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A Dream Journey

J. L. Raina

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The two books reviewed by Mr. J. L. Raina provide an interesting perspective on Kashmir. Ironically, both the books written by Kashmiris who live in exile. Mr. Arvind Gigoo who was uprooted from Kashmir Valley during the current turmoil lives as a Kashmiri migrant in Jammu. Jammu, although a part of J&K State, is a distinct geographical linguistic and cultural entity. Therefore, Mr. Gigoo perceives himself, and genuinely so, a forced migrant in his own State.

Mr. Shaukat Kashmiri lives in exile in Switzerland. He was forced to leave his homeland, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, (POK) on account his political views.

Both the writers are nostalgic about Kashmir. This nostalgia is reflected in their reflections on Kashmir.
[Editor]

As a genre, it would be called a travelogue, but it is much more than that. It is narration of a dream journey, which is nostalgic, emotional and also disturbing. The writer Shoukat Kashmiri, belongs to PoK, but has been living a life of exile in Switzerland for more than nine years now. The writer, Chairman, United Kashmir Peoples' National Party, is a proponent of free, autonomous or independent Kashmir (the state of J&K as it existed in August 1947 which includes Indian part of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan occupied Kashmir and Northern areas). His political views forced him to leave Pakistan and PoK, and live the life of an expatriate in Switzerland. In May 2006, he had a chance to come to India (on UN travel documents) to attend a seminar in Gurgaon, Delhi. However, after attending the Seminar, he visited Kashmir for the first time. This was a dream journey for him. The book is the record of his impressions and interaction with political leaders, intellectuals and social activists of the Valley. The 'bunch' of memories, which are both sweet as well as bitter, gives a peep into the psyche and thinking of the people of Kashmir, but the stress is more on the activities and politics of the leaders active on the political horizon of Kashmir, from both streams, separatists as well as mainstream. The sweet memories deal with the realisation of author's childhood dream of visiting the beautiful valley of Kashmir, known for its picturesque beauty, verdant forests, its murmuring brooks and

lakes of sparkling water. Needless to say that he is overawed by what he sees and becomes emotionally excited. It is all the more interesting because he has been living in Switzerland, which is known for its beauty.

The bitter 'memories' pertain to the political scenario of the state, and his disappointment over the lack of unity among the political leaders, who have adopted different paths and are bound by the shackles of expediency and personal or party agendas. While comparing the two parts of Kashmir, he writes – "I realised that a part of the State of J&K – Gilgit-Baltistan – is in such a dire straits, that the people don't have even the basic political rights. I felt that people of Indian Kashmir are lucky because they are able to wage a struggle for their rights. In Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, (POK) the people's attention has been diverted from their miseries, and directed towards the movement in Kashmir. Kashmir's 'national' struggle for freedom has been given a religious hue and a communal tinge. While the people of PoK were kept in the dark about their own deprivation, and the people of the country (Pakistan) were made to drink the intoxicating spirit of 'Kashmir will be a part of Pakistan". About his disappointment with the political scenario, he writes:

"After conversation with him- Naeem Ahmad Khan of National Front – I understood that everybody knew the ground situation here, but every politician is bound by the shackles of compulsions and considerations of expediency. This impression was later confirmed, word for word".

The following from his book excerpts will throw more light on his views and impressions.

IMPRESSIONS

Meeting The Chief Minister

"After meeting the Chief Minister (of J&K), Ghulam Nabi Azad, I felt that he was not confused like other leaders, big or small, but very clear about his political views. There was no pretension or formality in whatever he said. I felt he was serious about the progress and development of the state, and bent upon wiping out corruption. He has lot of experience, having been a Cabinet minister at the Centre. But, I couldn't get rid of the feeling that among the crowd of bureaucrats and political workers surrounding, him, he is the only talented and capable person, who is able to decide wherefrom to start the work and how to do it, according to his experience and expertise."

Not Another Afghanistan

"When I landed at Srinagar airport, I had a different picture of Kashmir in my mind, knowing that it has been in turmoil for the last 15 years. I thought Kashmir must have

become another Afghanistan, where you find ruins and waste, everywhere. But I was relieved, though I got a jolt, to find that it was not so. Hundreds of mansions and bungalows have been built during these years. It confirmed the impression, that is found outside Kashmir, that it was not only the gun that came to Kashmir, but enough money also. This money has come for Jihad, counter-jihad, relief for families of martyrs, rehabilitation and resettlement of sufferers, from India, Pakistan, other countries of the world, and from the agencies. But no individual or group in Kashmir can claim that even 20% of the money has reached the people, for whom it was meant. That is why, you find that so many families were ruined in this anarchy and turbulence, and there is nobody who really cares or looks after helpless and desperate widows and orphans, though people have constructed luxurious mansions in the name of 'movement', where you have luxury cars, servants, all kinds of luxuries. One can never even have the illusion of these people being the leaders of a suffering or oppressed community. You will only be reminded of Nawabs, Rajahs and Princes of old times".

A Proud Kashmiri

"When I came to Karachi in Pakistan from PoK for education, the students of the University would announce their ethnicity proudly, Punjabi, Baloochi, Sindhi — all proud of their own culture. When I was asked about my native place I did not take recourse to racial superiority nor did I say that I belonged to Sudhan community. Without hesitating, I introduced myself as Shaukat Kashmiri. Later my Kashmir friends asked me why I had done so. They warned me of the consequences. Later I realised how the word 'Kashmiri' was made fun of by calling "O, Kashmiri". After that I was insistent upon writing Kashmiri after my name.

Sheikh Abdullah: The Great Leader

"I was told that Sheikh Abdullah had himself selected the place for his grave. I could not but appreciate his aesthetic sense and fine taste. Some people had given me the impression that tight security has been put around Sheikh's grave to save it from desecration by angry people. I had felt angry and pitied the immaturity of the person who had told me this. I could not help to tell him that even Jinnah's and Iqbal's, graves are under security cover. But here I found only an ordinary security guard. My head bowed before the grave of the great leader, though I have never bowed before Pakistan's oppressive army or ISI people. I realised that the man buried here was once himself Kashmir – epitome of Kashmir. He had a charisma and two big forces tried to break the spell he had on people. In spite of his Himalayan blunders and foolishness of his colleagues, he remained at the zenith of his popularity. Inter-national conspiracies, manipulations of oppressive forces, Jinnah's short-sightedness, Nehru's breaking of promises, and waverings of Sheikh Abdullah and political leaders of Kashmir, created not only great obstacles in the path of complete freedom of Kashmir, but even the concept of freedom was lost in the oblivion.

The Medical Institute

“After Hazratbal Shrine, the Shei-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences is the second institution which was built under the personal supervision of Sheikh Abdullah, and with his personal efforts. He had announced the building of a hospital, endowed with the most modern medical equipment and medical facilities. It started when a purse containing a few lakh of rupees was presented to the late leader on his birthday, as a gift. He started the work with this gift, and the government and people helped him. With the beginning of turmoil in 1990, this hospital also became a shelter for mujahideens and most of the doctors became their playboys and the paralysed administration just watched. Though the situation is different today, yet the presence of uniformed men in the premises indicates that this institution is still under extreme pressure and in an atmosphere of suffocation.”

Ignorance on POK

“I was surprised as well as shocked to find that not only common people, but educated people, especially those connected with media, had very little knowledge or information about PoK, especially Gilgit-Baltistan. Some people didn't like my talk. Ignorance or apathy, whatever, you may call it, they were not prepared to face the ground reality. In fact, some people gave me the impression that for them criticising Islamabad's policies was equivalent to strengthening Indian hands. So the less said, the better it is.”