



impression

On The Bank of Sutra

by Salahuddin Akbar

THE meaning of *sutra* usually implies formula. And whenever we come across the term a prefix comes to our mind is *kama* - and we envisage first the perfect combination of the word *Kamasutra*. The wise takes it as love manual, and the otherwise might take it as work formula if they prefer to be known as workaholic. But for Gita Mehta the word *sutra* means a thread, or a string; also a literary term, used to describe aphoristic forms of writing. And her narrative thread, which is the holy river Narmada that links the stories of *A River Sutra*, weaves the richness of India into a dangerous love stories of its characters. Set on the banks of the holiest Narmada amidst the human traffic of the pilgrims and archeologists, policemen and tribal, priests and traders - in short it is a magnet to mendicants.

A bureaucrat, the nameless narrator, in search of tranquility takes a remote

posting to a government rest house overlooking the Narmada river, believed to be the daughter of the god Shiva, only to encounter various travellers to tell him their stories. Here meets a teacher who confesses to murder, a naked ascetic and the child he saved from prostitution, a millionaire monk, a girl fleeing her kidnappers, a musician silenced by desire. A musical instrument illustrates Hindu erotic. Primitive tribals explain India's most sophisticated philosophy. A murder is haunted by Sufi ecstasy, a modern rationalist is defeated by ancient magic. Instead of finding tranquility the bureaucrat is forced to confront the powers of mythology, religion, philosophy and music, and to acknowledge that the great river has a sanctity more threatening than he could have imagined.

A remote analogy and reminiscence of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* seems faintly flowing in the river Sutra. A Jain monk whose philosophy of non-

violence entails wearing a muslim mask across his mouth lest he accidentally breath in and kill an insect, tell how his father, a diamond merchant, spent 62 million rupees on a lavish ceremony to mark his son's renunciation of the world. A poor blind boy's angelic voice is so pure that a powerful *sahib* kills him out of jealousy. The manager of a tea estate is possessed by the spirit of the beautiful serpent/woman who seduced him, and believes only the river goddess can set him free. Every tale has the timeless quality of fable and slowly absorbs the reader into its mood. Geeta's voluptuous prose wraps itself as easily around her character's ironic, formal dialogue as her eloquent expositions of Hindu myth and descriptions of the bright, redolent landscape. On the steps of the temples at Mahadeo spill "Beggars and holy men. Priests instructing the devout on how to make their obeisance to the river. Horoscope readers and palmists. Vendors selling

baskets of marigolds to be offered to the idols, or glass paintings of the gods. Women drying their saris after their ritual baths. Pilgrims pouring oil into clay lamps to float on the river."

Geeta depicts the land in her *A River Sutra* as fragrant with spices and jasmine, suffused with mystery, bustling with paradox and peopled by beautiful women who wear ropes of pearls and carry lotus blossoms. Its jungles teem with wildlife, its colours make our eyes hurt. At times we suspect that Geeta has mounted an elaborate, satirical hoax, offering the West the vision of her country India she thinks it wants - erotic, mystical, other. Or perhaps it only seems so because this kind of lush writing has become so unfashionable. Either way, its effect is both seductive and discomfiting.

Geeta's best known Karma Cola is a book of stylish originality - the scintillating flurry of anecdotes stands as a highly entertaining account of the con-

sumerist West struggling to gobble up Hinduism and choking itself in the process. The entire book offers what must be real juice and colour of modern India seen from outside. She shows she can bring a scene alive with just a few strokes and a dab of colour.

But the stories also in the *Sutra* yield a number of different readings like the river which means different things to the Sufis, the Hindus, the local tribals and the teams of scientists that flock to study its ancient cultures. Each one proffers a teasing dialogue between materialism, explicitly allied to the colonial legacy, and what might be described as spirit. The "spirit" need not be religious. It refers to the quality of the objects that can not be described by their physical properties. I one of the later stories, a musician's daughter is afflicted with ugliness. No one will marry her and her mother fears for her future. Under her father's guidance, she learns "that music is the mathematics

by which the universe can be comprehended" and forgets her appearance. Later rejected in love, she comes to the river to rekindle the desire that makes her music holy. Geeta draws us in to her predicament, and makes us feel the emotional significance of what to Western minds is an absurdity. Just as the river can be both the fount of a thousand myths and "an unbroken record of the human race", so too, in Geeta's imaginative world, can an ascetic transform himself into a scientist. Oppositions collapse and contradictions disappear. What Geeta makes us see is the fine thread that links them. In this exquisitely written novel of *A River Sutra* Geeta Mehta uses the traditional forms of Indian story-telling to illuminate the paradoxes of Indian life and thought.

