

The Agony Of Dal Lake

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A stunningly beautiful woman,
Robed in ample, majestic mountains,
Crowned with soaring peaks.
A sublime mother, who for eons has nourished her children,
A cosmic sanyasin, who has meditated
For a few million years to be at God's feet -
That is Dal Lake.

I am in a shikara surfing the soothing waters of Dal Lake.
After twelve years of exile in U.S. I have come to visit her,
To rejuvenate our relationship, to put back my mind on fire.
But at this moment I feel blown off my feet
In the beautiful agony of meeting my beloved,
After an inhuman lapse of time.

I see from my shikara a scintillating, pulsating expanse of water,
Touching the faraway sinewy shimmering shores.
The dance of the wavelets produced by the shikara
And caressing cool breeze sets an invisible opera.
This is even before I have set my eyes above the water surface.

What did God have in mind when he created Dal Lake?
Did he want to help Kashmiris with an abundant supply of
Water, cool air, flowers, fish, and vegetables?
Or did he want to create a supremely beautiful place
Which would mesmerize people to believe in a higher meaning of life?

We do not know God's thoughts
But we guess he wanted to do both the things:
He wanted to help his creation in both the physical and spiritual spheres.
But still the overall mystery of Dal Lake is inscrutable:
When and how was it created
And how long will it remain here?

The mountains circumferencing the lake are magnificent.
Their light brown color is sensuously stylish.
They seem to be eternally protecting Dal Lake's privacy,
Cradling a spectrum of gardens in their fluid folds,
A semi-circular ring hugs the lake tightly.
The two islands, Sona Lank and Rupa Lank,
Are two more ornaments embellishing the lake.

Like a celestial visitor, Hari Parbat
Stands in a serene majesty and mystery on the west of the lake -
A part of the whole scene, yet apart from it.
On the south-west, like a sentinel, rises
Shankaracharya mountain and the temple.
Very foreign to the lake but yet blending with its ensemble.

In the distant western background lies the Pir Panchal mountain;
Behind the Zabarwan Mountains skirting the lake,
Stands the awesome Himalayan range in distance,
Making the big picture of Dal Lake huge and complex.
Looking atop Shankaracharya it is a vast canvass
Brushed with haphazard clusters of dwellings,
Water bodies, and mountains.
There is a mystic quality to the scene:
It seems to have been made by design and with a purpose.
It is so close to us but yet so remote from us.

Dal Lake, including all its tributaries, seen from above
Looks like a baby in a fetal position.
Each of its components: Gagribal, Lokut Dal, Bud Dal, and Nagin
Are special entities but it is the whole, the Dal Lake, which has
The spellbinding charisma, the soul, and the magic.

The Moghul Gardens have gained a legend, an aura, and fame over Dal Lake.
This is an unfortunate and egregious development -
Staining the truth, squelching the facts.
Moghul Gardens are some 300 years old,
Not upgraded for a long time, crassly ignored in maintenance.
They do not stand much against the world-class gardens.

If it were not for the beautiful mountains behind them
And the stunningly magnificent lake in front of them
They would not be worth writing home about.

What is Srinagar without Dal Lake -
A dirty, disheveled medieval town,
Needing much order and repair.
Any discriminating observer when thinking of Srinagar
Would first think of Dal Lake and its environs.

Shikara-riding the lake opens new scenes of beauty in every direction.
From the shimmer of water and melody of oars drumming it
To the dancing breeze that unrehearsedly greets you,
You find yourself in another universe,
Without an agenda and without a care.
You are transformed from a careful, trained observer
To a consciousness in daze, intoxication, and state of freedom,
In increasing gradations.

You are in a state of a dream,
Drifting from scenic discovery to self-discovery,
Drowned in a half-ecstasy created by the sublime ethereality of the lake,
Wanting to die now and here -
Which would be a crowning achievement
For man's heroic struggle to survive in an ugly world.
We do not know if there is a heaven
But we know that Dal is close to it.

Look at the lake at sunrise and at sunset,
In spring and in summer,
In fall and in winter,
In morning and in evening -
In each setting the lake has a special beauty,
A unique mood.
Like a ravishingly beautiful woman,
It is not one beauty that she possesses
But several, depending upon external circumstances.
While her beauty changes she is still the same:

An ever evolving and yet an ever constant maiden.

As if God had not created an amazing enough phenomenon,

He also created the rads - the floating lands in the lake.

They move and can be even stolen.

They are home to vegetables, flowers, and fowl,

Creating a human touch in the tapestry of God.

Have you been on the lake on a summer evening,

When the setting sun paints the horizon golden red?

At that time the dividing road between the Bud Dal and Lokut Dal

Gets transformed into scintillating silhouette

And the whole scene gets imbued with some divine meaning.

The memories of the old life in Kashmir

Flash bringing in the family trips on the lake in a doonga.

For the poverty-drenched life of those days

Such interludes provided the much needed romance of life.

But our ecstasy turns sour,

As Dal Lake is immensely polluted at this time.

Due to its neglect over long haul of time it has

Sediments, poor water quality, weed growth, encroachments.

It has shrunk from 8.5 sq. mi. to 6.9.

A resplendent lake with pristine waters

Has turned into a polluted body of water

And is in a shocking state of disrepair.

The angelically beautiful woman has been

Beaten, harassed, starved, and compromised.

Today Dal Lake moans in pains unnameable,

Cursing its unworthy sons and daughters,

Who besides neglecting her

Have turned the God's Valley into

A political inferno and ignited a religious war.

They have robbed the smiles from the children's faces

And spun them into decades of trauma.

They have divided the two communities

With such brutality that they will remain apart
For generations to come.
The lake mourns the wasting of God's gift of Kashmir
To its crass inhabitants.
In utter sorrow Dal Lake does not know what to do:
Should it disappear or shrink to an insignificant pond?
Only the invisible arrow of time will tell.

Sanyasin - a religious devotee seeking God

Shikara - a small hand paddled boat

Rad - floating pieces of land

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