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Social Realism in *A River Sutra*

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Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* (1993) develops through six subsequent stories narrated by people who come on Narmada pilgrimage. The novel is a rather noble approach to present an array of social realities of India together; such as, human greed and hypocrisy, widening chasm between rich and poor, women suffering, child abuse, as well as repercussions of modern life style. Along with, it presents "the mysteries of the East" (Kothari 47). In fact, the novel creates "a miniature India", and talks about the myths, philosophy and religion in India (Bande 152). Riesman appreciates its range of subject matter that takes into account a number of subjects like Classical Sanskrit drama, Hindu mythology, and Sufi poetry. He holds that for all its substance of ancient Indian tradition and thought, *A River Sutra* is a modern work that acknowledges the difficulties faced by modern India while taking the reader on a journey into a resonate culture (02). Likewise, Shubhashree opines:

Gita Mehta makes us travel centuries in order to re-interpret what it means to be a man especially in a country where the past lives on into the present although obscured and mystified unrecognizably. (145)

According to her, in this novel Mehta tries to bring mythological time, historical time, contemporary time and narrative time all together in the flow of the waters (146). Despite its multiplicity of subject matter the novel presents that in India there is unity in diversity. This multiplicity has not affected the integrity; instead it has added colours to the beauty of rich culture of the country.

But, the novel is rather different from other Indian English novels. While other novels are full of hardships of daily life, *A River Sutra* talks also about renunciation, salvation, and human love. It is only in India where people renounce the world and all the worldly things to achieve salvation. The novelist has aptly chosen an Indian method to articulate the themes and stories of her novel: "The form is as the tales of Vikram and Vetal" (Doctor 26). Moreover, the title of the novel echoes titles like Jaimini's *Mimamsa Sutras*, Badarayana's *Purvamimamsa Sutras*, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, or Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* (Eakambaram 210).

The novel starts with the introduction of a bureaucrat who works as a manager of a rest house at the bank of Narmada, situated halfway up a hill of the Vindhya Range. For the rest of the novel he plays the role of *sutradhaar* or a storyteller. He shares his experiences that come to him from his daily encounter with the pilgrims and his friend old Mullah Tariq Mia. According to Hedgie: "In the course of the work [he] meet[s] people of many different religions – Hindu, Muslim, Jain – and a broad spectrum of social and class backgrounds, from the most learned and wealthy to the least educated and poor, and gain[s] at least a glimpse into the complex society that makes up India" (02). While going through his daily routine he is inspired with six stories, which constructs the novel. These stories present some characteristics of Indian sensibility. Every story is simple and embodies a unique face of India. Greenlaw observes that the stories in the novel are brief but present intense human dramas that not only explore the desire for enlightenment but also expresses the complex roots of India's cultural and political heritage (23).

The first social reality that the novel reveals is Indians' deep faith in the theory of renunciation. But, the sordid fact that the novel adheres to it is Indian elites' pseudo-philanthropic approach, which mars the very spirit of the philosophy, towards it. Indian psyche is deeply imbued by this philosophy propagated by Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. All these philosophies consider that the contemporary state of man is a fallen one and everybody should strive to get rid of it. They consider that renouncing the world to practice the penance is a way to attain the salvation. This particular social belief is illustrated by the story of narrator himself. It is also illustrated by monk's tale. He tells that like his fellow monks he shaves his head to avoid human vanity and practices austerities and non-violence in order to attain salvation. He further tells about his previous life that was very luxurious. It was full of friends, fun, drink, and women. Like him his father was also believed in non-violence and did a lot of charity by distributing much of the company's profits in charitable trusts, yet he was unmoved by the conditions under which the diamonds are mined, or the distressing poverty of the miners. He says that "wealth had excised my father's emotions, freeing him to examine people as if they were abstractions. His benevolence had a cold mathematics that left him unmoved and without curiosity about those he helped" (25). He further says: "the inhuman nature of his philanthropy had frightened me . . . I had felt an undercurrent of fear that inheriting my father's business acumen I might also inherit his inhumanity" (25-26).

