

COMMENT

They Call it Paradise

KASHMIR MEANS VIOLENCE. People are familiar with cross-border terrorism and army atrocities. Partial withdrawal of Armed Forces Special Powers Act is not going to buy peace as the valley will remain a potential source of new recruits by dozens of insurgent groups because of abject poverty people face day in and day out. While the ruling elites of Kashmir get rewarded enormously from the Centre's liberal economic packages otherwise aimed at wooing the aggrieved toilers find it increasingly difficult to meet both ends. Only the other day a young man was killed and two others injured when Central Industrial Security Force personnel opened fire to disperse protesters agitating over power shortage in the Boniyar area of Baramulla district in the Kashmir Valley. So 'people are now being killed even for seeking basic amenities'. In reality army and police rule this valley of death and ironically it continues to enjoy the heritage tag—paradise on the earth—to tourists.

The depth of poverty most Kashmiris live in cannot be guessed from afar. Tourists don't see it and the authorities simply ignore it. They are happy with their ever increasing perks and privileges.

Afflicted by violent conflicts for over decades, Jammu and Kashmir, where children comprise half the population, is one of the poorest states in India. Average life expectancy is 45 years, and a quarter of children die before age five. More than 70% of J and K's population burn solid fuels such as wood and coal in their homes. Consequently, J and K is one of the top states worst affected by indoor pollution. Women and children suffer the most, as they tend the fires burning from wood, crop waste, charcoal and dung, which cause noxious smoke and blacken walls. As temperatures drop below freezing point, scarce food, light and warmth become grave problems. There are numerous cases of kerosene lamps bursting, in J and K, since they were placed too close to a family's wood burning mud stove. Besides the threat of burns, heating and cooking create smoke, which is killing people in the far flung areas of J and K state. Open fires continue as there is a lack of awareness to the problem, limited research to health risks, lack of affordable improved stoves or fuels that reduce exposure to unsafe levels, and non-availability of electricity. Inhalation of coal, wood and straw smoke, arising from heating and cooking in homes of J and K is resulting in carbon monoxide poisoning, respiratory illness and lung cancer.

Around 3000 people die annually in the state of J and K due to indoor smoke and over 500 suffer burns. Not so many people die in terror-related violence these days. Militants do hardly require much ideology to mobilise support in their favour. Despite all their tall talk about development programme and economic rehabilitation of the misguided youth the ground reality remains as grim as before, always recreating a political situation in which violence is the logical

outcome. Kashmir is not merely a law and order problem and yet the Sultans in Delhi and their subedars in Sri Nagar can think of more of the same—more funds for counter-insurgency measures. □□