[The writer is Director, External Publicity Wing, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.]

fiction

Purnimar Raat

by Gautam Sengupta Translated by Mir Waliuzzaman

AND Nellow was not supposed to be seen at all outside his hide-out; because he knew it only too well that Lottery Papu and his gang were chasing him desperately. They were sure to kill him as soon as they would find him. Nellow, however, had no idea of how it would be like getting annihilated; though he happened to possess a lot more of this kind of 'almost there' experience than other youths of his age. He had considered the possibility of being murdered and concluded that it might be a trifle more painful than the gang-beating he had received in the hands of Raju and his company a few days back.

But he had seen on many other occasions that people generally were quite scared when they faced death. Nellow remembered a recent event when they were taking Madna to gang-hack him; the victim was crying so haplessly in fear. In spite of being the hulk that he was, Madna was all entreaties then, imploring him so pathetically... boss, please let me go... don't kill me. The poor guy wetted his trousers before being chopped to death. During the operation, when his accomplices were busy doing the job, Nellow sat leaning against a pipe, smiling indifferently and thoughtlessly trying to push the tip of his tongue through the crack of his broken frontal tooth.

Nellow, in fact, had run out of his 'spiritual stuff' that evening. So he had to sneak out compulsively only to manage a little something to take a puff on and... he was going back to his den carrying the stuff alright... when, looking at the cement pipes bathing in the milky light of the full moon... he

considered stopping there for half a mo and taking a gulp of the essential smoke. And that did it... he had just forgotten to leave that place... he was sort of caught in a trance... relaxing and luxuriating in that unearthly atmosphere... and enjoying his whiffs of sugar like he had never experienced before. In his own lingo, this kind of inebriation was 'full-tight' or 'full-chhakaas'... anyway... Nellow had known that for certain that taking that particular drug topped all kinds of intoxication... But the trouble starts when you miss the timely shot... as it had happened once when he was interned at the police station... At first, he was yawning, then he started shedding water... drop by drop... through his nostrils, eyes... and next, there was physical, real pain all over... it was so bad that he felt as if the bones of his body were about to come out from under the skin and muscles, piercing the protecting bands... Guru, that's known as "turkey," Billu has explained. Billu had initiated him into the realm of this particular kind of 'masti' last year, when both of them were in jail. Nellow used to nauseate a little as a novice, but then he had graduated to be a seasoned addict.

Billu, though unlettered, happens to be a worldly wise guy. These addictions have been introduced by the 'saahibs,' he says. That must be true, Billu was considering mentally, or... who else could have innovated such wonderful means to enjoy the 'blissful kicks'? With his eyes closed comfortably, he was viewing a huge 70 mm movie screen, on which was spread a torn, yellowish mat... the miserably groaning fellow who had just been kicked about

and thrown on a corner of the mad was his father and... the owner of the booted leg that had served the kick was his uncle... and, the intimate harlot hanging off his uncle's shoulders and giggling all the while and arranging her dishevelled hair was his holy mother!

As Nellow could see the same phenomenon everyday, whenever he closed his eyes, the subsequent scenes had been, sort of engraved in his memory sequentially. He knew it only too well that the guy known as his uncle would next unzip the fly of his trousers and urinate on his father's indolent, supine form. And then, the female known as Nellow's mother would still be laughing and setting her hair... and finally hop into a taxi, accompanying his uncle. After the pair left, his father would erect himself with difficulty, pull his lungi (loin cloth) up and around his middle and... finding none else, serve his son a mighty buffet, uprooting a frontal tooth!

