

**Unveiling the Soul of Nature: An Eco-spiritual Study of Gita Mehta's
A River Sutra and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

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DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that the data presented in this Dissertation report entitled, “Unveiling the Soul of Nature: An Eco-spiritual Study of Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*” is based on the results of investigations carried out by me in the Discipline of English at the Shenoi Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University under the supervision of Asst. Prof. Poorwa Naik and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for the award of the degree or diploma by me. I understand that Goa University or its authorities will not be responsible for the correctness of observations/ experimental or other findings given by the dissertation.

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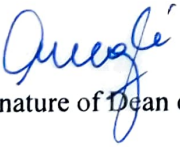
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This is to certify that the dissertation report, “**Unveiling the Soul of Nature: An Eco-spiritual Study of Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide***” is a bonafide work carried out by **Ms. Stella Ninoskha Dsouza** under my supervision in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Arts** in the Discipline of English at the Shenoι Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University.



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ABSTRACT

The dissertation titled “Unveiling the Soul of Nature: An Eco-spiritual Study of Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*” analyzes the selected novels in the light of eco-spirituality in the context of Hinduism. The study was conducted to understand the tenets of eco-spirituality, and how Hinduism encompasses the ideas of spirituality and ecology. The novels were then analyzed in the light of the tenets, such as anthropomorphism of nature, reverence for nature, etc. The in-depth analysis of the texts highlights that religion impacts the way humans perceive their surroundings. It also reveals how myths and rituals add a spiritual dimension to the man-nature relationship. The study also delves into how the various narrative techniques employed by the authors contribute to further bringing the natural elements to the center stage.

Keywords: Eco-spirituality, Hinduism, Myths, Rivers, Shiva, Anthropomorphism

CHAPTER 1

ECO-SPIRITUALITY: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN HUMANS, NATURE, AND THE SPIRITUAL

1.1 Introduction

Eco-spirituality understands the relationship between humans and the natural world by connecting the natural world to the spiritual realm. It is often characterized by a sense of reverence for nature and a belief that humans are interconnected with all living things and therefore we have a moral obligation to care for the planet. According to Fr. Fernando Diaz, the Greek word *oikos*, which means "home," is the source of the prefix "eco-" preceding the word "spirituality." This serves as a reminder that "this house is the only one we have, we're all together, and what happens in Kolkata affects New York, Santiago in Chile, and São Paulo". He believes that eco-spirituality is a connection between humans and those other than humans, it is a way of life— a means of comprehending our way of life and the reason we all reside in this one house, which we all have to share and take care of. (Fraser) Eco-spirituality can be found in many different religious and spiritual traditions, as well as in secular environmental movements. According to some Eco-spiritualists, we have an obligation to protect the natural environment because it is God's creation. In contrast, some others argue that God exists in nature and that our relationship with it allows us to have an encounter with God. Others continue to believe that there is no distinction between God and the natural universe and that they are one and the same.

Hinduism stands as the oldest known religion in the world. Its origins can be traced back to Central Asia and the Indus Valley. Astonishingly, it continues to be a

widely practiced religion in the modern era, cementing its enduring relevance. It is the third-largest religion in the world with over a billion followers. It is a vast and multifaceted faith with rich philosophies, traditions, and practices. According to Hinduism, the ultimate goal of life is to realize the fundamental unity of all existence, to acknowledge the interconnectedness of our inner selves (or *Atman*) with others' selves and the universal Mind. This can be achieved by fulfilling our duties in life (*dharma*) through the right actions (*karma*), which frees us from the endless cycle of birth and death (*samsara*). Upon reaching this state, the individual unites with Brahman and returns to the origins of oneness. The greatest obstacle to understanding our inherent interconnectedness is the false notion of separation – the mistaken belief that we are fundamentally different from others and from our Creator. This illusion, also known as *maya*, is strengthened by our earthly experiences. However, by acknowledging the underlying oneness of all beings and embracing the divine within ourselves, we can break free from *maya* and attain a state of enlightened self-realization. (Mark)

A severe blow was dealt to the social, economic, and spiritual areas as a result of people's failure to comprehend the true and profound meaning of *The Vedas* and Hindu cultural texts written by the great sages and our ancestors. Instead, the texts' symbolic meaning without conducting scientific research was taken. The primary goal was to establish a socially, economically, and spiritually sound society under the theme “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” to advance both the nation and the global community simultaneously. (Jayswal)

This research explores eco-spirituality in the light of Hinduism in the two selected texts namely, *A River Sutra* by Gita Metha and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav

Ghosh by studying the theoretical framework of the spiritual background of Hinduism and also how ecology and Hinduism are connected.

1.1.1 Importance and Reasons for the Proposed Research

Eco-spirituality and eco-criticism are both concerned with the relationship between humans and the natural world, but they approach this topic in different ways. Eco-spirituality is more focused on the spiritual aspects of this relationship, while eco-criticism is more focused on the cultural and literary aspects. Eco-criticism is the study of how literature and the environment interact to reveal how important nature is to the development and evolution of everything. It also opens up a variety of avenues for academic inquiry into environmental issues and how literature approaches the theme of nature. Some eco-critics attempt to offer potential remedies for the preservation of the environment through their writing. Spirituality and ecology research are connected through eco-spirituality. "A manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment" (I) is one definition for it. There is a growing need for environmentally based religion and spirituality in light of the current ecological crises and the new millennium. Scholars also understand eco-spirituality to be a response to people's desire to break out from a materialistic society.

The two novels chosen for the research are *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. The novels portray characters who are deeply connected to the natural world and explore the interconnectedness of humans and nature. The novels are saturated with Hindu mythology, legends, beliefs, customs, and rituals which add a spiritual dimension to the already existing man-nature

relationship. Critical eco-spiritual analysis of the selected novels is done in the light of Hinduism.

A River Sutra is a 1993 novel by an Indian-American author, Gita Mehta. The novel is set along the banks of one of the holiest rivers of India, the Narmada River which flows through Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The novel is a collection of six stories which are divided across sixteen chapters. The Narmada River plays the central role and joins all the stories together. The novel is deeply entrenched in Hindu traditions, beliefs, and rituals surrounding the Narmada. Each story discusses the character's life and experiences and the purpose of their visit to the banks of the river.

The Hungry Tide is a 2004 novel by the Indian author, Amitav Ghosh. It is set in the Sundarbans, a vast archipelago of islands in the Bay of Bengal. The powerful tides that occur in places such as the Bay of Bengal can be very destructive, but they also have a significant impact on the lives of people who live in the coastal areas. Sundarbans is home not only to a wide variety of flora and animals, but also to numerous mythologies, beliefs, and rituals. The novel weaves a web of stories highlighting the deep interconnection between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. The novel follows the lives of three characters, namely: Piya Roy, an American biologist; Fokir, a local fisherman; and Kanai, a translator.

Understanding eco-spirituality in the context of Hinduism helps to understand the Hindu faith's teachings on the relationship between humans and nature. It provides a new and fresh perspective on nature, developing a sense of wonder and appreciation for it. Understanding Hindu scriptures in *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*, and *The Puranas* which emphasize the significance of environmental protection and reverence for nature enables one to praise nature's beauty and

holiness. It helps to identify the eco-spiritual practices that the Hindu community practices which contributes to environmental sustainability, and build a bridge between the Hindu community and the environmental movement.

1.1.2 Scope and Limitation of the Research

The scope of this research is vast, as eco-spirituality is a dynamic field and it is of growing need as the environmental issues are increasingly pressing. Studying eco-spirituality in the context of Hinduism will help to gain a new perspective on environmental issues by providing a fresh insight into how spirituality and ecology intersect and how they can shape our response to environmental challenges. This area also offers rich opportunities for academic study by delving into ancient texts, philosophies, and modern interpretations.

The limitations of this research are as follows:

- Eco-spirituality is a broad and diverse field, encompassing a wide range of beliefs and practices, therefore all the components of eco-spirituality cannot be covered in this research.
- This study is only restricted to exploring eco-spirituality in the context of Hinduism.
- The study is limited to two texts, namely: *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh
- Due to the study's length constraints, only selected characters and events from *A River Sutra* and *The Hungry Tide* could be analyzed.

1.2 Research Problem/ Question

- How can the application of eco-spirituality to *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh foster the understanding of how the lives of people living along the banks of the Narmada River and the archipelago of Sundarbans respectively, are intertwined with nature? And how does spirituality play a role in this man-nature relationship?
- What methods or techniques do Gita Mehta in *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* utilize to impart a spiritual dimension to the natural elements in their narratives?

1.3 Relevance and Necessity of the Proposed Research

1.3.1 Necessity in the field of Language and Literature

- Eco-spirituality is valuable and necessary in the field of language and literature as culture, religion, spiritual beliefs and relationship with nature have a huge impact on one's language and also how one perceives literature.
- It helps to develop a deeper understanding of our relationship with the natural world, to find new ways to express our relationship with nature and to inspire others to care for the planet.
- It explores themes such as the interconnectedness of all living things, the sacredness of nature, the importance of environmental stewardship, etc.
- It is a powerful tool to raise awareness of environmental issues and inspire people to take action to protect the planet.

1.3.2 Relevance to the Society

Eco-spirituality emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the Earth. This aligns with the holistic nature of sustainable development, which seeks to address social, economic, and environmental aspects as interconnected components of well-being. Eco-spirituality encourages a deep reverence for nature, recognizing the intrinsic value of the environment. Sustainable development goals, particularly Goal 15 (Life on Land) and Goal 14 (Life Below Water) focus on the conservation and sustainable use of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, which align with eco-spiritual values. The values of respect for nature, interconnectedness, and ethical responsibility promoted by eco-spirituality contribute positively to the global efforts toward sustainable development.

1.4 Objectives of the Research Proposed

- The objectives of the research are as follows:
- To explore the concept of eco-spirituality in light of the selected texts.
- To approach eco-spirituality in the light of Hinduism in the context of the selected texts.
- To understand the spiritual background of Hinduism concerning the selected texts.
- To comprehend the relationship between Hinduism and ecology in the selected texts.
- To examine how myths affect the relationship between man and nature in the text selected.
- To critically analyze *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta from the lens of eco-spirituality.

- To probe into the eco-spiritual elements in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh.

1.5 Literature Review

1.5.1 Researchers and Research in the selected field

After doing an extensive review of the literature, the following are the findings:

Eco-spirituality is the belief that nature holds spiritual significance, which is often overlooked in psychology. Eco-spirituality is characterized by themes such as anthropomorphism of nature, powerful experiences in nature, nature as a spiritual resource, and connectedness to nature. It is a unique construct that predicts how people reason about the natural environment, treating it as a sacred value rather than an instrumental good. This concept is distinct from other constructs that predict concern for nature, as it captures a spiritual dimension of environmental concern and is only minimally correlated with political orientation. (Billet 1) This suggests that Eco-spirituality is a valuable tool for understanding and addressing environmental concerns.

Religion has a very strong influence on human existence, and our spiritual perspectives on the world. Religion, or ideas about our nature and destiny, have a profound influence on human ecology. The article deals with the Judeo-Christian Attitudes Towards the Environment which are as follows: Domination over Earth, Domination means stewardship, and all in creation as God's creatures, loved and cherished equally by God. Earth is a holy place, and we humans are "earthlings", who have been shaped by this earth. The way that humans now use nature is a sacrilege—a heinous disrespect for this sacred space. These actions diminish what

has true worth and purpose. Living more gently, sharing the earth more equitably with other animals, atoning for our previous pleasures, and drawing from the planet sparingly, humbly, and gratefully are all part of eco-spirituality. (Hettinger 81)

Eco-spirituality, in brief, is a science that links the environment with spirituality. It combines environmental advocacy with religion. The article gives an overview of how various faiths including Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, and Paganism, talk about eco-spirituality. In the context of Hinduism, many morals of Eco-spirituality are embedded in the roots of the traditions which focus on the well-being of the environment. In the Hindu text, *Yajurveda*, God is described as omnipresent, thereby reinforcing the need for respecting all creation. Also in *Vishnu Purana*, it is mentioned that God is pleased with those who do not harm or kill non-speaking creatures. Thus, it concludes that Eco-spirituality brings together religion and environmental activism. (Irshad et al. 301)

Eco-spirituality asserts that spirituality and ecology are inseparable, that there is a spiritual element to ecology, and that spirituality and ecological concerns are related. Although the roots of Eco-spirituality may be found at least in the 17th century. However, the foundational ideas of Eco-spirituality emerged in the 1970s, drawing from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including scientific ecology and the Gaia hypothesis, which was put out by British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock at the time. The author also gives an insight into the ecologization of religion and the spiritualization of ecology. (Choné 40) Lovelock suggested that the biosphere could continuously modify itself to maintain the world healthy or be able to support life because he thought of the earth as a vital, self-regulating organism. William Golding, a well-known British author, recommended the term Gaia, which was once used to refer to the Greek earth goddess, to Lovelock. The name was

selected right away as it had religious and mythological overtones. The Gaia Hypothesis integrates the ecological catastrophe with scientific knowledge and religious imagination. (Scharper 53)

Some researchers and practitioners understand eco-spirituality as a response to people's desire to break away from a materialistic and consumerist world. The concepts of deep ecology, which are defined as "the recognition of the inherent value of all living beings and the use of this view in shaping environmental policies," have had an impact on Eco-spirituality. Spirituality and environment may coexist together. God has given us this earth so that we may take care of and preserve Mother Earth. (Samuel 1)

The religious tradition of Hinduism has its origins in the age-old Sanskrit *Vedas*. Over the last 200 years, India's cultural dynamics have undergone significant change, which has led to a decline in the significance of environmental preservation philosophy found in Hindu literature. The author investigates the connection between Hinduism and ecology in India. His thesis focuses on the sacredness of water and pollution and deforestation in Himalayan regions. (Shenoy 2)

The article provides an eco-spiritual insight into *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta. The author delves into Mehta's involvement with postcolonial issues about environmental issues, her portrayal of nature's significance to divinity, and her development of the conventional notion of the unity of diversity and oneself in the natural and social worlds in opposition to the Narmada Valley Project. Mehta depicts many different periods as well as a range of religious rituals and beliefs in Indian culture via her tales in the text. These faiths have been crucial in defining cultural identity and customs in all of their facets. She investigates how the ancient Indian connection between humans and nature has been harmed by the British

global capitalist imperialists' culture-nature duality, which has maintained colonial dominance. She reconstructs the coexistence of environment and culture, as well as the role of the Narmada River in sustaining Indian physical, cultural, and spiritual identities. (DİNÇ 377)

In light of the growing global significance of religion in climate discourses, environmental and climate fiction can serve as an effective intermediate tool for spreading the ecological wisdom and importance of our myths. The novel, *The Hungry Tide* is influenced by Hindu mythology. An in-depth eco-critical analysis of this work reveals Hindu beliefs as the foundation for the embedded ecology of the aboriginal people of the Sundarbans islands. In addition to being a place where many rivers confluence, Ghosh asserts that the area of Sundarbans is also a place where various civilizations and mythology coexist. (Kumar 932)

In conclusion, the literature review has showcased how nature and spirituality intersect, and how humans share a deep connection with the natural world. The two texts chosen, *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, showcase a profound connection between nature, spirituality, and human existence. They encourage a deeper appreciation for the environment and the recognition of the spiritual dimensions that can be found within it. The research gap found from the review of literature is to add to ongoing discussions about the relationship between man, nature, and religion using eco-spirituality in the light of Hinduism in the selected texts, namely, *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh.

