

Undercover in Bandipore

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Acknowledgements

My wife Anita and my daughter Aparna are always a source of strength and inspiration for my creative ventures. I am thankful to my former colleague Dr Neha Kala and doctoral student Susmita Shukla who were generous enough to read the first draft and give some valuable suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to Vitasta's Renu Kaul Verma and her editor Manjula Lal for this publication.

Preface

The inspiration for this book is to hold up a mirror to the turmoil in Kashmir that was a conflict zone for at least four decades. It unfolds several dimensions of militancy and its different trajectories in Kashmir, one of which was the imposition of political religiosity that has made structural changes over the years to the social core of the Valley. It has provided an escape route for youth to affluence, influence and identity in secessionist upsurges.

In an unusual web of narratives, it brings into sharp focus how a rank outsider, in his search for education and a larger cause, gets entwined in a fight in which he has no personal stakes and a mission which he slowly realises can never be accomplished.

The kindly, wise persons who mould his life normally remain unsung in the public domain, and this book pays tribute to the *Babbs* who were once universally revered in Kashmir. The blended cultural-spiritual capital has buckled under the weight of imposed religiosity, depriving the younger generation of a vast heritage of language and literature.

And finally, it is a story of ordinary people who want to seek respite from this forced political turmoil, once they understand the cure of the collective ailment is not *azadi* but in the organic, ever-evolving cultural traditions of Kashmir. Power play and distant referents only complicate their lives without bringing any kind of salvation. My purpose was to weave a powerful and absorbing mesh of narratives that has, so far, remained untold in stories about Kashmir.

Chapter 1

Eight long years have passed since Parash's father took his last breath and left this world at the age of ninety-nine. *Babb* could have lived for 120 years, he would say, but then fate took a cruel turn and his desire for living slowly faded away. He witnessed a drastic change of fate that forced him to relocate from his native place, Bandipore. He could never reconcile with his sudden uprootedness. He spent the rest of life with his sons but their homes were just houses and quarters for him—his home and heart were in Kashmir.

He was a proud father and they, in turn, served him well. He often shared his poetry and discussed literature with his sons. Iqbal and Ghalib were his favourite poets and Kalidas and Shakespeare were his choice dramatists. *Babb's* reading habit and enthusiasm for life would have inspired anyone. His recitation of classic manuscripts in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic was so lucid and mesmerising that it surpassed great orators of the world. His youngest son Parash often felt that his own international exposure, doctorate and University position were like shadows hiding in the summer noon

in comparison with his father's intellect. Had *Babb* managed to acquire some political power or influence, his literary talent would have been easily recognised and his work would have become prized literature.

Babb was a product of the freedom movement. Irrespective of faith and position, everyone in Bandipore held him in high esteem. He was respected even by Mama Sahib, the Imam High of Bandipore. He was spiritually inclined, devoutly religious and strengthened the public good with his personal conduct. There was no contradiction in the two realms. He had grace with assertion, wisdom with compassion and unfailing optimism with pragmatism. He was not a romantic realist but an institution in himself, a catalyst for transformation.

After that fateful day in October 1990 until his death in 2010, he spent his post-displacement years proportionately with his three sons, who were in three different cities. Everywhere, his daily routine was unchanged: two hours meditation (morning and evening), reading literary and philosophical books and teaching the needy.

Barkat had come to him in Varanasi through his son Parash. Barkat was a taxi driver who drove his son from a conference in Allahabad to Varanasi. Coincidentally, five days later, Parash had to travel again to Lucknow and the company sent the same driver. During the return journey, Parash engaged in conversation with Barkat out