

A collective rush to the windows ensues as soon as the mountains are sighted from the aircraft. The sight of the mountains from the aircraft is awe inspiring and beautiful at the same time. As every passenger takes out her mobile to take a photograph, there is an announcement by the cabin in-charge informing everyone that taking photographs from the air or at the airport is forbidden. Not that this stops anyone but it is a chilling reminder that the usual rules do not apply to Kashmir.

I am going to Kashmir valley after more than 3 decades and obviously expect to see a lot of changes. We land and taxi at the Srinagar airport and the plane is immediately surrounded by armed men. Strangely for all the security, we are made to walk some distance from the plane to the terminal.

The road from the airport is relatively empty, it being a Sunday. We are on our way to Gulmarg, the meadow of flowers about 65 kilometres from Srinagar. The houses along the road are invariably large and well kept. Though I thought this must be the case because this might be the prosperous part of town, I was wrong. I was told later that houses in the valley are usually much larger than other places. I did see some evidence of this even in the villages on the way.

The highway to Gulmarg is very well maintained. All of a sudden one sees fully armed jawans, wearing bullet proof vests every few hundred meters. What is more, these frightening looking men are on many rooftops also. Reminds one of the SPG routine whenever the PM travels to the airport in Delhi. I ask Abid, our driver and he tells me that some army convoy must be due to pass on this road. The road is sanitized by the security forces and then they are deployed along the way. The driver also points out the police academy which was the site of the horrendous attack a few months ago.

I saw the same scenario repeated several times. This is Kashmir- where the ordinary police also carry carbines. Where there are fully armed security forces everywhere one sees. Where bulletproofed, *khaini* chewing paramilitary jawans sit on rooftops of shops and houses along the roads to maintain vigil. And yet the ordinary people tell me that the situation is normal. I guess after more than two decades of what the Kashmiris have seen, this is the new normal. I encountered a similar sentiment in Kabul where if there was no major incident for a week, the people would claim that there is normalcy-notwithstanding the constant, obtrusive presence of heavily armed security forces.

Abid is about 20 years old and hence in that dangerous age bracket where every Kashmiri is suspect in the eyes of the security forces. He is very evasive when I ask him about the security situation and gives a stock reply of things being normal now!

There is habitation all along the way with small villages and towns. Walnut groves, a few apple orchards, fields where the wheat crop has been harvested. In about an

hour one reaches Tanmarg, the place where the climb to Gulmarg starts. We stop at Tanmarg to get some water- the market is a typical small town affair with one noticeable difference. There are no shops selling alcohol! And thereby hangs a tale more of which later.

There is another thing one notices all over the valley- the chemist shops are not called medical stores or medicine stores or simply chemists as everywhere else- they are So and So Medicate! It is only much later that I realised that a Medicate is not just a medicine store. It also serves as a consultation room for doctors who come at fixed times.

Another thing which is noticeable in Kashmir- even the smallest hamlet has several well qualified doctors (holding postgraduate degrees) practicing. This seems unusual since one would imagine that well qualified doctors would prefer to practice in the bigger cities as is usual in other places. Instead, even in a small tehsil town I found many clinics, Medicates, and indeed nursing homes.

The drive from Tanmarg to Gulmarg is very scenic. The road though narrow is well maintained and winds up through Alpine forests and meadows. Gulmarg is a major army station which is the base for forward posts on the Line of Control. And so one sees more than one carbine mounted army Gypsy. The person manning the carbine has a commando dress on and has his face covered- I presume to foil identification. One is reminded of the days of the strife in Punjab when the police used to move in a similar fashion.

The Royal Park hotel in Gulmarg is situated at the very end of the road. This is the road that is Gulmarg for most people- loads of hotels, shops selling handicrafts (advertising their wares not only in English but also in Gujarati!) and other stuff and hundreds of ponies! On one side is the hillside and the other side the meadow from which the town gets its name. The meadow side is fenced- I could never find out why. But one is not allowed to drive into that area unless one is staying at one of the many hotels (which includes the ultra fancy Khyber) inside the fencing. Or one could pay 50/- to drive there but has to be back before sunset.