1.6 Formulation of the hypothesis

Gita Mehta in *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide*, have weaved the narrative of their stories in which the connection of humans with their environment is influenced by their spiritual beliefs, and the various myths, legends, rituals, and customs support this claim.

1.7 Research Methodology for the proposed research

The research is conducted using Qualitative methodology. *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh has been selected for the research. Eco-spirituality theory is used in the light of Hinduism for the analysis of the selected texts. A study is done on the spiritual background of Hinduism, followed by the relationship between Hinduism and Ecology. The role of myths in the relationship between man and nature is also discussed. The analysis is done text-wise, by examining how legends, rituals, and customs affect the way people perceive nature. The study delves into the narrative strategies employed by the authors to enhance the credibility and relatability of their works.

1.8 Research Design

1.8.1 Chapterization

- Chapter 1- **Eco-Spirituality: Bridging the Divide between Humans, Nature, and the Spiritual.**

This chapter includes an introduction to eco-spirituality and its origins. It provides a gist of Hinduism and also includes a brief introduction to the selected texts and their authors: Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The chapter also contains the aims, objectives,

scope and limitations, literature review, research problem, hypothesis, chapterization, and program chart.

- **Chapter 2- Eco-spirituality and Hinduism: Where Reverence for Nature Meets Spiritual Growth.** This chapter will give a theoretical framework for eco-spirituality in the context of Hinduism. Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions, and its rich teachings promote the sacredness of nature and the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. Myths and legends play a prominent role in Hinduism to promote its ideals and principles and thereby influence the way nature is perceived.

2.1 Hinduism or *Sanatana Dharma*: A Spiritual Way of Life

2.2 Hinduism and Ecology: Exploring Ecological Wisdom in Hinduism

2.3 Role of Myth in Bridging the Gap between Man and Nature

- **Chapter 3-Where Faith Meets Earth: Exploring Eco-Spirituality in *A River Sutra* by Gita Mehta.**

The chapter deals with the eco-spiritual analysis of Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra*. It begins with an introduction to the novel along with an overview of the worship of rivers in India. The novel discusses the Narmada-Shiva relationship, Shiva's penance, and Narmada's birth, the various beliefs and myths surrounding the river. Mehta portrays the river as a living, breathing entity that carries the essence of the whole country. To do this, she has anthropomorphized the Narmada River. The subsection of the chapter is titled "Anthropomorphism of River Narmada. By doing so, the different roles and characteristics attributed to the personified river

Narmada are discussed. Gita Mehta has used the meta-narrative technique which can be found in ancient texts like *The Mahabharata*, *Panchatantra*, etc. She has used various techniques to reveal that the influence of culture, religion, desire, etc on the human mind is inevitable.

- **Chapter 4- The Interplay of Ecology and Spirituality in *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh**

The chapter delves into analyzing the novel *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh from an eco-spiritual lens. The chapter opens with an introduction to the novel followed by four further sub-divisions. Amitav Ghosh has anthropomorphized the Sundarbans and the Ganga River, and by doing so he has added a new dimension to the narrative. Ghosh has revolved his tale around of legend of Bon Bibi, a goddess who is widely worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans. There are several legends and myths related to the Ganga River which are mentioned which hint at the holy origin and immortal nature of the river. The chapter deals with reverence for animals in the novel, by examining the significance of animals like tigers, dolphins, and crabs in the Sundarbans and also in the lives of the characters. The chapter also examines the narrative techniques used by Amitav Ghosh.

- **Chapter 5- Leaving an Eco-Spiritual Footprint: Conclusion**

The chapter includes the findings of the research/ study and also gives a gist into why environmentally based religions and faiths are of utmost importance in modern times.

CHAPTER 2

ECO-SPIRITUALITY AND HINDUISM: WHERE REVERENCE FOR NATURE MEETS SPIRITUAL GROWTH

2.1 Hinduism or *Sanatana Dharma*: A Spiritual Way of Life

*“Hinduism teaches us to live in harmony with nature, to respect all living beings,
and to cultivate a life of inner peace and joy.”*

– Sadhguru

When referring to the predominant religion in India throughout history, the term "Hinduism" is used as a broad phrase. Throughout world history, Hinduism has had a significant impact. (Griswold 163) In the eighteenth century, the term "Hindu" was incorporated into the English language. Hinduism is all-encompassing. It is neither a religion nor a system of beliefs, but a way of life. Hinduism encompasses all aspects of life, including the political, sexual, and economic spheres. "Religion," like "Hindu," is a Western term. (Prime 78)

According to Vaswani, the Hindu faith is a way of life rather than an "-ism." The name Sindhu is where the word Hindu originates, as the Muslim conquerors could not pronounce the letter "sa." The Hindu faith does not have a name, a founder, a beginning, and a known location. Its message is relevant to all generations, which is why it has endured and flourished throughout time. Scholars believe that the emergence of Hindu culture coincided with the arrival of the Aryans, who introduced an amalgamation of Greek and Egyptian religious practices. Scholars believe that the emergence of Hindu culture coincided with the arrival of the Aryans, who introduced an amalgamation of Greek and Egyptian

religious practices. This was combined with Dravidian knowledge and beliefs, resulting in the blending of various religious beliefs and modifications of the Aryans' complex thought processes which assimilated into *Shruti*—the Vedic civilization. (Vaswani 5)

The Vedas are a collection of writings that contain the timeless truths that the ancient rishis uncovered through intense meditation. The Hindu religion is known as *Sanatana Dharma*, or "that which has no beginning or end," or "the Eternal Religion," since it is a faith without beginning or end. It is not a single religion with a single dogma, but a fellowship of religions, a federation of ideologies. Every soul, from the greatest to the lowest, may grow and evaluate from it by consuming spiritual nourishment. It offers a comprehensive and all-encompassing perspective on life, marked by tremendous spiritual purpose, extreme tolerance, and profound humanism. (Vaswani 8)

God accepts all kinds of worship: making use of idols, visiting temples, offering prayers, engaging in simple worship with flowers and a lamp, carrying out extensive ritualistic *pujas*, participating in *kirtan* sessions, or just closing your eyes and meditating on the light inside. Any kind of worship is acceptable, including selfless sacrifice, unwavering faith, and the committed fulfillment of one's obligations in a spirit of worship. Any kind of sincere prayer or worship that comes from the heart is accepted by God. Worship locations, languages, and ceremonies don't matter. It covers every facet of life and doesn't skip on any ideologies. Its *Advaita* philosophy is ascetic and abstract, while its *Charvaka* philosophy is materialistic and atheistic; it holds that all people are born with the capacity for ethical behaviour and that everyone can and should strive for eternal joy. Although

sorrow, despair, anguish, and sadness are all a part of being human, everyone has the freedom to go beyond human bounds and pursue freedom. (Vaswani 12)

Hinduism's spiritual dimension embraces all that we do, say, and think about, including politics, economics, music, dance, fine art, commerce, trade, profession, education, and marriage. It is not limited to a person's purely spiritual endeavors. Education, or *Vidya*, is linked to the goddess of learning, Saraswati. *Bhakti*, or devotion, is the source of inspiration for dance and music. The married state is referred to as *grihastha ashrama*, a state where families follow the path of righteousness. (Vaswani 13)

According to the German philosopher Max Müller, "The religion of *The Vedas* knows no idols," even though Hindus worship a hundred distinct deities. The Hindu faith is fundamentally monotheistic, despite the misconception held by many that it is polytheistic. The sages of *The Upanishad* have stated, "*Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*," which translates to "The truth is one, it is spoken under many names." Furthermore, it says, "*Aakashat patitam toyam yatha gachchati sagaram sarva deva namaskaram Keshavam prati gachchati*". The devotion paid to all deities eventually reached *Keshava*, the Supreme Reality, in the same way that rainwater falls from the sky and ends up in the ocean. In the *Sanatana Dharma*, the idea of God originated with the idea of Brahman, the Infinite, the Eternal, and the Formless. Over time, the inconceivable started to take on multiple forms and attributes. *Nirguna* became *Suguna*. As per his three-fold facets, Brahman, the Supreme and the Eternal resolved into Brahma, the Creator; Shiva, the Destroyer; and Vishnu, the Preserver. The concept of personal gods gave rise to the idea of gods regulating certain human activities. As a result, the goddesses of energy, wisdom, and riches, Shakti, Saraswati, and Lakshmi, emerged. It is important to

emphasize that, despite being mistaken for polytheism, there is only one God. Because He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and present everywhere, He possesses an infinite number of attributes and titles. We refer to the One God, the Supreme Reality, by whatever name and form we give Him. "*Ishavasyam idam sarvam*," as *The Ishopanishad* states, "All that is, is a vesture of the Lord." (Vaswani 15)

Even individuals who reject the existence of God have a place in the Hindu faith. It is possible to be an atheist or agnostic and still be a Hindu. To question the existence of God at all is not a sin. Hindu seers believed that atheism was a step towards man's spiritual development as well. Hindus have an intimate connection with God, seeing him as a friend, brother, parent, lover, or father figure. Saints such as Surdas considered the Lord to be their child. (Vaswani 18)

Hinduism does not repudiate or reject the outside world. Its juxtaposition of the actual and imaginary worlds is both nuanced and profound. Even while this world is thought of as a curtain that keeps God's Reality hidden from us, this suggests that the veil in itself is real—after all, how else could it keep the Reality hidden? Lesser mortals are seduced by its hues and allure, but enlightened spirits see the veil for what it is: a veil. Hinduism's timeless message to modern people is that without spirituality, there can be no genuine freedom. Hinduism has always been centered on the *atma-shakti* or the growth of inner energy. (Vaswani 23)

According to Dada J.P Vaswani, the foundation of our magnificent culture in ancient India was the light of the *atman*, the Self, or the Spirit. The science of the spirit, or *atma vidya*, was the name given to this culture. Spirituality, too, is a science; its goal is to find the one Self that exists in all. We are forced to consider the fundamental question of spirituality: What is man? Or, to be more specific, who am I? Seeking self-knowledge is what the Hindu faith encourages us to do. In the

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Rishi Yajnavalkya imparts to Raja Janaka the lesson that, even in the absence of all external light, such as the sun, moon, and fire, one light persists. It is the Spirit's light, the light of the *atman*. The sun shines, the moon shines, and the fire glows because of this, the light of all lights. Man must live, work, walk, and return to his eternal home utilizing this light. (Vaswani)

The core ideas of Hinduism are found in *The Vedas*, or what we refer to as *The Vedanta*. According to *The Vedanta*, there is just one life in everybody. All creation and the universe are infused with a single life. Thus, let us honor and appreciate life in all its manifestations. Three things need our respect: respect for the things above us, the things surrounding us, and the things below us.

- Reverence for what is above us is directed toward the men of God and the immense cosmic power, widely referred to as God. It entails showing respect for parents as well as great spiritual leaders like gurus, as without reference one cannot develop and flourish.
- Reverence for the immediate surroundings entails respect for all of nature. If you approach nature with reverence, she will reveal a great deal of her secrets to you. The renowned poet Wordsworth once said, "One impulse from the vernal wood can teach us more about Man." We should be reverent towards everything since nature is nothing but the vesture of the Lord. regard for other people, irrespective of their ethnicity or religion because everyone is a brother and sister, which gives rise to the Hindu view of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which states that all people are members of the same family. Thus, the Hindu salutation is known as *pranam* or *namaste*, in which we give everyone we encounter our utmost respect and devotion.

- Respecting those beneath us means honoring the broken and impoverished, the needy, the lowly, and the crippled because they are all reflections of God. It also entails treating birds and animals with respect because they are also God's children. Within the same family of creation, they are the younger siblings of man. Man's holy duty is to love them, care for them, and save them. (Vaswani 26)

A fundamental tenet of Hindu philosophy is the law of *karma*. Every action has a reaction according to the law of cause and effect, creating circumstances that can be experienced during this lifetime or the next. In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna refers to the field of life as a *kshetra*. Every idea, statement, action, sentiment, desire, thought, and feeling are seeds that are sowed. Thoughts are the fundamental units of existence; they are forces and powerful. Thoughts become actions when they are repeated, and actions become character when they are repeated, and character is what defines your future. You will have to bear the consequences of your decisions and ideas. It's known as the Law of *Karma*. It is impossible to plant thorns and harvest mangoes. Just as the pure life energy is never destroyed, life is viewed as a continuity. In His teachings, Bhagwan Swāminērūyan has expounded that as God has endowed all people with the capacity for free will, it is their responsibility to carry out *karmas* that culminate in either *punya* (merits) or *paap* (sins). Moreover, when it comes to deciding the results of one's *karma*, God is the one who bestows the rewards of both good and bad *karma*. Death is acknowledged as a natural part of life, not as a rejection of it. One has to come back to this planet to harvest the fruits of their previous birth—what they sowed in the past. (“Karma and Dharma”) Consequently, the Hindu perspective acknowledges and believes in *samsara*, also known as reincarnation: the cycle of life, death, and

rebirth until a person's soul emerges into the Absolute and achieves *moksha*, or freedom from the cycles of rebirth, after realizing their fundamental divinity. According to Scriptural sources, self-realization is both the ultimate goal and destiny of one's lifetime for Hindus. As a result, they are urged to accept everyone and live in harmony and peace with their greater selves, as well as with society and the environment at large. They are urged to be adaptable and adjust course as necessary. (“Culture and Religion Hinduism”)

2.2 Hinduism and Ecology: Exploring Ecological Wisdom in Hinduism

*“Ecology and spirituality are fundamentally connected,
Because deep ecological awareness, ultimately,
Is spiritual awareness”*

