

Authors' note:

When we decided to participate in the Earthian contest, one of the first things we did was to browse through the themes listed in the Earthian website. The original plan was that each one of us in the group would select a theme, and talk about why that particular theme appealed to him/her. As we started talking and sharing, it dawned on us that all of us had been deeply impacted by the fire accident in Sivakasi, which had claimed the lives of many children our own age. The more we read about the accident, the more we discussed it, the more we became convinced that we wanted to write about issues that affect children, in the present. We explored various topics; from child labour to civil rights violations to gender bias. We read up on various social issues and ultimately settled on one topic: the uncertainty and loss of childhood in a war-torn area.

The next question we had was, "Does this fall under the purview of what we regard as sustainability?" Discussions with our parents and teachers and our own research shed some light on the subject. We found out that human rights, civil rights, labour rights fall under the larger umbrella of sustainability which includes not only environmental sustainability but also social sustainability. What is the use of environmental sustainability, when there are inequities in the society? Why aren't we discussing human rights, civil rights and labour rights in the context of sustainable living?

For this project, we have taken a broader definition of sustainability and looked at scenarios where human rights are violated and violence and mistrust prevail. What happens to the economic fabric of a community when relationship between humans suffers? This we have tried to explore through the lives of two young boys, Saif and Vikram. So, read on.

Judai - The separation

Chapter 1:

We were almost there. Another hour to go. We had been in the train for a day. Or had it been two since we left Mumbai? I seem to have lost all track of time in my haste to reach my destination. My Motherland: Kashmir. It had been two years since I had left for Mumbai....

Though I wasn't fortunate to witness the beauty of Kashmir in all its spectacular magnificence, I had formed an image of it based on the stories I had heard and the pictures I had seen. I often remember Abba's favourite Persian couplet 'Gar firdaus bar rue zameen ast, hameen asto, hameen asto, hameen asto'¹. Kashmir in Abba's times was a natural wonder. Nestled in the lap of Mother Nature, Kashmir truly was a piece of heaven- silvery rivers and streams meandering through tropical pastures and forests; the voluble waterfalls offering soothing serenity and solace. I sometimes envied Abba who had seen and lived through this beauty. However, now lurking beneath this beauty was an incomprehensible danger.

It was my homeland just the same. Where I had grown up, experienced and learnt; the very place which had made me who I am today. I was getting impatient. I wanted to see Abba's smile. He would embrace me with a tight hug. I would then...aah! That's when I had a painful realisation. I would not experience Abba's warmth. He had left me a week ago to be with *Allah*. As much as I wished that it was not real, it was the inevitable truth; a surge of uncontrollable tears spilled out of my eyes. It was not the first time someone had left me. Ammi had died too. Abba had not told me when or how. It must have been a really long time as I did not have even the faintest memory of her.

I tried to blink my tears away as I stared out of the window. We were nearing Jammu. I could hear chants in the distance. The rhythmic chugging of the wheels and the sonorous chants caused me to drift into a short nap.

I awoke with a start when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Sharmila mausi. I had befriended her in Mumbai, at the old age home where I worked. She was accompanying me on the journey, as she too wanted to visit her homeland, her Kashmir.

"Hum pahunch gaye!" she exclaimed. She was back in Kashmir-her Kashmir-from where she was forced to leave, during the exodus of the Hindu pundits. Now that she had returned, her happiness knew no bounds. Behind me, she scuttled around trying to gather her belongings...

¹ 'If ever there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here', Quote of Moghul emperor Jahangir on Kashmir.'

While doing so, she bumped into someone.

"Arre, Dekh kar chaliyega!" he cried.

His voice sounded familiar. I recognised it, but wasn't able to put my finger on who it was. Then, it hit me. I turned around. For a minute I couldn't believe my own eyes. I knew I wasn't mistaken. It was certainly him...Him... My best friend. My only friend. Long lost. It was Vikram.