The fenced area includes the army station as well as the famous golf course and the golf club. The sight is truly beautiful though the senses are overwhelmed by the smell of horse dung which is all pervasive. There are possibly upwards of 1000 ponies in Gulmarg. There is a pony owner union which sets the rates for hiring the ponies.

Strangely, the main door to the hotel is locked! And we are led in through the kitchen. Apparently, this is true for most hotels in Gulmarg. The Environmental Agency has cracked down on the hotels for violating pollution norms and sealed all of them. However, as it turned out, all of them were still in operation, of course with the main entrance locked and sealed!

The high point, literally, of Gulmarg is the so called gondola ride. This is a ropeway which in two phases goes up beyond Khilanmarg. The ropeway is the major tourist attraction in the place since it offers a panoramic view of the mountains and the meadows. I tried to find out about the ropeway and getting tickets for the ride. As is usual, every single person I asked, including the hotel manager, the shopkeeper and the guides, gave me a different answer as regards the timing of the rides and also the time the ticket window opens. One thing everyone though seemed to agree that the last ride was at 3pm. Since it was past three already, we decided to wait till tomorrow.

The other tourist attraction at Gulmarg is the Shiva temple whose claim to fame is that it is the same temple where Rajesh Khanna and Mumtaz got high on *bhang* and sang *Jai Jai Shiv Shankar*. In the film, the temple appears to be at a great height while in actuality it is only about 30 steps! The wonders of technology!

The next morning we get to the ticket counter for the gondola ride. This being in the fenced area, one has to walk about a kilometre from the road where the car can be parked. Expectedly, there is not a soul at the counter. Several people are hanging around who again seem to have different opinions on whether the ropeway would run today and what time the tickets would be sold etc. At this point, I am totally frustrated and I wander into the operations office of the ropeway. Here, after being shouted at by various uniformed guards (this being out of bounds for unauthorised personnel), I manage to get to the manager. In an extremely nonchalant manner, he informs me that the ropeway has not been in operation for a couple of days and would not be operational for several days due to annual maintenance. When I meekly suggest to him that this might be publicised so that people don't waste their time, he is very cross and tells me it has come in today's newspaper. Of course, the newspaper comes to Gulmarg only in the afternoon!

With the matter settled, the next best thing to do is to take a pony ride upto Kangan Dori, the midway stop on the gondola ride. The trail meanders through the forest and several forest villages. The pony owner informs me that it is maintained by the army since this is the route used to supply forward posts. The pony owner is from Baramulla. In the summer season he offers pony rides. Gulmarg is one of the few places where the tourist season runs all through the year with skiing in the winters. In those long winter months, the ponies are herded and kept inside and he offers snow sledging.

He stays at Baramula- about an hour and a half's walk or pony ride. He commutes every day and tells me how he is frequently accosted by security forces who expectedly harass him and sometimes extort money from him. The economics of ponies that he explains does not look very lucrative, though I suspect I was deliberately misled in the hope of a bigger tip!

Bakhsheesh. This is possibly the word most heard by a tourist in Kashmir. This is understandable since tourism (together with handicraft and horticulture) are the only sources of livelihood left in the valley. However, and this is what is strange, for a people who are so dependent on tourism, they are unusually aggressive. I got a taste of this when I tried to give 100/- to the person who brought the bags from the room to the car in Pahalgam. He took the money but immediately started abusing me in Kashmiri to his colleague. I of course didn't understand the language but could understand what he meant.

The pony ride to Kangan Dori was treacherous- especially the last kilometre or so where the incline was very steep and one wondered if the puny pony would just collapse. But we reached Kangan Dori, a small plateau on top of the first range of hills. Grassland and an idyllic setting with looming mountains on three sides. I was helpfully told that this was the place where several films, including Dharamveer were shot. This is something one hears at every location in the valley though. In fact, a valley near Pahalgam, whose official name is something else, is now called Betaab valley after the eponymous Bollywood film was shot there!

There are several small streams running out of a depression which is called seven springs because presumably seven underground springs come out here. The ponies are tired and thirsty and are left to graze and drink water. There are several shacks advertising food and snacks. Interestingly, some of them advertise pure Jain food presumably for the hordes of Gujaratis who have started descending on the valley. Every one of them serves that staple of convenience, Maggi noodles!

