

HEART OF DARKNESS



Forced out of Kashmir at gunpoint, Kashmiri Pandits live in squalor, filth and despair in refugee camps in Jammu and Delhi.

Sumita Chakraborty reports on the plight of people from the valley of tears.

Kashmir. The Switzerland of India. It's mountain air is crisp and invigorating. It has awesome green mountains, verdant valleys, apple orchards and blue lakes on which *shikaras* glide like expert ice skaters on frozen sheets. This is a beautiful land. This is also a brutalized land.

Since 1990 more than 400,000 homeless Kashmiri Hindus — men, women and children, targeted by the violence of Pakistan-aided terrorism, have fled their homes, to emerge as a new clan — 'the refugee', bundled out of Kashmir like herds of sheep into cloistered, squalid camps. The worst hit in this holocaust of



The Kashmiri refugee camps are not only overcrowded and squalid; they are unsafe too.

terror are the Kashmiri women.

According to Dr K L Chowdhury, chairman, Political Affairs Panun Kashmir and president of the Displaced Doctors Association, "Kashmiri women have borne the brunt of living in exile as refugees in camps, in and around Jammu and Delhi. They have to fend for three generations living in one tent or a windowless room of 12 feet x 12 feet. It falls on the women to look after the old and infirm and kids suffering from deprivation and malnutrition. Consequently, they have forgotten about their own existence. Deprived of basic amenities like water and electricity and totally devoid of medicare, they have had to make do with a measly dole of Rs 500 per head, per month and a maximum of Rs 2,200, whatever the number of members of the family. In these conditions, women have been crusading for survival. They have to cart water and fill buckets in the summers. They also have to protect the family from snakes, scorpions and human predators."

The Indian government over a period of years has hastily arranged several make-shift camps for the

Kashmiri refugees in Delhi and Jammu. Named Muthi, Purkhoo, Mishriwala and Nagrota, these camps comprise canvas tents offering little or no privacy for its inhabitants. "We believed that the Indian government and our Hindu brethren would stand by us in our time of need. But look at the squalid conditions we live in. Very few officials have actually come to visit us. It is almost as if they have left us to die," says a bitter Veena Mattoo, an inmate of the refugee camp in Jammu.

The tents are roughly 10 to 12 sq feet for a family. There is no privacy at all and they offer no shelter from weather changes. The grounds are damp and there are marshy water patches all around the camps. There is scarcity of basic sanitation. In fact, the toilets built inside have been built only at the behest of the inmates of the camps.

"These camps are unsafe for women. There have been numerous cases of young girls being raped and killed. So many girls have committed suicide, unable to bear the atrocities," says Neerja Mattoo, spokesperson of the Daughters of Vitasta (western zone), the female wing of Panun Kashmir.

