

## Those Who Remain ...

*These are extracts from a report by Nagrik Ekta Manch volunteers who worked amongst the riot victims who had taken refuge in Nanaksar Ashram, situated beyond Timarpur, north Delhi.*

AT the peak, there were about 502 Sikh families from Nand Nagri, Yamuna Vihar, Bhajanpura, Khajori, Gamri, Maujpur, who had taken refuge in Nanaksar, which translates to about 3,250 people. We watched with growing admiration how the Swamiji of the Ashram, along with two people, Mr Sharma and Kanwalsahib, and perhaps three dozen *sewadars*, managed enormous *langars* and allocated sleeping areas.

When we exchanged notes with volunteers at other camps, it became clear that the Ashram had probably the most efficient internal organisation to distribute food and shelter. If the Manch volunteers have succeeded to any extent in Nanaksar, a very large part of the credit goes to the Ashram. Working there has been and continues to be a pleasure.

As anywhere else, the most pathetic and pressing cases have been the 107 widows. One has only to meet Harbans Kaur,\* whose husband and four sons were killed, and see the tragedy etched in the wrinkles of her face. Or for that matter, two young widows, both under 25, each with a baby two weeks old, without a single earner to feed them. Or the woman who was married four months ago or the one heavy with a child who will never see its father. Or Amarjit, a 15 year old girl who has been orphaned.

Two sets of facts are of primary importance. First, the 107 widows have merely 33 income-earning

\* Names of the victims have been changed to protect their identity.

supporters and against this, there are 207 dependants, excluding the widows. In other words, each income earner must, on an average feed over 10 mouths. In normal times, it would have been five or less. Second, 77 per cent of these widows have no income earners at all and have, excluding themselves, 177 dependants. Thus, without any steady source of income, they have to feed over three mouths each, on average.

These two facts are worth remembering, from the point of view of long term rehabilitation, especially since the amount given as compensation for a death is a paltry Rs 10,000.

The problem of relief pales into insignificance when compared to that of rehabilitation. There is the problem of fear, the problem of memories, the problem of nowhere to go and no one to earn. The magnitude of the problem comes out in a single incident that occurred during the week starting Monday, November 5, 1984. A young widow sneaked out of the camp, went to the Yamuna and attempted to commit suicide by drowning.

To begin with, almost every widow refuses to return, and very justifiably so. This does not mean that most of them want to go to Punjab. Many have been in Delhi for years on end and do not have close enough family ties or relatives on whom they can make impositions in Punjab.

Widows are not the only ones reluctant to return to their residential areas. Those whose houses were gutted and who saw the worst horrors of mob frenzy have no desire to relive



them in their localities. In Khajori and in Gamri, as well as C block, Bhajanpura, people fear Kadam Singh, Jaina Gujjar, Kesri Jaggi, Tunda Jain, Khemu Gujjar and Ratan Singh, and wish to have no truck with them. In Nand Nagri, no one had returned to A3 Punjabi Mohalla as of November 19, because in nine cases out of 10, the houses that remain are merely burnt out facades.

If they do not want to return, where are they to go? It is clear that the amounts disbursed by government can help in no way at all. For instance, if a man has escaped death and his house has been totally burnt, but the roof has not caved in, all that he gets is Rs 5,000 on state account. Even if he wants to return, this would not suffice even for wiring, cleaning and replastering the house.

Obviously, the more serious problem is that of the widows. In fact, there are two main problems, those of income and of insecurity. It is clear that with the pittance they have gotten as the price of life and livelihood lost, the money will peter out in no time. As we have mentioned earlier, 77 per cent of widows in Nanaksar have no earning members left and have to feed, on an average, three mouths.

In many places, widows have indicated special skills, particularly sewing and knitting. It would be a

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good idea if aid agencies and banks give loans on very concessional terms to set up cooperatives, according to charters determined by the widows themselves, to purchase equipment. Thereafter, the Delhi administration or the government can supply them raw material and take the finished products, for which they can be given conversion payments. The goods can be sold in government emporia or through other marketing outlets.

As far as the wide, overwhelming problem of insecurity is concerned,

the answer is both simple and complex. There can be no viable macro solutions to this problem. What it needs is a moral commitment of every single one of us, who have worked with the Manch or otherwise, to take the responsibility of four or five such widows and their families for at least the next half decade. We will have to spend some part of our time per week with them wherever they are in Delhi, and help them whenever they need assistance. This might mean getting them ration cards, arranging for death certificates, helping them to move in,

helping the children with their homework, getting the aged ones kerosene, getting people jobs, liaising with *mohalla* people on their behalf, going to their festivals, inviting them over, advising them on financial matters, laughing with them, crying with them, drinking tea with them, playing with their kids, sharing our lives with them to the point that when they see us coming down the crooked lane they know that there is a friend. Without this, rehabilitation is a word for drawing-room conversation.

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