

Nothing is Blue

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Biman Nath

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Biman Nath's captivating, carefully-crafted work of fiction *Nothing is Blue* may be slyly summarized as follows in five Tweets (not exceeding 140 characters including spaces) to evoke interest in the modern reader with a short attention-span in this Internet age.

1. A boy in his late teens enrolls in the country's premier university; struggles to overcome homesickness and to pursue his passion –maths.
2. His mysterious roommate and a new maths concept intrigue him equally. Meanwhile, the principal asks him to look after a foreign visitor.
3. Amidst his studies and work in the library, he finds time to get to know a girl. He goes on a tour of the country with the foreigner.
4. Strange encounters abound in his tour. He learns the new maths from a tutor; gets hold of an old book written by a heretic lady scholar.

5. Things are not the same when he returns: something terrible has happened to the girl; religion and politics are about to change forever.

Does it sound like Chetan Bhagat's college story? Perhaps it does. But *Nothing is Blue* takes us back to the 7th century. The university is Nalanda. The principal is Shilabhadra. The foreign visitor is Xuanzang from China. The tutor is Brahmagupta, who has just invented *shunya*, i.e., zero. It is the time when emperor Harsha ruled a good part of India but there are signs of political unrest not too far away. Buddhism is on the verge of a major change. With all these ingredients, the author weaves a great story with science, sentiment and suspense. It is a work of historical fiction that engages the reader from the first page to the last while bringing to the fore the glory of India's past and the tumultuous time that changed it all.

The prologue of the book captures its spirit as Xuanzang in Chang'An, China, in 654 CE recalls what had happened 25 years ago during his visit to India. He regrets the loss of a horse-load of manuscripts when he was crossing the river Sindhu during his journey back to China. He writes a letter to Mahabodhi monastery for a copy of those books. But he knows that one book was lost forever – the book that could have corrected the calendars that are going out of sync with seasons. Thus, the author sets the stage for the central theme of the book that intertwines the lives of many characters in the book with the astronomy and mathematics of that period.



The story begins as a flashback when Ananda, the protagonist of the book joined Nalanda as a *samanera*, a novice monk. The descriptions of this great university are vivid. They help the reader imagine the austerity and scholarship that were characteristic of Nalanda. The daily routine and the state of mind of the students of that time do not appear to be much different from those of the students today. They had electives to choose from. Ananda chooses mathematics while his roommate, Kushala, focuses on herbal medicine. Kushala has a secret side that he hides as much as he discloses to Ananda. In his lectures on mathematics, Ananda is also intrigued by the debates about *shunyata*, the concept of zero. He is also haunted by his grandmother's stories, especially that of Khona, a legendary lady astronomer who was cruelly punished by her father-in-law, Varahamihira, an accomplished astronomer/astrologer himself. Amidst all this confusion, Ananda and Kushala are asked by the *pradhana*, the principal, Shilabhadra to look after the needs of the Chinese visitor Xuanzang. Ananda also meets Shyamalata, a young widow who like Ananda hails from the north-eastern part of India.

The narration of events of the book is so engaging that the characters come alive. Ananda is shown to be a sensitive person with a passion for learning mathematics despite the distractions. Kushala, the confident student and a close friend of Ananda, is involved with a sector of monks who practice tantric rituals. Xuanzang is portrayed as a gentle scholar with a great concern for the changing

face of Buddhism. Shyamalata's character is shrouded in mystery as the secrets get spilled ounce by ounce as the book progresses. The readers will feel empathy for the characters, especially for Ananda when he goes through a chilling experience on a fateful night that is a turning point to the suspenseful story.

The travels of Xuanzang and Ananda to the southern part, all the way to Kancheepuram, then up north to Ujjayini, and then back to Nalanda are filled with events that thicken the main plot. Ananda's meeting with Brahmagupta in Ujjayini is an intellectual delight for the mathematics aficionados. The discussions there range from the theories of *Yavans*, the Greeks, and those of past Indian astronomers and mathematicians. While in Ujjayini, Ananda has a chance encounter with a courtesan from whom he obtains a manuscript of Khona. A cryptic verse from that manuscript adds further intrigue to the reader as much as it does to Ananda who is trying to put it all together: the mysteries of astronomy, Kushala, Shyamalata, and strange practices of some Buddhist monks.

*It begins where it ends,
And in the sky it does dance.
They'd say it's incredible, –
But it once began with the Couple.*

Xuanzang, the silent observer of the events, seems to understand all that is happening around him. When he and Ananda return to Nalanda, they find that things have become worse: two deaths, disappearance of one person, and turmoil in the political situation near



and far from Nalanda. Xuanzang too is shaken one night by a bad dream in which he sees raging fire on the horizon and cattle inside Nalanda's *viharas*. An eclipse helps clear the astronomical puzzle. The readers understand the aforementioned verse of Khona as does Ananda. The title of the book evokes something profound at this stage in the book. Ananda and Xuanzang set out to visit Harsha, the emperor who invited Xuanzang to his capital. The climax of the book takes place there when a tragedy strikes.

The story traverses a full circle in the epilogue. In the mind of Xuanzang, Harsha's sister Rajyashri finds a parallel in a teacher of the Crown Prince in China. A Chinese Pagoda in the slowly clearing mist seems like the *Vanahamsa* stupa in India. This is a book about the ancient world – a world that was not much different from today's but yet subtly different.

The young and the old can equally enjoy this lucidly written scholarly book that seamlessly blends history and fiction. A list of books that the author had consulted is given at the end in the Acknowledgments section for the convenience of learned readers who want to know more. The book educates and entertains the readers. In the end, one is taken into a contemplative mood. Many a reader may find it difficult to resist the temptation of reading it again and again to appreciate its multiple layers. Some, like this reviewer, may even fancy a time-travel to the 7th century to experience firsthand the greatness of Nalanda of that time.

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