On that fateful evening, Nellow was enjoying the same movie... free of cost... his eyes closed, his brains on fire. He was pulling the inevitable piece of tinfol out of his trousers pocket for a relieving whiff so that he could sink into oblivion again, when he sighted the unbearable illumination. No sooner had he opened his eyes than the full moon came loweringly upon him. Clenching his teeth, Nellow muttered his favourite six-syllabled obscenity... and then turned his face to the left, intending to avoid the celestial luminary.

And right at that instant, his eyes fell on the jeans-clad female loner standing. One of her hands held a walkman and the other was busy in her

head of hair, exactly like that woman called Nellow's mother...

Three
Since morning, the police station premises seemed overly alert and busy. Miz Antara alias Jiji, a student of class ten, and the only offspring of Dr Mallinath Sircar has been reportedly raped and killed afterwards. The local community peace procession has just turned back tracing this end of its routine route. All the evening dailies of the township have treated the news attaching due importance. As a result, the police station is receiving incessant phone-calls; everyone is anxious to know how it all happened... Mr Chakravarti, the Officer-in-Charge of the police station, has recently managed to be transferred here from Koochbihaar, after a lot of hassle... he hasn't even been able to settle down comfortably... and now this disaster... Sitting in his office, the grim and sullen-faced OC is seen twisting the rings on his fingers; he looks at the precious stones and gems... zircon, pearl, agate... supposed to be bringing him luck while warding off catastrophes... like this... no, no, I must wear a coral this time, he contemplated. No more dilly-dallying... Chakravarti decided quickly and dialled his astrologer's number.

Paresh Saha, the Second Officer has served here quite a long tenure. He came out of his office to see what's going on around. Going back to make a situation report, he found Chakravarti speaking into the telephone mouth-piece in his earnest; so, he kept vigil over his avid looking boss, standing outside the door and picking in between his stained teeth most arduously with a match. At last,

the call ended; Mr Saha dug out a miniscule areca-nut chip from his oral cavity, flipped it away into the space and dashed into the OC's room.

Drawing a chair and settling down, Saha said - Sir, have you looked at 'the body' yet? There's hardly anything left on the carcass. The left one has been virtually shredded into pieces!

-Ridiculous, Chakravarti retorted. It looks like the whole nation is hell-bent upon committing the same morbid acts they keep watching on the TV screen round the clock!

- They had gagged the victim well. But I guess it was not a gang... might have been committed by one or two persons, at the most. The offenders might owe her an old grudge, I guess.

- Oh, don't talk nonsense. Who would bear a grudge against a kid girl like her? Chakravarti dismissed the idea summarily.

- You call her a kid, sir! Paresh laughed aloud, slowly shutting his right eye meaningfully. Then he added, they are all storage tanks, sir veritable reservoirs, I must say. You don't know these southern girls, apparently.

- No, no what are you trying to establish. Mr Saha? South or north hasn't anything to do with this. Chakravarti muttered, waving his head emphatically.

- It has, sirrah, it has. Have you ever head about any girl from our Barasat area coming out at night and standing in the dark on lake-shore, all alone? That too at eight O'clock after dusk? I'm ready to take up a wager, sir... there must have been an old grudge... I have had enough of such experience here... Now I hate all of these... can't bear it any longer, said Paresh Saha. Then he

flushed out another match from the box, started scraping the powder off its black and rounded end and left the room unceremoniously.

As Paresh went out, Mr Chakravarti suddenly remembered that the day was Wednesday, and, that it was on Wednesdays that his daughter went to music classes. It was her final year at music school; still, he decided that Nandita shouldn't travel alone any more. all the way from Salt Lake to the Tegharia school - specially the dark stretch along the VIP Road - ugh... he couldn't think about that coolly... it wasn't yet seven O'clock by his Omega wrist-watch... he phoned his wife hastily, losing no time.

- Listen, Rani, has she left already? - Who? - Who else, but you daughter? Is she gone to her music class? - No, not yet. She is getting ready for it. But why do you ask? - Listen, don't let her go. From now onwards, she will be receiving her music lessons at home. - Well, how can that possibly happen? You know it very well that her teacher Jayanta Babu does not teach music outside the school! - In that case, Nandita will be tutored by someone else. The thing is, she is not going anywhere, anymore all by herself. Have you got my message, dear? It's my order and it's final. - Won't you tell me what has happened? - That's none of your business. What will you gain by simply knowing what has happened? Chakravarti grimaced. To sum everything up, she is not going anywhere after the last light. Saying these words, he slammed the receiver down, without waiting for any reaction from the other end.

