

Kashmir is FREE – and now Kashmiris can't fly out!

(An excerpt from KASHMIR IS FREE – a novel by Dr. Arun Kumar IAS)

Prologue

Srinagar 29 March 2022

Shabir Ahmad Kaloo, the editor of *The Kashmir Front*, stroked his trim Kashmiri beard as he punched furiously on his laptop. Then with a flourish, he finished his piece: “The PM of India, Are You Listening?”

As he slouched back in his swivelling office chair, Shabir gave his editorial a final once over.

Looks all right ... enough to give the Indian agencies another sleepless night, he smirked as he scratched his sharp aquiline nose.

A whiff of air from the open window suddenly blew away some paper from Shabir's desk, which was, in any case, cluttered with all kinds of reports, newspaper clippings, and files. Instinctively, Shabir bent down to pick those up from the floor. And winced in pain.

“Bloody hell!” he whimpered, as his fingers also picked up some dirt from the unswept floor.

Looks like the sweeper has not been coming for quite some time, thanks to the frequent hartals in the city.

Surrounded as it was by all kinds of buildings, Shabir's office in downtown Srinagar had no natural light. And the musty smell was now all-pervading. That's why the windows had to be kept open.

Just then, he heard a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he said.

A tall lanky clean-shaven Kashmiri man entered his room.

Shabir looked up. “Ah Khurshid! There you are.”

Khurshid entered the room with a laptop bag. He took a seat facing the editor.

“Did you manage to get what I'd asked for?”

“Yes, Sir,” Khurshid said hesitantly. He opened his laptop and showed the pictures to Shabir.

“I think this one would be appropriate.”

Shabir adjusted his round spectacles that gave him, as he was told, a decidedly intellectual look, and stared intently at the picture of a dead young girl. Her head covered in a scarf, scars all over her face and her eyes closed. Her face—so peaceful.

“Perfect. Is it from the *paar* folder?” Shabir asked referring to the stock images sent by the Pakistani agencies from across the border.

“Yes Sir. So, if we use this image, we will get paid extra. But Sir... just to clarify, this girl is not Kashmiri. She's probably a Syrian who was killed in an US air strike conducted against the ISIS.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Shabir replied, “The girl looks Kashmiri, and the image fits the editorial I’ve just finished ... So just email the picture to production and you can leave.”

Shabir proof read his editorial once again giving it some final touches. The production then uploaded the article along with the photo of the girl as a front-page editorial.

The editorial’s last few paras read:

For how long, will you keep on killing us? For how long? Just yesterday, your Indian Army gang raped and mercilessly killed a 16-year-old innocent Kashmiri girl. Her only fault—she was good looking. And, of course, that—she was a Kashmiri.

*Mr. Indian PM, do you know why young men are pelting stones at your army? Want to know the real reason? The reason is, that we’re sick and tired of your **farce democracy**, your manipulated elections, your governments imposed from Delhi, a democracy that has no place in the world we are trying to build in Kashmir.*

You’ve exploited us since 1947. You have bartered our water and exploited mercilessly our power and mineral resources. And when we raise our voice, you kill our boys and rape our women. Someday, Insha’Allah, you’ll have to pay for this all.

It’s no longer the fringe, Mr. Indian PM. Every boy and girl on the street is throwing stones at you, and at all your instruments of coercion, loot, and plunder. It’s a revolution. A mass movement. How many will you kill, Mr. Indian PM?

You have no option but to leave and give us our cherished azaadi.

As Shabir swivelled back in satisfaction, he experienced another sharp pain on the left side of his abdomen. He winced as he massaged that side of his belly. The pain now radiated to his back. His breathing became laboured.

The pain had been bothering him for quite some time. And so Shabir had consulted his school friend, Dr. Anil Koul, a nephrologist with Apollo Hospitals, who advised him to rush immediately to Delhi for some advanced tests for his kidneys. Shabir could have scheduled an appointment in Srinagar in SKIMS (Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences), but he had no faith in the local doctors. Most were so busy minting money that they had little time to keep up with the latest developments in their respective medical disciplines.

Funny Anil Koul, Shabir mused, thinking about his friend who was the declared *joker* of their class because he was always joking! His family too had “migrated” out of the Valley in those turbulent 1990s because of the threats from those Islamist zealots, as they claimed. But Shabir’s belief was that it was that evil Governor Jagmohan who had asked the Kashmiri Pandits to “run away” so that he could have a freer hand crushing the Muslims. Shabir and Anil could never agree on what was the real cause but had remained friends regardless.