- Fritjof Capra

Ecology is defined by the World Book Encyclopaedia as, “the scientific study of the interactions between living organisms and their surroundings. These living creatures comprise both simple and complex plants and animals, or to put it another way, all of the world's microscopic and non-microscopic life forms.” Ecology is mostly the domain of biological research, but it might be studied using a multidisciplinary discipline, of which some religious perspectives could be extremely helpful, for a larger knowledge of ecology, especially in connection to humans. As can be seen from the above, religion—and thus, Hinduism—has made several significant contributions to how people relate to and interact with all living things as well as non-living objects. In terms of Hindu tradition, this is explained

by the idea of *Ishwarah Sarvabhutanam*, or the omnipresence of God. Ishavasyam, the divine, is everywhere and manifests in countless forms. *The Bhagavad Gita* (7.19, 13.13) and *The Bhagavad Purana* (2.241, 2.2.45), for example, make several references to the supreme deity's omnipresence. For instance, the Ganges and other great rivers in India are revered as goddesses by many Hindus. The aforementioned indicates that the ultimate entity is pantheistic. (Okafor and Stella 3)

The Hindu faith respects the environment and its resources above everything else. *The Vedas* are hymns to nature, with each deity standing in for a particular element's divine quality. Vayu is the wind, Agni is the fire, Varuna is the rivers, and Indra is the rain. Every ceremony begins and ends with the chanting of the *Shanti Mantra*, which is an offering for harmony with the elements. Animals are also venerated as gods, gods' companions, or as gods' vehicles. Pollution was avoided because people revered the wind and the water. Mountains were believed to be the dwelling places of gods, hence they needed to be guarded. Perhaps no religion emphasizes environmental ethics more than Hinduism. The earliest teachings on preserving the environment and maintaining ecological balance can be found in *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Puranas*, and *The Smriti*. Hinduism instils in people a respect for and the ability to coexist harmoniously with the environment. In Hinduism, ecology is an integral aspect of a spiritual worldview. (Bhat 5) Ignacimuthu explains that "Hinduism expresses the firm belief that the natural environment in which people are placed is a manifestation of divine nature itself." In Hinduism, the idea of Mother Earth's family is referred to as *vasudhaiv kutumbakam*. According to Dwivedi, *Vasudha* refers to the earth, and *Katumba* to the extended family that includes all living things, including humans and animals. This indicates that all members of Devi

Vasundhara's extended family, including humans, are animals that inhabit our planet. We cannot (individually and collectively) attain the requisite maturity and respect for all other living things unless we view the universe as a single, big family. (Okafor and Stella 5)

Hinduism specialist Dr. David Frawley states that Hinduism "lays as much importance on environmental ethics as compared to any other religion." It firmly believes that, regardless of a person's level of faith or lack thereof, God is present in all of creation, including nature. Hinduism is referred to by Sri Aurobindo as *The Sanatana Dharma*, or the Eternal Religion. He upheld that because Hinduism made no claims to universal adherence, had no one infallible ideology, and did not define itself along sectarian lines, it gave itself no name. Additionally, he refers to *Sanatana Dharma* as "a body of spiritual knowledge and experience, a mighty law of life, and a great principle of human evolution." He taught that living is a sadhana, in which the goal is to realize the Divine in the world by work, love, and knowledge; that is, living for God in oneself and others, not only for oneself. (Bhat 19)

In *Vedic Ecology: Practical Wisdom for Surviving the 21st Century*, author and translator Ranchor Prime argues that *Sanatana Dharma*, the name Hindus use today, is the legitimate name for Hinduism. This can be roughly translated as "the eternal essence of life." This essence is not unique to people. It is the fundamental characteristic that connects all living things, including plants, animals, and humans, to the surrounding universe and, ultimately, to the Godhead, the original source of their existence. *Dharma*, or righteousness, is the cornerstone of Hinduism. According to the famous Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, *Dharma* exists for the overall well-being (*abhyudaya*) of all living things; therefore, *Dharma* is the means by which the well-being of all living things is maintained. (Bhat 21)

In *The Mahabharata* epic, Bhishma, who had attained the highest level of knowledge of *Dharma*, responded as follows to Yudhisthira's question about the nature and application of *Dharma*:

“*tadrso ayam anuprasno yatra dharmah sudurlabhah|*
duskarah pratisankhyatum tatkenatra vyavasyati||
prabhavarthaya bhutanam dharmapravacanam krtam|
syat prabhavasamyuktah sa dharma iti niscayah||”

(*Santi Parva 109.9.11*)

Dharma is the most difficult concept to define. It has been defined as that which contributes to the bettering of all living things. Thus, *Dharma* is unquestionably that which promotes the well-being of living things. The enlightened rishis have declared that *Dharma* is that which endures. (Bhat 23)

Respect for nature is a prerequisite for true spirituality. To comprehend the inner reality of nature, we must first look within—not just ourselves, but the entirety of creation. "When we feel like we are a part of the whole and ask ourselves questions about how this creation is functioning, how our being functions within it, and who created it and how—when we try to find the motive force behind all of this—this is spirituality," says Shri Sewak Saran. According to Indian philosophy, a *manav* is a person who fully respects nature, whereas a *dhanav* is a person who abuses it. Human welfare and the welfare of nature are inextricably linked. Being good to the environment will naturally make us kind to one another. (Prime 20)

Protecting the environment is a moral obligation for all humans, according to Hindus, not because of a selfish rush to preserve biodiversity and thus human life. Rather, it is the *Dharmic* way of life. The misuse and exploitation of the planet and its resources are the result of ignorance about this Dharmic way of life. Renowned

Indian scholar and philosopher Dr. Karan Singh states, “In ancient spiritual traditions, people believed that man was a part of nature and that he was inextricably bound to the elements around him on a spiritual and psychological level.” He continues, “*The Vedas* consider every object in the universe—living and non-living—to possess the same spiritual force.” In the end, all that exists is an expression of the same heavenly power. The divine and human are not mutually exclusive. Indians viewed the environment as a friendly abode. They held that nature, gods, and people were all essential components of an organic totality. Later on, the scribes of ancient India personified all the supernatural powers as *Devatas*, or deities, deserving of worship or respect. Thus, the need for ecological balance for human happiness was stressed by the ancient sages and seers. “Need, rather than greed,” served as the foundation for humankind's interaction with the natural world. The first verse of *The Isha Upanishad* states:

“*isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat |*
tena tyaktena bhunjithah ma grdhah kasyasvitdhanam||”

(The Lord is the owner and ruler of everything, living or non-living, in the universe. As a result, one should only take their fair part then hand over the remaining amount to the Supreme, who is fully aware of its ownership.)

Environmental ideals are mirrored in *The Vedanta*, but man has become blind to them because of his greed and selfishness. Man will soon lead himself into a grave calamity if he does not recognize the necessity to treat other creations in the universe as his equal, treat them with respect, and live in peace with them. One of the greatest physicists of the modern era, Albert Einstein, once said that “humans are a part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. He presents himself, his ideas, and his emotions as though they are apart from

everything else—a sort of optical deception of his consciousness. We are kind of imprisoned by this illusion, limited to our desires and affection for a small number of people who are closest to us. Our mission is to break free from this captivity by expanding our compassion to include all living things and the breathtaking entirety of the natural world." According to Christopher Fici, the chant *Om Shanti, Om Shanti, Om Shanti* is more than just a means of achieving inner peace because it also refers to the well-being of the universe around the individual. (Bhat 24) For Hindus, the environment includes all three meanings of *shanti*: the first *shanti* signifies ecological peace; the second *shanti* signifies peace in society, between individuals, groups, countries, and peoples; and the third *shanti* signifies inner peace or spiritual peace.

Nature and life were central to *The Vedic* perspective. Centuries ago, it had laid down the foundational ideas of environmental ethos. Ecology and environmental science are regarded as branches of contemporary science that conduct in-depth investigations into the environment and its components. Although they emerged as science in the 20th century, their roots are found in Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature. India's longstanding interest in the environment and ecology is abundant in the Vedic literature. *The Vedas* state that the world is organized around nature. The relationship between man and nature is the main topic of *The Atharva Veda*. Keeping nature in balance is essential to human society's survival and well-being. The need for ecological balance for human well-being was highlighted by the ancient sages and seers. One of the first written accounts of man's intimate relationship with nature is *The Rig Veda*. The basic idea of the value system found in *The Vedas* is the harmonious coexistence of all of God's creatures. Ecological endeavors have been influenced by the environmental matters found in

ancient texts. The ancient sages and seers were able to visualize the intimate bond between humans and nature and noted that human existence is a part of this immense world. *The Vedas* make numerous references to the preservation of the environment, ecological harmony, weather patterns, rainfall phenomena, and other related topics, all of which clearly demonstrate the great degree of knowledge that the people and seers of that age held. *The Rig Veda* exalts Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Maruts, and Aditya, highlighting their role in preserving the equilibrium in the functioning of all natural phenomena, including the earth, mountains, lakes, forests, and so on. (Bhat 30)

Mother Earth is personified in Vedic literature as the goddess Bhumi or Prithvi. She is a generous mother who bestows kindness upon her offspring. Hymns of *The Atharva Veda* beautifully depict her beauty and abundance. In Hinduism, food is regularly presented in the temple to God. The environment and we will both be unsatisfied without these sacrifices. The earth delights when she sees that her produce is being presented to God, its original source, rather than herself being revered and worshipped. Bhumi or Prithvi is happy to see God being honored since she is a servant of God herself. This principle—that all beings survive on food grains, which depend on rain—is articulated in *The Bhagavad Gita*.

“Rain is the result of yajna, or religious activity, which is predicated on carrying out obligations as prescribed by the Vedic texts.”

— (*Bhagavad Gita* 3. 14-15)

We have to realize that little is more in order to have a balanced relationship with nature. There is enough to meet everyone's necessities, but not everyone's greed, according to Gandhi. We must constantly consider and inquire about what our true requirements are. (Prime 75)

Intricately woven throughout Indian life and culture are plants and trees. The old Indian seers took great care to protect and preserve plants and trees because of their significance for human existence on a daily basis and for maintaining environmental equilibrium. They not only talked about the benefits of worshipping plants and trees, but they also developed the idea of it. Ancient Indian civilization revered nature, but modern-day man attempts to control and exploit it. Indian culture has always revered plants and trees as symbolic deities. Trees and plants have a significant impact on human life. They provide us with necessities like food, oxygen, clothes, shelter, medications, and other things that are necessary for life on Earth. They enhance the attractiveness of our environment. They commit themselves to the good of humanity without thinking about their own interests. The Vedic people understood that all living things on Earth have a common ancestor and that every living thing has inherent worth, a purpose, and the right to exist. As stated beautifully in *The Bhavishya Purana*:

*“chayamanyasya kurvanti swayam tisthanti catape|
phalanti ca pararthesu na svarthesu mahadrumah||”*

(Uttara Parvan, Ch. 128, Sl. 15)

(While standing in the sun, trees offer protection to others. For the benefit of others, letting go of selfishness, and producing fruit.)

*“prastrnati stambinirekasungah pratanvatih osadhih avadami|
amsumatih kandanirya visakha hvayami
te virudho vaisvadevih ugrah purusajivanih||”*

- *The Atharva Veda* 8.7.4

(O Man! I address the plants that belong to the All-gods on your behalf as ferocious and life-giving. I offer them prayers. They are all bushy, spreading, elongated, rich in shoots, jointed, and possessing spreading branches.)

“*vrksasthah pitaro devah praninam hitakamyaya|*
vrksanam sevanam srestham sarvamasesu sarvada||”

- *Skandapurana*-VI 252-7-8

(The *Devas* and *Pritas* live in trees for the benefit of all living things. The highest virtue is to always worship trees)

All animals and birds that are a part of the natural world were given care and attention by the Vedic seers. They are divided into three categories according to *The Rig Veda*: animals of the sky, animals of the forest, and animals living among humans. Every living thing in the universe has a unique environment. However, from the viewpoint of man, they are all a part of his environment. *The Vedas* placed a strong emphasis on the safeguarding and perseverance of animals and birds.

“*ye gramyah pasavo Visvarupa virupah santo bahudhaikarupah|*
vayustanagre pra mumoktu devah prajapath prajaya samararnah||”

- *The Atharva Veda* 2.34.4

(May the village's numerous, exquisite creatures unify into a single, multifaceted form. As Vayu, the Lord of Progeny, rejoices over his progeny, let the God Vayu in front of them grant them liberty.)

The Vedic literature describes the compassionate treatment of animals. This compassion is not limited to animals—it also encompasses insects. It is believed that all animals, even the smallest ones, have "souls of their own." Hindu texts exhort people to treat animals fairly. Animals were significant in both man's religious and economic life. Sheep, cows, and buffaloes were not only tamed but

also revered alongside Mother Goddess. The main idea of *The Vedas* is harmony; they serve as a reminder to man that he is a part of the environment, the system, as a whole. (Bhat 57)

In ancient India, people took care to avoid any actions that would jeopardize the abundance of nature. It was recognized that Mother Earth's well-being depended on the environment's maintenance and preservation. In the *Shanti Mantra*, the ancient Indian seers simultaneously emphasized the need for cooperation and interdependence amongst all natural forces and regions and prayed for peace at every step. All kinds of life should dwell in harmony and peace, according to the prayer, not just geographical areas, bodies of water, vegetation, trees, and natural energy. Regarding *The Vedas* and *The Upanishads*, the German philosopher Schopenhauer famously remarked, "The greatest privilege this century may claim over all previous centuries is access to *The Vedas*." There is no other subject as uplifting and useful in the entire world as the study of *The Upanishads*. The teachings of *The Upanishads* are the result of the greatest human knowledge and wisdom. (Bhat 29)

Men have lost their sense of awe in the scientific and technological era. They are blind to the wonders that surround them and are not aware of them. In the modern age, we often take the simple things for granted. Even so, science will never be able to fully explain the rationale and purpose underlying the actions of nature, no matter how plausible an explanation it can provide for how it functions. It could explain how, but it is unable to explain why. The divine purpose of God permeates everything in existence, from the universe to the individual trees and seeds to the ground beneath our feet. We may end up using the power that modern technology has given us to cause severe damage if we fail to understand this divine purpose,

which will prevent us from knowing how to live in it or use it. Consequently, for knowledge of matter—that is, science—to be useful to mankind, it must be combined with knowledge of spirit, according to Hindu scriptures. (Prime 3)

Fire's *dharma* is to burn, while water's *dharma* is to quench thirst. Finding the real, eternal essence of being and the eternal path is what *Sanatan Dharma* refers to. Hindus are looking for life's purpose or the *dharma* of the soul. This is the purpose. Nature is sacred, all life is sacred, and the land is sacred, according to *The Isha Upanishad*. That is the contribution given by Hindus. We must extend the human frontier to encompass the entire planet. The earth is a goddess, our mother, and the place where God resides. (Prime 78)

2.3 Role of Myth in Bridging the Gap between Man and Nature

*“Science and technology revolutionize our lives,
but memory, tradition, and myth frame our response.”*

- Arthur M. Schlesinger

R. Bringhurst defines myth as "a theorem about the nature of reality, expressed in animate narrative form rather than in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions." This is an alternate approach to science and research. Like science, it seeks to perceive and articulate ultimate truths, but myth's hypotheses are presented as tales rather than as mathematical formulas, technical explanations, or taxonomy guidelines, a tale so realistically observant that, like any natural rule, it might be rediscovered at any time and in almost any society. M. Hasse affirms this in *The Structure of Scientific Inference* by stating that, “modern philosophers are convinced that scientific understanding, like all human understanding, proceeds by

way of providing metaphorical redescriptions of phenomena.” Myths are believed to have their roots in Indigenous philosophical and spiritual traditions, which draw their wisdom from closely examining how humans interact with the natural world. Indigenous concepts that "All things are interconnected" and "All things are related" are developed through metaphorical narrative. (Pierotti) Interestingly, Greek mythology personifies the earth as Gaia, the mother of all things and all people. Earth is a complex and dynamic self-regulating system made up of all living things and inorganic matter, and ecologists now refer to it as Gaia. The belief that Gaia is the source of human life is shared by both mythology and ecology. (Yadav) This attitude of reverence and gratitude towards nature is also reflected in Hinduism or *Sanatana Dharma*.