To be continued

The Inseparables

by Akhtaruzzaman Elias Translated by Swapan Barman

WOULD he not be able to manage a small job in a firm? Yes, he would, but then could he live in a furnished flat in Panchshail or Kulshi? Not in his lifetime. Sometimes he thought that he could lead an independent life with the experience in the alleys of the port. But that had a risk of entanglement. He could take risk but it would be too tough had there been no one behind him. Moreover that thought was unfair. If 'Kabir Bhai' had not been there, he would not have known those people, so much of tricks and so many ways. He had to stick to him to the end. He would be able to do everything if he only stuck. He decided to get up early the next morning and to play with the Alsatian. That time Sarwar Kabir would be doing some freehand exercise in the lawn. Would he refer then to 'McDonald's & Robison'? No, that would not do. Caressing Argus he would just improve the impression of Sarwar Kabir. And this much, only to make him happy. He would say about the job when Sarwar Kabir would be going to office. But the best thing would be to bribe the driver 20 takas so that he took leave because of his daughter's illness. Then he would drive Sarwar Kabir to office and it would be easier for him to convince him. He would have to lower himself a little to the driver but once he would have the job, how many drivers would he get? When the plan became

clear, he stopped tossing and turning. So the sleep was sound.

'Argus! Argus! Naughty boy!' at that call woke up Argus. It was already seven o'clock. Sarwar Kabir finished jogging, freehand exercises and was playing with Argus with a ball. All the plans of Argus were nipped in the bud. He had nothing to do except come to the lawn rubbing his hands. Continuing to rub he said, 'Last night I came back late, I went to Chalkbazar, no shops were open there. And no one wanted to open his shop at Reazuddin Bazar. Where to get oranges? In New Market also... 'Oranges?' pronouncing the interrogative word Sarwar Kabir paid attention to Argus. But as soon as Argus saw Argus it started to get restless. Wagging the tail it looked at him. Argus became content when Sarwar Kabir said, 'Argus seems to like rather you.' It was a very good sign, but the thing with oranges was not yet clear. So much pain, so much efforts and so much courage. And Sarwar Kabir would know nothing! After having no orange Mrs Jasmine B Kabir, that old chick, did she sleep in anger? Sarwar Kabir could at least say that she had to eat apples at the cost of her figure, as there were no oranges. If only he knew that, his tension would have a definite shape. Argus had a lot of difficulties with those elite, supercultured and powerful people. Now how would he speak of the job?

The meal of Argus should be in-

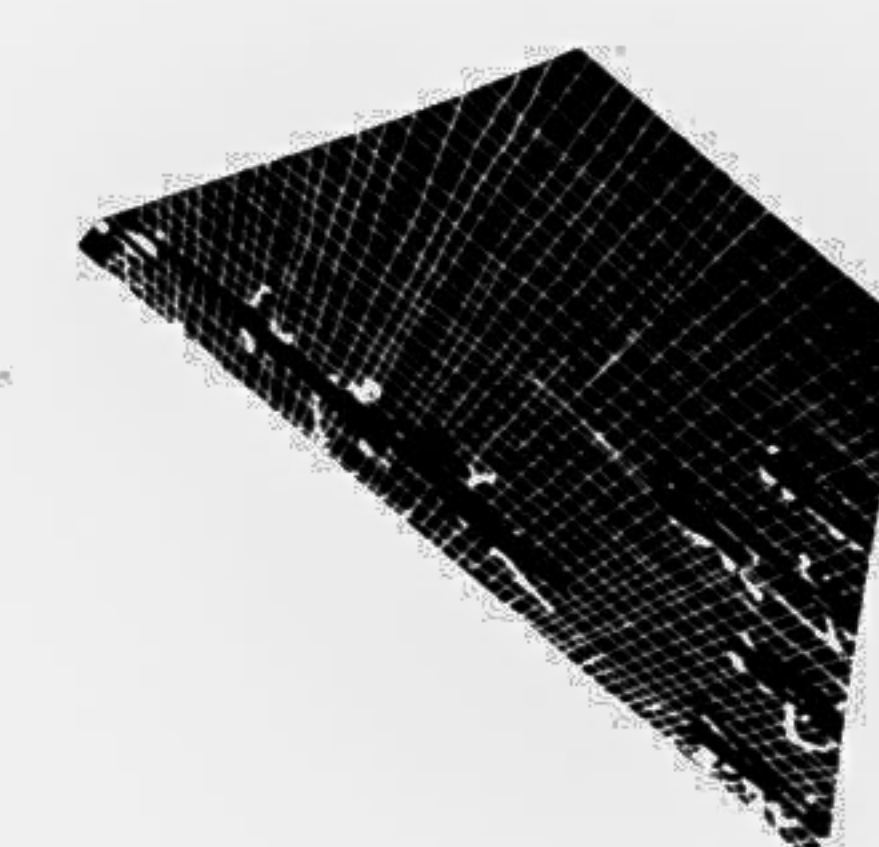
creased. It has got so dull, so weak,' said Sarwar Kabir.

