhu-

Madhavi enjoys company of her lover in Spring time, Shyam -Gujari tells of her longing to a peacock, and butterflies follow to Barari as she runs to her beloved. Somewhere I had read that the executives of a company were taken to a river for a week. They had to remain in the water the way they like to and listen to poetry and music. Later on when they returned to their company their work output was far beyond imagination. And now it's not new that such things are practiced in the biz- world. And tell me why we go to open fields, small hills and rivers, and to the forests and mountains during week- ends, holidays, and vacations? It's actually our going back to nature as our primal roots are there and we know that going to her always comforts us.

A million dollar question may arise: 'Is it possible for us to bridge ourselves between the two extremes- progress with the help of science and technology, and protection of nature? The answer is 'yes.' Any doubt to it can be removed by 'The Minstrel's Story'. The Naga Baba who actually is the Professor Shankar, former Head of the Archeological Department, could do it then why can't we? What the Naga Baba did is putting into practice the education of nature. He learns how the extremes of heat and cold can be endured by the jungle plants, and also overcome thirst, hunger, and exhaustion. He is hardened and softened by nature that leads him to go to the downtrodden, the prostitute

and the unprotected ones. From a brothel, he brings a girl with him and what Nature does to Lucy he does to this girl. (4). She learns 'water is pure where snakes swim', how to collect milk from goats, recognize animal foot marks and find cow dung. The Naga Baba smears his body with ash. The girl learns its scientific reason that it's 'an antiseptic and an insulation against heat and cold and ... mosquitoes never bite.' (p.249). The girl also finds that the Baba separates the food into four equal portions- one to be kept aside for the animals, one for any stranger who might need a meal, saving only the remaining two portions for themselves.' (p.249) Here is the Baba's concern for nature and her ecological system and humanity too. Such practices we haven't maintained and that's why we need rules against animal cruelty. The girl finds that at her home she ate last but this cruel looking Baba feeds like the father. Again we have rules- rules for child labour, and women cruelty. But the Baba does it naturally without any concern for rules. In rural areas before they start having it the meal is fed to the live charcoal or they offer to the earth. Even ants are fed. We aren't ready to believe all such things as we consider ourselves people of reason. But it's the narrow outlook. The reason has not led us to wisdom. This is exactly the case with the narrator who is

shocked on his learning that the Naga Baba is the Professor Shankar. Here's the master stroke of Mehta combining the two: the reason and the natural into one person.

This environmental thread- a sutra is case to cop up with the horrible contemporary situations. The moral, though hidden, is really the art that she has achieved, and it is priceless, peerless to us. And yet I would agree to the point that 'the true significant of River sutra... originates from the polyphonic variations of the enigma of human life, a certain philosophy of life, which is convincing and confounding at the same time, and its concentric polysemy'. (5)

References:

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If you are irritated by every rub, how will you be polished?