

White Lies



The harsh winter in Kashmir has frozen the essentials of life. Writer Justine Hardy, who has spent many winters there, talks about what lies beneath the carpet of snow

When the Pandits left their homes in Kashmir in 1990, one of the things that they found the cruellest to bear was the harsh climate of the plains

beyond their valley. The heat consumed them, burning them up as they grieved for their lost homeland. In refugee camps in Jammu and Delhi, they spoke of the cracking of their hearts as they had been driven in trucks through the Banihal Tunnel, cutting under the Pir Panjal range that marked the boundary of their valley.

When members of that same diaspora see the images coming from Kashmir's winter now, the white beauty of the snow tugs at their emotional umbilical cord, their visceral connection to the valley. But when they read about what the people here are living through, they look out on the Delhi fog, or onto a warm afternoon in Mumbai, or from a well-hearted apartment in New York, and they know that there is a lot about Chilla Kalan, the cold heart of Kashmir's winter, that they do not miss.

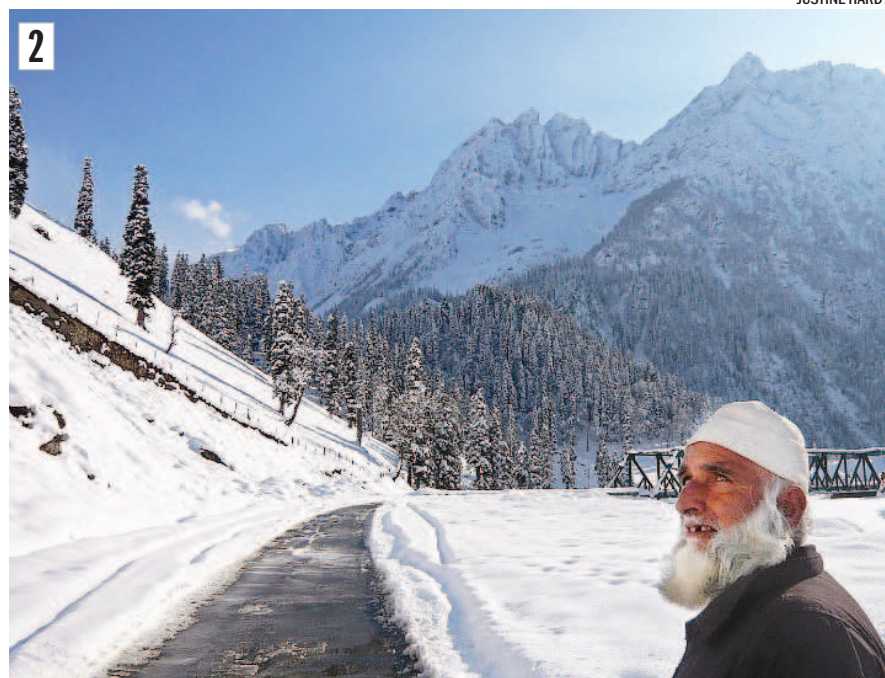
When the first big snowfall reached the valley floor on the night of 5th January it had been a strangely mild day. Some of the tourists who had come in search of Winter Wonderland complained to their hoteliers and houseboat-owners, asking where the snow was. Kashmiris looked at the sky and knew what was to come - the strange warmth so often being the harbinger of a heavy snowfall at this time of year.

A dear Pandit friend, in transit from Massachusetts to Delhi, emailed me as she was travelling. 'Why are you there?' she wrote. 'What karma are you trying to pay off?' She has a point, though when I look at the hardships that I face while living in the valley, near Nagin Lake in Srinagar, they dwindle into insignificance when compared to those living out in the rural areas here.

That first big snowfall knocked out power, water, phone lines, and the Internet for several days in Srinagar. For the first day we all looked out at silent whiteness, the pure covering that hid so much of what is ugly beneath it: uncollected rubbish, nalas running with sewage, stagnant water bodies. We all greeted each other with 'Sheen Mubarak!' (Happy Snowfall!) and a collective enthusiasm kicked off merry snowball fights at any opportunity. By the second day of the power outs, the novelty was wearing off.

