

Michael Palin

BBC travel presenter in his book *HIMALAYA* gives an account of travel to Kashmir and he writes:



MICHAEL PALIN

The Indian government has 600,000 army and security forces in Kashmir their ubiquitous presence has coarsened the city and compromised whatever beauty it might have had. Apart from bunkers and armoured patrol cars, there are barbed wired and sandbagged surveillance posts, sports pitches that have been turned into army camps, and I'm told there's is not a single cinema operating in Kashmir's capital now. All have been requisitioned for military accommodation.



GREENWAY HOTEL

On the corner of the busy main street, Lal Chowk, and opposite the heavy fortified Telegraph Office stands the Greenway Hotel. Two weeks ago two suspected 'Islamic' militants hole up here and withstood a siege for 20 hours before police (Indian army) blew the building apart with mortar fire. Ten people were killed and 40 wounded and the Greenway now consists of little more than a half a roof, scorched black walls and a crumpled framework of charred and blistered timbers. Around this time this happened six more people were killed when a car blew up in the vegetable market.

It's not cosmetic, either. Within a couple of miles of this aqueous paradise 16 people have been killed by bomb and bullet in this last month alone, and to the figure can be added another 60,000 who have died in Kashmir since the conflict began.

Dal Lake in Srinagar would give many paradises a run for their money. Except that this one is in Kashmir, where, nowadays, heaven and hell come pretty close. If anything, Dal Lake is even more beautiful in the rain.

After the partition of India, all 565 Princely States, comprising 100 million people, were required to sign instruments of accession to the newly formed country. What Kashmir different was that 80% of its population was Muslim.

Hari Singh (The Hindu Dogra ruler) hummed and hawed and eventually decided, two months after independence, (and not without some heavy pressure from Nehru) that his state would stay a part of India.

Srinagar (the capital city) must have been a handsome city once. There are still many tall, steeply gabled, half timber, half-brick buildings, a few onion domes and a magnificent mosque with roofs, turrets and spires with echoes of Russia and lands to the north