Incidentally, at this moment an elderly Jain monk visited him. He got impressed by the monk's treatment and attitude towards life and teachings of Mahavira. But what overwhelmed him more was monk's air of contentment. From here, the seed of his becoming a monk was sown. He wanted that satisfaction and moral peace in his life. This urge led him to decide to leave the world like a monk. For his grand renunciation ceremony his father spent sixty two million rupees. On inquiring the purpose of the display, the monk tells that that his father was duplicating the procession with which Mahavira, the great teacher of the Jain faith, renounced the world (20).

On carefully analyzing the psyche of monk's father it is well evident that he is an egocentric man. While the philosophies advocates renunciation because they consider that a man's wealth and social position water his ego, which is the only obstacle in self-realization, the monk's father takes the occasion to display his wealth. Critiquing this mentality of rich people, Surendran writes:

[India is] a land of contradictions. A country which boasts of ancient civilization, India has her own weaknesses. There is no dearth of hypocrisy and the rich exploit the poor. To show their vanity people never hesitate to spend even millions. What takes the back seat here is the concern for the toiling masses, who would continue to lead a miserable life when the rich becomes richer by hook or crook. (40-41)

Moreover, the son, the monk, is not different from his father. He keeps on boasting about his grand ceremony and feels a kind of pride in it. Milan Swarup Sharma holds, "In actuality Ashok has no urge for salvation or to get rid of doubt, delusion and extremes, but it is merely a passing whim, a psychological imbalance" (124). Rama Nair also raises question on his understanding of Jain philosophy:

[C]lassical Jain philosophical literature emphasized not physical renunciation but the attitude of renunciation. The attitude of non-

attachment does not imply a change of status as in embracing asceticism. It would imply that the mind must be completely free of evil intentions, and this would be possible only if the act of ahimsa or non-injury emanates from love of other beings. (186)

Thus, Jain Muni misunderstands asceticism for renunciation. But it is only a badge of renunciation that helps the people to attain a state of egoless-ness. Since both Ashok and his father, despite their asceticism and philanthropy, are ego-ridden; both are nothing but hypocrites. They represent the class of rich and so-called ascetics in Indian society who seem to be very pious; but, in fact, hardly have any regard for human beings.

The novel also deals with the plight of women in contemporary Indian society. The issue is well apparent in at least three out of six stories in the novel. The courtesan's story deals with the condition of women in the profession of prostitution. It tells that women in this trade have had a magnificent past but with the passage of time their importance has decreased in society. Those days are gone and now they live a pathetic life. Because of poverty, they are still forced to be in it. In order to sustain their family they adopt this job. But people treat them as means of pleasure and exploit them for their constraint. It is not all but they are abducted, seized by robbers and in case they are found by police, they are put in jail.

The story of music teacher and her daughter also suggests an undercurrent of women's plight in Indian society. There is something cryptic between the lines in the musician's story. The story is of a girl who has a grotesque feature because of which she is ashamed of her appearance. She is the cause of her mother's trouble: "My ugliness upset her. When other children stared at me, sniggering at my ugliness, my mother's eyes filled with tears" (Mehta 210). A girl with an unattractive feature suffers a lot, especially in India. She is humiliated outside as well as even by her friends and relatives; and at the age of marriage hardly gets a marriage proposal. She recalls:

I was not gifted enough for my mother to feel secure about my future. She had lived so long with genius that she could recognize it like a bazaar fruit seller recognize a fine mango from a merely good one even though he has not grown it, and she believed that a woman without genius could be protected only by a husband in a harsh world designed for men. (Mehta 212)