The only other people there are a group of Bengalis. It is fairly hot in the sun and yet, as expected, they are well clad for any eventuality! The mainstay of tourism, of the not so high-end kind in Kashmir seems to be Gujaratis and Bengalis. From what I see, the Bengalis typically travel in larger groups and hire a Tata Winger (20 seater bus) to move around. They stay in cheap lodges and are usually careful spenders. In fact, in Srinagar, during my morning walk near the Dal lake, I saw a young Bengali arguing with a shopkeeper and buying 20 plastic glasses, half a litre of milk and some sugar, presumably for making bed tea for the contingent! The Gujaratis are, surprisingly, more easy with spending money and are also much more brash.

At the hotel in Srinagar a Gujarati group of young couples and several children descended late in the evening. They went straight to the garden from the taxis and started a party! One of them, in a caricature straight from a Govinda film (complete with dark glasses and white shoes) was actually carrying a two-in-one portable stereo playing Mika Singh songs at full volume! And I thought portable transistors and two-in-ones had gone the way of black Bakelite electrical switches since even the rickshaw wallahs in my town, who used to listen to Vividh Bharti on a Murphy transistor perched precariously in the basket on the handle bars, now listen to lewd Bhojpuri songs on their mobiles!

Refreshed with tea at Kangan Dori, we start the climb down. This time I decide to walk rather than risk the pony ride on the steep incline. After an hour long walk, we get back to the car and start the four hour long drive to Pahalgam.

The route to Pahalgam is via Srinagar and Anantnag. As we pass Srinagar and take the Srinagar-Jammu highway, the lifeline of the Kashmir valley. The traffic increases substantially and there is continuous habitation. After a few kilometres we pass through seemingly empty fields. Miles and miles of fields where there doesn't seem to be any sign of any crop. Our driver informs us that these are the famed saffron fields of Kashmir. Saffron plant grows very close to the ground and when it flowers, sometime in late October, the flowers are picked and the stamens or saffron threads harvested. As soon as the fields end, there are hundreds of small shops, each advertising pure saffron (and dry fruits).

The road also passes through a green tunnel – a long stretch with tall trees lining both sides. This is familiar from countless films but still is a beautiful sight. All along the way there are security forces in full battle gear, either sanitizing the route for a convoy or just maintaining vigil on rooftops. We pass some small factories making cricket bats. The famed Kashmir willow I am told is no longer easy to get because of deforestation and strict enforcement of forest laws. So the manufacturers have switched to poplar wood to make bats.

I see a sign advertising some kind of “joinery”. This is a bit intriguing till I realise that it is basically a sawmill and furniture factory rolled into one. Passing Bijbehara, we turn off the main highway and take a road through villages and apple orchards to Pahalgam.

Pahalgam, on the banks of the river Lidder, is in my memory a place with postcard beauty. Three decades ago, the town was truly small with a handful of hotels and guest houses on the banks of the river. Situated at more than 7000 feet, the river at Pahalgam is fast flowing and amazing in its pristine beauty. And of course, the densely forested mountains rising all around were magnificent.

Now the town that we drive through to get to our hotel has a reasonable sized market and loads of hotels and guest houses. I believe the transformation happened not so much because of tourists like us, but because of the tremendous increase in the number of Amarnath yatis. Pahalgam is on one of the routes to the holy cave shrine and till last year, literally tens of thousands of pilgrims would need to camp here and then proceed to Chandanwari about 15 kilometres away.

We check into the hotel Pine-n-Peak (claim to fame- film actors like Ranbir Kapoor, Shah Rukh Khan, Katrina Kaif amongst others have stayed there!). The hotel is located in picturesque surroundings, at the end of town and has a forest at the back. Apparently, this and similar up market hotels are owned by one of the few business families in Kashmir who have grown phenomenally wealthy in the last two decades.

Starting with their traditional business of either carpets or wood, they have diversified into all manner of businesses. During the height of the militancy in the valley, when property prices crashed, these well connected families bought them in what seemed like a fire sale. Then, when tourism started booming again, sold them or constructed hotels and resorts on them. However, like all smart businessmen, each of them has made sure that that they have hedged their bets- in case things get bad, they have houses in Delhi and Jammu and also business operations in many other cities.