I rushed out. I had to talk to him. "Vikram," I screamed. He turned around and on seeing me, he dropped the bag he was carrying. Our eyes met and for a split second, memories of my childhood came flooding back

Chapter 2:

It was 1989 - the year insurgency erupted in the valley. As a young boy of thirteen, I remember yearning to go out and play to my heart's content, hang around the market place without haste. However reality was completely different. We knew only one word - curfew and our lives revolved around curfews and more curfews. I realised that what happened on the street did not just stay there; it entered people's homes, their minds, and forced them to go in search of answers only to be left with many more questions. The ordinary lives of very ordinary people like me turned out to be a casualty in an undeclared, continuing war...with no end in sight. The nights were spent listening to the piercing sound of gunshots and during day I would sit hoping and praying for a miracle, a sense of normalcy. But even I knew, it was only a farfetched dream...

I would wonder...WHY?? Why were these two communities always finding ways to put each other down and gain supremacy? What was the point of this constant fight? And who was the REAL enemy? Who were we fighting against? Every time I asked Abba these questions, just for a minute, I would catch him thinking, deliberating; however, the very next second he would get irritated and tell me to move along as he was too busy in his shop.

That reminds me...Abba's shop! It was our own shop and we sold beautiful hand-woven carpets, shawls, rugs, saffron and nearly everything "Kashmiri". Along with Vikram, my best friend, my only source of solace during that period of turmoil, I would go to the store and watch the artisans work their magic. They would weave, embroider for days-even months- to produce carpets, whose beauty and design, colours and vibrancy were enchanting. Vikram and I would try to make something on our own, sending Abba flying into a rage.

Abba was also grappling with a greater worry. Post insurgency, the number of tourists visiting the Valley had dipped. Our business, needless to say was affected, and Abba was getting anxious. Any store that opened and did business

became the target of the insurgents. Tourists stopped coming; workers quit; Abba couldn't transport carpets outside of the Valley. He did try to manage things on his own... Poor Abba! Then the incident occurred. I vividly remember the day...it was 1st of May. The day started off as any normal day.

Vikram and I walked to school unobtrusively past the hordes of Indian soldiers flanking the paths. They were a common sight in our valley. They were literally everywhere-the Jamia masjid, the Jyitheshwar temple, the market place....you get the idea. It was almost as if their constant presence controlled our lives. "Why are they here?" I would often get irritated at their sight. We were enveloped in not only distress, but also anger towards them. This anger reached its peak on that night. Houses were set on fire. People were charred to death and their belongings reduced to ashes. Abba's *dukaan* was unfortunately one of them. Oh! The grief of watching his shop burn to nothing...

Muslims and Hindus rushed to attack one another. People were being beaten up with sticks and they were throwing stones at each other, without knowing what they were aiming at. Vikram and I were mute spectators of the futile fight. No one knew who the culprit was. As the two of us just stood there holding each other's hands tightly, a thought struck me answering my queries: *What we really should be fighting against - is animosity and greed.*

I wondered when these people would figure this out. All we have achieved so far is creating rifts, and with each gunshot heard, each insurgent arrested, each soldier ambushed ..the rift only widened. The word 'Kashmiriyat' no longer seemed to have or hold any meaning anymore.

As I stood there, lost in thoughts, I failed to grasp that Abba was slowly taking me away from Vikram. We were no longer holding hands. Vikram was crying, screaming. I tried to break free from Abba's firm grip. It was then that Abba declared something that would change my life forever. "Promise me," he said, "You will have nothing to do with him, ever again." I tried to get , only to be held back tightly. The tears were now spilling out uncontrollably.

Then it dawned on me. I wouldn't be holding his hand for a long time.

Chapter 3:

"Abba! Please don't do this to us. I at least deserve an explanation. Why did you pull me away from Vikram?" I pleaded for an answer. I knew that Abba had never been too happy about my friendship with Vikram as his father had once made derogatory comments regarding my father's business. I also intuitively knew Vikram's family tried their best to tolerate me for Vikram's sake - I mattered to him, so they put up with me. I once again begged for an answer. A tear escaped from Abba's eyes on hearing my fervent cries.