Her mother's stressed face follows her everywhere. She is less sympathetic towards her and like other mothers she does not stretch her arms to console her. All this cause despair in her that is further multiplied by the inconsiderate behaviour of her father. Her agony is that she gets shelter neither from her mother nor from her father. She expresses as: "I struggled to please my father inside the music room, and then outside the music room consoled my mother for my ugliness" (Mehta 213). As far as her father is concerned he seems oblivious to her ugliness as well as her misery because "genius stands at a strange angle to the world of humans, careless if its own cruelty" (Mehta 218). Therefore, she is deprived of all the natural affections which a child innately enjoys. She craves for mother's care and father's affection but finds no moorings. All this leads her to learn music so that with the help of it she can forget her anguish for some time. Her story raises the issue of beauty and dowry, and shows that in Indian society beauty holds more importance than talent.

Naga Baba's story gives another facet of the women exploitation in India. It is a case of child abuse. In the story the small unfortunate girl is sold for only five hundred rupees. Her father calls her misfortune because her mother died giving birth to her. For this very reason, he dislikes her. In such situation when a motherless child should be treated affectionately, she is scolded and beaten. Things go like this and one day a woman comes pretending to be her new mother. She promises the family that she will arrange some job for her and will treat her like her daughter, but pushes her in prostitution. But she is saved and taught by Naga Baba. Commenting on it Gita Doctor states that the story re-enacts the Shiva legend in today's context, as a naked Sadhu rescues little girl from a brothel and transforms her into a beautiful minstrel-woman who travels about, completely free and liberated to ask her own way in life (27).

Another social reality subjected by the novel is failure of Indian administration to protect the interests of poor and weaker, as well as people's lack of confidence in the system. The social reality of administration's apathy towards the weaker is well apparent in Rahul Singh's episode. Through his story, it is obvious that he like several other brigands is not born but made. By nature he is very kind hearted and understands people's problem. He does not hurt them rather punishes the persons who do so. The novel reveals that he has been a government servant and after the end of his commission, when he returns back to his village, he is shocked to see that some people have captured his land. He gets infuriated at this injustice and seeks help from police, but is informed that since his land is grabbed by an influential person, police cannot help him. The incident forces him to become a bandit.

It is visible in the story that how social machinery works. His land is stolen by someone and instead of taking action against the culprit the local politician provides him the shelter. This reveals the ugly side of politics. The corrupt politicians often harm underprivileged people for their personal gains.

Along with politicians, the novel also presents the corruption and hypocrisy in Indian police system. The police are not loyal to their responsibilities and do not perform their duties properly. What the police are supposed to do is to be the protector of law-abiding citizen, to curb corruption and violence but in reality they do otherwise – lawbreakers and influential persons are supported and protected by the police. Their inefficiency is apparent in their failure of searching the courtesan's daughter. Afraid of the bandits, it abandons the investigation unfinished. Instead of making the bandits afraid, they themselves are afraid of them. While they should have shown their prowess by getting the girl released from bandit's captivity, they give up the enquiry. For this very reason the courtesan requests the narrator not to inform the police. Perhaps she knows very well that they are not capable of protecting her and her daughter. She does not want her daughter's life in danger again. Moreover, when she gets her daughter back by chance her daughter requests the narrator to keep her identity a secret.

Ultimately, she commits suicide because she finds it better to die than to face police's interrogation and tortures. This is the confidence that the people have in social machinery. At the time when police should come forward to help victims, they too victimize them.

The next social reality is the societal apathy and opportunistic attitude towards the poor but talented people. The novel illustrates how a child prodigy born in a poor family is bound to die without reaching to zenith. Sometimes, it is crushed by poverty and sometimes it is nipped in bud by people in the upper strata of society. The case is well illustrated by Master Mohan's story. He was an excellent singer in his childhood and due to his talent had acquired name as a child singer. He was praised for his voice in concert halls filled with his admirers. His father who himself was a music teacher aspired to see his son as a successful singer and tried his best to establish him. But his fate denied to favour him and when the recording contract was finally offered, only weeks before the record was to be made, Master Mohan's voice broke down (56). His struggle with his fate ultimately resulted in failure. After it Master Mohan is bound to live poor. As a music teacher, he earns meagre amount on which his family is raised. But his canker wife adds more difficulties. She not only troubles her husband by her bitter taunts, but has included children also in this mission. They complain that because of his poverty they are deprived of amenities of life. After giving music lessons to children all the day, he cooks his meal himself.