The next day, we go to the market and expectedly, almost all the shops are selling handicrafts or Kashmiri shawls and carpets. The standard tourist route is to go to Aru and Betaab valleys. Our driver is a youngster who looks barely out of his teens. He turns out to be an enterprising sort- after finishing his high school in Pahalgam, he did his graduation from Anantnag since that is where the closest degree college is. After doing various computer courses etc. and doing odd jobs as a data entry operator, he started driving taxis while also pursuing a Masters degree in History from IGNOU.

Taxis and ponies seem to be the dominant mode of employment in this place too. And here again, both these are organised into unions. Which means the rates are fixed and so is the number of trips a particular taxi or pony can make. The organisation seems to work well for the tourists since they don't need to haggle, though this also means that taxis from other cities like Srinagar cannot ply on the routes reserved for the local vehicles. For owners, it brings some degree of order since there is no cut throat competition for custom. The driver informs me that his turn has come after sitting idle for 3 days.

The road to Aru is pretty bad. But the beauty of the surroundings is astounding. Aru is a small village about 15 kilometres from Pahalgam which has been called the Switzerland of India. Alpine meadows, mountain streams, snow clad mountains and glaciers. I don't see too many hotels and even fewer tourists. There are a couple of buses with the ubiquitous Bengali tourists though. The driver tells me that the hotels are normally used by foreign tourists who come and stay there for several weeks- hiking, trekking and just chilling out I imagine.

The place is actually quite pretty-and not just in a picture postcard way of unspoilt natural beauty. The landscape is rugged and the trails have a lot of the all-pervasive pony excrement. The J&K Tourism hotel seems extremely ramshackle and even the lavender garden there is in shambles. None of this has of course deterred our Bengali compatriots to enjoy a wholesome mid morning snack of pakoras, tea, Maggi etc. accompanied with much boisterous and loud banter.

We decide to have tea at what passes for the market here which basically is a row of some 10 shops, 5 selling handicrafts etc. and 5 selling tea and Maggi and other assorted snacks. We are joined by an obviously NRI looking couple. The gentleman,

in his sixties is dressed as a canonical NRI. His wife is haggling with a handicrafts shop owner. The handicraft shopkeeper is wearing a Stetson hat which he is also selling! Why anyone would come to this middle of nowhere place and purchase a Stetson hat used by cowboys in the Wild West is mysterious. The NRI meanwhile starts instructing the tea shop owner into how good Kahwa should be made! I presume having come from a country of tea drinkers he saw nothing wrong in pontificating to someone who possibly started drinking kahwa along with his mother's milk! The presumptuous arrogance of NRIs can never be overestimated!

We head back to Pahalgam and onwards to the other tourist attraction, Betaab valley. This is about 8 kilometres from Pahalgam on the main route to Chandanwari and onwards to Amarnath. The valley itself is huge and very picturesque though in a somewhat less natural manner than Aru valley. Maybe this is because the tourism department has made a huge park with bridges over streams and toilets and benches etc. for people to enjoy.

There are many buses parked at the park- School and college students have come here for a picnic. Indeed, there are many picnics going on in the park. The students, mostly teenage girls are crowding around the ubiquitous Maggi and Uncle Chips seller partaking what might be forbidden pleasures.

After walking around the park, we head back to the hotel. I take a walk along the Lidder river and am surprised at the number of guest houses which have come up. There is a well maintained lavender garden on the banks which unfortunately is closed.

Anantnag is one of the biggest towns of the valley and is considered to be the commercial capital of the valley. Located just off the main Jammu-Srinagar highway, it is on the way to our next destination, Kukurnag. Nag in the local language means springs. Anantnag presumably means unending springs while Kukurnag is Chicken springs.

The road to Kukurnag is in bad shape. It is being widened and repaired at many places and so the distance of 40 kilometres from Anantnag takes us around an hour and a half. Kukurnag is on the way to Kishtwar valley. It is the site of the largest fresh water springs in Kashmir. The town itself is fairly small and on the edge of it are the eponymous springs. The springs now form part of a large horticultural garden.