Hinduism or *Sanatana Sharma* values nature greatly. It uses rituals to celebrate seasonal changes, show thanks for a plentiful crop, and pray against harmful natural forces. These rituals act as a connection between humans and the environment. (Rao) According to Dr. Nandita Krishna in her book *Hinduism and Nature*, the Vedic creation hymns—which, despite their plurality, highlight the non-dual character of the creator and the created—are the source of Hinduism's distinctive relationship with nature. The ideas of *dharma* and *karma* become crucial tenets in figuring out how the Hindu society interacts with the natural world, both in everyday rituals and activities and in the community's overall worldview. She claims that "any disruption results in a breakdown of peace and the natural balance" and that "the earth and its inhabitants are part of a highly organized cosmic order called *riti*." (Neelakandan) Hinduism believes that we, as humans, are stewards of this earth and that the only way to save our planet is by understanding that all creation is sacred. Sacredness, from a Hindu perspective, maybe a rather vague

term at first glance. It comes from the belief that everything in the universe, even inanimate objects, animals, and nature, is infused with Spirit since all creation comes from one Divine source. The more we connect to this presence, the more we connect to everything around us. This is because the natural emotions that arise from this connection—such as gratitude, admiration, honor, and empathy—inspire us to care for the delicate balance that keeps everything in existence. Therefore, in addition to being limitless and all-pervasive, divinity also lives in an endless variety of personal deities which followers can have a deep connection with. It makes sense that as devotees get closer to these deities, they would also have a desire to take care of the physical forms—be they rivers, trees, mountains, etc.—in which those deities appear on Earth. According to Osho Rajneesh, "The invisible part of Nature is God and the visible part of God is Nature." (Yadav) Human harmony with nature is made possible by mythology. Mythology emerged as a way of explaining mysteries at a period when science was unable to explain natural events. Individuals were able to draw similarities between their behavior and the natural phenomena to explain them. Because of this, they personalized the sun, moon, clouds, whirlwinds, earthquakes, and even the sky. (Yaka) Myths and legends are included in the broad category of Indian mythology. The most valuable aspects of Indian culture are found in its mythology. The Indian mythological system and culture have been greatly influenced by *The Vedas*. Narratives from Indian mythology have been transmitted through the centuries, either orally or in meticulously preserved texts. For millions of people, Indian myths serve as the sacred narratives of the Gods and Goddesses. Because of its deeply religious content, the stories' oral transmission could be believed. ("Indian Mythology") Hence, anthropomorphic societies like the Hindu community have an inbuilt and tremendous capacity to preserve nature as

they should because they perceive the natural occurrences of the universe as connected to gods and goddesses that require tender care. (Allard)

Centuries before World Environment Day, Greenpeace, and the environmental movement emerged, the teachings of *The Shruti* (*The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*) and *The Smriti* (*The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Puranas*, and other scriptures) propagated that all plants and animals in the land of *Bharatavarsha* are sacred, that all creatures, including ourselves, are conscious, and that for this reason we should respect every aspect of nature. "*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma*" (everything is Brahman), is what *The Upanishads* state. Thus, myths, stories, and rituals have further reinforced Hinduism's very profound grasp of ecology and the interaction between man and the environment.

India's most popular religion, Hinduism, is an all-encompassing way of life that touches on the political, sexual, and economic spheres of existence. The spiritual aspect of Hinduism includes all aspects of life, including marriage, education, trade, politics, economics, fine art, music, dance, and business. Despite the common belief that it is polytheistic, it is essentially monotheistic. It has significantly advanced our knowledge of how people interact with both live and non-living things. Hinduism is based on the idea of *Ishwarah Sarvabhutanam*, or the omnipresence of God, which emphasizes environmental ethics and the value of the environment. The texts that teach about protecting the environment and upholding ecological balance include *The Vedas*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana*, *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Puranas*, and *The Smriti*. Hinduism is referred to as the *Sanatana Dharma*, or the Eternal Religion, and is based on the belief that Earth is our mother. People no longer feel in awe of the natural wonders around them in the scientific and technological age, and science is

unable to adequately account for the divine purpose of nature. Indian mythology, which has been heavily impacted by *The Vedas*, includes myths and legends regarding Hinduism. Indian mythological stories have been passed down through the ages, acting as the sacred stories of the Gods and Goddesses. Indian mythology, legends, and rituals all contribute to the religion's deep understanding of ecology and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

CHAPTER 3

WHERE FAITH MEETS EARTH: EXPLORING ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN

A RIVER SUTRA BY GITA MEHTA

“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

- Albert Einstein

3.1 Worship of Rivers in India

Water is the religion of life, known in Sanskrit as *Jalam Jeevana Dharma*. Life cannot exist without water, however, water is endowed with the power to create as well as destroy. Just like we are at God's mercy, we are also at the mercy of the water. The deepest kind of worship of water is found in *The Puranas*. The most heavenly, holy, supernatural, and miraculous entities there are said to be rivers. They are believed to possess many of the abilities and qualities of gods and sages. (Bhatia) Many of them are revered and considered sacred since it is thought that they are of divine origin or possess supernatural qualities. Hinduism values water because it is said to have purifying properties for the soul. India has seven sacred rivers, all of which are connected to Shiva. (“Hindu Beliefs about Sacred Rivers, Mountains and Science”) One tradition has it that Shiva jumped into the Ganges River, causing it to fall from heaven to earth. The seven sacred rivers—the Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri—were split up by the water that matted his hair. With a few notable exceptions, most of the rivers in India are regarded as feminine. People think of rivers as feeding, nourishing, and quenching mothers. They are represented as deities. (Narayan)

3.2 Background of *A River Sutra*

Gita Mehta's 1993 novel *A River Sutra*, beautifully intertwines the spiritual essence of rivers with the socio-political landscape of India. Within its narrative, eco-spirituality emerges powerfully, reflecting the interconnectedness between ecology and spirituality. It masterfully narrates the tale of the Narmada River; Shiva's penance, the birth of the river, which is a symbol of Indian culture, as well as tribal customs and the desire for life as a whole. It covers insights into Hindu beliefs, rituals, and mythology. In it, Lord Shiva and the Narmada are shown as a timeless source of inspiration, together with their legendary symbolism and customs. Gita Mehta uses lectures, poetry, and spiritual invocations to unite the tale. The novel is divided into six stories namely, *The Monk's Story*, *The Teacher's Story*, *The Executive's Story*, *The Courtesan's Story*, *The Musician's Story*, and *The Minstrel's Story*. These stories have been divided into sixteen chapters, with *The Song of the Narmada*, serving as the sequel of *The Minstrel's Story*. According to Salman Rushdie, "Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* is an important attempt by a thoroughly modern Indian to make her reckoning with the Hindu culture from which she emerged." (Govinthasamy et al.)

The storyline, which is set against the background of India's revered Narmada River, flows like a sutra as it interweaves tales that delve deeply into the complex interrelationship between humans and the natural world. The Narmada itself transcends its physical form, becoming a character that embodies the spiritual essence of the land. The term "sutra" suggests a compilation of lessons or aphorisms implying the abundance of knowledge the novel provides. The Narmada River itself takes on the role of a muse, inspiring acts of devotion, inspiring the birth of legends, and acting as an earthly manifestation of the spiritual world.

Hindu practices and beliefs have been shaped by myths and rituals for millennia, acting as the religion's bloodlines. As one embarks on a journey alongside the revered Narmada River, these customs are brought to life in *A River Sutra*, in which the Narmada River is more than just a ribbon of water that cuts across the center of India; it is a living, breathing creature that carries the essence of the country it flows through. Thus, Gita Mehta has anthropomorphized the Narmada River to add a spiritual dimension to it. When gods and spiritual forces are portrayed as having human characteristics and appearances, this is known as anthropomorphism. (Bailey) Discussions on the environment frequently utilize it. Anthropomorphism of nature is linked to nature, which consequently inspires conservationist action. An excellent way to gain access to spiritual perspectives on nature is to anthropomorphize it. (Tam et al.)

The anthropomorphism of the Narmada River and how it manifests itself in the lives of the many people who come to the river to satisfy their desires will be discussed in this chapter. The narrative style used in the novel will also be covered in this chapter. By doing this, the chapter will clarify how spirituality and ecology are merging, and how this influences how humans interact with the natural world.

3.3 Anthropomorphism of River Narmada

3.3.1 Narmada- The Goddess

“Narmada River is among the holiest sites, and is worshipped as the daughter of Lord Shiva.” (Meha 1) It flows through the states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and is personified as Goddess Narmada, also known as Devi Narmada. Shiva was so enthralled with her graceful movements and energizing spirit that he bestowed upon her the name Narmada, which translates to "the one

who gives joy." 'He then gave her in marriage to the ocean, Lord of the Rivers, most Lustrous of all her suitors.' (Mehta 6) The river flows in a variety of forms that delight the Ascetic Shiva to accompany her spouse. She had a slender physique and was quite gorgeous. However, her enticing features made her a target for many gods and devils to seek. Famous for her concealing behavior was the goddess Narmada. To avoid them, she used to conceal and avoid anybody close to her. She at last gave herself up to Lord Shiva, who bestowed upon her the blessing of turning into a sacred river that never runs out of water. ("Narmada – the Revered River Goddess")

The novel, *A River Sutra*, is set on the banks of the Narmada River. Indians associate the river with their religious beliefs, worshipping her and finding redemption in her companionship. They view the river as a motherly figure; therefore, a multitude of anxious and dissatisfied people crowd around its banks in search of inner solace. Several Hindu texts state that one is immediately granted absolute liberation if one lives and dies inside the sacred confines of a holy place. (Narayanan) This belief can be seen among the inhabitants along the banks of the Narmada River, who believe that "the criminal offense of attempted suicide is often ignored if the offender is trying to kill himself in the waters of Narmada." (Mehta 1)

Narmada River is considered to be one of the holiest rivers in India, 'A mere sight of its waters is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births' (Mehta 98) According to the Puranic scriptures there are four hundred billion sacred spots along the bank of the Narmada River. It is believed that "Bathing in the waters of Jamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of Saraswati in three, in the waters of the Ganga in one, but the Narmada purifies with a single site of her waters." (Mehta 105) The sacred river is also said to wash away Saturn's evil

influence, which is why a variety of miserable individuals, including depressed people and epileptics, throng to its banks. The legend about Narmada's healing powers has become widely known. Dr. Mitra claims that when people go too far, it becomes religious folly. He makes this claim about the religious suicides that occur in Amarkantak, where individuals either drown in the Narmada or starve until they die or self-immolate on its banks. (Mehta 99)

In *The Courtesan's Story*, the mother, i.e., the Courtesan was happy that her daughter had committed suicide in the waters of the Narmada River because according to her beliefs “she would be purified of all her sins.” (Mehta 122) The mother believed that her daughter made the right decision to end her life, rather than fall into the clutches of the cops who would interrogate and humiliate her. She did not want her daughter to suffer in a world where she would never be forgiven for marrying the bandit, Rahul Singh. The world would always label her as “impure” and “unchaste”, but as per the beliefs of devotees who flood the banks of the river, Narmada can purify one of any and every sin they have committed in their lifetime, therefore, the daughter of the courtesan jumps to death in the river, looking forward to gaining forgiveness and purification of her soul.

The people who live along the banks of the Narmada River, known as Vano villagers, worship a stone figure depicting a half-woman with full breasts as a fertility symbol and the torso of a coiled snake. The tribal members believed that they were once part of a great snake kingdom that was defeated by the gods of the Aryans and that the only thing that kept them alive was a divine personification of the Narmada River. The river was given the ability to annul the effects of snakebite by the grateful tribe. The tribals could be heard reciting the invocation, “*Salutation*

in the morning and night to thee, O Narmada, defend me from the serpent's poison."

(Mehta 4)

According to Hindu mythology, Narmada is equated as the sister of the serpent deity Manasa, who is referred to as "the daughter of Lord Shiva." She is described as "the sister of the serpent King Shesha and the daughter of Kasyapa and Kadru" in various mythical stories. Manasa's sister Narmada possesses the capacity to heal from the detrimental effects of a snake bite. (Govinthasamy et al.)