While leading a monotonous life, one day he meets a nine-year old poor blind boy Imrat. He decides to teach that poor child, in order to fulfil and re-live his own dreams again. He starts his teaching and soon finds that the boy has a very good learning skill. In order to avoid the conflict with his wife the music classes are held in a park. Their audience increase day by day and the boy becomes popular among the morning walkers, vendors and the dwellers of the park vicinity. Being aware of their popularity one day a man comes to him with a singing contract and offers him a good amount of money.

Everything seems to go well and Mohan and his pupil's dream is about to be fulfilled, but his fate never proves kind to him and suddenly his dream shatters again. Knowing the boy's popularity an influential man, Mohammad Sahib – a so-called lover of music, invites Imrat and his teacher at his place on the prospect that Imrat could get a chance to sing in the Calcutta Music Festival. Master Mohan gets amazed by the fate of the boy. But to his surprise, the poor blind boy is killed by Sahib on the pretext: "such a voice is not human. What will happen to music if this is the standard by which God judged us" (Mehta 89). The narrator of the story Tariq Mia considers it as stealing "an object of worship so no one but [Mohammad Sahib] can enjoy it" (Mehta 90). It is the problem of the Sahib, perhaps he holds that good things belong to him only and to nobody else. Therefore, he kills the boy.

The story suggests that there are two groups of people: the first are the people of hypocritical and materialistic nature like Master Mohan's wife, Mohammad Sahib, and the owners of music recording company. These people do not miss a single opportunity to take advantage out of it. The other group includes the people who are honest, kind and ready to help people in their times of need; like Master Mohan, Imrat and his sister. Though Master Mohan earn small amount of money yet he is very honest, patient, and hardworking. His kindness is very much visible when he takes a roadside boy and decides to help him despite knowing anger of his wife and his financial condition. It is true that he wants to see his own dream come true in the form of boy's voice but he does not expect anything more than this. He does not want to achieve any material success. Like him are Imrat and his sister who are poor but are honest and they do hard work. With their diligence and noble aim, they try their level best to accomplish their mission, but unfortunately are ultimately gnawed away by the people of first group.

Another social reality that the novel subjects to illustrate is the monotony of city life and repercussions of it on youths. It is illustrated by Nitin Bose's story, nephew of the narrator's friend. Nitin is an executive in a tea company of Calcutta. He is sent to the guest house to be cured from his own belief that he is possessed. He comes there to perform some rituals at some shrine near Narmada. With his diary it is revealed that he is a city grown up, convent educated man. Like, most of modern educated young people, he also believes that success lay in imitating the western life style. All this leads him to drinking and adultery. But, soon he gets fed up of hustle and bustle of Calcutta's daily life. At this juncture he gets two alternate proposals from his company; either to manage a tea estate, or to go for an executive training course. To the surprise of his colleagues he prefers the former. He writes: "to me, suffocated by the sheer weight of Calcutta's inescapable humanity, the solitude of the tea estate [seems] its most attractive prospect" (Mehta 114) because "life on the tea states [seems] a real man's life" (113). His friends warn him against the dangers of loneliness, because of which he may get crazy and addict to drinking, smoking, adultery and all other debaucheries. But he insists and finally reaches there and finds the atmosphere much better than his imagination.