The springs, five of them (hence Kukur like the webbed feet of a chicken) are at one corner of the park. Huge trees of chinar, reetha and other varieties with the waters of the springs meandering in channels are very scenic. The remoteness of the place, the paucity of visitors makes it ideal for lovebirds to meet and expectedly there are many of them sitting and sharing chips and coca cola.

On the way back to Srinagar, we pass Anantnag after which the road improves. Avantipura, a small settlement is the site of two temples. Situated on the banks of the Jhelum, the temples, dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu were constructed in the 8th century. The temple ruins are impressive and well maintained maybe because there are not too many tourists. When we visit it, there is only one group of Bengalis busy clicking away family pictures in the backdrop of the temple. The young girl, in classic Bollywood style insisted on climbing some broken pillar to be photographed- this despite there being clear signs indicating one should not climb them. There is a local guide cum trinket seller peddling his wares. Interestingly, the thing he is selling is not some "I love Kashmir" keychains but flower seeds! I am not sure why anyone stopping at Avantipura would buy Dahlia seeds.

Getting into Srinagar is chaotic. Though we take the route through Badami Bagh which is the Cantonment, there is still chaos on the roads. An army truck parked on the side half blocking the two lane road is common since there are several markets on the road. A sign in one of the markets catches my eyes- "Army personnel not to walk around here". I wonder if this is to prevent the locals from being bullied or to prevent the security forces from becoming easy targets of attacks. The big army hospital on the road is strangely named "Govind Vallabh Pant Hospital". Surely there might have been some Kashmiri icons which were worthy of this honour.

Our hotel in Srinagar is situated in what is the VIP area. One wall is shared with the United Nations Compound (yes, there is a UNMOP contingent in Kashmir to enforce the Line of Control presumably). The other side is the Shankaracharya Hill. From our room one can see the compound of the Chief Minister's residence.

Since it is fairly late in the afternoon, we decide to finish the shopping etc. today and then go for the sightseeing tomorrow. We have been told that there is a government run store where one doesn't have to bargain. And, like all middle class Indians, having that inherent trust in the state to be fair and just , we decide to go there. The store is housed in a huge building which apparently was the British Resident's house during colonial times. The house, like most houses was built of wood and was destroyed in a fire some years ago. It has been rebuilt and renovated in the original style by Intach.

The place is strangely empty , given the number of tourists one sees in the city. So we goad the reluctant salespeople to show us some carpets and shawls and finish this mandatory chore of the Kashmir trip.

I ask the driver about purchasing alcohol. It turns out that there are only 3 shops which sell alcohol in Srinagar since the militants closed all others. And the one closest to our hotel was the site of some shootout the day before! I ask the hotel manager whether it is safe to go and get some alcohol and he is fairly nonchalant about it. I gather some courage and ask the driver to take us to one of the shops.

The gate is heavily armed and we are led into a compound. The whole atmosphere is fairly sinister and I start thinking whether an evening of relaxing with whisky is worth all this. Anyways, I venture into the building to find a huge hall full of tables. There are atleast a hundred people drinking there and behind a caged area is the supply. And it is still only 4 pm on a working day! It turns out that this is not a shop but only a “bar” or what are called “ahatas” in the planes. Places where people can drink and partake of overpriced egg bhurji and peanuts.

The driver then takes me to the shop and the actual experience of buying whisky is not too overwhelming. I stand in an orderly line of people queued up to get to the cage and the shopkeeper from a small opening takes the money and gives the bottle.

The next day is sightseeing day in Srinagar. The driver, who is a middle aged Kashmiri from Badgam is very knowledgeable about the city. The first stop is Chashme Shahi or the Royal Springs. This is a garden built around a mountain spring on a hill overlooking the city. To get there we need to pass the VIP area including the governor’s residence. The security is obviously very tight and there are several road blocks on the way.

The garden is very pretty. This being October, the flowers are in full bloom and the view of the city is breath-taking. I notice that a huge area below the hill and next to the Dal Lake is taken up by a golf course. The appropriation of this prime property in the city by the elite to indulge is depressing though I guess one should get used to it. The Delhi Golf Course, the epitome of elitism has what would possibly be the most expensive real estate in Delhi. Retired bureaucrats and corporate honchos spend lazy afternoons playing golf and sipping gin and tonic.