"Saif, they are evil. You shall stay away from them. They set fire to our shop." Abba barked and he angrily stomped away. I was too stunned to speak. "Vikram's family? His father and uncle? Or was it the bhaiya in the store? How could they?" They had taken advantage of Abba's naiveté and expressed their hatred toward him by setting his shop on fire.

I was worried. The heavy, humid summer air only added to my discomfort. As beads of sweat formed on my forehead I reflected on our close bond. Would it ever be the same again?

I remembered the good times we had shared. I reminisced about the first time we had met. It was in July. The rains had just started. Although Abba had told me not to go out alone, the 'rule-breaker' that I was, I did exactly the opposite. Of course, he punished me when I got back home that day. But for once it was worth it.

It was raining. I saw a boy of my age standing under a chinar tree, waiting for the rain to stop I guessed. What a coward, I thought to myself. Who would want to stand under a tree when they could be playing in the wonderful rain? I ignored him and continued to splash about. It was only later when I moved closer that I saw the blood oozing out of his left knee. I rushed to him. There was no time for introductions. Blurting a quick *salaam* I asked him where he lived.

"Ram Nehru *ke ghar*," he replied in a meek voice. From his tone, I could make out that he was in severe pain. My heart went out to him immediately. Without any further questions, I helped him onto my bicycle and we set off to his house. This however was no ordinary journey- it was the beginning of our friendship.

"How old are you? About my age, perhaps. I am so glad to have a kid my age in the neighbourhood. I finally have someone to play with. Life was beginning to get so boring out here. Now that you've come..." I looked at him with a twinkle in my eye. It was only then that I realised that he hadn't said a word. I had been rattling on this whole time. *Arre!* Talkative me! I hadn't even asked him his name.

"My name is Saif, what is yours?" I asked, nearly running into a tree. I stopped and steadied myself, looking at him.

"Vikram" he replied, his tone bespeaking his innocence and then unexpectedly he burst into tears. Not knowing how to react, I awkwardly patted his back and asked him what the matter was. "I...I've never really ... really had a friend before." he wept copiously. I started to laugh at this statement. "I'm your friend silly!" I said, holding out my hand to him. His face instantly lit up.

On reaching his house, Vikram introduced me to his family. I remember the words - simple, yet so powerful. "I just found a friend. My best friend. Saif." and winked at me.

Best friends we were! We went on to become inseparable. In the days which followed, we shared our lunch, snacks, and all our secrets. I remember sitting on the compound wall, eating plums and pelting the seeds at certain "fortunate" passers-by and putting on our most innocent faces as soon as they threw accusing glares at us. He was my *chhota bhai*.

Not only did we have fun together, we also shared a deeper bond. We knew everything about each other. Some days, we would just discuss our greatest fear... separation. We had heard and witnessed that boys had missing from the neighbourhood and the most shocking was the frequent attacks on temples and masjids. I was terrified, and knew that Vikram was also grappling with the same fear. On the days when violence prevailed, both of us would hide in his attic, gripping each other's hands tightly for comfort.

Memories...evoking pain in my heart, too hard to bear. I was shattered. I was furious! How fair was it that we had to suffer the consequences of a fight triggered by adults who clearly weren't familiar with the concept of settling issues through dialogue? It's a real art. The so called 'mature' adults' ability to turn even the smallest of events into a huge fuss and wipe out precisely what family and love stood for.

Every day, since that night had been a living hell for me. What made it worse was that Vikram was right there. I had to eat my food all alone. I had to bicycle to the market place alone. No Vikram sitting in the backseat, chattering away! Once in a while, I would catch a glimpse of him in the store or being shuffled away to the market place by his dad. Our eyes would meet, and in that split second we would see in each other's eyes, immense anguish at the separation.

Months passed. Abba had taken on the job of a *chaaiwala*. As I sat at the window sill of his tiny shop I would ponder about the worsening situation. All efforts to pacify the fighting groups and engage them in meaningful dialogue had failed. Firing would be heard from time to time, each marking the death of a fellow Kashmiri. The thought that Vikram could be one of them gave me sleepless nights.

