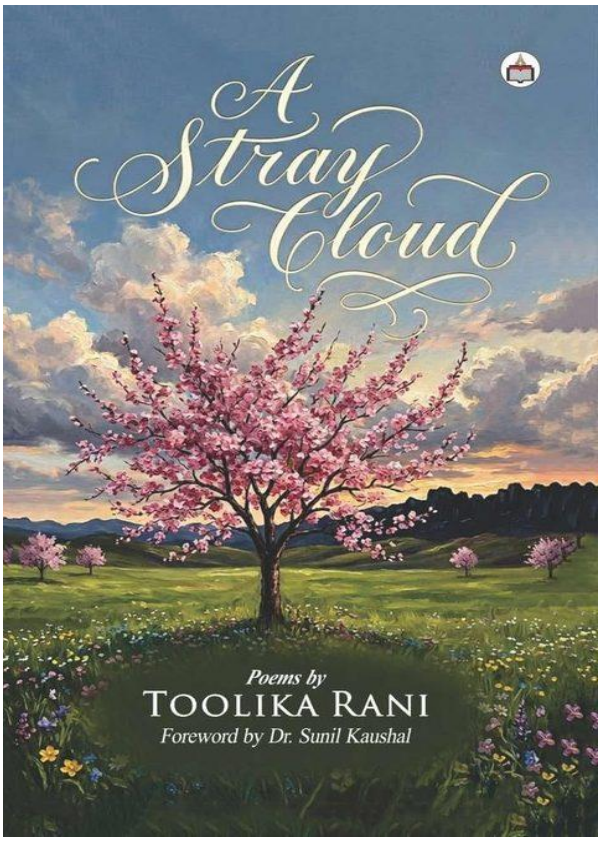
Toolika Rani's *A Stary Cloud,* Authors Press, New Delhi, 2026 Pages 93, price: 295/-.

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Toolika Rani's latest poetry collection *A Stray Cloud* gives you the exact feeling of the title. One gets the feeling that it's a bright sunny day where the skies are blue. Exactly the sort of day when a stray cloud drifts by and catches your attention. I have been exposed to Toolika Rani's distinct style of writing on social media so I was looking forward to getting hold of her collection with impatience. Toolika Rani's poetry is straight from the heart and completely unpretentious. Toolika seems to be asking the reader to do precisely that -live without pretention or expectation and her poetry seems to want us to live the way we want to. In Notes Original she writes…

Why do you want
To listen to the sounds of the outside world?
There is music enough
Fiercely coursing
Through your nerves.
…
The rhythm of life that unfolds itself
On the pulled strings of a huge instrument
Is different for you, and different for your friend.

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In this, Toolika is clearly asking the reader to find her own mojo -be it dance to her own tune or find her own melody. Do not follow the herds and find your own pattern and rhythm of life.

There is a lot for everyone to reflect on. Two of her poems that appealed to me are urban at heart and deal with the cityscape. 'A Larger City' and 'The Soul' were in fact first published in an anthology titled Cityscapes. These poems are a result of contemplation and observation -of how villages became cities and how beneath the glittering neon lights lies all the rot and decay in the city -from pollution, to the lonely migrant to the bureaucratic and VIP culture with the elite name dropping at parties and mingling to gain favours -politically and in business. Perhaps Toolika has seen the changing face of Lucknow itself?

In The Soul, she writes:

> Are you born in a city,
>
> Or you choose one?
>
> Not everyone has a choice.

This verse will surely set you thinking about free will and destiny. Is it our fate that decides whether we spend a lifetime in a hamlet or a metropolis, the mountains or the plains?

In her poem 'A larger City', her pen is dipped in literary sarcasm as she writes:

> Oh, move to a larger city,
>
> Won't you?
>
> Why waste your life
>
> In a Timbuktu?

She then goes on to speak of the hypocrisy of big city life. Of the people flaunting wealth, status and of the air of importance that government officials have.

The heart of this poet is in a quieter place and I know for sure the mountains beckon her. Toolika Rani is not just a poet. She is also known as Squadron Leader Toolika Rani and is a highly accomplished Indian mountaineer and former Indian Air Force Officer who has devoted a considerable part of her life to climbing, exploring and understanding the depth of the world's mountains.

In fact, I got better acquainted with her on social media when I contributed to the wonderfully curated anthology on the Himalayas titled, 'The Mountain Was Abuzz'.

I would conclude with two more poems. One of the most riveting poems in the collection is 'Where Have You Lost Your Colours?'

Even the poets, who aren't obviously writing about themselves and their experiences, leave signs of who they are within. This poem reflects on her understanding of human relationships that seek warmth, intimacy and communication. The moment you serve it cold on a plate for dinner, communication dies. In this imagined scenario of a relationship where things can be cold between partners, she writes:

An unbroken silence,
A stillness in the eyes,
Cold hands,
And colder lies
Of everything being normal.

Then the contrasting few lines of the denouement hit you hard where she really pours her heart out on what should be

Reaching out for each other?
Not just in bed
But perhaps while driving a car?
Or at the dinner?
Not merely with the fingers
But a look of affection.

One finds Toolika take on hypocrisy at various levels and this is a common thread running through her poems. The poems on the city and urban spaces call out the hypocrisy and shrewd diplomacy and arrogance of the city dweller who has lost core human values, hobnobbing with those in the corridors of power. In the relationship poem, she talks of the alienation and disconnect between humans as a result of what the modern city imposes on its people. The more they get connected digitally and through social media, the less easy they find it to speak and express themselves to partners.

Toolika's poems always carry some message or some take away whether they talk of the city life, or relationships. The poems are stray clouds -softly and gently touching the subconscious mind of the reader with the messages they carry and the things they want us to ponder over. The fact that they don't seem like messages is where the literary skill of the poet comes in.

Her poems are sitting inside little clouds in the blue skies for us to get blessed by passing showers.