

Book Review : Days of Destiny by S.S. Ambardar - Maharaj Kaul

This is an epic autobiography written in extraordinary detail, with a deep undercurrent of nostalgic pained emotion, in exquisite English. Starting from author's deep past, from the early childhood, to his near end, it contains a panoramic as well as a detailed sweep of his existence. The author's soul is present behind every word he has written.

After reading the 565-page book, one is choked by the inquiry, which has been incrementally rising during the reading, who is Mr. Shanti Swarup Ambardar. One is smitten by his intensity, depth of inquiry, and faith in human goodness. There is only once when he tried to depart from the accepted life of a Kashmiri Pandit, when he wanted to renounce the world and become a *sanyasi*. Otherwise, he stood ramrod-straight on the path of his life. His love for human beings, especially for his relatives, was intense. This included his Muslim friends. We can summarize his stellar qualities by saying that he was a man of deep faith, which was of higher value to him than even his strong intelligence.

Shanti Ambardar describes in excruciating detail the personalities and events from his mega-family. There was a lot of love present in families those days, which found an easy outlet during the celebration of religious and social events. There were uncles and aunts, and cousins and other relatives, besides your parents, who created a stratosphere around you of love and family bond, welded with family folklore and mythology. The economic poverty of Kashmiri Pandits often remained buried under these securities, not getting a chance to raise its head often. This architecture formed a permanent ornament and security over the author's life.

The book's title, Days of Destiny - A Memoir, is apt as it is essentially an autobiography. But it strongly connects with the prevailing Kashmiri Pandit culture and philosophy, and Kashmir Problem. The author was born in Kashmir in

a middle-class orthodox Pandit family and studied up to M.Sc. in chemistry. The timing of his birth was critical as it was just seventeen years before the birth of independent India in 1947, which led to the birth of Kashmir Problem the same year. So, from the impressionable age of seventeen through his demise in 2016, he lived in its severe clutches. The book clearly shows that if Kashmir Problem had not existed, the author and his wife would have lived a serene life in Kashmir till the end.

After his college finished in 1952, the author picked a job with Intelligence Bureau of Indian Government in 1953. Not being happy with it, he made a bold but consequential step in moving to teaching in 1956. Starting with St. Joseph's College in Baramulla, Kashmir, and ending up in Sri Partap College, in Srinagar, Kashmir, in 1986. The teaching profession gave him quite a good perch to be connected with the culture, politics, personalities, and places of Kashmir and the world. The book is a mosaic of the day-to-day life he lived with his family and friends, with the surrounding realities of living as a member of a minority community, Pandits, with the majority community of Muslims, evolving Kashmir Problem, and the emerging India after its independence.

There are no grand events or stark revelations in the book, but only the trajectory of three generations of a common family in Kashmir from 1930's through 1980's. But it is the way the narrative has been written that makes it so compelling to read. The author has woven his tale in one-day-at-a-time fashion, focusing on the circumstances and emotions present within the milieu and culture of the times. The language he has used is spartan and serene, in fine and elegant sentences. He is never excited, angry, or philosophical: just a cameraman and a commentator on the scene. So, the book is a cool narrative on the life of a sensitive, thoughtful, and good family; who, unfortunately, suffered a lot in its last phase due to the evil designs of Kashmir Problem.

Ambardars had a serene, secure, and a mentally rich life in Kashmir, which tragically was shattered by the politics of the place they lived in. Kashmir Problem was much larger than any single common family's life. Starting in 1947 as a

political situation about which newly formed dominion the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir should belong to, India or Pakistan, it mushroomed into an epic war between the original inhabitants of Kashmir Valley: the Kashmiri Pandits, who trace their roots in it to 5,200 years, and Kashmiri Muslims, who trace it to 550 years. At the exit of Britain from Indian subcontinent in 1947, the areas directly under their control, called Provinces, and the 565 areas indirectly under them called Princely States, had to be divided into two new dominions of India and Pakistan. There was no third choice. While the division of the provinces and the 562 princely states was cut and dry, the choices of the three princely states: Junagarh, Hyderabad, and Jammu and Kashmir, became problematic. The affiliation of the first two was resolved by 1948, but that of the third one, Jammu and Kashmir, continues to remain unresolved in the eyes of Kashmiri Muslims, even after seventy-three years. Pakistan claims Kashmir Valley because of the Muslim affiliation of the majority of its residents, while India claims it because its prince in 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh, opted freely to join India under the treaty called Instrument of Accession, which was the criterion used for all the 565 Princely States to join either country.

While Kashmir Valley, a part of Jammu and Kashmir State, is legally securely a part of India, it was the mercurialness of its legendary Muslim leader, Sheikh Abdullah, and the machinations of Pakistan to absorb it on the basis of its Islamic majority, that has kept Kashmir Problem alive so long. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir Valley, but the one in 1989 was the most damaging and dramatic. One of the upshots of it was that Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave the Valley. Out of their original population of 400,000 there, only 8,000 remain. Kashmir Valley has been more than a motherland for Pandits, it has been a part of their religion. It is this loss of sacredness of the place that has riven irreparable holes in Pandits' psyche and soul. There have been other people in history that have been forced to leave their motherlands, but driven by human instinct to survive they have moved on. But Kashmiri Pandits cannot accept the loss of their sacred land, the birthplace of their gods.

Ambardars' forced expulsion from their sacred land is the tragic undercurrent of the story of their lives narrated in this book. Without the presence of Kashmir

Problem, their lives would have ended serenely. So is the case with almost all other Pandits who were compelled to leave the Valley. This book is studded with a detailed, incisive, narrative on Kashmir Problem as it evolved from its inception in 1947. The account of Pakistan's attack on Kashmir in October, 1947, popularly called Qabailis attack, based on the author's conversations with the people who witnessed it, and other sources, is excellent. It describes the painful details of the attackers' inhumanity and the valor of Indian army to repel them back. Incidentally, the author's nephew, whom he raised as a son, fought in one of these wars. Only an intelligent and honest Kashmiri living in Kashmir could have produced such a comprehensive narrative of a demonically complex problem such as Kashmir Problem.

Kashmiri Pandits must read this book as it reflects on their or their relatives' lives before and after their tragic forced diaspora from Kashmir. It will make them re-absorb the veil of the rich cultural tapestry they lived under, their serene and nuanced existence in the land of their forefathers and gods. Others should read it to understand why Kashmiri Pandits are so pained to leave their motherland, when other people in history who were also forced to undergo that have borne it relatively calmly. The book's 565 pages may daunt some, but they should then think of it to be two books on Kashmiri Pandits' culture and ethos. The fateful tragedy of Kashmiri Pandits as narrated in this book moves you deeply.

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