

एक था भारत

'India Was One'

A Book Review by Jennifer Kumar



India is a diverse country and one of its mottos is 'Unity in Diversity'. This clichéd theme can bring together all Indians or even drive them apart along linguistic, regional, cultural, geographic, religious, caste, sect and countless other borders.

This complex theme coupled with the search for a single Indian identity is a theme I pick up from the book "India Was One" by the anonymous writer known only as "an Indian".

The story narrates the theme through the two main characters Jai and Kahani who meet in college, fall in love, get married and like many other Indians in their socio-economic and educational bracket, end up moving to America. Jai being from South India and Kahani from North India represents the quintessential bringing together of the cultures of North and South India.

For those who want to understand some of the background and mindset of the diversity in India, this book will fill in many gaps. Throughout most of the book, these gaps appear not to be filled in by the characters' dialogues, thought processes or narration of external scenes, but by a third party akin to a tour guide. For someone new to the Indian context, this kind of narration can be helpful to understand some of the dichotomies, intricacies and 'everyday'ness of India.

Capturing the characters' emotions and approaches to life felt more natural to me as a reader once Jai and Kahani began their journey from India to the US. Moving between cultures and countries always conjures up emotions and takes people out of their comfort zone. This was well highlighted in the characters once their global journey began. The most memorable character from my point of view would be Mr. Shah, Jai's employer who helped them settle down in their first few days in the US. Mr. Shah was akin to Jai and Kahani's "cross-cultural coach" who, once they landed in the US, took them around and oriented them to subtle details of the American ways. This character was able to offer the accounts of the lifestyle and culture through the word of mouth of a character, which made it more interesting and natural to the development of the story.

After some of the 'dream life' in the US; completing some Desi tourism and making an American friend, that's when Jai and Kahani learned of India's north-south divide and rushed back to India to be with their family. The climax and ending of the story will keep any reader hooked through the chaos, emotion and drama that ensues. Everything that begins so fast without any warning also ends in pretty much the same fashion. The reader is left in a state of mixed emotions wondering if the conflict has really been resolved or not.

The author's post script and reflections offer the readers a lot to think about regarding India, the Indian identity and the struggle to pass on an Indian identity to the generations to come, who over the years may lose touch with India and its rich, diverse, complex and beautiful culture. ■

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 Can love really conquer all?  
 Can love bring together diverse  
 cultures that seem at times to  
 mingle only out of necessity,  
 but at other times to be  
 forcefully territorial about their  
 differences and claims of  
 originality?  
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Author Jennifer Kumar is the founder of Authentic Journeys Consultancy based in Kochi, India. An American, she provides cross-cultural and soft-skills programs to IT professionals working in global teams. More at: <http://www.authenticjourneys.info/>