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Learning At The Sangam

Gaur traces the origin and phenomenal development of the university with exemplary thoroughness and accuracy

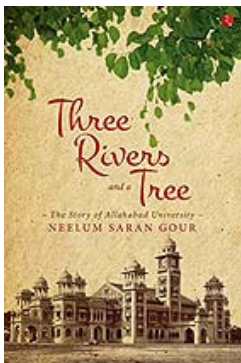
Noorul Hasan on Three Rivers And A Tree: The Story Of Allahabad University By Neelum Saran Gour

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Three Rivers And A Tree: The Story Of Allahabad University
By Neelum Saran Gour
Rupa | Pages: 364 | Rs. 295

This is a book as haunting as it is itself haunted by the real ‘ghosts’ of a century-and-a-quarter old Allahabad University. It is ably written and saturated with irrefutable facts about the university’s long journey from its colonial past to its present-day digital ethos. Gour traces the origin and phenomenal development of the university with exemplary thoroughness and accuracy. Advances made in disciplines as far apart as theoretical physics and English literature, or entomology and computer science, are recounted with equal aplomb and intimacy. The grand narrative is refreshingly enlivened by anecdotes and tales about legendary teachers like Meghnad Saha, Ishwari Prasad, Firaq Gorakhpuri et al. Subtitled ‘The Story of Allahabad University’, it is nevertheless a definitive history of a tragically beleaguered institution. Belatedly recognised as an institution of national importance and made a central university, the consequent opulence of its ‘hardware’ has all but destroyed its celebrated ‘software’—“everything has been upgraded, updated, retrofitted, except the people....”

The precipitous rise and fall of the university is cleverly compared to the extreme climate of the city, touching 50 degrees Celsius in summer and often dropping to zero in winter. Added to this is the subtle subterranean connection between the city and the university. The syncretic character of the city is seen as a major component

of the university’s dna. Despite recurring fissures and conflicts, the university, in this account, has remained inclusive and secular. Unabashed and incessant politicisation has not succeeded in creating communal strife. That the ‘sangam’ city has kept the confluence of cultures in the university intact in some odd, inexplicable way is heartening. For instance, a pall of gloom descended on the campus and people went about their work in shocked silence the day Babri Masjid was demolished.

Nevertheless, much of the malaise vitiating the university is rightly attributed to forces at work on the broader socio-political canvass. Casteist politics, though dogging the university for several decades, has become singularly dangerous and violent in recent times. Marauding gangs can bring the normal functioning of the university to a halt for months on end. Gour makes an acute point about the manner in which Gandhi and his methods have been appropriated by activists of different stripes to justify anything from sit-ins, hooliganism, noisy protest marches to violent physical encounters and even murder. She has reproduced newspaper reports of just a month old to show the frequency and recurrence of these acts of terror and disruption.

In a book so meticulously researched, written and produced it is surprising to come across a couple of factual howlers. S.S. Ray is named as the president of India who signed the emergency bill of 1975. Amarnath Jha tops his BA examination as well as standing fourth on the merit list! It is disappointing, too, that a book so rich in a variety of revealing details should be without an index.

However, I close this unputdownable book completely enthralled and haunted by its imaginative recreation of a vanished glory and its tenacious engagement with the meanness of this age. It is a tour de force.

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