



Postcard from paradise



It is 6:14 pm. The heart-shaped oar slices gently through the tranquil waters, leaving behind a wave of ripples. A small flock of Brahminy migratory ducks fly overhead. It is looking for a secluded spot on the lake to settle down for the night. Their silhouettes are barely visible in twilight.

“Yea duniya usi kee...., zamana usi kaa..., mohabat mein joo hoo gaya hoo kisi kaa... (This world belongs to him...., this era belongs to him..., who surrenders to someone, in the name of love....)”

The romantic Hindi song emerging from the window of a houseboat brings a smile on the young boatman's face. A small cluster of Yellow water-lilies appears from nowhere and begins to drift alongside their boat.

A boat filled with fresh flowers crosses in the front, leaving behind a trail of floral scent. Another boat carries a newly wed couple on honeymoon. A lonesome Kingfisher dives swiftly into water and takes off with a tiny fish fluttering in its beak.

Their boat glides forward with one final stroke of the oar and comes to halt as it touches the houseboat's hull. A small board on it, reads; 'Farishta-e-shagoon' (Angel-of-solace).

The distant Zabarwan mountains lining the horizon, give the lake's landscape a magical appearance. The fading orange glows of their sunset silhouettes seem unreal from far.

The long awaited call of 'Maghrib' (the evening prayer), suddenly escapes from a nearby mosque. Abdul, the boatman, hurriedly puts away his oar and steps on the houseboat's deck. He respectfully places his knees on its wooden floor and begins his 'Namaz' ritual.

The dusk soon fuses into a starry night, their tiny twinkles start to reflect on the lake's still surface, turning the entire sight into an image out of some school time fairy-tale. A few kilometres away on the lake, the flock of Brahminy ducks wades around in solitude.

It is 6:24 am. The sun has risen behind the Zabarwan mountains. It begins to wash the landscape with its ornate rays. Thin streaks of light start to sparkle on the lake. Minutes later, the call of 'Azaan' (the morning prayers), echoes through the stillness of the hour. Life on the Dal lake awakens.

The ducks takes off after a well fed night, heading south-eastwards. As the day breaks, boats start paddling across the lake, carrying a variety of merchandise ready to be sold at the floating market; tea, organic perfumes, tomatoes, vegetables, flowers, seeds, fruits, saffron, herbs, spices, fresh fruits, dry fruits.

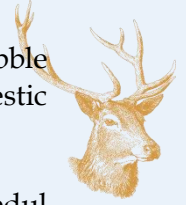
Above the lake, high on the hill, the gongs of a bell go off at the 200 BC Shankracharya temple. The distant sound reminds the lake dwellers of Lord Shiva's timeless presence.

A large russet-golden leaf descends from the old Chinar tree. It zigg-zags its way slowly to the ground.

On yet another lake, a Lotus garden quietly floats around. Its pink-white buds reach out through large leaves covered in fresh dew. It simmers in the early morning sunlight.

A few meters away, two men are busy repairing the hull of a houseboat. A craftsman sits nearby, sharpening his chisels.

In a conserved forest towards the east, a family of Hanguls (Kashmir's stag deer) nibble on the caprifloracea shrubs. The parent male stands still alertful of intruders, its majestic antlers poised upright in air.



Abida Begum, Abdul's wife paddles their boat towards the floating boat vendors. Abdul sits on the edge of the boat sipping Salty tea and munching a piece of fresh Czhot bread from the local Kandur bakery.

Abdul is a contented man. "Insha-Allah" (if God wills), he whispers to himself, thinking of the pumpkin and melon seeds he had planted on their 'rad' (a floating piece of land).

Meanwhile, several kilometres towards the west in a small village on the banks of Sind river, a farmer is admiring his paddy field. Several rows of peasant women stand in the plantations. The water-fills below mirror their colourful reflections. A Scarecrow on thin bamboo sticks stands behind them. Its tattered white shirt flutters deceptively in the breeze.

Higher up in the mountains the Gaddi (Sheppard) grazes his herd of sheep. It presents a picture postcard image of contrasts - cream white sheep against the backdrop of a lush green meadow. Two iron-collared black Bhutia dogs trot alongside him, watchful of the resident leopard. A stream of spring water trickles near them, offering a heavenly elixir for human wellness.

One more day in Paradise has just begun. No amount of influence; political or otherwise, can make any difference to the Valley's aesthetic coffers and mesmerising character.

Welcome to Kashmir. It has enticed men of distinguished intellects and characters - from nomadic explorers, invading emperors and sovereign heads to great poets and revered Sufi saints, granting them a blissful refuge. Its character and soul has seduced mankind across the centuries. Its true appeal cannot be captured through words.

Amir Khusro Dehalvi, the Persian poet and scholar was remarkably right when he used the word 'Firdous' (Paradise) as early as the 13th century to describe 'Kashmir'. Inspired by her enchanting surroundings, it was here that Habba Khatoon, the 16th century native poetess known as the Nightingale of Kashmir, infused her poetries with romantic élan and lyricism.



Nothing changed, even centuries later, Maestro Zubin Mehta with his entourage of over a 100 members of the Bavarian State Orchestra, invariably choose Srinagar Kashmir as the ultimate venue for his historical Ehsaas-e-Kashmir concert.

"*Today my dream has come true!*", the Maestro had begun, as he had lifted his baton to direct the orchestra, merging Beethoven symphonies with Kashmir's traditional music of

rabab, tumbaknari, sarangi and santoor. The harmonious fusion of music had echoed across the 17th century Shalimar Gardens and touched every soul in the audience. It was a tribute to the people of Kashmir and their valley.

The plentiful fruit orchards and dry-fruits, intricate handicrafts and papier-mâché arts, hand carved walnut furniture, carpet weaving, zardozi and embroidery works, the finest stoles and woollen shawls, the irresistible wazwan cuisines, the changing shades of the chinar trees from dark-green to gold to scarlet-brown, the wealth of fauna and floras, the flawless Kashmiri hospitality and the silent feel of fulfilment, has cast a spell on one and all since the beginning of time.



- Neel Thakur (Author)