Recharged with the change he starts working with new energy. Being devoid of any other engagements he starts exploring Indian philosophy and mythology. He gets fascinated by the stories of gods, sages, demons, and endless legends contained in the *Purans*. He finds himself a changed person showing the mannerism of an elder. While working, he does not even realize passage of two years. After sometime, compelled by his need and urgency of his desire, while his brain still intoxicated by heavy drinking, he falls in physical relation with a lady named Rima. He continues it for many nights. Meanwhile, the management of the company again asks him to return to Calcutta, owing to which he returns and takes the charge of directorship there. In order to organize things for his successor he comes to the tea state for a sort while but one morning is informed that he is possessed, and is advised to worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River.

On looking through the case of Nitin Bose, it is easily evident that it is a story of a modern city brought up man, deeply imbued in materialistic pattern of life. But in deep corner of his heart he aspires some mental peace; but, instead, gets possessed by a tribal woman. However, several critics hold that Rima is an imaginary being; and they consider that it may be possible that his loneliness, desire and the effect of his grandfather's books would have made him to assume a woman who was nothing but his own creation. He himself asserts: "perhaps my loneliness cause[s] my mind to create its own enslavement. Or perhaps I [have] really become the victim of my grandfather's books" (Mehta 122). But, A K Chaturvedi considers it real, and sees it as an evidence of spiritual superiority of villagers who live with nature over the city dwelling people who are devoid of any touch of nature:

Thus, a tribal lady of bewitching beauty fascinates Nitin, a man of the civilized world, and keeps his soul under her control. Despite being well educated Nitin falls a victim to the magical power of an uneducated woman. Wielding this invincible power on a man's life is not an unusual thing for Rima, but to avoid its effect is beyond the capacity of Nitin, an executive with the treasure of knowledge acquired from the study of a large number of books on varied subjects. This reflects the defeat of a man's intellect by the magical power of an uneducated woman. (34)

The passion for a scientific discovery is apparent in the story of Naga Baba. Along with, it reveals one of the typical social realities of India – the long established tradition of asceticism in India. This ascetic of Lord Shiva belongs to the martial ascetics, the one they call the Naga Sadhus, the protectors. He is called Naga because he wears no cloth, instead smears ash on his body, and carries a human skull bowl to drink water and to take what people offer him to eat. He also carries an iron trident wrapped in saffron cloth. Some of the locals can tell by looking at his saffron covered trident that he belongs to one of the great Naga academies renowned for the wars they have fought to defend their faith. People also narrate the story of Naga's struggle with British during the Indian Mutiny when twenty thousand Naga ascetics, naked, ash-covered, with matted locks, came down from their caves in the Himalayas to do battle with the red-coated Englishmen ambitious to establish an empire (Mehta 241). Tariq Mia enlightens the narrator that a Naga leads a life of voluntary hardships. He keeps on moving from place to place and does not stay anywhere for very long. He spends his nights in cremation grounds, where he meditates, and survives on roots, berries, and plants in jungle. He does yogic exercises to overcome human limitations and slow down the metabolism to endure the extremes of heat and cold. Before the nine days that proceed the night of Shiva, a Naga ascetic does some special rites. He takes bath and applies ash of cremated bodies over his hair and body to increase the power of his meditation. After it, he starts his meditation, which continues for nine days and nights. Finally on the ninth day, on the arrival of the night of Shiva, he breaks his fast by begging at the houses of those who are unclean, untouchable, or profane (Mehta 240).

During the ritual visits Dom, untouchable and at last, he progresses to his third and final destination that is to a brothel. It is said that at such occasion once the Naga Baba meets a girl. There he denies accepting any offering by the woman but asks for that girl child who is there with a man inside the house. Initially the woman tries to convince him to take something else instead of the girl. But being afraid of his resentment, finally she agrees to give the child to him. The Naga Baba seizes girl's hand and carries her with him in the jungle.