The tribals also have the belief that their goddess releases the possessed and heals insanity. According to them, the goddess is merely a single of life's principles. She is the embodiment of every love-inspiring illusion. She is superior to all gods because of this. Whatever you choose to name her, she represents the feelings a mother has for her kid. A male a female. A guy in need of food. Individuals to God. (Mehta 92)

The Executive's Story illustrates the Narmada River's healing power. Nitin Bose was deeply infatuated with Rima, with whom he enjoyed every night, but was scared to see her in daylight as it might rob him of his enchantment. When they were making love, Rima's teeth penetrated Nitin's flesh "like a sudden striking of a snake" (Mehta 82) and she screamed her delight against her throat, making him believe he had a creature half serpent in his arms. He believed that he was completely bewitched by her, but when he realized that she was the wife of a coolie, he was overwhelmed with "a wave of disgust" (Mehta 84) This proves that he was only in love with the image of Rima which he created in his mind. It was at that moment he felt that Rima's spell had broken off of him. On the night of the ill omen when he followed Rima's voice, he believed that she had sealed his soul in the halves of a coconut. After this incident, Nitin was left hollow, just like an empty

shell. Lunar eclipses have long been tied with superstitious beliefs and seen as signs of impending catastrophe. Some cultures assume that moon eclipses announce deities' anger or predict wars and natural calamities. ("Lunar Eclipse: Myths Related to Health You Need to Stop Believing") Similar beliefs can be seen in the story, where the tribals believed that "a man can become fatally ill or mad if he walks outside during the eclipse of the moon" (Mehta 88) When the tribal priest examined Nitin, he said that if Nitin wanted to get healed of his mental illness, he must worship the goddess at the shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. "Only that river has the power to cure him" (Mehta 89)

At the banks of the Narmada, Nitin was accompanied by the tribals to perform the ritual for his healing. No outsider was allowed, except Nitin, who was no longer considered an outsider since the goddess had touched him. According to the tribals Nitin was being punished because he denied the power of the goddess, and therefore, he needed to perform the ritual to beg forgiveness and he healed. Under a banyan tree, which was the shrine of their goddess, Nitin was asked to make a mud idol of the goddess which he later had to carry and immerse in the waters of the Narmada while chanting,

*"Salutations in the morning
and night to thee, O Narmada.
Defend me from the serpent's poison."*

(Mehta 94)

Three weeks after performing the rituals and following all the instructions given by the tribals, Nitin Bose completely recovered. When a miracle takes place in any sacred place, people instantly erect an altar or shrine, as illustrated by Dr. Mitra, who says, "Someone is sure to commemorate Nitin Bose's recovery by

building a temple where he immersed the idol. It will become a place of pilgrimage attracting hosts of lunatics to your riverbed.” (Mehta 97)

Narmada oozes spiritual energy in addition to its healing and purifying properties. The rocks in the Narmada River bed bear the mark of Shiva's third eye and the three lines of the ascetic's ashes, which transform into the smooth lingams worshipped in both large temples and family alters with the prayer. Therefore, it is believed that “In the living stones of the Narmada, God is to be found” (Mehta 112)

In *The Minstrel's Story*, Uma is the young girl who is rescued by Naga Baba from a brothel. After teaching and training her, one night, on the night of Shiva, Lord of Death, he ground a stick of sandalwood applied it on her forehead, and told her that she is to meet her new mother. He then carried her to the river bank and, suddenly, he gripped her and lowered her into the waters. “The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight, you become a daughter of Narmada” (Mehta 163). In *The Song of the Narmada*, the Narmada Goddess is wonderfully described. Her attributes of being holy, graceful, and energetic are highlighted. The goddess Narmada is known by other names such as Rewa, Kripa, and Surasa, because of her movements and presence.

“You grace the earth

With your presence

The devote call you Kripa

Grace itself

You cleanse the earth

of its impurities.

The devote call you Surasa

The holy soul

You leap through the earth

Like a dancing deer.

The devote call you Rewa

The leaping one.

But Shiva called you

Delight

And laughing

Named you Narmada.”

(Mehta 176)

Gita Mehta has anthropomorphized the Narmada River as a goddess in *A River Sutra*, drawing on the different myths and tales that exist, resulting in a spiritual dimension and a sense of the river. In the process, it has elevated man's connection with the river to that of a devotee and goddess. As humans, we feel it is our moral duty to please and serve the gods; hence, when one views the river to be a goddess, they are naturally inclined to adore and care for it as they would a deity.

3.3.2 Narmada- The Daughter of Shiva

“The sages meditating on your riverbed say

You were twice-born

Once from penance,

Once from love.”

(Mehta 178)

There are several legends surrounding the birth of river Narmada, “the daughter of the god Shiva”. (Mehta 1) In *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta, through *The*

Song of the Narmada, points to the myth that the river is believed to have been born twice, once from penance and once from love. According to the legend, Shiva, the Creator and Destroyer of the Worlds was in such a deep ascetic trance that rivulets of sweat began to run from his body down the hills. The stream took on the appearance of a woman. (Mehta 5)

“From Shiva's penance you became water

From water you became a woman...

...O river born of penance

Named by laughter”

(Mehta 177)

For the second part of the myth, the legend states that once the Ascetic was sporting with the goddess, combining his ardor with ‘the drops of love's exertions from the breasts’, He created it from the liquid of his heavenly desire. He fashioned it into a river, Narmada, to soothe holy men's desires. (Mehta 178)

“Once and only once

In the turning Wheel of Existence

The Terrible One was moved to laughter

Looking from his inward contemplation

To watch you”

(Mehta 177)

As parents dote on their children, so does Shiva. He has blessed her and marked her forever as holy and sacred. She's no ordinary river. He adores her company and laughs over her. Being the daughter of Lord Shiva, she is referred to as “Her Holiness”. She is believed to link mankind to the energy of Shiva. (Mehta 5) To experience this divine feeling, thousands of pilgrims donned in white clothing

take on an arduous pilgrimage, because the purpose of pilgrimage is believed to be endurance.

The relationship of Uma and Naga Baba/ Professor Shankar is a representation of the relationship of Narmada and Lord Shiva. "If the Narmada was born from Shiva's penance, then surely Uma was born of the Naga Baba's penance." (Mehta 167) Just as Shiva named the river, Narmada, so also, the Naga Baba named the rescued child, Uma, the name of a goddess, which means peace in the night. When she sang the song of the Narmada, "You are twice born, once from penance, once from love", she was referring to the Narmada, but it was only true about herself. Like the Narmada, Uma, too had two births. One was her biological birth, but the night the Naga Baba rescued her, she was reborn. Naga Baba always stayed with her as a father figure, he taught her to read, write, and sing songs of the Narmada. As a father protects his child, so does Naga Baba. He cared for her and provided for her. He gave her a new life. He also taught her how to survive in the jungle. She learned to look out for water snakes, learning that the water was pure enough to drink where they swam. He taught her to drink fresh milk from wandering goat teats and to search for cow markings. When they were given food, she noticed that the Naga Baba split it into four equal portions: one for the animals, one for any stranger who needed a meal, and the remaining two for themselves. In doing so, he taught her the importance of nature and the interconnectedness of man and nature. At the end of the novel, when Professor Shankar asks Uma where she is heading, she replies that she is heading towards the coast. To this, he asks, "To find a husband, like the Narmada found her Lord of Rivers?" (Mehta 181) Gita Mehta hints that Uma is heading to the coast, where the Narmada River joins the Arabian

Sea. Professor Shankar as in Shankaracharya is Shiva's name. Therefore, Naga Baba, or Professor Shankar is the representation of the Lord Shiva.

The father-daughter bond is further illustrated in *The Musician's Story*. The musician is an affectionate father who is mostly oblivious to the ugliness of his daughter. He accepts her as a student and encourages her to rise above the mundane world. He wants her to be married to music. He teaches her that music is an all-pervasive art form and that it is a gift from Shiva that should be revered. There is perfection and beauty in the music of nature, which cannot be imitated or captured. He explains the music legend of Shiva, also called Bhairav, which means "Fire of Time". He described the creation of melody. Before Shiva danced the creation, there was no art. Deep as water, black as darkness, and weightless as air, music slept inside a rhythmic void. Then Shiva shook his drum. Everything began to shake with the will to live. While Shiva danced, the universe burst into being. Shiva's expressions gave rise to the six great ragas, which are the foundational notes of all music. It was through their vibrations that the universe came into being. "Each raga is related to a particular season, a time of day, an emotion." (Mehta 133) The musician's daughter narrates about her talented father who, "through music," strives "to free" her from a negative image of herself so that she "could love beauty in wherever it was to be found, even if it was not present in" her mirror." The story centers on Shiva, the father of the Narmada River, and the musician who brings his daughter to Shiva's daughter, Narmada to cure her. He wants her to realize and come to terms with the truth that she is not the bride of the musician, but rather the bride of music. Coincidentally, *The Musician's Story* has a striking resemblance to the mythology of Narmada. Both of them get cheated in the end and remain unmarried.

Narmada has been anthropomorphized by Gita Mehta as Shiva's daughter. Several legends surround the birth of the river. One of the most famous myths in the novel is that Narmada was born twice; the tale of Uma and Naga Baba illustrates this. She is given a new life by Naga Baba who is like her father figure. Mehta has also brought up Shiva's music legend. Since music is said to have a holy origin and is considered a gift from Shiva, it is revered and should be treated with respect. There is a saying that the music of nature is unmatched. As a result, even the sound of nature possesses an element of spirituality.

3.3.3 Narmada- The Seductress

*“...O damsel of beautiful hips,
Evoker of Narma, lust,
Be known as Narmada
Holiest of rivers.”*

(Mehta 177)

Gita Mehta draws up erotic imagery of the virgin Narmada. The myth of Narmada's birth from Shiva's penance states that the stream took on the form of a woman, the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin who innocently entices ascetics to pursue her, stoking their lust by changing appearances from a girl dancing lightly to a romantic dancer and a seductress with loose limbs and lassitude of desire. Shiva blessed her by saying, “You shall be forever holy.” (Mehta 5) Erotic imagery is prevalent in Hindu literature and paintings, according to cultural psychologist Ashis Nandy. The entire legend around Krishna and his female devotees is saturated with eroticism. (Sen) Therefore, it can be safely said that eroticism is not an alien concept to Hinduism, and this is reflected in the novel *A*

River Sutra. The belief of the inhabitants on the bank of the Narmada was that ‘without desire, there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact, be dead.’ (Mehta 92) Therefore, desire is believed to be the most essential part of nature and human existence. The narrator claims that he is a *vanaprasthi*, but while watching the river isolated in darkness, he imagines her as a jewelry-wearing woman, loosely extending her arms while rubbing scented oils all over her body, her long black hair flowing free and her eyes outlined with collyrium. He saw the river at dawn as a woman getting ready to see her lover, applying vermilion to her palms and the soles of her feet. (Mehta 90) In her myth, Gita Mehta uses the ambiguity of Narmada's urge to provoke sexuality. Even the ascetics and gods could not escape from the grip of desire or *narma*.

“From Shiva's penance you became water

From water you became a woman

So beautiful that gods and ascetics

The loins hard with desire

Abandoned their contemplations

To pursue you.”

(Mehta 176)

Mehta has shown Desire to have great power. The tribal people revere it as a goddess. She goes by several names, including the Terrible One, the Everlasting Dream, the Dark Lady, the Implacable Mother, and the Destroyer of Time. The Tribals held that Desire in high regard, considering it to be the firstborn seed of the intellect and even their conquerors had accepted its invincibility. Mehta narrated the myth of Kama, the God of Love who draws his sugarcane bow, also called the Exciter of Madness, and shoots one of his five arrows at a hapless traveler, who

then craves some unsuspecting woman as an incarnation of Delight, the Goddess of Involuntary Allure. According to the myth, “without Desire the play of the worlds would cease.” (Mehta 63) Since desire is so fundamental to the existence of the universe, that even the gods cannot escape its clutches. Shiva, the Ascetic was pierced by the five flower-tipped arrows unleashed by Kama. Therefore, Narmada, the Evoker of *Narma* or Lust is called “Her Holiness”. Dr. Mitra points out that “Narmada” means a “whore” in Sanskrit, yet according to the Puranic scriptures, there are four billion sacred spots along her bank. (Menta98)

The seductive image of the Narmada is reflected in the characters of Rima and Uma. Rima is a tribal lady who is viewed as an outcast because of her low caste. In contrast to the conventional portrayal of women in Indian literature, she is fearless and assertive, taking charge of her own sexuality and initiating an affair. She is not penalized for exercising self-control over her sexual desires. Rather, she is worshipped and bestowed with goddess-like attributes. Nitin Bose, who becomes utterly infatuated with her, even goes so far as to describe her as a goddess. Rather than striving to fit into the traditional roles of wife and mother or feeling embarrassed of her sexuality, she uses it to achieve what she wants. She refuses to surrender and put up with her abuse when she is scored. On the other hand, despite being made to become "unchaste" at an early age, Uma is regarded for her holiness and is said to have goddess-like attributes. Despite having been a child prostitute in the past, she is not despised but rather revered.

Music is believed to be non-existent without desire. Musicians believe that a sensual encounter between Lord Shiva and his Consort, Goddess Parvati led to the birth of the Veena. After making love to her all night, when he woke up and saw the goddess sleeping, he was so moved by the tenderness that he created an instrument

to immortalize his wife's immortal beauty—the first instrument of music—the veena. (Mehta 126) The two globes that give rise to the resonance of the veena are Parvati's breasts. The Veena's frets are her glass bangles, its neck is her thin arm, and its tune is an expression of Shiva's love.

The songs sung by the tribal women in *The Executive's Story* showcase erotic imagery.

*"Which god is notorious
In the neighborhood?
Look! It is the god of fucking
Who is notorious in the neighbourhood"*

*"On the hill
See the peacock's feathers sway
As I am swaying on your lap,
Sighing on your lap,
Smiling on your lap,
O my handsome friend."*

*"Bring me my oil and my collyrium
Sister, bring my mirror and my vermillion
Make haste with my flower garland
My lover waits impatiently in the bed"*

(Mehta 83)

Gita Mehta, therefore by anthropomorphizing the Narmada River as a seductress, has given a spiritual outlook to desire. Men and the universe as a whole would cease to exist without desire. Therefore, one shouldn't look down upon desire, but rather, revere it.

3.3.4 Narmada- Escape from the Cycle of Birth and Death

*“O Messenger of Passing Time
O Sanctuary and Salvation,
You dissolve the fear of time itself.
O holy Narmada.”*

(Mehta 180)

According to *The Puranas*, Narmada was present at the birth of time itself, when Shiva in the form of a golden peacock roamed over the ocean of void. It is believed that it was Narmada who reminded Shiva about the creation who was awaiting his command, and then, he brought forth the whole world and the mountain, on which he sits in meditation until Destruction. The legend goes on to say that Narmada will remain till the Destruction. River Narmada is portrayed as a haven for those seeking rest and peace. “I and I alone am sanctuary.” (Mehta 180) A mere glimpse of Narmada's water is supposed to cleanse a human being of generations of sinful births. (Mehta 98) The Narmada River, according to Prof. V.V. Shankar, the river's course has never changed. The river is the same one that the people who lived 1,00,000 years ago saw. On either side of the Narmada, there are differences in the Hindu calendar. The river Narmada has served as a muse for several writers and poets for centuries and continues to do so to this very day. *The Mahabharata* was narrated on the bank of Narmada thousands of years ago by the sage Vyasa. Kipling used the riverbank area as the backdrop for *The Jungle Book*. Numerous other individuals have also made their mark on the river in the period. The hills beyond the rest house have been described in Kalidasa's epic play *Shakuntala* and his poem *The Cloud Messenger*. Shankaracharya wrote a poem

on this river twelve hundred years ago. Not too far away, the Narmada showed itself to the poets Rupmati and Baz Bahadur as a spring beneath a tamarind tree.

