Book Review: The Infidel Next Door

Rajat Mitra
History is like an empress, angry with a whip in hand, who demands obedience to the written word. Me embrace, protecting us when our soul needs answers.

Jagdish Batra

When a man fights for truth, he is the loneliest,” says a character in this novel *The Infidel* message which the author Rajat Mitra wants to convey. He is right because not many swimmers against the tide of prevailing intellectual discourse and call a spade a spade the wa

A page-turner coming from a psychologist may not be something new, but this debut novel from Rajat Mitra approach to the conflict in Kashmir. That is because the writer has worked for many years at the ground level, and his work has given him the experience of the age of ethnic violence. Despite the author being from a domain different from literature, this novel is a literary piece – individualized characters, realistic situations and a plot full of suspense.

Of late, interest in Kashmir has risen and quite a few writers like Urmila Deshpande, Abhay Narayan Sapru, and Humra Quraishi have published novels based on life in Kashmir. Not long ago, Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry* which, contrary to the title, presented a cynical view of things. Mitra’s novel ends on an optimistic note, where education, politics, religion, etc.

The story of the novel is set in the 1990s, when the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits started as a result of rise in first-time exodus. Long ago, Aurangzeb’s forces let loose a reign of terror on Kashmiri pandits because the refusal to convert to Islam. He had been requested by the pandit community to save them. Thereupon, he convert him, if he could. Aditya Narayan lost his ancestor in that carnage and since then his forefathers history of Aurangzeb’s rule is well known, the memory of Battmazar, an island in Dal lake is not so well known. Where hundreds of Hindus had been buried alive during the cruel Pathan era in Kashmir, leading to another valley.

Aditya’s guru, referred to as *Guru Dev* in the novel, demands as *gurudakshina* the re-building of the Adi Shash “If this temple survives, Hinduism will survive in Kashmir.” Aditya goes along with his parents to Srinagar temple which is in ruins. In doing so, he faces stiff opposition from the hotheads among Muslim community alongside the ruins of the temple.

The Imam of the mosque is a liberal Muslim. He has adopted the orphan girl Zeba and brought her up alone. He becomes a stone-pelter under the influence of Haji chacha, the villain of the piece. Aditya, through his Ga wins Zeba’s heart and is able to generate humane feelings in Anwar who saves the life of Aditya. Later, Anwar person, who tormented by the memory of his past action, tries to find answers to ethical questions. Finally, story ends with Aditya’s permission to Anwar to write on the ruins that the destroyed temple is a symbol of Aditya is a symbol of hope.

Aditya Narayan comes out as a deeply spiritual person and has no interest besides performing the rituals a order. He may appear to be too virtuous to be true but then the intent of the novelist seems to be to yearn build bridges between the two communities.

The novelist has experience of life in Kashmir, so he is able to find out the root cause of the misconception Hindu religion and way of worship. The education of Muslim children in *madarsas* is partly responsible for...
public discourse outside school is controlled by fanatics like Haji chacha for whom azadi (freedom) means infidels.” There are slogans written on the walls of houses of Hindus asking them to leave or face the cons

The terrorists, who get funds from abroad, issue diktats asking women to remain in purdah or face acid attacks cosmetics and fancy dresses for them, though they won’t mind such stuff for their mistresses even as they to Salim, a terrorist to avoid the stigma of being in love with a Hindu, but Salim murders her to prove his d

To be fair to the writer, the writer does not shield Hinduism on the issue of casteism. While Aditya and his dom caste characters as equal, his father is not able to reconcile to it. If Aditya is the icon of liberal Hindui Muslim following interface with Aditya. As a practising psychologist having worked with cases of trauma a convincingly the change in Anwar who is perplexed at the thought of having saved Aditya whom he initial friend and the other pacifist who is converted through Anwar’s example, explains: “You hear the voice of the enemy from dying.” Thus, love triumphs over conscientious people.

Also Prof. Baig, the Vice Chancellor of Jammu University is a brave and upright Kashmiri intellectual who Kashmir above religion. He is the one who enthuases Aditya when he is depressed. In a hard-hitting article, right they have to claim victimhood when they perpetrate collective violence upon pandits.

While the army's role gets kudos from the writer, that of the police force is not commended as some of its with terrorists which leads to the alienation of the Kashmiri youth. Mitra also blames Article 370 for the pi

The novel is written in lucid language. It is replete with quite a few quote-worthy lines like “History is like hand, who demands obedience to the written word. Memory is the mother who holds us in embrace, prote answers.” Mitra has carefully given in footnotes the meanings of Kashmiri and Hindi words for the benefit compiled in the form of a Glossary at the end. The 355-page novel is divided into 100 short chapters, but it he should know it being an experienced psychologist – that he keeps the interest of the reader alive creati seems to sag.

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