



# New hope for an old university

Three Rivers and a Tree:  
The Story of Allahabad University

By Neelum Saran Gour  
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In the author's own description, this book is a "story-teller's history of the Allahabad University, not a historian's", and that was perhaps only to be expected. For Neelum Saran Gour, who was a student of Allahabad University and has taught in the English Department there for over three decades, has earlier published eight works of fiction. This book is for the most part as deeply absorbing as only good fiction can be, but it is also unmistakably a factual history of the first 125 years of Allahabad University. It is imaginative and stylish in its telling but the tale it tells remains grounded in the gritty realities of the evolution of higher education in our country. Virginia Woolf once suggested that a good biography should combine "granite-like solidity" with "rainbow-like intangibility" and Gour's narrative of her *alma mater* too seeks to combine both these elements.

Allahabad is a holy and hallowed city, glowingly described in the *Padma-Purana* and by Kalidasa. It acquired a new strategic prominence when Akbar built in 1575 a grand fort right on the *sangam*. The city came under British rule in 1801 and served as the provincial capital from 1858 to 1920, emerging as probably the most Anglicised and high-colonial city in North India, with a High Court set up there in 1868 and the University in 1887. As Gour tells us, the blue-and-white tiled dome of its first campus, Muir College, was modelled after the Al-Azhar mosque and madrasa in Cairo (10th century), the tower was to be the second highest in North India next only to the Qutab, and altogether (as the British mouthpiece *The Pioneer* anticipated), it was, when completed, to be the "finest structure in the N-W Provinces, except the Taj" (p 13). At its grand inauguration in 1886, AC Lyall, Lt-Governor and occasional poet, said the "style and proportion and design of the architecture" of this fitting "seat and sanctuary" foreshadowed "the speedy expansion of higher education under the combined impulses of Eastern and Western ideas and traditions". (p 18)

Thus most auspiciously launched, Allahabad remained indisputably the premier university of North India well into the 1950s, long after other universities had come up in Banaras, Lucknow and Aligarh in the 1910s and the 1920s. Of the eight chapters of her book, it is the third, covering

the period from 1927 to 1957, that Gour titles "High Noon". The faculty then included Meghnad Saha (Physics), NR Dhar (Chemistry), Harish Chandra (Mathematics),

RD Ranade (Philosophy), Ganganath Jha (Sanskrit), HS Jevons and JK Mehta (Economics), Rushbrook Williams, Sir Shafaat Ahmad Khan, Ishwari Prasad and Tara Chand

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(History), SG Dunn, Amarnath Jha and SC Deb (English) — not to mention the poets Firaq Gorakhpuri and Hariwansh Rai Bachchan who too taught English, in what may be seen as a *trivium* of English, Urdu and Hindi. Gour highlights equally the vibrant co-curricular life in the various hostels and numerous clubs that made for a fuller student experience.

Gour's next two chapters do not take the story forward chronologically but serve to enrich it by providing different dimensions to it. In the somewhat ineptly titled chapter "Tidal Wave" (for surely that phrase has a negative connotation), she focuses on the larger life of the nation mainly in terms of the struggle for independence, and the huge impact it had on the university and the city. Gandhi first visited Allahabad in 1896 (on a brief break from South Africa) and then again in 1916 when he stayed at Madan Mohan Malaviya's bungalow on Hamilton Road and walked briskly with the students to the Muir College where he gave a lecture on "the role of ethics and spirituality in economic progress", a lecture that was printed in the liberal newspaper *The Leader* the next day (p 125). It sorely needs to be reprinted now! Later, with the Nehrus and their Swaraj Bhavan and Anand Bhavan, Allahabad became for long the headquarters of the AICC. But it was also a hub of armed revolutionary activity. Chandra Shekhar Azad was finally ambushed and shot dead by a British police officer in what was then Alfred Park (and is now Azad Park), just across the road from Muir College. When independence came, Jawaharlal Nehru returned to his home town to deliver in December 1947 the convocation address and began by noting that the university and he had been born at about the same time and had grown up in close vicinity. (Anand Bhavan stands just half a kilometre down the road from the Senate Hall of the university.)

If this chapter extends the university into the public domain, the next chapter, "Picture Gallery", deepens it

through providing brilliant portraits of some of the legendary figures of the university. Most of them lived before Gour's time, of course, and she deftly deploys older memoirs and other archival sources, as well as her flair as a novelist, to bring to life those who made Allahabad University the great institution it became. The luminaries of the golden age (as listed above) are all here, and some others besides. This may prove to be a favourite chapter for many readers for this is what puts flesh and blood on the bare bones of the story and imparts human warmth to an institutional chronicle. The institution-builders portrayed here come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, each with their own proclivities and peculiarities; here indeed is God's plenty.