The mythology surrounding the Aryan-Tribal war, in which the latter were granted immortality by their gods, also contains references to immortality. The warrior's head was successfully severed by the tribe, but the boon prevented them from killing him. It continues to be believed that the head is someplace in the jungle, surrounded by honey bees. The common belief among the bandits living in the jungle was that one would become immortal by getting stung by any of those honeybees.

The Minstrel's Story gives a detailed account of the life of Naga Baba and all the penances he goes through to achieve the enlightenment that he had. After leaving Uma behind, he goes on to attain a higher level of enlightenment, and it is during this time, that he realizes that “a soul must travel through eighty-four thousand births to become a man.” (Mehta 182) With this new attained wisdom, he leaves behind his ascetic life and embarks on a journey of re-entering the world. The ancient sages were aware of this, which is why they said,

*“Whoever praises you
At dawn, at dusk, at night
May in this human form
Acquired through the suffering of
so many rebirths
Approach with honor
The feet of Shiva Himself.”*

(Mehta 175)

One cannot flee the world or retire from it. The life that one has, should be valued and lived for a good cause. Because whatever you do in your current life, the fruit of it will be carried into the next. Hinduism places a lot of focus on the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. Life in any and every form should be respected and cared for. When the unnamed narrator told Prof. V.V Shankar that he had retired from the world and become a *vanaprasti*, the professor told him that he had chosen the wrong place to flee in the world, as ‘too many lives converge on these banks.’ (Mehta 173) Thus, instead of fleeing, one must love life and everything around him, by seeing the deity that is present within.

3.4 Narrative technique

In the novel *A River Sutra*, Gita Mehta employs a complex storytelling style called metanarrative, in which there are several sub-narrators instead of just one main narrator. This approach involves using a narrator, who may or may not be a character in the work, to telltale aspects included in a narrative. The type of narrator employed depends on the author's point of view. The novelist's ability to depict a crowded world in her novel is aided by the long-standing Indian storytelling tradition. People can learn moral lessons from these stories. The content and storytelling style of the novel may give the impression that it is a didactic work. (Bite)

Although it initially appears to be a compilation of short stories, the reader will find themselves unable to distinguish between them after reading them all. Gita Mehta employs the meta-narrative style seen in ancient Indian works such as *The Mahabharata*, *The Panchatantra*, *The Kathasaritsagar*, and *The Kadambari*. She uses a variety of storytelling techniques while simultaneously bridging the narrative

gaps between each story. All characters of the stories make a single appearance and continue the same theme from one story to the next. (Bite) In the novel, every single individual stands in for a certain community. Using a first-person point of view, the anonymous narrator opens the novel by giving the details of his life and career. He joins the Narmada rest home as a manager after retiring as a bureaucrat. He's looking for a job because he wants to live a quiet life away from the grind of the big city. In addition to listening to the stories, an unnamed narrator provides background information on each one. He presents all the stories in an unbiased manner, almost like a catalyst. Every narrative in the book concludes in a different chapter, and the author always sets the right mood for the story before narrating it.

The monk serves as the narrator in *The Monk's Story*, telling his story in the first person. In this narrative, the monk takes over from the anonymous narrator. Mehta selects the monk, who is a reflection of Mahavira, to ensure the tale is trustworthy. "I have loved just one item in my life", (Mehta 10) the monk tells the narrator, but he withholds the explanation. After he leaves, the narrator contemplates over it but is unable to come up with a response. As a result, he asks Tariq Mia, who later takes on the role of the third-person narrator in the following narrative, *The Teacher's Story*.

Tariq Mia is an elderly mullah who is devoted to the realities of human existence and who wishes to reveal to the narrator the key to human life—that is, "The capacity to love." (Mehta 32) Having witnessed this occurrence, he is selected to be the storyteller of the story. Master Mohan is a music teacher who longs to be a well-known singer but his dream has not come true. He sees himself in Imrat, an orphan he encounters, and so he dedicates his life to teaching him. He, unfortunately, descends into madness as a result of Imrat's death and seeks comfort

along the bank of Narmada River. After Tariq Mia heals him, he kills himself on the way back. Without Imrat, Master Mohan couldn't fathom his life. "Perhaps he could not exist without loving someone as he loved the blind child," (Mehta 60) Tariq Mia says to the narrator.

An executive named Nitin Bose uses his journal to tell his story in *The Executive's Story*. Nitin Bose falls in love with Rima, a native woman, while residing in a tea estate. He loves her in a materialistic way. He becomes unstable mentally as a result of his love failure. Because Rima satisfies his sexual cravings, he is devoted to her. His mental denial of his unethical behavior caused him to go completely insane. The diary serves as a tool for confession that can help people feel better mentally. His story captures the essence of Indian customs and psychology. To set the right mood, the author explains the tale of Kama before beginning the story. Nitin recounted his story in the first person, narrating it in a trustworthy manner through his diary.

The narration style shifts once again between narrators in *The Courtesan's Story*. The courtesan told her narrative in the first person, describing how the bandit Rahul Singh abducted her daughter. Through this narrative, the author hopes to give specific details regarding the courtesan's life. The courtesan's daughter serves as another narrator, sharing with the narrator her experiences living among the bandits. She explains what prompted Rahul Singh's abduction of her. The author employs a first-person point of view regardless of how the narrators switch throughout the novel because no one else can truly capture the intense sentiments and emotions of a certain individual.

In *The Musician's Story*, the narrator listens to the musician's daughter tell her narrative in the first person. Her father is a passionate musician, and in return

for studying music, one of his disciples consents to marry his daughter. However, because the musician's daughter is ugly, he chooses to marry a different woman. His love is materialistic and values outward appearances solely. Her father convinces her that beauty is something that is subjective and that it changes depending on the viewer. Each raga, which can only be explained by someone who understands music, is described by her in her story. Thus, the author decides to make her the narrator.

The Minstrel's Story is told through the eyes of Tariq Mia, who had the good fortune to meet and get to know both Naga Baba and the young girl he rescued from the perils of child prostitution. The details of an ascetic's existence are given by Tariq Mia. *The Song of the Narmada*, the sequel to *The Minstrel's Story*, is told in the third person by an unnamed narrator.

Each story's background is given by the unnamed narrator. In the novel, the author employs the flashback technique. The background knowledge included in each narrative is intended by the author to set an adequate mood that appeals to the reader's mind. Gita Mehta conveys the psychology of the human psyche via a variety of characters. (Bite) The human mind is ultimately powerless to resist the influence of culture, faith, religion, and desires and must ultimately submit to them.

Therefore, to conclude, Gita Mehta in *A River Sutra*, weaves her novel by placing the Narmada River as the central character. The river is anthropomorphized by the author as a goddess, daughter, seductress, and a liberator from the cycles of birth and death. By doing so, she has made a connection between nature and spirituality, which further results in how humans perceive nature. When nature is presented as holy and sacred, humans, who are bound by faith and religion, feel the moral obligation to protect and care for it. By using various narrative techniques,

and characters, the author dives into the human psyche, and in doing so, she reveals that the influence of culture, religion, and desire cannot be resisted by the human mind.

CHAPTER 4

THE INTERPLAY OF ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY IN

THE HUNGRY TIDE BY AMITAV GHOSH

*“A single plant, A blade of grass,
or one speck of dust is sufficient...
to bring you clear remembrance of the Creator.”*

- St. Basil the Great (379 AD)

4.1 Introduction to *The Hungry Tide*

Indian writer Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* was released in 2004. It is set in the Bay of Bengal's Sundarbans. This delta region boasts the world's largest mangrove ecosystem and is a labyrinth of rivers and islands. The northern region of the Bay of Bengal is home to the Sundarbans. It is home to a wide variety of snakes, crocodiles, and the Bengal tiger, among other diverse species and vegetation. The title “The Hungry Tide” alludes to the strong and unpredictable nature of the tides in the Sundarbans, mirroring the insatiable appetite of the surrounding ecosystem and its inhabitants. The novel is divided into two parts, namely: Part One- The Ebb: *Bhata* and Part Two- The Flood: *Jowar*. The narrative centers on two main characters: Kanai Dutt, a translator from Kolkata, and Piyali Roy (Piya), a marine biologist of Indian-American descent. Piya meets Fokir, a local fisherman when she travels to the Sundarbans to research rare river dolphins. On the other hand, Kanai, who is in the region to look at a family estate is drawn to Piya's search. The novel delves deep into eco-spirituality within the context of Hinduism, exploring the intricate connections between the natural world and

spirituality. The Ganges River, known as the sacred river in Hinduism, plays a significant role in the novel as a symbol of the divine and a source of spiritual sustenance for the characters. Amitav Ghosh weaves together the beliefs and rituals of Hinduism with the environmental challenges faced by the characters living in the Sundarbans, a region prone to natural disasters and climate change. Ghosh has given anthropomorphic forms to elements such as the Ganga, the Sundarbans, and even tigers. Anthropomorphizing is an effective way to put non-human species front and center and encourage people to respect and care for everything around them in the modern world, where people think they are in charge of the universe and can rule over all other non-human species.

4.2 Sundarbans: A Living Entity

In the Ganges delta, the Sundarbans span ten thousand square kilometers of land and water, with more than half of it in India and the remaining portion in Bangladesh. It has the largest area of mangrove forests in the world. Situated at the mouth of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, bridging the border between India and Bangladesh, the region's forests and rivers provide habitat to an extensive array of animals, including many species facing extinction. ("Sundarbans National Park") Between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands, which stretch for almost three hundred kilometers from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. These islands are compared to "trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the *achol* that follows her, half-wetted by the sea." (Ghosh 6)

Ghosh has vividly described the Sundarbans as a dynamic and ever-changing ecosystem. Some of these islands have survived throughout history, while others

were swept into existence only a year or two ago. Some of them are enormous, while others are a little bigger than sandbars. These islands represent the rivers' restitution, their promise to return to the earth what they have stolen, but in a way that declares their unwavering dominance over their gift. Every day, hundreds of acres of forest go under the sea, only to reappear hours later. The tides may reach up to three hundred kilometers inland. Sometimes the currents are so strong that they completely transform the promontories and peninsulas; other times, they create new sandbanks and shelves where none previously existed. When the tides create new land, mangroves begin to gestate overnight. If the appropriate circumstances are met, they may spread quickly enough to completely cover the new island in a few short years. "A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles." (Ghosh 8) Despite lacking any aesthetic appeal to attract outsiders, this archipelago is known worldwide as "the Sundarbans". It refers to the beautiful forest. At high tide, the Sundarbans is half-submerged land; only when the water recedes does the forest emerge. Looking at this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, explains why the name "tide country" is not only suitable but also significant.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans is represented as a living entity, a manifestation of the divine in the natural world, with its attributes of a woman giving birth to new lands. The way Amitav Ghosh has depicted the Sundarbans as a living, self-regulating creature has parallels to the British atmospheric scientist James Lovelock, who put out the Gaia Hypothesis, which holds that the earth is a vital, self-regulating being. (Scharper) A sacred linked web of life is formed by the intricate mangrove forests, the tides' ebbs and flows, and the wide variety of fauna.

The constant ebb and flow of tides symbolize the rhythmic heartbeat of the Sundarbans.

In addition to showcasing the Sundarbans' natural beauty and wonder, Ghosh has also portrayed the dangers lurking in the forests. Humans can never disagree with the terrain's total hostility for their presence, its cunning and ingeniousness, or its will to destroy and eliminate them. Many of the settlers enticed to Lusibari Island by the promise of free lands were farmers. But on the island, hunger led them to hunt and fish, with fatal consequences. Many drowned, and many more were killed by crocodiles and estuarine sharks. The mangroves didn't provide much direct value to humans, but many risked their lives to obtain tiny quantities of honey, wax, firewood, and the sour fruit of the kewra tree. Every year, dozens of people die in the embrace of that foliage, killed by tigers, snakes, and crocodiles. (Ghosh 79) In the various islands of the Sundarbans many humans have lived, but they were driven off by storms and tides, tigers, and crocodiles. Mangroves are unique in that they do more than just recolonize land; they also erase time. "Each generation produces its own population of ghosts." (Ghosh 50)

The Sundarbans is considered as a powerful entity capable of both creation and destruction. It is capable of both nurturing and killing. It is an all-encompassing universe that is not bound by time. It is always changing and expanding. It is a rich source of ecology, folklore, and spirituality. It has numerous secrets and mysteries that have been uncovered and are lying dormant in the forests waiting to be discovered.

4.3 Bon Bibi: The Guardian of the Forest

Mythology frequently helps humans' interactions with nature and its elements. Nature's role in mythology is critical, as it has always been viewed as a mystery that may never be answered. When science fails to explain certain natural events, mythology can be used to provide answers to challenging questions. One such example in *The Hungry Tide* is the legend of Bon Bibi, which is set in the Sundarbans; but, to the people who revere her, she is much more than just a tale.

In the Sundarbans, mystical elements are intertwined with the lives of those who rely on the mangrove forest for their living and survival. Gods, spirits, devils, and other supernatural entities have played important roles in the archipelago because of the severe weather conditions and the restricted agricultural opportunities. These non-human entities provide frameworks and mediation, under whose supervision livelihoods and communities are built and governed, and the folkloric tradition that arises from such intricate connections between humans and non-humans offers rich material for a historian's craft. (Halder) Islanders on both sides of the Sundarbans, which connect India and Bangladesh, place a significant value on Bon Bibi. She is regarded as a mother to both humans and tigers. After moving away from the influence of the elements—earth, fire, water, and wind—hundreds of years ago, mankind began to construct spiritual entities and gave them human forms, such as Bon Bibi. (Khan) They worshiped these deities because they thought they controlled the universe's elements. The people who live in the tide country think that Bon Bibi calms nature so that people are shielded from the wrath of the wild animals that wander the Sundarbans' mangrove forests. “Bon Bibi”, also known as “Ban Devi”, which means “woman of the forest” in exact translation, is the guardian spirit of the Sundarbans forests. It is believed that she rules over the

jungle and that the tigers, crocodiles, and other animals do her bidding. (Ghosh 102)

The goddess Bon Bibi is worshiped by both, the Hindu and Muslim communities in the deep jungle of the Sundarbans. The term "Bibi" is unique for a Bengali deity because it is frequently adopted as a surname by Muslim women. (Shankar)

Rather than starting in the heavens or on the banks of the Ganges, the story of the tiger-goddess takes place in the city of Arabia, with mosques and minarets serving as the background. The two most well-known telling of the legend may be found in contemporary works written in the late nineteenth century: Munshi Mohammad Khatir and Abdur Rahim's *Bonbibí Johuranamah*, or *The Narrative of Bon Bibi's Glory*. Dokkhin Rai received protection from the saint Ghazi, indicating a link to Krishnaram Das's epic poem *Ray-Mangal*, which was written in 1686 and predates the Bon Bibi narrative by a few centuries. (Halder) This suggests an older past. The story continues to live among the islanders of Sundarbans.