We were so close... yet so far.

Chapter 4:

I was sitting at the windowsill of the *chai* shop. As I looked out I saw a Hindu family leaving the valley. It was not the first either. Over the months several pundits had been fleeing to Jammu. Abba told me that they lived in refugee camps. "They deserved it", he would sometimes say in anger. Other times, I would also see him saddened and dejected as I would hear him say, "One more family has left... one more family has lost its battle." I was thinking about all

this when I heard a group of men on the street talking about the night when my father's shop had been burnt down. I strained my ears to catch their conversation.

"The time has come for a second attack. Undoubtedly, we shall succeed...much like the last time. The *chaaiwala* still thinks it is Ram Nehru who burnt down his shop." a certain man rambled on. I was too stunned to pay attention. It had not been Vikram's family after all! I dashed to my father and blurted out everything. He was shocked. He dropped the glass he was holding and both of us ran to Vikram's house. We had to apologise.....

We found the house locked. It was too late. Vikram had left for Jammu and nothing could be done about it. I collapsed and so did Abba. He cried out ...for what, I still don't know.

"You need to go to Mumbai. Srinagar is no longer safe. Salim chacha will meet you at the station." Abba said through tears. When I asked him why he was not coming with me, he explained in four words: Kashmir is my homeland. He had lived in Kashmir all his life. He shared an emotional bond with this place, one that he could never cut off.

Though I desperately wanted him to come along, I understood his dilemma and hence did not question his decision. Instead I simply left my birthplace. My Kashmir. No longer a Paradise, yet my home.

And so started my journey.....to Mumbai.

Chapter 5

Finally I reached Mumbai, the city that never sleeps. I was amazed to see the sea of people at the station. Salim chacha met me at the station and he took me to his home. The house was small and though I knew I would feel cramped in such surroundings, I thanked chacha. I had no other choice as I had left Kashmir with very little money and did not know anyone else in the city.

I spent the first few days exploring the vast city. One day, I would go to the Gateway of India, and the next day it would be Haji Ali. Coming from Kashmir, a town in which justice and civil rights were just mere terms, where curfews were a routine, Mumbai seemed just the opposite. People were free to do whatever they pleased and there was no one to police them. One could roam the streets at any time of day, without being answerable to anyone. People were so caught up in their own lives that they did not bother to notice whether you were Kashmiri or a Bengali or Muslim or a Jew. Ironically, Mumbai seemed more of a paradise to me now, than Kashmir ever did!

After a week or so, chacha told me that he had found a job for me in Jeevan Aasha, an old age home. I started working there as a gardener. I was to tend the garden and also take care of the residents.

At the old age home, all the important festivals - Id, Diwali, Ganesh Chaturti, Christmas - were celebrated in a grand manner, and with tremendous joy. And though I participated by helping to decorate the home in anticipation of each festival, I couldn't bring myself to join in the activities. I would watch the people sing and dance, offering prayers to their various gods and I would feel nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was the same with cricket matches. While the residents would be cheering for India, I would just stand in the corner, expressionless.

It was during one such match that I noticed her. She was fair and small, with a cloud of white candyfloss-like hair. She sat in one corner of the TV room, knitting silently. The people around were cheering enthusiastically; India had won a crucial match in the series... I did not know which one and did not bother to find out. I watched this scene as an outsider, totally unmoved.

Suddenly I felt a pair of eyes on me; I turned my head only to see the old woman in the corner intently staring at me. No words were exchanged, but in that one moment, I felt an instant connection. We nodded imperceptibly to each other and that was that.

The next day, after finishing my chores, I went into the administrative office to find out who this old lady was. She was Sharmila Pundit, a 72 year-old Kashmiri Brahmin - who had lost everything. She had been living in the refugee camps of Jammu when a kind army official helped her get to Mumbai and placed her in the old age home. She was a model resident - neat, punctual, undemanding, helpful and kind. She hardly ever talked and preferred to remain silent.

