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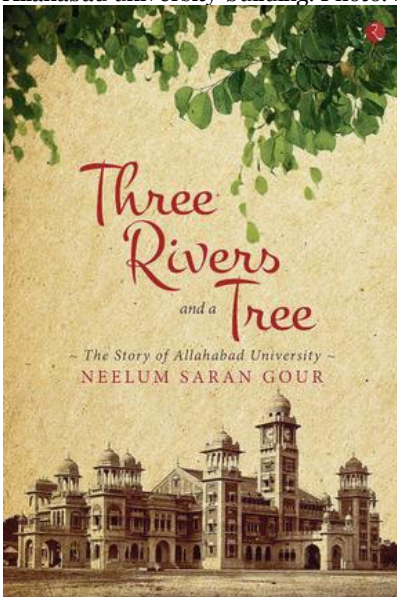
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## Allahabad University: A lore collector's recollections

- [Kunal Ray](#)



Allahabad university building. Photo: Special Arrangement



Book authored by Neelum Saran Gour called Three Rivers and a Tree. Photo: Special Arrangement



Neelum Saran Gour

*Writer Neelum Saran Gour tells the writer why she finds the 125-year-old Allahabad University so fascinating.*

*Neelum Saran Gour prefers to be called a storyteller, even though she is a renowned author, translator, academic and chronicler of various facets of Allahabad city. Her fiction and academic writing appeared in several national and international anthologies. She has been Writer-in-Residence at the University of Kent and Stirling, and conducted creative writing workshops for Sahitya Akademi.*

*Gour's new book 'Three Rivers and a Tree – The Story of Allahabad University' (Rupa) recounts cherished moments from the 125-year-long existence of the much feted institution, where she works as Professor of English. Excerpts from an interview.*

### **Do you think of yourself as a raconteur of Allahabad's history?**

I did not consciously set out to be a raconteur of Allahabad's history. It was my readers, reviewers and critics who fixed that label on me. I wrote of people, relationships and perennial situations and my readership wasn't confined to any particular interest group. And I've written on many cities that I've lived in and enjoyed – Kolkata, Lucknow, Canterbury. But Allahabad is my enduring world, the frame that now holds the canvas on which I ply my brush. Looking back, I realise that while my motley short stories travelled in content across many locations, my novels have been Allahabad-specific. It was after an *NDTV Just Books* interview with Sunil Sethi, after the publication of my fifth book, 'Sikandar Chowk Park', that I received a proposal from Marg Publications to guest-edit a pictorial volume on the history and culture of Allahabad and I accepted it. The volume, 'Allahabad Where The Rivers Meet,' turned out to be popular with Allahabadis scattered all over the world. I guess that was when this mantle of Allahabad historian was placed on me. I am no historian, just a lore collector. Recently, I compiled local stories, oral history and nostalgia narratives to a Facebook site about Allahabad. My next two books, a novel and a short-story collection, both due for release soon, are consciously Allahabad-intensive. So are the books I plan to write in the coming years.

### **We are shaped by cities we live in. How has Allahabad, a so-called small town, shaped you?**

Writers have travelled to distant locations, seeking creative stimulus or spent lifetimes balancing culturally disparate homelands. But I have travelled vertically, not horizontally in space, delving into the visceral layers of my city's life. This has made me experience its pulse-beat, its interlay of history, the rhythm of its languages and dialects, its interior anecdote and shared chatter, its collective memories, even the idiom of its wrangling, things which have nourished and supported my writing.

Categories such as big-city and small-town mean nothing to me. In this so-called narrow compass – I believe it's called Middle India now – I find all the ingredients of authentic inspiration – struggle, love, conflict, lust, compassion, betrayal, courage, death. If anything, the slower pace of life has given me more quality time for work and a larger measure of interpersonal connectivity with people. The core experiences and situational configurations of life remain much the same, the rest are variations on these essential themes. Yes, till a few years ago, a writer from Middle India lost out on general visibility, but the Internet has changed all that. I would say that while my cerebral positioning is place-neutral, my empirical placement has now become intensively local.

### **You are also a fiction writer. How do you separate the two when you are writing history?**

I call myself a story teller, not a hard-core historian. Which means that my mental reflexes highlight the human drama, the play of personality, the serendipitous revelations and the excitement of seeing processes and patterns fall in place, and meanings emerge, however tentative. This is not what a rigorous historian does. I hear historians quip that all history is fiction, in the sense that it is filtered through human subjectivities and is necessarily conditioned by them. In my fiction, I deal with the possible as my intuition prompts, writing from emotional intelligence as it were; I deal with the proven or the probable as available data indicates, only allowing a certain controlled free-wheeling of imagination.

### **Your new book is about the Allahabad University, where you work as Professor of English. How did you ensure objectivity while writing this book?**

I have tried to maintain a careful balance, to take an impersonal view from the outside and also provide an engaged insider's perspective. My

university possesses a monumental and legendary presence even when it is long past its prime and has been reduced to a majestic, sagging edifice, resonating with stories. This book was specifically intended as a celebration, to commemorate 125 years of the Allahabad University a couple of years ago. A celebration it definitely is, an attempt to preserve an institution's living narrative, its great moments, its faces and voices, even its echoes and ghosts. There is always the risk of falling into the trap of romancing the past but I have tried, to the best of my power, to guard against my own subjectivity and write with candour, and in places with brutal honesty, while including well-documented details in support. I have tried to capture the reverberations of historic events as they were felt in the university, to assemble its picture gallery of personalities, and to give the reader some taste of the vibrant campus, its pranks, student agitations, social life, humour, its striking memorabilia; and subsequently its complicated entanglement in the politics of the region and the transformation that overcame its character. No one can claim that the Allahabad University is anything like the iconic institution it was. But rather than categorically deride the compromised present I have tried to decode the process of its decline and trace its laboured and confused attempts at re-invention in altered times.

There are many written histories of metropolitan centres such as Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Kolkata. Have we been rather unfair towards mofussil centres/small towns *vis-a-vis* written documents of their past?

On the contrary, there are well-researched histories in the regional languages, written by insiders as well as travellers passing through. It would be worthwhile to retrieve and translate some of the local histories into English to facilitate better awareness.

### **Does Allahabad still possess a unique cultural character?**

Allahabad now provokes extreme reactions – great affection in those addicted to it, and violent criticism from many who despise it, even while living in it. Yes, it has its own style, its rarefied and residual interblend of Indic, Islamic and British culture that still survives in shrinking pockets. Something of its famed literary temper, both folksy and purist - highbrow, continues in patches. The patois, the tall stories, the cussed argumentative character continue. Allahabad has witnessed the recession of the Colonial world and is now undergoing a seismic shift from a city defined by the classes to a city brought to revise its identity by the masses. But that is the direction taken by any democracy worth its name.

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