

Travel and Treks in Kashmir, Zaskar and Ladakh

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We landed at Srinagar, my first visit to Kashmir almost after two decades. There were police and army pickets all around for protection. The banner said 'Enjoy the beauty, we are on duty'. It must be hard and dangerous job. The famous Moghul gardens and Dal Lake appeared to be an apology for its past glories. We spent two days at Gulmarg, walking and climbing to acclimatise. The view of Nanga Parbat remained elusive. Our next halt was at Sonmarg- the meadow of gold. The famed walk and visit to Thajiwas glacier was a nightmare- at least about 200 tented tea shops, mules and garbage was all around. Same at Baltal, the starting point for the *yatra* to Amarnath cave; security, large tent colony and garbage!

In mid-afternoon we stood on Zozi la, not a pass in usual sense of the word. It is a passage through the Himalaya where the range has flattened and a long passage allows the road to go through. We stood on the road had 'Charlie Moment'. Dr Charles Houston, a legendary American climber, had crossed Zozi la in 1938 on way to K2. When he heard that we will be passing this Zozi la, albeit now by vehicle, he offered a book of poetry to his good friend, Dr Thomas Hornbien, who was with us. He read a poem from the book.....'I am the captain of my ship and I am the master of my soul'. A day earlier we had talked to Charlie from Sonmarg. It was a poignant moment for all of us with memory of our 97 year friend Charlie.

Dras was a small town with a large Mosque standing in bazaar. Kargil, few kilometres ahead was as dirty a place as you will ever see. Between the two stood a wonderful memorial as tribute to the officers and jawans of the India army who had fought in the 'Kargil War'. Names of all the soldiers, 530 in all, who made the supreme sacrifice are written here. Surrounding the memorial were the very same mountain ranges where the war was fought; Tololing Ridge, Tiger Hill, Rifle Horn, Major Batra peak and host of other points.

30 km ahead of Kargil our road bifurcated to go across Sapi la to Gyal. Next day our trek started. First day itself was killing. We climbed up almost 700 m to camp at foot of Rusi la. Spending a rest day to acclimatise next day Rusi la was reached easily. To our south stood Nun and Khun massif- never seen in so much clarity. To the northwest was K2 and Masherbrum, a peak that was climbed by Tom Horbein. The descent to the north was gentle but long and next day we reached the Phu valley at Bartoo. I had trekked in the Himalaya where Buddhist and

Hindu cultures flourished. In this valley it was fascinating to observe Muslim villages. Nothing was different though, same type of houses, gentle and hospitable people working in field and. Instead of temples and monasteries these villages had mosques and children when asked their names would say they are Bilkis Banu and Shafi Ahmed. There were white flags fluttering on ridges, like thankas flags atop Buddhist houses. They called it 'Koran Thankas' – instead of *Om Mani Padme Hum*, as in Buddhist Ladakh, it had names of Allah written on it. They all fluttered in same air as worship to same god.

In two days we were at head of the valley at Ichu village, so underdeveloped as if forgotten by all. The route to Wakha la, further ahead in the valley, was blocked by high river water, while Hang la in the south was snow bound and not fit to be crossed by loaded animals. So we returned to camp at some exquisite forest and returned to reach Sankoo, a large town. The drive to Ringdom, via Pannikhar and Parkachik. We drove to Pensi la and back to Ringdom. It was a one of the finest 'mountain drives' one could undertake with several challenging peaks observed in each of the side valleys. Ringdom monastery was small but located at significant place. The sad part was the chorten at its entrance in memory of three lamas who were shot dead by terrorists few year ago, now prompting establishment of a permanent army post in the holy precinct.

The trek to Kanji la was rewarding as the trail crossed a fast flowing nala, crossed a gorge and finally in a long day, crossed the 5480 m pass, unfortunately without much view. One more camp and we were at the ancient village of Kanji with four old monasteries full with paintings and statues almost 900 year old. Some of us continued the trek across two high passes while we left for Lamayuru and caught up with them at Wanla. Last night was spent at Timisgam, the seat of Namgyal dynasty, kings of Ladakh. At the fort here the famous 'Treaty of Timisgam' was signed centuries ago. It delineated the borders between Ladakh, Spiti and Tibet which is still holding today.

The last journey was to Pangong lake in all its beauty. But with many cars driving here for day-visits its environs are threatened as they drive till edge of water, create garbage and camp on the shore. On this alarming note we were back at Leh to participate in the Himalayan Club gathering at Leh to discuss the same problems.