About 3 kilometers above Chashme Shahi is Pari Mahal. This is a complex built by Dara Shikoh and is supposed to be an observatory though I don’t see any signs of any observation towers etc. The hillside is forested, possibly thanks to the proximity of the Governor’s residence. The complex itself is in ruins and I did not see any signs of any restoration. There is of course, like all other places a ticket to enter. The J&K government has outsourced the collection of ticket money to private agencies. This is possibly the reason why in this middle of nowhere place, parking fees for the car is Rs. 50/-. And since the place is about 3 kilometers uphill from Chashme Shahi, most people drive here which is convenient for the private contractor!

The two famed Mughal Gardens, Shalimar and Nishat are teeming with tourists. The flowers are in full bloom and thus make the gardens look fabulous, despite the tens of photographs being taken of women in Kashmiri dress!

We come back to the Dal lake and drive around it to the Nagin lake and the shrine of Hazrat Bal. The shrine houses a relic of the Prophet and is much revered in the

valley. Since it is time for the namaz, the driver discourages me from going inside. Instead, he takes me to the place where all the action is- the Jama Masjid.

Located in the old city, on the far side of the Dal Lake, this is a huge mosque from where the Friday sermons are frequently followed by some protest march or demonstration and the inevitable police clampdown. The mosque is very unusual since it has prayer halls on four sides with an open courtyard in the middle. The rood is supported by huge wooden pillars of deodar. I am told that the mosque was actually a Buddhist monastery before the ascendance of Islam in the valley.

The mandatory boat ride on the Dal Lake is reserved for the evening time. Our boatman is a well-dressed young man. He has a handicraft shop in Srinagar and another one in Goa! During the winter months, when the tourist influx into Srinagar is low, he and his brother shift base to Panaji and sell handicrafts there. The ecosystem of the lake is very interesting and not just in biological terms. The mobile photographers for the honeymooning couples are everywhere! But then this is something which doesn't seem to have changed in decades- doesn't everyone remember the mantle in the drawing room of most middle class families having a photograph of the lady of the house in Kashmiri dress taken in Nishat Bagh during the honeymoon?

But there are new entrants- small boys selling hot Maggi noodles on their boats apart from freshly made kebabs and of course potato chips and coca cola mostly to boisterous groups of Bengalis and Gujaratis. There are even peddlers of jewellery, of shawls and assorted handicrafts. Our boatman points out a hotel on the banks of the lake which has been taken over by the CRPF. Apparently, the huge security apparatus needs office and residential space. Small and medium sized hotels are taken over on rent by them. Interestingly, there are no functioning cinema halls in Srinagar. All of them were shut down and some are being redeveloped as shopping malls while some have been taken over by the security forces for their use.

We have a couple of hours in the morning before our flight. The driver suggests we go to a place called Badam Bedi, an almond garden on the edge of the city. The place is very well maintained courtesy the J&K Bank which developed it and maintains it. It is amazing that a large bank is involved in several such enterprises- I saw a garish imitation of Appu Ghar in Pahalgam which is similarly built and maintained by the bank. I guess one of the better forms of CSR.

The almond garden is empty and we walk around admiring the almond trees and the pagoda shaped structure in the middle. On one side is the lake and on the other side is the hill with the imposing Hari Parbat fort. This was started by Akbar though never finished and was completed in the 18th century. The fort is out of bounds currently and is occupied by the J&K police.

The road to the airport passes through the famous Lal Chowk and the main commercial centers of the city. About half a kilometre from the airport, we are made to go through a security check with our baggage. The baggage is scanned and we are frisked while the driver waits. I had experienced something similar in Kabul where one has to go through various security checks before the airport, though the laxity of the Afghan security forces is such that it is not clear what purpose the roadblocks served!

It is Friday and so the afternoon namaz is being performed outside the airport. Before the prayers, a local maulwi is giving a sermon to about 150 people. Several of the policemen have joined in the prayers while their CISF colleagues look at them with a mixture of amusement and derision. The area near the gate inside the terminal is packed with BSF men waiting for their plane to take them back to Jammu or Delhi. The plane is delayed and so the men are lounging around occupying all the seats. But, as Abid the driver said, "Haalaat ab normal hain".