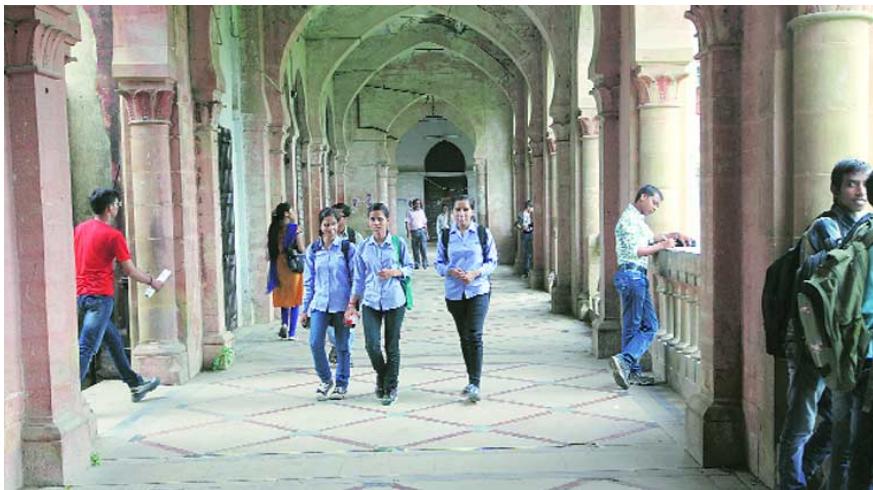


Class, without consciousness

Written by [Alok Rai](#) | Updated: August 1, 2015 12:05 am



This is a heroic, even Proustian achievement — in which remembrance becomes the dominant mode of experience, recollection in willed tranquillity. (Source: Express photo by Anand Singh)

Book- Three Rivers and a Tree: The Story of Allahabad University

Author: Neelum Saran Gour

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Absence, marriage counsellors advise, makes the heart grow fonder — and nostalgia is directly proportional to one's distance from the object of nostalgia, in space or time or, preferably, both. This has a direct bearing on the book under review — Three Rivers and a Tree: The Story of Allahabad University, by Neelum Saran Gour. Although the writer disclaims any intention of producing a history, and declares her novelist's right to tell a story, she is forced to provide her "story" with such ballast of fact as the meagre historical record can provide. But after that, for purely technical reasons, the balance has to be made up with myth, memory and, inevitably, nostalgia. This is a potent combination, and it is reasonable to expect that the book will be embraced warmly by the non-resident Allahabadi community — which is, like certain other non-residents' communities, fervently chauvinist. But Gour manages the impressive feat of being nostalgic even while being a participant observer, as student and faculty, for close on 40 years. This is a heroic, even Proustian achievement — in which remembrance becomes the dominant mode of experience, recollection in willed tranquillity.



I should declare at the outset that I too have had a long association with the University of Allahabad. I was associated with it, as a student and then as faculty, for a quarter century, though it feels like a whole one. This may be interpreted either as a disclaimer, warning about possible bias or, alternatively, as a claim to insider credibility: I know what I am talking about, I have been a toad beneath that harrow. Be that as it may, it must be said that the Allahabad University could not have found a nicer person to write this history. Gour brings to the task an established reputation as a novelist and chronicler of small-town life, and a durable commitment to the institution she serves with such distinction as the institution allows.

The beginnings, appropriately, are bathed in the golden glow of myth. This happens in the unnatural calm of the aftermath of the Mutiny in which, as it happens, Allahabad played a crucial part, both as the place from where the British fightback started, and also the place which suffered some of the most vicious post-Mutiny vengeance, trees festooned with dangling bodies, etc. – as local mythology has it. But the two mythologies are not allowed to corrupt each other. So, the university starts out innocently as the Muir Central College, peopled by brilliant eccentrics. And Gour has done a commendable job of combing through the available records, and given some substance to these legends.

But “golden ages” inevitably call to mind Raymond Williams’s comment in *The Country and the City* on the way in which all golden ages tend to fade into ever more distant pasts as soon as they are subjected to scrutiny. Something similar happens here as well, and Gour deserves credit for enabling us to hear discordant, despondent voices from that fabled past and conclude: “It is startling that what appears as a malady of more recent times [a deep disaffection with education per se] was present — almost exactly so — in the so-called ‘golden era’.”

My own years as a student at Allahabad University happen to belong to a period that Gour characterises as “Autumn Afterglow”, which sounds attractively Keatsian — even though the English seasonal schema doesn’t quite match our tropical melodrama: dusty, wind-blown springtimes; arid, blazing summers; moody monsoons... It is somewhat embarrassing to have one’s adolescent self thrown at one, but Gour has dredged up something from a student symposium of 1963, and I am a little surprised at my assessment of the (then) state of university education: “a cruel parody ... where you train morons to become parrots.” Some years after this, I wrote a piece on Allahabad University for the *Times of India*. I called it “Training the Barbarians.” It appears that some things never change. Probably me.

Gour brings the story forward from that alleged afterglow into a now that she identifies as one of “parochial localism”. She is accurate enough in her characterisation of this condition — captured with unsparing honesty in the diary section in “Real Time”. This is a state of chronic “affray” — not quite riot, but teetering just this side of it, and wholly disjunct from anything that can remotely be called education. Gour puts a fine democratic gloss on this condition — this is the real India, breaking out of the Oxbridge mould which was, she knows, a threadbare pretence anyway. Always. With castes and classes busily bubbling together, in conflict and collusion, the university is undeniably a vast democratic experiment — but is it a university?

Gour is too nice a person to acknowledge the truth that she is too good an observer not to have noticed. That is the central tension that has determined the shape of this book. When she can no longer take shelter in the romantic distortions of nostalgia, she must let the truth slip through, or risk falling into the bland falsehoods of bureaucratic prose. But she fights shy of diving into the cesspool. She backs into the raucous present, but with her eyes fixed firmly on the consolations of a possibly mythical past. An alternative strategy would have been to work her way from this present into the necessary past that must be pregnant with this present, a moment that is traumatic with this rough birth.

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