His mobile buzzed. It was Air India.

“Mr. Kaloo, Shabir Ahmad Kaloo?”

As Shabir confirmed, the chirpy female voice on the other end continued, “Sir, we apologise, but your flight for April 1, 2022 on Air India AI 0825 for the Srinagar-Delhi sector has been cancelled for technical reasons.”

Bloody hell! Bloody Air India?!

“Okay, but would you be then making any substitute arrangements?” Shabir asked sharply.

There was silence for a few seconds.

“I’m sorry Sir,” announced the female voice on the other end, “but all our flights are running full. Your payment is being refunded and will be credited within 24 hours to the credit card you used for the booking.”

There was a sudden rude click at the other end disconnecting the call.

That was no help. *But what the hell? What else did you expect from this perpetually bankrupt national carrier?*

So Shabir logged on to his favourite MakeMyTrip site and looked for flights for 1 April. Usually, there were some twenty non-stop flights from Srinagar to Delhi every day. So, he was confident he would be able to find another flight. But funnily, all flights looked fully booked.

Desperate, he tried yatra.com, goibibo.com, cleartrip.com, and then the websites of Jet, Indigo, Go Air, Vistara, SpiceJet, Air Asia—every airline site he could recall. No seats still. He tried via Jammu, via Chandigarh, even via Leh, and then looked for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th April, but the result was infuriatingly the same.

This was crazy. The tourist season was a month away, and still the flights were all packed.

Unbelievable!

One option was to go to the Srinagar Airport that day and try finding a seat on any airline that was flying out. But in the security-crazy airport area that wasn’t so easy. You had to have a valid ticket before you could enter the area. But how can you have a valid ticket if the airlines were not offering any?

The only way to short-circuit the security, Shabir knew, was to declare you were going to receive someone. But for that too, you needed an official vehicle. Or an authorised travel agent who could give you a lift.

Anyway. These were the only two options Shabir could think of, and so, after a few calls, the influential editor of the *Kashmir Front* managed to locate the driver of an IAS officer who was going to the airport on that day to pick up his boss.

Came the D-day, and surprisingly Shabir could make it to the arrival area of the Srinagar Airport with no hiccups. The glass building with its sharply sloping roofs was designed to look like snow covered Himalayas. But to Shabir, the airport looked more like a bunker. A reminder of India’s colonisation of Kashmir.

He thanked the driver profusely and rang up his contact in the security who escorted him to the airline ticket counters OUTSIDE the terminal building.

“This is the maximum I can do Shabir Saheb,” the police man told him. “You have to have a ticket now for entering the departure area.”

Fortunately, there were no queues at the counters. But that was a no brainer.

There were no queues because there were still no vacant seats on any airline.

Meanwhile, flights circled overhead and kept on landing. Passengers kept on arriving in droves on all kinds of vehicles and kept on getting inside the building.

It was almost after half-an-hour of waiting that Shabir could observe an interesting phenomenon. The passengers flying out all appeared to be non-Kashmiris. Most were in uniform, from the army or BSF, CRPF, or any of the other tens of para-military outfits posted in the Valley.

But strangely, all the flights that were landing in were only disgorging Kashmiris—men, women, children, all looking quite flustered. *There were no Indian or foreign tourists at all.*

After observing for an hour, Shabir couldn’t control himself and approached an arriving family—seemed like husband, wife, son, and daughter.

“*Bhai Saheb*, is everything all right,” he asked.

The man and his wife and children exchanged glances.

“How the hell do we know?” the man exploded.

Shabir slunk back, shocked, and speechless.

Fifteen minutes later, he approached a departing man in uniform, “Sirji, are you flying out today?”

“Obviously I am. But why are you asking? Aren’t you a Kashmiri?”

“Yes, why?”

“Then you should be happy you’ve got what you’ve been asking for,” he said. And then looking at Shabir’s quizzical face added, “your blasted *Azaadi*, what else? So, enjoy your freedom now. And don’t bother to come to India. Ever.”

(Dr Arun Kumar is an ex-Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer of the 1979 batch of the Jammu and Kashmir cadre. As Chief Executive Officer for over six years from May 2002 to June 2008, readers may recall Dr Kumar’s outstanding contribution to professionalizing and modernizing the two world famous Shrine Boards viz Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB) and Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB). He is the one who introduced helicopter services for both these shrines and electric buses for Vaishno Devi.)