Since she was from Kashmir like me, it was almost as if we were related. I took to seeking her out every day; we would nod to each other in the corridor. I would pluck the most delicate rose from my garden and silently hand it to her at lunch. She accepted my daily offering as if it were the most natural thing to do. Sometimes, she would come into the garden, sit on the verandah and watch me work. I felt protected by her presence.

And so our relationship grew over the months. I would often talk to her while working, telling her about my life and family that I had left behind. She got to know about Abba, our shop, what happened to it. I also talked to her about Vikram. She never uttered a word, but her eyes were expressive, she listened to me and understood all that I had to say.

One rainy afternoon, I was sitting in the verandah with mausi, when I got a call from chacha who gave me the shocking news. Abba was dead! He can't just leave me alone in this world. He just can't, I thought. Tears endlessly rolled down my cheeks. Then, I felt mausi's soft hands stroking my hair. I just lay there, with

my head in her lap. I was shattered... Abba! I suddenly got up with a jerk. I knew exactly what I had to do. I wiped my tears. I must go home, to my Abba, to my Kashmir. But how? Just then as if she had read my mind, mausi spoke to me for the first time.

"Beta," she said, "I will take you home."

Chapter 6:

Now I stood at the platform looking into Vikram's eyes. Was life giving me a second chance? One loved one taken from me; another given back. I smiled. Unfortunately, I couldn't say the same about him. He had recognised me, no doubt. But from the expression on his face, I knew that he wasn't pleased to see me. His eyes had a strange glint.... They flared with anger. He seemed so... different. This was not the Vikram I knew.

"*Abbe Saale!* What do you want now? Haven't you tortured my family enough? You took away our respect and dignity in the valley; we lost our status in society. My life is hell! Are you happy now? Some friend you are."

"I...I didn't know." I stammered.

"Well how would you know? As soon as things started getting out of control, you conveniently disappeared. Did you bother coming back here even once? To see what had happened to the place you once called home? After you left, nothing remained the same. You don't understand my anguish, do you? The pain of getting separated from my home." he charged at me, his fist ready to pound my face.

"VIKRAM!" I shouted. With all the strength I could muster, I held him at bay. I wanted to scream, I am your best friend, idiot, but something, someone rather, stopped us. It was mausi.

The absurdity of the situation struck me. Best friends once. Sworn enemies now. I came all the way from Mumbai ...for this? For more fights, for more violence? I just collapsed on the platform. I could not control myself. Tears started gushing out. The fights, violence, helplessness, lost friendships, lost childhood. The one person who cared for me was gone. The one person who I thought would care for me... was right in front of me, unwilling to forgive me. I had no one. I had no place to call home. I started to cry.

"Abba passed away, Vikram." Talk of being a man... all the anguish, the loss, the angst... I couldn't take it. I began to sob like a little boy. "I have lost everything, Vikram." I could sense Vikram's hand on my shoulders, "I too have lost ... everything, Saif." Tears swelling in his eyes.

I heard mausi say with a faraway look in her eyes, "In a war like this, there are no winners; only losers."

Three lost souls in a land we call home...

Epilogue

"Ask a Kashmiri what makes him a Kashmiri, and the answer will be kashmiriyat. Ask what it means to be a Kashmiri, the answer will be practicing 'kashmiriyat'. Try again and ask what kashmiriyat is and you just end up wondering when the reply comes: it is unique to the Kashmiris. Of course! Central to any discourse on Kashmir is the idea of kashmiriyat, which is understood to be a tradition unique to the region and which transcends religious trivialities, while upholding cultural harmony." words of Manisha Gangahar, describing appropriately the feelings a Kashmiri had towards his motherland.

This sense of being a Kashmiri is a thing of the past. Who is the enemy? Is it this man or that? Who can I trust? Should I trust anyone at all? All Kashmiris wonder. These questions continue to haunt every Kashmiri who lives.

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