

Postcard from paradise

جنت سے پوسٹ کارڈ

It is 6:14 pm. The heart-shaped wooden oar slices through the tranquil waters sending shapeless ripples into infinity. A small flock of Brahminy migratory ducks fly overhead looking for an isolated place on the vast wetland lake to settle down for the night, their silhouettes barely visible in twilight.

Faint melodies of a 1964 hindi song “*Yea duniya usi kee, zamana usi kaa, mohabat mein joo ho gaya ho kisi kaa*” (This world belongs to him, this era belongs to him, who surrenders himself to someone, in the name of love) come floating across from somewhere far, bringing a smile on boat-man’s face. Clusters of yellow water-lilies appear from nowhere drifting about aimlessly in the water. Behind it a boat full of fresh flowers passes by leaving behind a trail of mixed floral scents. Near them, another one carries a newly-wed couple locked in passionate embrace of marital liberty and honey moon romance. A lonesome Kingfisher dives swiftly into water and flies off with a tiny fish fluttering in its beak.

‘Farishta-e-shakoon’ (Angel-of-solace), the wooden shikara boat glides forward with one last stroke of the oar coming to halt with a gentle thud touching the deck of cedar wood houseboat ‘Hindustan-kee-shaan’ (Pride-of-India). Zabarwan mountains watch over the watery landscapes from the horizon like ageless sentinels, guarding a paradise. The long awaited call of ‘maghrib’ (evening prayers) escapes suddenly from the nearby mosque, gracing the silence of the lake. Putting aside his oar, Abdul, the boat-man steps out onto the deck. Lowering his knees to the floor, he begins his devout namaz ritual. Soon dusk fuses into a starry night, completing the fairytale sight with their twinkles in the dark sky. A few kilometres away the Brahminy ducks wade around on the lake in thankful solitude.

It is 6:24 am. The sun rises slowly behind the mountains washing the landscape with its ornate rays, sparkles of its crisp morning light begin to dance on the lake surface. Call of ‘azaan’ (morning prayers) echoes through the stillness of the hour. Life awakens. The flock takes off heading in south-eastward direction after a well fed night. As day breaks long wooden boats paddle across hurriedly, carrying an assortment of colourful merchandise; tomatoes, vegetables, fruits, organic perfumes, flowers and seeds, tea, saffron, herbs and spices, selling their merchandise with a hand-held weighing scales. On the holy hill above, the gong of bell goes off at the 200 BC Shankracharya temple of Shiva sending out waves of invisible blessings over the valley.

A large russet-golden leaf descends from the tall Chinar tree (a maple tree species) zig-zagging its way slowly to the ground. On another lake, a Lotus garden floats over placid waters its pink-white buds reaching out through leaves dotted with shining droplets of dew, they appearing like tiny diamonds in sunlight. Not far from there a few skilful men begin to repair a ‘noer’ (hull of a houseboat) by re-using old wood. Another craftsman sits nearby sharpening his chisels, imagining the intricate motifs he can carve.

In a well conserved forest towards the east, a family of Hanguls (Kashmir’s stag deer, an endangered species) nibble on some shrubs. The parent-male Hangul stands still alertful of intruders, its magnificent antlers poised regally in the air.



Near him white butterflies chase each other in playful gusto, an indications of a pristine habitat and an intact sanctuary thriving at its prime.

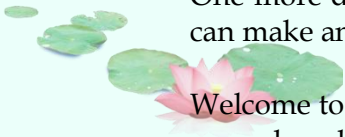


Abdul's wife, Abida Begum paddles their boat towards the floating vegetable vendor's market humming her favourite Kashmiri song "*mayi chani rawam raat dooh, b karyo yueer waloo*" (in your love I have lost my days and nights, I want to embrace you with my love), while Abdul sits on edge of the boat sipping 'nun chai' (pink salty tea) and munching a piece of fresh 'czhot bread' from Kandur (traditional local bakery). Feeling content in his heart and spirit, he whispers "Insha-Allah" (if God wills) thinking of the 'pumpkin and melon' seeds they planted on his little 'rad' (a floating piece of land).

Meanwhile several kilometres towards the west, in a village on the banks of Sind river, a farmer is admiring his lush paddy field. Rows of peasant women stand over plantations, the water-fills mirroring their colourful images in multiple inverted reflections. Amidst them, a scarecrow on bamboo sticks stands motionless its tattered long white dress flutters deceptively in the breeze.

Elsewhere, higher up in the mountains, the Gaddhi (sheppard) grazes his herd of sheep, presenting a picture post-card frame of contrasts; cream white sheep against a backdrop of radiant green meadow, an iron-collared black Bhutia dog trotting along watchful of some prowling leopard. Near them, a stream trickles with pure himalayan spring water offering a heavenly elixir of health and healing.

One more day in 'paradise' has begun. No amount of influences, political or otherwise, can make any difference to its mesmerizing aesthetic coffers nor to its cultural character.



Welcome to "Kashmir". It has enticed men of distinguished abilities and intellects - from nomad explorers, emperors and sovereign heads, to great poets and sufi saints, granting them solace and blissful refuge. Its magics have seduced people over the centuries, it is not possible to successfully capture the essence and true appeal of the valley in a few words.

Amir Khusro Dehalvi, the scholar and persian poet was remarkably right when he used the word 'firdous' (paradise) as early as the 13th century to describe Kashmir. Inspired by the bewitching beauty of her 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 ever changed, even centuries later, Maestro Zubin Mehta with his entourage of over a 100 members of Bavarian State Orchestra invariably choose Kashmir as the venue for their historical concert. "*Today, my dream has come true*", he said as he lifted his baton merging the Beethoven symphonies with local folk music of rabab-tumbaknari-sarangi-and-santoor (traditional instruments).

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



- Neel Thakur (Author)