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REFUGEES

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A decade after fleeing the Kashmir Valley, thousands of Hindus despair in Jammu camps

PRABHA PRABHAKAR BHARDWAJ, JAMMU, INDIA

Hopelessness is in abundance here in Purkhoo Camp in a dry, rocky river bed a short distance from downtown Jammu. When I last saw this place, five years ago, it was comprised of rows and rows of army tents, one per family. Now there are small, single-room concrete "houses." Divided by torn saris, one corner serves as kitchen, another for sleeping and living. Some enterprising families have made small kitchens outside in the space between the narrow street and the room wall; some have grown plants in the three-foot square dirt patch beside the building. It is a demeaning life to brahmins used to comfortable houses and gardens.

In the first house I'm invited to visit, I meet Sanjay Kumar and his family. Sanjay has just completed his class 12 exam, while his sister Sunita is studying in class 10. He has four older brothers, all with degrees, including one masters in economics. Sanjay lamented, "There are no jobs for Kashmiris. Jammu Hindus have been kind to us, but they will not forego their

quota of government jobs in our favor, so we have to look for private opportunities or survive on subsidy."

I next met Mr. Mohan Lal, aged before his time. He and hundreds of thousands of others fled the Kashmir Valley in 1990. He used to cultivate rice and had a fruit orchard. His three daughters and three sons have all been married since then in the camps. The community understands each other's constraints and organizes marriages in a very simple way without causing financial hardship to any party. When he first came, the government gave each family of four Rs. 500 (^{us} \$10.64) per month. That has since been raised to \$51/month, plus a supply of rice and wheat flour. But still, Lal said, "Our condition is going from bad to worse. The Jammu quota of government jobs is separate. Even though such a big population of Kashmiri pundits has been shifted to Jammu, the quota for jobs remained in Kashmir and has now been given to Kashmiri Muslims. It is not fair." "In reality," he went on, "the militancy is not of Kashmiri origin. The militants are brought from Afghanistan and elsewhere."

At Purkhoo Camp alone 1,500 of these one-room quarters with common facilities have been constructed. The residents complained of rampant corruption. They said \$8,510 was allotted for the community hall, but less than half of it was actually spent. I witnessed the deplorable construction quality myself. They complained about the lack of adequate health care and

medicines, but acknowledged that the education facilities for their children were adequate. Because of the quota problem, there are not enough jobs, even for the educated. Some young men were offered jobs as police constables, but the pundit community does not regard policing as a fitting profession. They would rather work as teachers, but there are no vacancies in that field. Rich Kashmiris who own big businesses or industries have shifted to other parts of India or even migrated abroad. Those without resources, jobs or opportunity elsewhere remain dependent on government relief in these camps.

Mrs. Somavati, a middle-aged woman, was very vocal about their condition. "We are beggars in our own state, our own house. It is wrong to call us 'migrants.' We did not migrate by choice. We were displaced because of adverse circumstances. Everything changed for us when we crossed Banihal [the pass at 9,300 feet halfway on the main road between Srinagar and Jammu], we left our food habits, our special taste, our culture behind. We are not living; we are merely existing. But in this *pardes* ["foreign land"] we Kashmiris still have one common identity."

With an extremely painful expression, she added, "Even birds do not leave their nests willingly. Where is the hope for us? Circumstances will not change, the situation is getting worse."

I met Mrs. Veena, who does not live in the camps. She is one of the lucky few who found a government job in Jammu and can afford a house at Ban Talah where she lives with her family. She no longer draws the relief money or supplies.

Mr. Mohan Lal Bhat, President of Migrant Camp said, "What is there to go back to? In these twelve years there are no jobs left for us. Our houses have been burnt and the land has been occupied. We are alive because we are educated and have strong willpower. When we first came, we thought it would be for only ten or fifteen days, and did not bring anything with us as we did not want to disturb our house. Now so many killings have taken place. Our only hope is if the exile of Lord Rama in the forest lasted fourteen years, maybe ours will also finish in that time frame."

There are two more camps like Purkhoo and Migrant, plus the Geological Survey of India building in Jammu. This was commandeered by the refugees in the early 1990s and housed hundreds of people when Hinduism Today's staff visited the unfinished concrete shell in 1995. Now there are 32 families, often with three generations of members, living there. They get a government grant of \$17 per adult and rations of rice and wheat flour. I asked them if they want to return to Kashmir. Mr. Pyarelal Dhar replied, "Where and how can we go back? When even the Chief Minister of the State travels under high security. How can we feel safe? We want to go back, but only when law and order is restored. In 1990, we owned businesses. I had a house in Rajbagh and during one night, when attacked, we had to escape to save our lives and the honor of our families. How can we go back, when the law-and-order situation remains the same?"

Mr. Ravi Zutshi, representative of the Joint Migrant Forum, brought into focus a new issue. "Some Muslim families have been brought to Jammu and given migrant status," he explained. They then are eligible to receive the same relief money and

ration as we do. After establishing this status, they go back to Kashmir. Then each month one of their family members comes to Jammu, collects the relief money and rations, which he sells, and returns to Kashmir. The Central Government should have a team here to control this." Mr. R. L. Raina suggested to me, "The Central Government should take strong steps, as there is no improvement in our condition. There is corruption among the relief organizations, and the procedures for receiving cash and ration are tedious. At times I feel I have lost even my citizenship of India. I feel I have no rights anywhere."

Personally, I felt totally helpless to see these refugees suffering in the city in which I grew up. One group, upon learning a Hindu journalist had come, assembled to see me, expecting a miraculous, instant solution to their problem. But I could not reassure them on even one account. The leaders of India, Pakistan and the world need to find a solution to this Kashmir issue. A whole new generation is being brought up in the appalling conditions of these refugee camps. It is a great downfall from their ancestral heritage

reflected in the Urdu couplet, "Ghar firdaus bar
ruhe aamin ast, hamin asto, hamin asto."

Translations can never match the original, but it
means approximately, "If there is heaven
anywhere on Earth, it is here, in Kashmir."