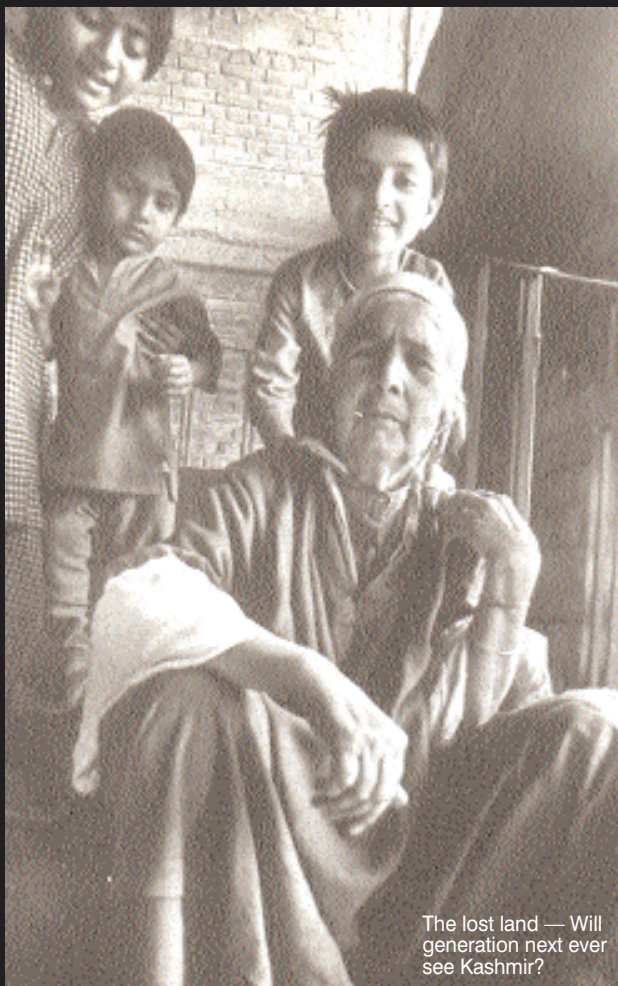
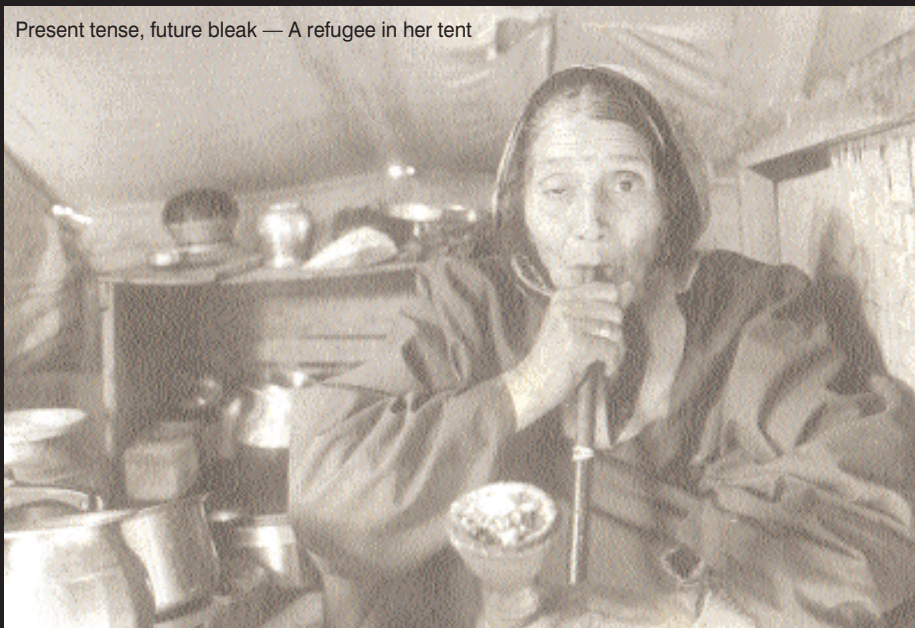
"These camps comprise scholars, engineers, doctors and others. We have highly professional men and women with us. There is no privacy, lack of hygiene and a lack of medical facilities. Our women have to go through the ignominy of bathing or using the same filthy toilets the men use. It would have been better to die with a bullet in our backs than depend on our government,"



"Am I a refugee in my own country only because I salute the Indian flag, believe in the Indian Constitution and am a proud Hindu from India? Is that why the government is so insensitive to our plight?"

Dr Agni Shekhar

Present tense, future bleak — A refugee in her tent



The lost land — Will generation next ever see Kashmir?

says a disillusioned Vimal Kumar, a chemical engineer, now a refugee in the Jammu camp.

“Am I a refugee in my own country only because I salute the Indian flag, believe in the Indian Constitution and am a proud Hindu from India? Is that why the government is so insensitive to our plight? We are not migrants. We have been displaced by terrorism. Our women are being tortured, raped and killed, why is it that nobody cares?” asks Dr Agni

Shekhar, convener and president of Panun Kashmir.

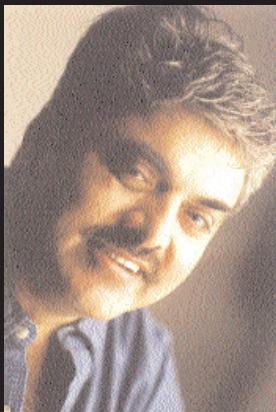
“We had to flee from our sacred land to save our lives almost overnight. One day we received intimation from terrorists to leave Kashmir. They told us that Kashmir, where we lived for decades, is not ours. We were outsiders and it belonged only to the Muslims. They claimed it was a part of Pakistan, not India. We were told to leave immediately, otherwise they would kill us and burn our houses,” cries 53-year-old Kamna Kumar. Living in a refugee camp in Delhi, her tent is a far cry from the palatial house she was used to in Kashmir.