In Medina, through the intercession of the archangel Gabriel, a devout Sufi faqir called Ibrahim was blessed with twins, Bon Bibi and Shah Jangoli. The twins received word through the archangel that they had been chosen for a divine mission when they reached age. Their task was to leave Arabia and go to "the country of eighteen tides" (*athhero bhatir desh*) to prepare it for human settlement. With that charge in hand, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli headed toward Bengal's mangrove forests. At that time, Dokkhin Rai, a strong demon-king who ruled over all creatures living in the *athhero bhatir desh*, including ghouls, ghosts, and evil spirits, ruled over the jungles. He was filled with an unquenchable hunger for the pleasures that human flesh might provide and had a deep hate for humans. The enraged demon attacked the intruders, but after a fierce struggle, he was defeated. However, in her compassionate victory, Bon Bibi declared that half of the tidal country would stay

a wilderness, leaving Dokkhin Rai and his legions of demons to occupy this portion of the forest. She kept the remainder for herself, and under her reign, this formerly forested area was quickly cleared for habitation. The country of eighteen tides was thus restored into order, with its two halves—the wild and the sown—being carefully balanced. Instead of killing Rai, Bon Bibi forced him to swear that he would not hurt anyone who worshiped her. Because animal attacks are a major cause of human mortality in the Sundarbans, the locals have worshipped Bon Bibi as protection from the numerous dangers of the jungle. Everything was well up until this order was disturbed by human greed. (Ghosh 103) This is a custom that dates back many centuries.

According to mythology, a man called Dhona makes a deal with the demon Rai to give him all the honey in the forests in return for his little nephew, Dukhi. Bon Bibi intervenes in time to prevent the boy from being eaten by a tiger that is about to devour him. Dokkhin Rai again begged for forgiveness. After Dhona's experience, the story's conclusion emphasizes Bon Bibi's careful balancing of the land's boundaries. Upon the boy's promise that he and his friends would never again enter the forest with the greedy goal of using its resources for their own, excessive profits, she finally sends Dukhi back to his mother, with a treasure trove of honey and wax. Because of that tale, the islanders still ask Bon Bibi to watch over them before venturing into the jungle. This aligns with the teachings in the Isha Upanishad:

“isavasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat|

Tena tyaktena bhunjithah ma grdhah kasyasvitdanam||”

Which translates as, The Lord is the owner and ruler of everything, living or inanimate, in the cosmos. As a result, one should only take items that are required

for yourself and that are included in their quota. One should not accept anything else because they are not theirs. (Bhat 26)

The Sundarbans' rugged landscape brings together people of different faiths and ideologies. The legend of Bon Bibi is the foundation of the syncretic civilization, which is revered by all faiths. In Indian custom, the absence of a temple for worship makes a village or town uninhabitable. In the novel, Amitav Ghosh mentions that on the island, there were little shrines outside houses. (Ghosh 102) There is a Bon Bibi mandir at Bokkhali, a little resort town on the edge of the Indian Sundarbans. Before taking a boat ride around the Sundarbans, visitors stop to pray here. People from many religious backgrounds attend the temple, which is an explosion of activity and noise. Additionally, there is a bakery named Bonbibu *mishti ghar*. There is an annual Bon Bibi feast day in Ramrudrapur, a highland region of the Sundarbans where the forest has receded. Muslim and Hindu ladies both fast all day on the festival day. Some of them fervently pray for a child to conceive, ask for a better crop, and bring their kids to the deity for blessings. They also offer her statue traditional delicacies. After that, there is a cultural show where people sing traditional songs from Bengal about legendary creatures that rule the woods. But the islanders always worship Bon Bibi simply and passionately in the lowland portions of the Sundarbans. Every time they venture into the jungle, they call on her out of fear of dying. (Khan) There, they believe that Bon Bibi's role is to keep the island's fishermen, woodcutters, and beekeepers safe from the deadly animals. However, when a loved one was killed, the bereaved family was comforted by sayings like, "Sometimes this is the means she (Bon Bibi) chooses to call those who are the closest to her. They are the first to go." (Ghosh 109)

There was a very strong belief among the inhabitants that if anyone crossed the line by mistake and ventured into one of Dokkhin Rai's islands, there would be sudden storms, out of nowhere. They believed that those were the doings of Dokkhin Rai and his demons. Nirmal narrated to Horen about an incident that was recorded by a Jesuit priest when he and his crew experienced the "most extraordinary night" in the Sundarbans. He records that first, the wind died down...next, the air around the boat became so hot that they could scarcely breathe. All of a sudden, the mangroves around the boat burst into flames as the greenery was invaded by great swarms of glowworms, in a manner that it seemed like fire was dancing in the mangrove's roots and branched. This made them believe that many demons were living on the islands. The following night, suddenly without any warning, a violent storm arose and pursued the priest and his crew into a creek...the rain fell as if it was poured into the boat from buckets and the lightning and thunder were so loud and vivid, and so near their heads, that they despaired surviving that horrible night. (Ghosh 146) The fear of Dokkhin Rai was so ingrained in the minds of people that whenever they crossed into "Dokkhin Rai's territory", they would make genuflections and pray to the goddess for protection. When Horen and Kusum reached a *mohona* on the route to Garjontola, they started to make genuflections, touching their chests with their fingertips after raising them to their foreheads. Kusum explained that they had crossed the border that Bon Bibi had drawn to divide the land, separating the human realm from Dokkhin Rai and his demons. Nirmal saw with his own eyes that the wheel of time was turning too quickly to be visible from this side. Islands were created and destroyed in a matter of days, rivers wandered from week to week, and change was the way of life in the tide country. (Ghosh 223) They believed that in Dokkhin Rai's territory fear

protected them, and kept them alive, and that without fear the danger would double. They should shut their eyes, chant mantras to shut the mouth of the big cats and make gestures with their hands. While leaving any of Dokkhin Rai's islands, they had an unwritten rule that they were not allowed to leave anything behind, nor could they spit or urinate, neither could they sit and relieve themselves. They weren't permitted to leave behind their morning's meal. If they did so, they believed that harm would befall them. (Ghosh 244) Therefore, people would not even dare to harm nor pollute the land. They revered the land and treated it as a sacred place.

There are two distinct accounts of Bon Bibi's worship in the novel. The first occurs when Fokir takes Tutul and Piya to the island of Garjontola. The goddess' shrine was just an altar covered with leaves. None of the Hindu gods that Piya was familiar with were represented by the goddess. A somewhat smaller man was next to a large-eyed female dressed in a sari. Between them crouched a tiger, easily identified by its painted stripes. Fokir performed a brief ceremony with his son Tutul. First, they gathered some leaves and flowers and placed them before the shrine. Fokir then started chanting while he lowered his head and joined his hands in prayer. She heard a repeating statement that seemed to be referring to Allah, but the manner he was praying was more like Hindu *pujas*. (Ghosh 152) Nirmal writes an account in one of his letters about one of his visits to the Monichjhapi in mid-January, which was the time of Bon Bibi *puja*. On the day of the *puja*, Kusum and her son, Fokir, made small clay idols of Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jangoli, which they later loaded on Horen's boat. Many other islanders had singers and drummers with them in their boats. On the way to the shrine, Kusum narrated the story about how her father's life was saved on the Garjontola island by Bon Bibi herself, who appeared to him in his dream and told him not to be afraid, but instead,

to trust in her. Just as promised by Bon Bibi, Kusum's father went back home safely and returned to build a shrine to the goddess on the island, and through the rest of his life, every year he came there with his family during the time of the *puja* to pay tribute to the goddess. When they got to the shrine, all that was there was an elevated platform covered in thatch and supported by bamboo sides. They placed the idols of Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jangoli, lighted a few sticks of fragrant dhoop, and set some leaves and flowers at their feet. It resembled an ordinary household *puja* in every way, but Nirmal was shocked when Horen started reciting the mantra and discovered what it was:

*“Bismillah boliya mukhey dhorinu/ poida korilo jinni
tanam alam* baro meherban tini bandar upore/ taar
Chhani keba ache duniyar upore”*

Which translates as “I start to speak in Allah's name. / Over the created world, who is there but He? / He is the Begetter the Lord*. / He is full of mercy for all of his disciples.” (Ghosh 256)

The recitations followed the pattern of a *puja*, but they were invocations in Arabic. It was a peculiar type of Bangla with strong Arabic and Persian influences, making it difficult to comprehend. The faith of the Tide nation, according to Nirmal, was comparable to one of its large *mohonas*, a meeting place for several rivers as well as a circular route that allows travelers to go between faiths and religions as well as from one country to another.

The Sundarbans people's way of existence and their everyday interactions with non-human animals are explained in the narrative of Bon Bibi. Both historically and currently, Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai offer a moral framework that upholds the boundaries between humans and non-humans that sustain ecological

stability and harmony. Bon Bibi reminds us that when communities don't plan to take more than they need to exist, the forest is at its healthiest.

4.4 The Holy Ganga

In Hinduism, the Ganges is the most sacred river. Hindus refer to it as Mother Ganga and revere it as a "life-giving river." Many people refer to her as pure, pious, and endowed with numerous spiritual advantages. Ganga is revered as the goddess of forgiveness and purification because bathing in the sacred Ganga or sprinkling Ganga water about one's house is believed to wash away sins and purify the surrounding area. Hindus hold that one might be freed from the cycle of life and death and have their sins forgiven by just touching Ganga water. Ganga water is used for purifying in several significant rituals, including marriages, birth celebrations, and funeral rites. Thousands of Hindus travel to holy sites along the Ganges, particularly where it connects with other rivers.

Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans which is formed by the confluence of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. The legend told in chapter one states that if Lord Shiva hadn't tamed the goddess Ganga's torrent by binding it to his ash-smeared locks, her descent from heaven would have split the earth. It is said that the river unfurls over a vast and thirsty plain like a heavenly braid, an immense rope of water. Because the story's ending is never told and hence never envisioned, it comes as a surprise. The tale continues to say that eventually this braid unravels and Shiva's matted hair is swept away into an enormous tangle of knots. This section of the river breaks free from its bindings and splits into hundreds or perhaps thousands of knotted threads. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries of land and water are always

mutating, always unpredictable. While some of these channels are only two or three hundred meters broad, others are like powerful rivers, spanning so much distance that one shore is invisible from the other. Every one of these channels is a river unto itself, and everyone has a strange evocative name. These channels frequently meet in clusters. Such a confluence is referred to as a *mohona* in the local language, which is a strangely seductive word with several layers of beguilement. (Ghosh 6)

Nirmal claims that the Ganga is the world's greatest river. He clarifies that the Ganga doesn't end when it runs into the Bay of Bengal, despite popular supposition but on the contrary it continues. It merges with the Brahmaputra through a lengthy, well-marked channel that runs along the bay's floor. This underwater river's length much surpasses that of its overland channel. (Ghosh 181)

There is a visible Ganga: one which flows on the land and one beneath the water. And when put together, it becomes the greatest river on earth. Ganga River, therefore is surrounded by numerous legends and myths and is a part of the lives of the people living far and near.

4.3.1 Lord Vishnu and Ganga

According to Nirmal, goddesses are a common link between myth and geology. (Ghosh 180) and he elaborates on this by telling the story of the creation of the Ganga by Lord Vishnu and the reasons why it's the greatest river in the world.

Legend has it that the demi-gods appealed to Vishnu, who appeared as the beautiful dwarf Vamana, for help when the demon god Bali conquered all the planets in the universe. When asked by Bali what he wanted in charity, when he appeared in his courts, Vamana responded that he merely desired three paces of land, measured by his steps. He explained, "If I were not satisfied with just three

paces of land, I would be not satisfied with the whole universe...it is better to be satisfied with whatever destiny brings, for discontent can never bring happiness.” (Prime 45) Bali remained true to his pledge even when it was revealed that the dwarf was indeed Vishnu disguised. Subsequently, Vamana-Vishnu grew in size until he encompassed the entirety of the universe. Bali observed that all that existed was in that magnificent form of the Lord. Then he walked three steps. He covered the earth's surface with his first step. With the second he covered all the planets of heaven, and his toenail created a tiny scratch on the fabric of creation. It was this pore, that became the source of the immortal and eternal Ganga that flows from heaven. (Ghosh 180) It is the water that has washed the toes of Lord Vishnu. By bathing in its waters all sins are washed away. After being defeated Bali begged Lord Vishnu to place his third footstep on his head, giving the Lord all he owned, even himself.

The Hindu concept that one might have everything and still be unhappy is conveyed through the legend. God may sometimes remove someone's possessions out of mercy to help that person realize what true happiness is all about. In modern times, when humans are obsessed with accumulating as much of the limited resources of the earth as possible, believing that material possessions will provide happiness. It is important to reflect and appreciate what one has.

4.3.2 Ganga: The Daughter and Sister

Ghosh in the novel *The Hungry Tide* mentions a myth that links Ganga to Greek mythology. According to the legend, Ganga River is the daughter of the Greek goddess. Where the Ganga currently flows was only a shoreline, marking the Asian mainland's southernmost point. Back then, India was in the Southern

Hemisphere, a very long way away. It was attached to Antarctica and Australia. The Sea Tethys, the wife of Oceanus in Greek mythology flowed through the subcontinent. The Himalayas and sacred rivers like the Jamuna, Ganga, Saraswati, and Brahmaputra did not exist before then. Furthermore, in the absence of rivers, there was no delta, floodplain, silting, mangroves, or, to put it another way, no Bengal. Then, the lush coastline of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu was a frozen wasteland, with ice reaching a depth of two hundred feet. There was a stretch of ice shoreline that gradually receded into the waters of the now-extinct Tethys Sea where the southern coast of the Ganga presently resides. India was separated from Antarctica 140 million years ago and started its northward march. The subcontinent advanced more quickly than any other landmass had ever done. The weight of the peninsula caused the Himalayas to rise, revealing the Ganga as a stream on an inclining slope. As India travelled, the Tethys, got thinner and narrower until the passage closed. Mother Ocean finally vanished as the two landmasses clashed at her expense. There won't be any tears shed in honor of this mythology because it also recounts the birth of the Indus and Ganga rivers, her twin children in whom her memory will continue to live.

