

Kashmir: A Departure

Death of Dreams: A Terrorist's Tale

by Aditya Sinha;

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BADRI RAINA

A great weariness hangs over the idea of Kashmir. Most 'mainstream' or 'nationalist' opinion says testily enough is enough; after all the long rope during which time the Kashmiris have lived gluttonously off the centre, read India, it is time they fell in line, or else. The fact, however, is that in the absence of a politics that is willing to acknowledge the primacy of the Kashmiri experience, the authenticity of their struggle and sacrifice, to jettison red herrings, to own a large part of the responsibility and the guilt, the story of Kashmir, in Aditya Sinha's words, will remain the "story of betrayals: Kashmir's betrayal by India, by Pakistan, and by the Kashmiris themselves".

For that reason, the weariness I spoke of has tended to colour most writings on Kashmir, both of the journalistic and academic kind. Often the failure of sympathy and, consequently, of a felt historical intelligence have tended to proliferate sometimes patronising, punishing, self-righteous, sectarian tomes of a thesis-oriented nature from outside the living centre of Kashmir's composite suffering. Such pronouncements take on pretty simplistic or self-serving expression. Thus we will be told that the 'Kashmir problem' is essentially attributable to the fact that the valley is predominantly Muslim; that the bulk of Muslims in Kashmir are at heart Pakistanis; that the only Kashmiris who have been betrayed are the Kashmiri pandits. Or that the problem resulted, plain and simple, from Nehru's refusal to yield to Patel's superior tactical vision which had recommended that the 1947 Indian army putsch should have accomplished a more comprehensive job. Or, alternatively, in the mood of reconciliatory graciousness, that Kashmiris have really no problem to speak of, the villain being entirely a theocratic Pakistan hell-bent on destabilising the 'unity and integrity' of India. Or that the 'Kashmir problem' is, at bottom, the continuing expression of an imperialist design to weaken India.

These and other accounts of similar hue do not explain to us, for example, why a

Muslim-majority Kashmir stood rock-like against the Pakistani onslaught in 1947 even before any Indian soldiers happened on the scene. The present reviewer was six-year old at the time and remembers the ringing slogans '*hamlaavar khabardar, hum Kashmiri hein tayaar*', and '*Sher-e-Kashmir kaa kya irshaad, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh itehaad*'. Or, why in 1965 as Pakistan launched 'Operation Gibraltar', it was the common Kashmiri who steadfastly helped the army in locating and capturing enemy soldiers; or, why even as late as 1987, after all the chicaneries and political sell-outs, Kashmiris came out to participate in the democratic process. Nor do they explain why, except for the anarchic phase in 1990, the valley throughout its history, barring the Sikandar 'butshikhan' era and the Afghan occupation in the eighteenth century, has been a marvel of inter-community harmony; or what it is that has distinguished Islam in the valley from the more orthodox and virulent forms elsewhere.

It is against the inadequacies of such a body of 'mainstream' historiography about Kashmir that Sinha's book comes across as a moving departure. Put simply, Sinha rather than pontificate from the outside, lets, in an existential remove, a returned 'terrorist' speak. That shift in voice generates an authenticity of projection which opinion and policy-makers alike would do well to attend to. To my knowledge, this is the first time that anyone has had so elaborate and intimate an access to the 'other' in Kashmir. Sinha's labours are invaluable, even if, eventually, the trajectory of Babar Badr's experiencing from the seventies to the nineties and the author's unobtrusive empathy with the credence of that trajectory coalesce, politically, in the desire for a full, democratic future for Kashmir, autonomous, in some ways, both from India and Pakistan, but importantly as part of a secular, Indian state.

Sinha says at the outset: "this book tells the story of Kashmir's insurrection, through the eyes of a boy named Firdous Syed Baba, who metamorphosed into the militant Babar Badr". The crucial factor in the success of Sinha's narrative, which often in style partakes of the procedures of a Sidney Sheldon or an Alistair McLean in its catchy, dramatic episodes, lies in the choice of the protagonist. Unlike many, really most, young men who joined mili-

tancy either through peer group pressure or blackmail, or indigent circumstance, or woolly-headed notions of 'jihad', or some personally-felt loyalty to some group leader or the other, or out of a simple desire for aura, Sinha's protagonist is one who comes across as a deeply troubled, thinking young man, possessed with the ability and willingness to be analytic and objective not just about leaders and 'tanzeems', but at heart-rending stages of introspection about himself and the impersonal possibilities of his own commitment to the emancipation of Kashmiris along wholly, and commendably non-sectarian lines. This makes of Babar Badr a tragic hero and accords to his career a credibility and significance that enables a searing interiority of evaluation.

Originally a distant acolyte of Shabir Shah, the Nelson Mandela of Kashmir, who, it turns out hated reading of any kind and remained incapacitated by his inability to initiate any meaningful politics, Babar Badr, coming from a National Conference family, was the first to float the Muslim Janbaaz Force at a time when the JKLF dominated the valley. Badr then takes the author through the hitherto unrevealed conflicts between individual commanders and cadres and forever splintering militant formations to a point when any commitment to the masses in Kashmir and even to 'Jihad' came to be replaced by either the murderous battle of contending egos or competing claims to the favours and bounties disbursed by the ISI that clearly had no interest in the specific perceptions or sufferings of the Kashmiris. Sinha's detailing here is an eye-opener, even as the collapse of democratic leaderships and urges is underlined across the quarter century covered by the narrative. Remarkably, Sinha's novelistic style does not impair his grip on the main factual details of Kashmir's post-independence history, taking in the accreted significance of the Delhi Agreement of 1952, the colonisation of Kashmir between 1953 and 1975 (the accord with Sheikh Abdullah) by the centre's quislings, the fall of the Sheikh during his second regime into corruption, solecism and misrule, the sell-out to the Congress in 1984, the wretched Shah interregnum, the decisive fall-out of the betrayal of the democratic process in the elections of 1987 leading to the displacement of the ballot by the bullet. If Sinha's account brings out the incapacity of the armed and other paramilitary forces to connect with the Kashmiris, Babar Badr's experience helps him equally and authentically to underscore the alienation of

Kashmiri Muslims, even the 'jihadis', at the hands of Pakistan.

Thus, Babar Badr, who incidentally was the first major militant leader to boldly enter into a dialogue with S B Chavan, the then home minister, risking opprobrium and death, in defining his career from a National Conference background in the seventies back to the National Conference in 1997 also defines the frustrating circularity of the fate of young Kashmiris look-

ing for a genuine democracy and an endorsed stake in governance both within the state and within India.

Sinha may expect to draw flak both from the psuedo-nationalist camp and, in lesser ways, from the Congress establishment. The fact that his account will annoy much more the ISI and the Pakistani establishment should, on the whole, help to lend credence to the book as a text that is primarily engaged with the Kashmiris. **EPW**