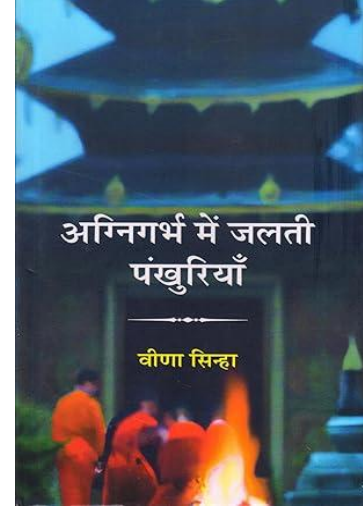


12. Book- Review



Veena Sinha, Agni garbh men jalti pankhuriyan, 2024, Prakashan Sansthan

And from the fire emerges the quest for knowledge

The answer to the question “What is eternal?” is as timeless as time itself. There are signs that much, much before early humans took to agriculture, community living and started wondering about things other than mere survival, the question of what life is all about had been bothering them. It is no wonder that the earliest writings in human history are less about fiction and more about philosophy, the purpose of life, existence and meaning beyond death. Dr Veena Sinha is no stranger to these questions, partly because of her education, training and profession as a medical doctor, and partly because of her relentless quest to look for that which is elusive, felt but not seen or heard, suffered but not always leaving an ache. Her works so far have covered a vast swathe of human emotions described with flair in backgrounds that emerge from different parts of the world.

In her latest Hindi novel *Agni garbh men jalti rahi pankhuriyan* (literally meaning *Soft petals got scorched in an abyss of fire*) the mood is sombre, haunting, enlightening and troubling – all at the same time. After all, when the slice of time is the turbulent 12th century India and the overwhelming narrative is the destruction of ancient centres of learning by the cruel invaders, what else remains to be remembered? Yet, amid the gloom and foreboding environment, there flourished love, tenderness, inquisitiveness, and a resurgent quest for knowledge after a devastating bout of destruction.

The characters are drawn both from the centre and the fringe of the then society. The definition of right and wrong is based on factors that today might be considered un-civilised, but were very much part of the social mores and norms back then. Crime, passion, jealousy, deceit, trust, betrayal, love and benevolence are only some of the human emotions that are interwoven with words and literary imagery by the writer.

Indubitably, the India of that time was a wonderful but awakened, vibrant, developed and vibrant, living society under the terror of foreign invaders. On the one hand, it was a period of development of knowledge, science, art, religion, statistics, building construction, architecture, economics, medicine, logic, philosophy and fiction. On the other hand, it was also a symbol of the relentless journey of people looking for new horizons with the desire for a better future amidst all the evils prevailing in the society. The propagation of the knowledge given by Gautam Buddha was spreading a new consciousness in the society, but a large and influential section of the society stood up against this propagation. It was a golden opportunity for the invaders coming from the West when they were taking advantage of the evils and divisions in the society to rapidly take Islam to new areas, looting the wealth of not only the rich but also the common class citizens, and increasing their influence by committing indescribable atrocities in the temples of spiritual and knowledge.

The narrative follows the life journey of Madhav, an intelligent and ambitious young man from a wealthy merchant family, who seeks to expand his business with a desire to give a new meaning to his life, and to know the world outside his city.

But the ambitious journey is marked by violence, fear, hatred, separation, death, and leads him on a seeing an incomprehensible wealth of knowledge beyond the worldly in between, it was a feeling that changed his outlook on life.

Even more painful than being separated from your family, loving wife, loving son and friends is the feeling that the pillars on which your world rests are not as stable or capable as you think them are. Nothing is untouched by the changing cycle of time, and then there is a feeling of emptiness, from which only knowledge can escape. The realisation that lies supreme is: knowledge is eternal, in so much as life itself. For, what is life if not an eternal search for knowledge? The cycle of life and death gives every new-born a chance to learn and acquire

knowledge. While a few succeed, most are consumed by earthly greed and emotions such as lust, anger and jealousy. Yet, knowledge transcends the cycles of getting born, dying and being born again. What remains eternal is knowledge and the quest for it.

The description of the life story and conquests of invaders from the west invokes terror, but also highlights the fault lines and weaknesses in the Hindu community at that time. There was hardly any issue that had the potential to unite them. Conversion by the fear of death was a routine happening. The invaders saw a scared, docile population which was ready to convert, become loyal to the invaders and were ready to harm their own people for material or other gains. The description of greed, fear and cruelty is often gruesome, but it needed to be told. Equally saddening is the description of the plight of women in that era. They were doomed to lead sub-human lives, get beaten up by their husbands and men, not permitted to acquire knowledge, and yet, they were expected to be loyal and ever ready to do the bidding of those men.