Legend states that Sindhu and the Ganga were once believed to be conjoined twins. The river dolphin, Shushuk, is evidence of this. The twins' mother Tethys had given them this marine creature as a legacy. It was nourished and adopted by the rivers. The Shushuk can only be found in the Ganga and Sindhu rivers, nowhere else in the world.

The river has been given a human-relatable presence by Ghosh through her anthropomorphism as a sister and daughter. It stirs up feelings of respect and sympathy for the river. People are moved by the touching tale of a mother giving

her life to protect her children, and they are filled with feelings of empathy for the river. The author asserted that the river possesses an eternal essence by connecting it to Greek mythology.

4.3.3 Ganga and Shantanu

Ganga is anthropomorphized as a seductress and temptress in the ancient texts. It is believed that a solitary, enthralled moment of King Shantanu by a river resulted in a parva of the Mahabharata.

According to the story, while strolling along the Ganges River, King Shantanu caught sight of this stunningly beautiful woman. He was unaware that she was the human embodiment of the goddess Ganga. The king begged Ganga to marry him right away since he was so taken by her beauty. He made the request, laying his heart, love, entire kingdom, and fortune at her feet. Ganga, moved by the King's affection, answered him. "O King. I'll agree to marry you, but only under one condition. Never ask me where I'm from or what my real origins are. You must never question my acts, whether they are good or negative. You have to support me in every way. I'll leave you right there if you behave in a way that violates any of these requirements." Because of his intense love for Ganga, the king agreed to her terms and they were married. Shantanu and Ganga had a happy and loving life together. It was the ideal marriage. Shantanu became even more drawn to Ganga because of her purity of thinking. Every time a baby was born, Ganga brought it to the Ganges and threw it into the river, whereupon the infant drowned and died instantly. Then, with a smile on her face, she returned to her kingdom. Horror struck Shantanu. Even though he was in shock at what he had just witnessed, he forced himself to refrain from questioning Ganga because of the pledge he had made to

her. Ganga went to the river with the same purpose after the birth of her eighth child. Shantanu was no longer able to control himself. "Stop!" he yelled. You cruel woman. Why do you perform this terrible act? Why do you do what no mother would? You are both beautiful and crazy. Ganga tells him that since he broke the promise, it was time for her to leave. She reveals herself to him "I am the goddess Ganga, and the curse of Sage Vasishta on the Eight Vasus has caused me to take on this human form." Ganga took the baby with her as she departed Shantanu after narrating her story. After raising him for a few years, Ganga returned the baby to Shantanu and told him that her son's name was Devavratha. She told him that he was an accomplished archer and had studied all branches of study under Vasishta, having learned *The Vedas* from her. Reunited with his kid, who radiated like a person of heavenly birth, Shantanu was thrilled. He raised his son with affection. This son, Devavratha, later becomes the well-known Bhishma. (Raghavan)

The goddess Ganga is anthropomorphized as a sensual woman. Though her drowning of her children makes her appear inhumane, it soon becomes clear that she is kind and merciful and even goes so far as to assume human form to free the Vasus from the curse placed upon them.

4.4 Reverence for Animals

Amitav Ghosh skillfully interweaves the link between humans and animals in *The Hungry Tide*. He offers an entirely new perspective on the current human-animal relationship by relating these animals to spiritual aspects. Through the character's encounters with the wildlife of the Sundarbans, an immense archipelago between Bangladesh and India, the narrative depicts a reverence for animals. The

novel examines how human and animal life are entwined in the Sundarbans, by highlighting their interdependence on each other for survival.

There are references to tigers, crabs, and dolphins throughout the novel. In many cases, they serve as the narrative's catalysts. They serve as cultural and religious symbols. The author highlights how these animals are a part of the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans.

4.4.1 Tigers

Death is not something uncommon in the Sundarbans. As a result, for centuries, Muslims and Hindus alike have worshipped Bon Bibi to ward off danger. These days, they sacrifice sweets to get her protection from tigers since it's heavily believed that the demon king, Dokkhin Rai disguises himself as a tiger and kills people who enter the jungles. Tigers are therefore feared and adored, this is evident because, between the statues of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli, a tiger is seen crouching. Despite the hard circumstances of the mangrove forests and the tigers that constantly roam around, thousands of people risk their lives to gather tiny amounts of firewood, honey, wax, and other resources. According to Kanai, there is not a single day in the Sundarbans when a person is not killed by a tiger. It was forbidden to utter the word "tiger" or "*bagh*" at all. They dreaded it because, according to them, "to say it is to call it". (Ghosh 108) When Piya, to mimic a tiger, made her hands into a claw, even before she could complete the gesture, Fokir clasped her hands and stopped her, this reveals that the people were terrified of the animal and that even making any reference to the subject was forbidden. Tigers are described as big cats who roam around "like ghosts, never revealing their presence, except their marks, sounds, and smells. They were so rarely seen, that to behold

one, it was said, was to be good as dead” (Ghosh 108) Several women on the embankment passed out after seeing a tiger. Nilima described that the tigers in the tide country were different from those in other areas. In other places, tigers attacked humans only in unusual circumstances: if they were disabled or otherwise unable to hunt down any other form of prey. Tigers in the tide nation have been known to attack humans, even when young and healthy. They have been seen to swim up to eight miles at a time. Boats and *bhotbhotis* were constantly attacked—even in midstream. Some explain this tendency to the peculiar tidal environment, where significant portions of the forest were submerged on a daily basis. (Ghosh 241)

Encounters with the tigers underscore the characters’ vulnerability in the face of nature’s powers, while also highlighting their awe and respect for these creatures. By adding a spiritual touch to tigers, Ghosh evokes a sense of admiration.

4.4.2 Dolphins

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh depicts dolphins as enigmatic and revered creatures that inhabit the waters of the Sundarbans. In the novel, Piya travels to India to research the behavior of Orcaella, a rare species of dolphin. The study of dolphins introduces her to people such as Kanai, Fokir, Horen, Nilima, Moyna, and others. She hired a local fisherman, Fokir, as her boatman. Piya argues Kanai should be interested in river dolphins because the first species were discovered in Calcutta. She describes them as animals that need the same attention and consideration as humans. During her observations, she saw that the dolphins appeared in large numbers during high tide. It was revealed that this dolphin species was related to killer whales, hence it was given the name Orcaella. When someone discovered the small difference between river and coastal dolphins,

they named it as Irrawaddy dolphin. Through her incredible journey, Piya realizes that saving the dolphins requires saving the Sundarbans. This incredible ecosystem is the only area where river dolphins and Irrawaddy dolphins coexist.

Ghosh has provided a spiritual dimension to dolphins. Kusum refers to dolphins as Bon Bibi's messengers. They delivered her news about the rivers and *khals*. They arrived during the *bhata* or high tide to inform Bon Bibi of all they had observed. During the *jowar* or low tide, they dispersed to the furthest reaches of the jungle, becoming her eyes and ears. Kusum's father advised her that to fish, one must first learn to follow the dolphins.

The presence of dolphins underscores the interconnectedness of all life forms within the ecosystem. Dolphins are also presented as symbols of divine presence in nature, carrying spiritual significance, and thus evoking a sense of wonder and reverence.

4.4.3. Crabs

Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* portrays crabs as symbols of resilience, adaptability, and the interconnectedness of life. In the novel, Fokir earned a living by catching and selling crab. Like him, many other inhabitants of the Sundarbans are dependent on crabs for their livelihood. Thus, crabs become a source of sustenance for families, highlighting the dependence of the local population on the resources provided by the Sundarbans.

Despite the harsh and unforgiving conditions, prone to natural disasters such as cyclones and floods, crabs have adapted and continued to survive in the face of adversity. Piya laughed to herself when she realized that the word “crabby” came from the crab, “a creature so stubborn it would rather be captured than let go”.

(Ghosh 140) The stubborn and headstrong attitude of the crabs has helped them to thrive.

Crabs play an important role in the ecosystem of Sundarbans, contributing to its delicate balance. Piya had learned during one of her classes that crabs formed the sanitation department and the janitorial team rolled in one. They kept the mangroves alive by removing the leaves and litter; without them, the trees would choke on their debris. She recalled that someone had once rightly said that intertidal forests should be named after crabs rather than mangroves because it was certainly, they, not the tigers or crocodiles who were the keystone of the entire species. (Ghosh 142)

The ancients have included a crab in the Zodiac, i.e., Cancer. Piya, whose zodiac sign was cancer, had always wondered why a crab was chosen when there were so many other interesting animals to choose from. After contemplating on this for a while Piya came to realize that it was the crab that ruled the tide of her destiny. (Ghosh 142) Nature, she believed, encompassed everything that wasn't formed by human intervention. She knew it wasn't her intention that had led her to where she was—it was the crabs—because they were Fokir's livelihood, and without them, he wouldn't have known how to lead her to the pool where the Orcaella came. (Ghosh 142)

Crabs are portrayed as more than just a means of livelihood. Their presence serves as a reminder of their strength and perseverance even amid the harsh conditions. Crabs act as a catalyst in Piya's life, bringing her into contact with Fokir, who takes her to the dolphin pool.

4.5 Narrative Techniques

Ghosh has reformed and blended indigenous storytelling traditions. It enables him to incorporate history into the narrative. His narrative is a combination of both fiction and fact, depicting the lives of people in the Sundarbans, their customs, and beliefs while also revisiting their past. The narrative depicts several histories, including the Marichjhapi massacre, the life cycle of the Oracaella, how it was discovered, and the history of the aquatic life of which it is a part.

The novel refers to the story behind the foundation of the Canning town, the shipping inspector named Henry Piddington who named cyclones that devastated the regions, Sir Daniel Hamilton's dreams of establishing an ideal community in the Sundarbans, the legend of Bon Bibi, the rituals and customs of the inhabitants, and the present-day narrative of Nilima, Kanai, Piya, Fokir, and many others. The Sundarbans islands are constantly affected by flood tides or massive tidal waves caused by cyclones, but Ghosh reminds us that it is the layers of human histories, combined with the collaboration of past knowledge, experience, and memory, that improves our understanding of a specific region.

There is a constant shift between the past and present. The author has included varied perspectives and voices from a range of backgrounds and generations. He employs a variety of narrative approaches, including character focalizations, mythologies, memory, symbols, internal monologues, testimonies, diary writing, intertextuality, and mimetic and diegetic forms of narration. He attempts to create a world that expresses his observations of people's lives and the environment around them in both the past and today.

To conclude, Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* promotes the notion that eco-spirituality is more than just reverence for nature; it is also about

acknowledging humanity's interdependence with the environment. Through the characters' experiences, they learn the importance of harmonious relationships with nature and the necessity to protect and preserve it for future generations. Throughout the novel, characters handle the intricate network of ecological difficulties while also exploring their spiritual connections to the natural world. Ghosh masterfully blends parts of local folklore, mythology, and spiritual beliefs, depicting nature not only as a physical thing but also as a spiritual force that impacts the characters' lives and destinies.

CHAPTER 5

LEAVING AN ECO-SPIRITUAL FOOTPRINT: CONCLUSION

“Eco-spirituality gives us the sense of wonder, beauty, and inspiration to act for the Earth community.”

- Mary Evelyn Tucker

Numerous religious and spiritual traditions, as well as secular environmental organizations, incorporate elements of eco-spirituality. Eco-spirituality is the link between spirituality and ecological research. According to eco-spirituality, spirituality, and ecology are intertwined, that is, there is a spiritual component to ecology, and there is a connection between spirituality and ecological issues. Themes like anthropomorphism of nature, profound experiences in nature, nature as a spiritual resource, and connection to nature are what define eco-spirituality.

Hinduism is the world's oldest known religion. It is a vast, multifaceted religion with a wide range of doctrines, customs, and rituals. Its beliefs state that God accepts any sincere form of worship or prayer that is offered from the heart. Locations, languages, and rituals of worship are unimportant. It doesn't exclude any beliefs and covers every aspect of life. Within the Hindu religious system, a great deal of eco-spiritualistic morality is ingrained in the traditions that prioritize environmental welfare. Comprehending eco-spirituality within the framework of Hinduism enhances an understanding of the teachings of the religion on the relationship between humans and nature. It offers a new and fresh perspective on the natural world, fostering reverence and respect for it. Hindu eco-spiritual practices promote environmental sustainability and serve as a link between the environmental movement and the Hindu community.

Gita Mehta reconstructs the coexistence of both culture and nature in *A River Sutra*, along with the significance of the Narmada River in maintaining Indian identities on a physical, cultural, and spiritual level. She uses the Narmada River as her central protagonist to create her narrative. The author has anthropomorphized the river, depicting it as a goddess, a daughter, a seductress, and a liberator from the cycle of life and death. She has thereby established a link between spirituality and nature, which has an impact on how others perceive it. Humans, driven by faith and religion, feel obligated morally to preserve and revere nature when it is depicted as holy and sacred. The author delves into the human psyche using a variety of narrative techniques and characters, revealing that the human mind is unable to withstand the influence of culture, religion, and desire.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh asserts that the Sundarbans is not merely the convergence point for several rivers but also a location where mythology and different civilizations coexist. He promotes the idea that eco-spirituality involves recognizing humanity's interconnectedness with the environment in addition to respect for nature. The experiences of the characters teach them the value of peaceful coexistence with nature and the need to save it for future generations. Ghosh depicts nature not only as a physical entity but also as a spiritual force that influences the lives and fates of individuals, skillfully fusing elements of local folklore, mythology, and spiritual beliefs.

Given the present ecological crises and the new millennium, there is a growing need for ecologically based spirituality and religion. Eco-spirituality is a movement that combines environmental activism with religion. Religion has a significant influence on how people perceive their environment, therefore taking environmental issues and teachings into account may be crucial to the overall

preservation and maintenance of the environment. It will encourage concern and responsibility for the environment. It will promote greater respect and concern for the natural environment rather than seeing it as just a resource to be exploited. This change in viewpoint may result in more environmentally conscious actions and lifestyles that put the well-being of the earth first. The ecological issues of our day are not limited to the environment; they also affect society and spirituality. Eco-spirituality will offer pathways for self-healing and harmony with the environment. An increased sense of harmony and connection may be fostered by engaging in activities that appreciate nature, such as eco-meditation, mindfulness, and rituals.

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