While distancing from the city and going deeper into the jungle, the girl narrates her saga. She hails from a poor family, and is considered as misfortune by her father because her mother died giving birth to her. She further tells:

[T]hen this woman came to the slum where we lived, saying she needs young girls to work as servants for her clients. I believed my father when he told me god had given me a new mother. I was happy when he sold me to her. But that woman never treated me like a daughter. She just kept me in that house for those men. (Mehta 250)

The Naga Baba gives her a new name, Uma – another name for the goddess. On the way he teaches her how to live with nature: “[T]he Naga Baba [makes] a small fire and [burns] the dung so it would crumble between his fingers into ash that he [smears] all over his body, an insulation against heat and cold. When he [rubs] the mixture on her arms she [finds] mosquitoes [do not bite] her” (Mehta 249). Their company reminds the companionship of Wordsworth and Lucy. As Wordsworth teaches Lucy in his poems, he too teaches and helps the girl to learn so many things so that she can live with nature. Commenting on her emancipation in the lap of nature Mohit Kumar Ray writes:

[The story shows] the woman's equation with nature, and her act of reaching out to nature in her crisis and despair. . . . And coming close to nature the woman also imbibes the serenity and strength of this unchanged, "immortal" nature. This helps her to find fulfilment through a positive process of being and becoming. (31)

But later in the novel the bureaucrat-narrator is shocked finding out that this Naga Baba is in fact a professor. He is Professor V V Shankar, the foremost archaeological authority on the Narmada in country. It is told to him that he has been the head of the Archaeological Department, but being fed up with the decided routine, he resigned. Thereafter, he lived secretly somewhere and after some time resurfaced with a remarkable book, *The Narmada Survey* that brought him a great success in archaeological circles. To the narrator's surprise, in order to do his research, Professor Shankar has even gone through perils of asceticism. This shows his dedication and involvement with his work that resulted in his discovery that the river is not holy but immortal.

Thus, Gita Mehta presents an appropriate set of stories that raise a number of indigenous social issues. Along with, these stories also present the vibrancy of Indian culture. The novel deals with both traditional and modern India, and shows that Indian people are trying to synthesize them. The novelist subtly demonstrates the weaknesses that are gnawing contemporary Indian society. A careful study of these stories makes it apparent that the human greed is the archenemy of mankind. Subhashree has rightly recognized: "[T]he cohesive force pulling the stories of these various travellers together becomes apparent. We realize that most of these characters, after attempting to do the right thing, end up being wronged in some way by the greediness inherent in modern society" (148). But the novel does not stop here. It goes further in suggesting a viable solution to this weakness of the contemporary society, and that too in same subtle manner. As Gita Doctor holds, in the novel, the different tales are about love; the love of money, the love of flesh, the love of truth and the search for it that can lead to a transcendence (26). The novel subtly suggests that it is only this transcendence that would give the solution to contemporary problems that springs from human greed. It would be appropriate to quote E Galle rightly, who writes:

All [the] allusions, anecdotes and descriptions are enough to draw an outline of Indian society, state its problems and locate cultural philosophical question which stands at the centre of the novel. On one hand it shows that Gita Mehta has no utopia to propose in order to solve India's social political predicament. On the other it reveals the specificity of the life with reference to the past and present doctrines prevailing in the country, reconciling them in humanism. (39)

In totality the novel seems to teach the lesson, as A G Khan holds, "to respect the humblest, to hate none, to find divinity even in the most depraved" (13). Referring to Chandidas's love poem the novelist seems to seal veneration to humanity:

Listen , O brother.
Man is the greatest truth.
Nothing beyond.

In the novel, the river Narmada is the symbol of Indian tradition, and like the river it also is immortal. Though, because of human greed in contemporary time, it seems endangered; but the novelist is hopeful that, with the dedication and endeavours of those who, like Professor V V Shankar, are indulge in the synthesis of old and new, it will resurrect itself. However, Gita Mehta acknowledges that contemporary India is suffering under the perils of harsh realities; but, she also shows the confidence that ultimately it will be able to overcome them. This is the *sutra* that the novel brings-forth.

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