

**Samay Ke Baad (Beyond Time)**

**Kshama Kaul**

**Anil Prakashan  
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**AN UNVARNISHED TALE OF AN UPROOTED KASHMIRI WOMAN**

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This slim volume is one of the most moving books that I have read in recent years. Though I may not be qualified to review this book written in Hindi, yet the immediacy of its content makes the desire to do so irresistible. I want as many people as possible, whether they have suffered the pain of displacement or not, to become aware of its existence. It needs to be known outside the confines of Hindi-reading circles.

The writer is a poet and brings the poet's sensitivity and sensibility to this account of loss written in the form of a diary in exile. In the jumble of books on Kashmir in its tragic state today, it is refreshing to come across an honest 'unvarnished tale' of a woman uprooted from her natural habitat – geographical and cultural – and left to wander in alien climes. This story of displacement is poignant yet surprisingly free from bias. There is an envy for those who are free, like the Americans, from the burden of history, and compassion for those who must bear the weight of time and the guilt of what others have wrought in the name of history. She says: "How light, how free they must be who have no past, no history! And we? Suffocated by the past, crushed under the weight of the doings of our ancestors. Not an empty place in our hearts but occupied by the thoughts of our past!"

The loss that broods over this book, is not only the exodus from Kashmir (the general plight of the community to which she belongs), but the real issue of a loss of 'home'. Abandoned by her husband, nothing is left even of the concept of home in her case. It is the search for "a room of one's own" that is the focus of Kshama Kaul's diary. What she hankers after an exile, is not an 'imaginary homeland', but a real place to which she longs to return. Without going into the controversies of why the Kashmiri Pandits left Kashmir and skirting the endless debate on who is to blame, she talks about the fact of displacement and what it means in real terms to the lives of a family: a single mother with two small children and her parents. The old parents are victims of twin displacements, uprooted as they are not only from their home in Kashmir, but their daughters' peculiar predicament sees them living with her, rather than with their son, which would have been

socially and psychologically acceptable. Their displacement places an additional burden of guilt upon her.

There is lyrical flow to her diary entries, a daily record of little humiliations, huge dilemmas and profound observations. On the one hand she must cope with her children's queries about the missing father and their changing attitudes to his memory, and on the other face the barbs of hostilities and insults on her own double displacement. The treatment she receives makes her constantly aware of her 'otherness' in the micro and macro environment of cities of India. With a few deft strokes, she paints the landscape of the dispossessed. To a prospective landlord, she is nothing but a meat-eating intruder, a 'migrant' who only adds to the civic woes of an already burdened metropolis. The following extract will illustrate:

I am giving this coop the respectability of a room. The blackened ceiling... broken shelves a dirt floor. Just as big as our bathroom back home. He stands against the door and says: "You people eat meat, fish, onions, everything. You are Kashmiris.

'Yes, I could not deny it, 'the rent?'

"Ten hundred and fifty'.... Meaning displacement, meaning exile, deportation, meaning exiled in ones own land. They were lucky, the ones who were shot dead. Far better than us, they are part of that earth. And we nourished by the hope of return and killed by the fear of not surviving long enough to return. I envy you my friends... We could not enjoy the joy of dying in our own land... we were deluded by the thought that this too was our own land."

It is a telling picture of the disillusionment of the naive who arrived in the metropolis in the hope that here they would find that "heaven of freedom", that they thought was denied to them as a minority in Kashmir. The so-called mainstream seems to be nothing but a mirage.

The writer has the rare gift of being able to rise above petty vengefulness; she does not succumb to the temptation of apportioning blame for the current tragedy in Kashmir. In her frequent encounters with Kashmiris including Muslim visitors from back home, she finds them all trapped in one falsehood or another; those in the valley, in the captivity of the bosses there, and the 'migrants' in that of their 'leaders' here. Both communities must be fed with untruth to keep them apart, and while the individuals lose everything, including the last vestige of pride and dignity, the so-called leadership thrives on delusions of grandeur. The following quote is worth pondering over:

"There is a cauldron here, into which are falling donations from abroad; food, not for the starving, but to swell the bellies of the looters. Perhaps this is what happens when a people die. If these leaders separated themselves from this festival, the gaping void of their postures would become visible to everyone. What would they do then? Kill themselves? Persons without a being must build a wall to lean against. The wall supports them and they in turn hold up the wall... Nobody talks about home..."

It is to her credit that she does not allow bitterness to cloud her judgement. The bewilderment of a woman, who has been 'had', in reality as well as in metaphor, is communicated strongly. There is

hurt and anger but they are balanced by the understanding that in a charged atmosphere truth must yield to sloganeering. Wryly she comments that there is one truth being spoken here and another there. While she broods over the 'double-speak' of the majority community in Kashmir as well as in India, there is a pitiless exposure of the role of the self-proclaimed Kashmiri Pandit leadership, their masks pulled off and the huge gulf between their public and private persona exposed.

But it is not in the analysis of events that the real strength of the book lies. (There is the danger here that the ideologically committed on both sides of the present divide might read their own separate meanings in her text!) The strength of the book lies in its poetic evocation of emotion. There are haunting images of lost innocence. The memories of childhood provide a fine counterpoint to the life she is leading now. There are moving details of how festivals were prepared for and celebrated in the natural habitat, to throw into greater relief the contrast between the scene in the Kashmir and that in exile. The rituals that were laden with meaning back home seem grotesque in the changed locale. These little vignettes are packed with meaning and must tug at the heartstrings of Kashmiris, to whose muted sorrow she has given voice. An unforgettable image is that of her mother's pitiful belonging rolling in the dust of the metropolitan road, when the cart carrying them from one shelter to another overturns. Among the objects that eat the dust is the household deity. The irony saves the scene from descending into pathos. Resonances from other expatriate literature add to the richness of texture. References to shared feeling are understandable but the mere mention of names of writers and artists she runs into during her migrant phase seems irrelevant to the structure of the book, unless it is meant to suggest the only real, solid substances in the nothingness that surrounds her life at that moment of time.

Samay ke Baad is a document that comes straight from the heart of a woman who has suffered personal loss and collective sorrow, but has retained pride in her integrity and identity. As such, it is a valuable contribution to Indian feminist literature.