Then there is the influence of science, half-science and pseudo-science, followed by the occult, black magic and superstition. We may baulk at the descriptions of such episodes, but it is to the credit of the writer that the scenarios are true to detail and the reactions thereto, as would have been in those times.

The characters in the novel are as human as can be. They aspire to improve their lives, look forward to a better future, more successful business, stable families, strong relationships. But at the same time, there are individuals who are consumed by greed, jealousy and guilt. They have no qualms in damaging – even mortally – those who trust them. Feigning friendship, these villains do not hesitate for a moment when it comes to misguiding and bumping off an acquaintance for stealing their valuables. True to humanity, life at that time also comprised shades of grey. Not to forget, there are guileless individuals as well, who are simple enough to be taken for a ride at every turn of their lives.

Amidst such diverse individuals, there is Acharya Manikantak, a sage who answers his devotees' questions about the simplest -and the toughest – issues of life. The questions are as inane as the purpose of the sun's rise to a query about what remains after one is dead. The Acharya answers his disciples in a simple manner while giving opportunities to them to pose

counter questions to develop their logical intelligence. What he says in reply to a question almost sums up what the narrative of life is all about. The sun, moon, mountains, flowing rivers, valleys, forests, chirping birds and animals, and even our body and our breathing, change their nature every moment. Everything is changing each moment.

The myriad descriptions take us on a journey into the inner precincts of households, warriors' forts, huts of sages and saints, places of leisure, dense forests, palaces and dens of criminals. The vast rainbow of human inhabitation and the emotions therein is described in a language that never ceases to influence the readers' consciousness. However, as one starts thinking that there is no hope, and that destruction is inevitable, there comes a streak of hope in the form of solace from an unexpected quarter. And a lot happens to change the narrative. The direction changes, and so does the destination. New shores are discovered where people are different. Where greed is not as important as helping fellow humans, taking care of them and motivating them to learn and become better. There were monks for whom saving the repertory of knowledge was more important than saving their own lives. they showed exemplary innovation and astuteness in preserving scriptures, books and texts.

And side by side, we also learn that Khilji and the other invaders were consumed by their own greed and brought down by it. Those who lived by the sword, died by it.

That is how the overawing significance of change being inevitable is cemented again and again upon the readers' psyche. This is the simplest yet momentous gleaning from this memorable work. The fascinating narrative of spiritual growth in the midst of a unique portrayal of contemporary society and life inspires us to look at our present life from a new perspective, it has the potential to change our thinking about life, death, knowledge and social rules. Leaving many questions about the lives of all the characters, this novel takes the readers to a world where nothing is eternal anywhere. The unique writing style of Dr Veena takes the readers on a journey that is fascinating, and moves from one unexpected turn to the other. The description of the dwellings, rituals, relationships and aspirations of that time period is deeply moving and shadows of the same stay with you for long after you finish the novel. This is a unique characteristic of all works of Dr Veena, whether verse or prose. The words have a meaning that sometimes appears quite unexpected.

The mood overall is sombre, the description is grounded but not forced. There is a strong sense that something big, something unexpected is just about to happen. When the reader gets to know that the society being described is shortly getting to be under siege, then the air of expectancy runs thick. Nothing seems to have the promise of lasting forever. The writer must have gone through a lot in recreating the ambience and her deep knowledge of history, culture and religious practices of that period – among Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Islamists - is visible on every page. The landscape and society, rites and rituals, fairs and festivals, food and cuisine come alive in the author's imagination and is transmitted to the reader's mind with the smallest details being highlighted. The description of the quagmire of relationships of people in Nalanda, Bihar, Sarnath, Odisha and many other places is reflective of the extensive research that has gone into it.

The story-telling has a haunting impact. The characters live on in the readers' minds for a long time. This novel has a message that transcends geographical borders. It is for all humanity and all classes, creed and communities. Nothing lasts forever. Fame, wealth, love and hatred all are transient. We are here for a purpose. We have been inexorably drawn together as per a design that is unknown to us. Yet, we work, live and react as per the situation and keep planning for a future over which we have no control. Whatever travails our ancestors went through centuries ago, has had an impact on the way we think and react to our surroundings. Dr Veena has this unique knack of bringing out surprises and apparently unconnected strands that eventually connect as a universal design. We wish Dr Veena keeps coming out with more and more such narratives that illuminate our lives and make us see the world differently.

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