We drove out to a village four days after that first big fall, a small place a few hours beyond Srinagar, on the road to Charar-i-Sharief, the shrine town of Kashmir's poetic patron saint, Noor-u-din Noorani. Our mental health rehabilitation project here is running a series of basic mental health awareness programmes for Anganwadi workers at their centres all over the state. We had an intern working with us from the US, and the team was keen that she see village life in Kashmir, first hand.

We were stopped at a village just a few miles outside Srinagar. The road had been blocked off, and a bonfire built in the middle of this main thoroughfare between Kashmir's summer capital, and the towns and villages to the southwest of the city. It

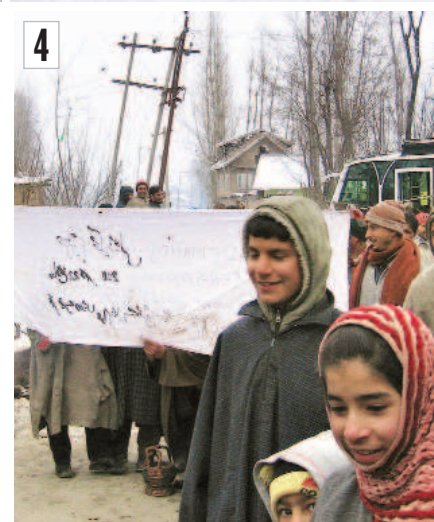


JUSTINE HARDY



(Top left) Snow being pushed off houseboats roofs (top right) houses around Gulmarg. 1. An apple orchard 2. Snow on the road to Sonmarg 3. A stranded tricycle 4. A relatively good-humoured protest

was a protest, and a well-executed one. When we tried to backtrack, and wiggle through the back allies of the village, we found each route also blocked off. We returned to the main road, and joined the protesting crowd. Though they were vehement about their problem, the crowd was full of women and children, people were chatting by the bonfire they had built, warming their hands, their backs, and cold bones. There relative good humour was surprising. Their protest was because they had not had power since 22nd December. It was by now 10th January and the highest day temperature since the 5th January



had been -2°C , the nights going down to around -7°C , and that was in one of the warmer areas of the valley floor. Three weeks without power and still the villagers were able to smile when warming themselves around their protest fire.

When we eventually reached the village where we were running the programme we asked the Anganwadi women whether any of them had family in some of the less accessible, higher reaches of the valley. Some of them did, and they said that because this winter was so hard those higher villages would probably be cut off until February, maybe some of them into March. The chances that they had of power were almost nil.

Our project treats people suffering from depression and post traumatic stress, both things common by-products of the valley's troubled story. These are the ugly cousins that come with any extended period of violence. The brutality of the winters here exacerbates the problem. Suicide figures, already a constant reminder of Kashmir's recent history, climb during the long winter months. Bitter cold eats into the psyche as well as compromising the immune system. Anyone who has tried to function in a place where keeping warm is an almost full-time occupation can empathise with the current situation here. The brain simply does not function very well, tempers are frayed, and tolerance levels drop.

☞ Suicide figures, already a constant reminder of Kashmir's recent history, climb during the long winter

The truth of sub-zero temperatures, and the icy whiteness that they preserve, is that there are two very different sides to the silence of snow. The first is of snowmen, snowball fights, Nagin and Dal lakes, elegantly draped in white, the houseboats like floating dolls houses in a romantic winter's tale, the images of happy tourists, bundled up, hardly able to move in multiple layers of wool, faces lifted to the falling flakes, eyes wide, alive with delighted laughter. The other side of the story is of painful deaths in isolated villages, along roadsides, in snowdrifts, hypothermia being a slow and cruel killer, shutting down the organs as the blood drains deeper into the body in an attempt to maintain some kind of core warmth, trying to protect the sensitive heart and brain.

It is hard to imagine that something as beautiful as snow can have teeth, but his winter in Kashmir, the soft flakes falling around us have a sharp bite.

Justine Hardy is an author and psychologist. Her most recent book on Kashmir, 'In the Valley of Mist', is published by Random House India. For more information on the mental health project in Kashmir, see: www.kashmirlifeline.org