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*Keep off the grass*

KARAN BAJAJ

*keep off  
the grass*

KARAN BAJAJ



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*keep off  
the grass*

## KEEP OFF THE GRASS

An Indian Bestseller. 150,000+ copies in print.

HarperCollins India

### SYNOPSIS & EXCERPTS

What do you do when you are a 25-year-old Yale graduate earning half a million dollars a year as a hotshot investment banker on Wall Street?

You stay the course, and become a millionaire by thirty, of course.

Not if you are Samrat Ratan, born in the USA to immigrant Indian parents; you quit and embark to India on a search for your roots instead.

Samrat's roller coaster journey in India starts from the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Bangalore, and almost ends in an Indian prison cell where he is jailed for possession of marijuana. Along the way, he develops a dangerous drug addiction, meditates in the foothills of the Himalayas, encounters flesh-eating Aghoree saints on the banks of the Ganges in Benares, indulges in a bizarre one-night stand with a Danish hippie in Dharamsala, and has many other mystical Indian adventures.

Does Samrat – Yale valedictorian, investment banker, convict, drug addict – survive to tell this crazy tale? Read Karan Bajaj's hilarious yet introspective debut novel, KEEP OFF THE GRASS, to find out.

### AN EXCERPT FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

I spent many evenings watching the daily arti on the Benares ghats, mesmerized by the lights cast by the thousands of diyas on the water, and the sound of bhajans sung by impassioned devotees. They have so little, I thought every time I heard them, yet they have so

much to thank God about. And here I am, a rich, fat, selfish bastard who has everything, but can't stop complaining. Everything but happiness, I would remind myself. But what is happiness, and why does it continue to mock me? I have never been a religious person, but the mystical artist did rouse something in me, and I desperately wanted to believe in the existence of a higher truth than the one I knew.

The ghats provided their fair share of bizarre experiences as well. One night as I sat staring transfixed at a funeral pyre long after the crowds had dispersed for the night, I heard a sudden movement from the pyre. Benares has a reputation for being a dangerous city at night, and I had been forewarned that taking midnight strolls on the ghats was begging for trouble. But I'd smoked some strong stuff and was acutely lethargic. The abrupt movement which had attracted my attention seemed to be caused by a thin, white ghost emerging from somewhere around the pyre. His tall, angular body was covered with ash, and he seemed to be gliding towards me. I wondered briefly whether I was hallucinating because of the marijuana, but quickly dismissed the possibility – I was a committed stoner by then, and had smoked way more before.

He stood beside me now.

'Do you have a cigarette?' he asked in perfect English, with a trace of an American accent. Clearly he sounded more like a man than a ghost. But then, how does one know how ghosts sound, I thought? My heartbeat returned to normal though as I looked closely. It was a breed I recognized well – an American pothead hoping unsuccessfully to discover missing pieces of his soul in India. I saw one in the mirror every day, after all. I offered him my new favourite cigarette brand, India Kings.

'Ah, I like it,' he said after taking a small puff.

We kept silent for a while – what small talk do you make with an ash-smearing white American yogi who just appeared out of a funeral pyre?

'Where are you from?' he said finally.

Uh-huh. For me this wasn't the easiest conversation starter. I decided to stick to Manhattan for this conversation.

'Well, then we are from the same country,' he said, 'I was born in Texas, and even

worked as an investment banker in Manhattan for a while. Great city. I tried to have a bite off the Big Apple, but I guess I couldn't digest it.'

I looked to see if he was pulling my leg but he seemed serious. I wondered if I would become like him one day – streaked with ash, meeting fellow confused souls on the ghats, and telling them about my banking days. That would be a sad end to my odyssey, I thought. But then again, maybe not. This dude's eyes shone with obvious pleasure and contentment. He looked...he looked almost happy, although it could well have been the ethereal lights from the remaining diyas. I was intrigued. He obviously knew something I didn't know. I racked my brains wondering how to sustain the conversation. He appeared completely comfortable and calm in the silence. Finally, for fear of losing him, I asked.

'Pardon me for asking but I thought I saw you come out from behind the funeral pyre. Was I mistaken or were you praying there or something?'

'Or something,' he replied vaguely.

I looked at him puzzled. I wasn't expecting him to be evasive. What could you possibly be hiding when you are buck-naked and smeared with ash?

'What were you doing there if I may ask?' I pressed expecting to hear about some complicated Indian prayer that helps achieve salvation.

He replied nonchalantly, 'I was hunting for flesh. Fingers, to be specific. Those are my weakness, very delicious. I finally found some that were not charred by the fire, and am carrying them with me now. Do you want to see one?'

I was stunned, convinced he was either a psychopath or a lunatic or both. I was planning my escape now.

He must have sensed my panic because he continued calmly, 'Look, I don't expect you to understand – your sphere of comprehension is very different. I am a part of the Aghoree sect, which you probably haven't heard of. Don't worry, we are not going to sacrifice you or kill you or something.'

I was hardly reassured. 'What is the Aghoree sect?' I asked, curious despite myself.

He replied, 'Aghorees wander from place to place, looking for human remains because that is all we eat. We believe that everything that comes from God is an expression

of his love and beauty. By feasting on the darkest, most repulsive of His creations, charred human remains, we show our devotion to all creation.'

By now, I was shivering with fear, and my terror grew when I saw one more Aghoree baba, his body smeared with ash as well, walking towards us. Maybe he had a toe fetish or a tongue fetish. I didn't care to find out.

'Jai Shambu Baba. I must take your leave now. It is late – you can keep the rest of the cigarettes,' I said.

The white baba smiled an eerie smile as I almost ran from there convinced that I had encountered a crazed cult of lunatics.

'Serves me right for wandering around stoned so late in the night,' I thought to myself as I rode through the empty streets trying hard to stay calm and not fall off my bike.

Back at home, I shakily downed several pegs of Scotch to calm my nerves. Soon curiosity got the better of me, and I went on the Internet connecting via the excruciatingly slow dial-up that I had installed in the room. I searched with various combinations of Aghoree and found that the sect was concentrated around Benares because of the easy availability of human remains there. I would have made a particularly good dinner, I thought, since I had become really fat on the rich Indian food in the last year. For all my confusions, ending as a value meal (zero procurement cost) for a bunch of ash-smeared yogis was hardly the solution I was seeking. My nocturnal wanderings did slow down significantly after the incident, although it didn't make me stop getting stoned at the ghaats. Only now, I did so in broad daylight and full public view, the fear of flesh-eating Babas far outweighing that of spending time in a prison cell again.