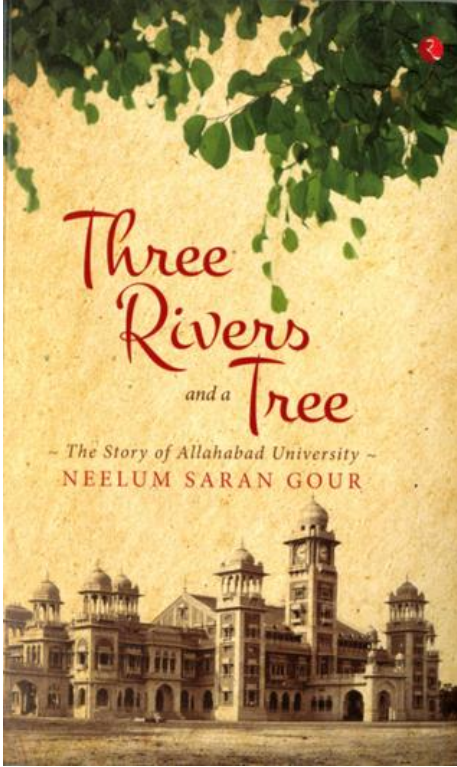


An ethos explained

- [GOVINDAN NAIR](#)



Special arrangement

Three Rivers and a Tree — The Story of Allahabad University; Neelum Saran Gour, Rupa, Rs.295.

A poignant portrayal of the rise and decline of Allahabad University

The evocative title of this book resonates the romance that the author seeks to imbue in this chronicle. The ‘three rivers’ symbolise the meeting ground of the Ganga, India’s “river of destiny”, and Yamuna, “the river of romance” — together representing Allahabad’s ‘Ganga-Jamuni’ union of Indic and Islamic cultural traditions — with the Saraswati, a third stream reflecting knowledge, and also ideas and cultural traditions of another race and continent. The ‘tree’ signifies the hoary banyan standing at the confluence — the indestructible ‘Akshaya-vat’ of legend — aptly portrayed in Allahabad University’s logo with the motto “As many branches, as many trees.” Those who associate the University primarily with the ill-repute of the recent past will be pleased to learn that for the larger part of its existence ‘three rivers and a tree’ represented an apposite depiction of Allahabad University’s over-arching ethos.

Muir College, later to become Allahabad University, was established in 1869 reflecting, in Neelum Saran Gour’s words, the “British attitudinal syndrome” that equivocated between humane commitment to the spread of education and hard calculation of advancement of imperial interests. The College was ‘upgraded’ in 1887 when the need arose to cater to the vast unserved territory between Calcutta and Lahore Universities; Allahabad, the new capital of the North-West Provinces was chosen against the claims of Benares and Lucknow. Allahabad University would provide a European-style, essentially cosmopolitan, education.

With a story-teller’s instinct Gour dwells fondly on the University’s heyday. She discerns “a coherent, energetic, engaged community — physically and intellectually robust, overflowing with purpose... a complete world anchored in a cosmopolitan ambience without losing a quaint polished localism all its own.” The great halls of the Law College, which has produced no less than seven chief justices of India, resounded with the voices of the most eminent jurists of the country and made a notable contribution to jurisprudence; the impressive scholarship of the history department earned the appellation ‘Allahabad school of history’. Illustrious departments of physics and chemistry, piloted by stalwarts like Meghnad Saha and Neel Ratan Dhar, were spaces for original work and dedicated study; the mathematics department acquired renown as the ‘Allahabad school of analysis’. The great efflorescence promoted by the Hindi department is still labelled *prayagvad* in Hindi literature; the English department, where Gour studied and taught, was the nerve-centre of the University for its procession of memorable personages and the priority accorded to English-teaching.

By virtue of the central position occupied by the city of Allahabad in the freedom movement, the University came to be intimately associated with Indian politics. Gour tells about the dismay at the shooting down of Chandrasekhar Azad in the college backyard; lectures by Tilak and Gokhale, Lajpat Rai and Sarojini Naidu; verbal altercations between Annie Besant and Gandhi at a University debate; the fervour of the boycott of foreign cloth and the Simon Commission, of salt-making and the Quit India call. This exposure, combined with the influence of Nehru, a frequent visitor to the campus, and the proximity of Anand Bhavan, the message of Bose, the presence of Marxist historian P.C. Joshi, and Lohia, the iconoclast, meant that students of Allahabad University were blooded early into politics. Unfortunately, as Gour puts it, “the step from civil disobedience to uncivil disobedience is a small one.”

After the 'high noon' of the preceding decades came the gentle decline of the 1960s and '70s followed by the plunge after the Emergency into sectarianism and narrow-mindedness, indiscipline and violence, disillusionment and frustration. If the balance has been somewhat restored in the past decade through infusion of funds and prestige on becoming a 'central university', the 'golden years' remain a distant memory.

Gour traces Allahabad University's fortunes with a poignancy born of her long association. What marks out her book is the vivid portrayal of the fascinating cast of characters who shaped the institution. With irony and humour she brings to life the founders, William Muir and J.G. Jennings; early pedagogues E.A. Wodehouse (yes, brother to P.G. Wodehouse and tutor of Jiddu Krishnamurti) and G.Thibaut (the Sanskritist); visionary builders Sunder Lal, Ganganath Jha and his son Amaranatha, who was for years the face of the institution and "knew and loved every brick and stone of the University"; legendary teachers like philosopher R.D. Ranade, the singular Satish Chandra Deb, the unique Raghupati Sahai (otherwise 'Firaq Gorakhpuri'), the embattled Harivansh Rai Bachchan, and many others. This alone makes this book worth reading.

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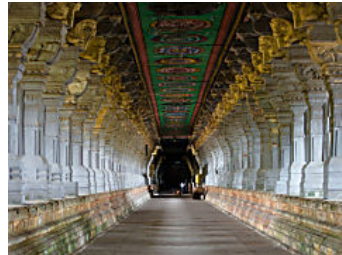
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