The prince among them turns out to be Amarnath Jha, who was appointed professor of English at a precociously early age and finally retired after serving three terms as vice-chancellor. When Premchand was requested to deliver the presidential address at the first All-India Progressive Writers' Conference in 1936 and modestly demurred at first, he suggested as alternatives the names of Jawaharlal Nehru and of Amarnath Jha, this scholar extraordinary and *rasika* of not only English but also Urdu, Hindi, Sanskrit and Maithili literatures. Gour offers us several samples of Jha's own writings, including a portrait he once painted of the first Indian vice-chancellor of the university, Sir Sundar

Lal, which he began ominously by stating: "Whatever other great qualities he had, brilliance was not one of them." But this was only so that Jha could later valorise his "sweet reasonableness" (qtd pp 153-54), his unwavering patriotism and his willingness to work himself to death. Mere brilliance had been put in its place. When writing about Jha, Gour in turn rises to comparable levels of eloquence and insight:

Jha left in 1947 after serving three terms. Some said that he had grown too large for the position of vice-chancellor. Some believed that he grew disenchanted with the decline, already evident...The simpler explanation seems to be that being "Amarnath Jha" 24/7 was a demanding and exhausting job, and that he was undergoing an inevitable burn-out. The hectic whirl no longer pleased him...The curtain had been rung down. (p 168)

The next phase of the university is described by Gour as "Autumn Afterglow", and this is what I basked in when I entered Allahabad University and did my B.A. and M.A. in English and then served briefly as a lecturer, from 1963 to 1969. We still thought ours was the best university in the country, even though the university would shut down *sine die* for a few weeks every year following a strike routinely organised by the student's union. I contested and even won a union election but (as recounted here), rather than being able to make the slightest change, I was only taught

a cynical lesson in caste-politics and financial jugglery and had my idealism dented (pp 240-45). The decline to "Waning Day", Gour's next chapter, was already irreversible, as lumpen "student leaders" seemed to call the shots, corrupting and caricaturing the very idea of education, banishing vice-chancellors from even entering the campus for years and manhandling and hitting them when they tried, and obliging helpless conscience-stricken teachers to go on Gandhian silent marches.

Gour does not take note of it, but things were then pretty much the same all over India if not worse. Bright students from the iconic Calcutta University fled in droves to what had been to them the upstart University of Delhi, a vice-chancellor of Jadavpur University was shot dead on campus, and at a college in Odisha, the principal declared that mass cheating in examinations and rampant indiscipline were "the will of Lord Jagannath and we had no business to resist the divine will". (*Academic Lives*, ed. Bijay Kumar Das, Doaba House, Delhi, 2014, p 190). This must be the ultimate line of least resistance, and virtuous in the bargain.

For all the current ills of our system of education, we can of course in a knee-jerk response blame Macaulay! It was he who in 1835 set up the English pattern of education in India not truly to impart education but rather to make babus and *sarkari naukars* of us. In popular perception, the greatest glory of Allahabad University, too, for

decades was that it had perfected the art, or the artful craft, of producing IAS officers. But there are other deeper symptoms of our academic malaise for us to address. We often blame the ever-expanding numbers and the indiscipline. But numbers represent democratic aspiration and indiscipline can be a trigger to radical refashioning. Among the many consequences of what happened in Paris in May 1968 is that the one and only Sorbonne is gone beyond recognition, for there are now 13 Sorbannes in Paris.

"How would this relic of the Raj reinvent itself?" asks Gour of her university (p 334), not dejectedly but in hope, for the university is suddenly flush with funds and personnel, having been transformed from a state university to a "central university", in a move initiated by an alumnus and long-serving teacher, Murli Manohar Joshi, during his term as the HRD minister. Gour now sees on the campus lawns a "rustic-looking boy absorbed in his new laptop" and imagines that he is being blessed by the "soaring arches and lofty halls and carved cupolas and colonnades" (pp 355-56) — such as AC Lyall had over a century ago envisioned as the worthy habitat of a worthy education. This may be a pious vision but it is a fitting culmination to what is probably one of the most archivally rich, acutely engaged and delightfully narrated histories of any educational institution in India to have been published so far. ■

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