

BY ANURADHA GOYAL

This is a very difficult book to review but I am so happy that I read it and that too read it at the perfect time, in train on my way to Banaras. Like I always say the books choose me at the right time and this just re-enforces the same belief. It is a multi-layered story of a seeker who like Kabir is found by his foster parents and grows up being a Chandaal, working on the famous Manikarnika ghat of Varanasi. Kabir and Tulsi Das come in his dreams, but they refuse to be his Guru. His search for his Guru takes him to Himalayas, where he does find his Guru before going on pilgrimage across India and becoming a revered saint in the process.

Authors have combined the history, philosophy, spirituality and very intense experiences in the life of the protagonist to weave a very engaging story. In this character they have converged all that we know from various sects of followers. Major part of the story is based at the ghats of Banaras, specially the big cremation ground of Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghats. It beautifully brings out the two aspects of devotion Saguna and Nirguna through the two best-known poets of Banaras – Tulsi Das and Kabir. He takes you through the depths of Shiva in his favorite city Kashi and how the creation and destruction take place here at the same time.

I loved the near Sanskrit language of the book, and for the fact that authors have chosen to write this language in this time and age when we do not see much literature in Hindi being written, even in its colloquial version. Kudos to authors for choosing to write in purest form of the language, I hope with the good response that their books has received (3 editions in less than a year), they would end up reviving interest in both the language and the subject. To begin with it took me sometime to put myself in tune with the language, but after that I thoroughly enjoyed it. As I was reading protagonist Maha's journey in Varanasi, with my train moving closer and closer to the city, it heightened my curiosity to explore the ghats mentioned, to go through the twisting turning narrow lanes around the ghats and various temples mentioned in it, to feel the places mentioned in various stories.

Through the Maha's journey both physical and philosophical, through his quest and search for a Guru authors take you through the philosophies of Sanatana Dharma – the theories of Dvaita and Advaita, the relationship of Shiva and Vishnu and their presence in each other's stories and spaces, the path to Nirguna that has to go through Saguna in the journey of a seeker. The travel or Yatra that is essential for a seeker is what Maha does along with a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramhansa and hence ends up understanding the Shakti as well through the three parts A, U and M of the ultimate mantra 'AUM'. He understands the footsteps of Buddha and many seekers and saints before him as he meets them at various Tirthas that he visits. You can almost visualize him gaining Tej or aura as he moves ahead on his path.

Kashi at the center of the story and at the center of philosophy has been depicted in such a way that there is no way you would not revere and be more and more intrigued about it.

The intimate description of the cremation ghats and the people who work there makes you think of those people who simply live among the dead and bid them their final farewell, the impact it has on their psychology and how they end up being treated by the society. In the place where everyone comes to die, to be free from the cycle of birth and death this is a profession like no other and in no other place.

A very powerful and intense story, very Indian story written in language par excellence...must read if you can read Hindi and if Indian philosophy interests you, if you want to know Kashi very closely.