'Yes, I'll tell Abdul to feed it more,' said Argus but it was not so easy to increase its meal. Two days earlier there had been a quarrel between Jasmine B

more it will yawn all the day lying.'

'This is a silly idea. Listen, no animal can have strength without food.'

'No, who told you that? According to modern medical science one should never eat to the full. If you eat too much



Kabir and Sarwar Kabir over that. Jasmine Kabir protested when Sarwar Kabir said that the food of Argus should be increased, 'If the body is not slim where should be the difference between an Alsatian and a local dog? If it eats



you feel uneasy, you cannot be attentive to your work.'

Sarwar Kabir smiled to discard his wife's knowledge of modern medical science. 'Nonsense! Does balanced diet mean eating less? You have to eat what

you need. But bowels should be clear, loading and unloading should have equal importance.'

'Rustic!' It was not the taste of Jasmine Kabir to talk of constipation every time. But it was the obsession of Sarwar Kabir on the contrary. He smoked incessantly until his bowels were clear in the morning; even one of the objectives of his jogging and exercise was to clear the bowels. One day he was talking about that with a friend and Argus overheard Sarwar Kabir saying, 'In the morning if the bowels are not clear, there is a traffic jam in the stomach. Then all the day is spoiled. At any cost I must get my stomach clear by seventhirty in the morning.'

'How do you jog when it rains? Don't you have problems?' Sarwar Kabir gave a thankful smile at the anxiety of the friend and to assure him he said, 'I have that arrangement too.'

'How?' keeping the friend curious Sarwar Kabir slowly lit a cigarette. Curious, Argus had to close the gate for nothing. He required an excuse to stay there.

'When you get up, a short intercourse solves your problem. After a few strokes there's a pressure in the abdomen, then the regular dose of three cigarettes and you get your bowels clear.'

'She is,' Sarwar Kabir smiled pressing his lips. That smile was difficult to master unless one was in a high position. He extended that smile, 'you need a trick. In the morning you can do exercise without getting up and with that you can stay slim. Number one is swimming and number two sexual intercourse early in the morning. Either of these two keeps your figure slim. And this theory works.'

Argus became a little restless to think when he would make such pish pleasantries. The other day Jasmine Kabir had entered inside calling her husband rustic, remembering the quarrel of husband and wife Argus said, 'Ma'am can get angry if it is given more food.'

'Leave your Ma'am. Its meal must be increased. If it moves a little more, it will digest the food and that will increase its agility. Alsatians are always nimble-footed. My Argus is rather slow. It does not get proper nutrition.'

'Today I'll be there when it eats,' said Argus.

'See a little. A man does not become low when he takes care of a dog.'

'No, no, why should he be? Is there any friend like a dog? Don't you see how Argus reacts when I come back after staying abroad a few days? Every time I see its jubilant mood after coming home I think its name is appropriate.'

To be continued