Ashok Pandit, spokesperson of Panun Kashmir (western zone), laments, “The government has added salt to festering wounds by treating the Kashmiris like ‘invisible’ refugees, insensitive to our cause. We have been thrown out of our own home due to the atrocities of Islamic fundamentalists but there has been no positive action taken against them till date.”

“We had to leave Kashmir immediately. We had heard alarming tales about how the terrorists kidnap women at gunpoint and force them to marry them or just rape and kill them.” — Kiran Bhatt

Kiran Bhatt, a Kashmiri Pandit residing in Mumbai, whose father was forced to leave Kashmir says, "We had to leave Kashmir immediately. We just gathered up a few of our belongings and left our homes overnight. We had heard alarming tales about how the terrorists kidnap women at gunpoint and force them to marry them or just rape and kill them. How innocent men are whisked away into the blue and found writhing with pain with some of their vital organs cut off or their corpse found amidst the rubbish with most of their vital organs carved out. Many relatives have seen their fathers, husbands and sons shot dead in front of them. We were lucky to come out alive."

"The government has sold our tears. Our people languish in refugee camps and our Prime Minister invites General Pervez Musharraf, who is responsible for this carnage, into the country for talks? Pakistan induced terrorism has killed so many Hindu men, women and children and India spent crores to wel-



"The government has sold our tears.

Our people languish in refugee camps and our Prime Minister invites General Pervez Musharraf, who is responsible for this carnage, into the country for talks?"

Ashok Pandit

come the man who has propagated the killing of innocents. Look at the attitude of the Indian government to our people. They push the Kashmiri Pandits into barely livable refugee camps and then forget all about them," says Pandit.

A study conducted by the Jammu-based Dr Chowdhury, showed that more than 60 per cent of the inmates of these camps were suffering from some disease. These comprise skin diseases, psychiatric disorders, stress etc. "Most women suffer from diseases of the bones and joints, osteomalacia, osteoarthritis, anaemia, malnutrition, skin diseases and infections. Stress-related

diseases are rampant and so is depression. 20 per cent of adult women suffer from high blood pressure and another 20 per cent from diabetes," explains Dr Chowdhury. There have been three major epidemics that have raged through the refugee camps over the years. In 1991-'92 an epidemic of drug resistant typhoid broke out amongst nine per cent of the inmates in Jammu. In 1994, dengue afflicted almost 7,000 refugees while in 1997-'98, hepatitis E epidemic broke out in Jammu afflicting nearly 1,500 refugees. All these epidemics could have been avoided if proper hygiene and sanitation had been taken care of.

The Kashmiri Pandits have been declining in numbers over the years. In 1993, amidst 4,105 camp inmates, 108 deaths were reported, birth rate was merely 42. 1995 was particularly bad. In the Purkhoo camp, the death rate was 200 as a result of several diseases due to lack of hygiene, and birth rate was an appalling five. "Is there any privacy? We share our

tents with our parents and children. This is where we change our clothes and this is also where we eat and cook. How will the birth rate increase in these camps?" asks Renu Pandit, an inmate of the Jammu refugee camp. "The worst suffering is that of deprivation. The Kashmiri Pandit woman's sexual life is at a standstill. She has neither the conducive atmosphere nor the desire for sex. Stress has caused premature aging and an arrest of sexual functions. She suffers from premature menopause. Because girls marry late, the total fertility span is shortened.

They choose not to bear children for if they cannot fend for themselves, the question of bearing kids does not arise. More people are dying prematurely, from unnatural causes. The population of the community is thus fast shrinking and we are faced with the spectre of extinction," says Dr Chowdhury.

Auschwitz is a nightmare the world would like to forget. But it must not be allowed to forget that Kashmir refugee camps still exist and something must be done about these 'invisible' people. Their cries of suffering must not be silenced by the sound of the terrorist's guns and bombs. ■