

Jammu: A Road less Travelled

By Sanjeev Nayyar

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When I visited the Kashmir Valley in 1988, I was told to visit the Jammu region as well. The dream came true this October. The route was Jammu and around, Rajouri, Poonch, via Mughal road to Anantnag, to Kishtwar via Sinthan Top, Bhadarwah and finally Jammu.

This is one of the most scenic and exciting drives in India, perfect for bikers and car rally enthusiasts. We drove approximately 1800 km through good, stone or mud roads, snow and water streams, all in a 2005 model Tata Indica that unexpectedly served us very well. We visited a border village in Samba that was affected by the recent Pakistani firing. The villagers were happy with the new government's strong response. The BSF Company Commander told us that for the first time in his over 30 years of service, of which over 10 were in the state, the BSF was allowed to give a befitting response. Jawans were motivated.

Whenever there is heavy firing, villagers take shelter in temples, gurudwaras and banquet halls. Food is provided by nationalist and temple organisations. Their biggest problem is inadequate toilets for ladies. The village folk want the Union Government (no faith in the state government) to make permanent shelters and toilets where they can take temporary shelter during firing.

They expressed concern at the increase in missionary activity in Samba and the impact of conversions on the social fabric of the region. When there is a power cut, the border is lit up by diesel powered generators. Why is the government not providing the BSF with Solar powered lights, asked one of the well informed villagers?

Basohli

Basohli, approximately 160 km from Jammu, is well known for a style of painting characterised by vigorous use of primary colours and a peculiar facial formula that prevailed in the 17th and 19th centuries in the foothills of the western Himalayas.

It is from here that this style spread to Chamba and Kangra .We met with members of Vishwasthali, a social and cultural organisation that is striving to keep the tradition alive by teaching young children about the local culture. They cribbed about virtually no state government support and excess importance to Valley. To see pictures of Basohli Paintings <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Basholi-Paintings.aspx>

In Jammu, we met some Kashmiri Pandits who lamented the lack of employment opportunities for their children because of which they were forced to move elsewhere.

They wondered why IT companies like TCS and Infosys did not open development centres in Jammu. The reason, of course, is that the companies will want to own land, which is not permitted according to the Jammu & Kashmir law. They said Jammu could become an

“education hub” for students of Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. They want the central government to take the lead by setting up an IIT and an IIM in the state.

A number of Pandit families moved out of camps to Jagti Township on the outskirts of Jammu when militancy broke out in the Valley in the late 1980s. Notwithstanding allegations of poor quality construction, these families realised they had been cut off from the city. Whether the new state government will treat the Pandit community fairly is a question that kept popping up in the conversation.

Rajouri

In Rajouri, locals said the state government made beautiful gardens in the Valley, but nothing comparable there. I could relate to their anguish; when I asked the state’s tourism office for a brochure on Rajouri and Poonch, they said these were border areas and nobody visited those spots (hence, they don’t bother publishing tourist literature about the area).

Also in Rajouri, we visited the Balidan Bhawan. In 1947, local women and men got to know of the impending attack by *Kabailis* (Pakistani tribesmen) and local Muslims. To see picture of Rajouri including Balidan Bhawan <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Rajouri.aspx>

When death stared at them, the women, with the consent of their husbands, consumed poison. As poison began showing its effects, they got the men to shoot them. When bullets were exhausted, the women requested the men to slit their necks. *About 20,000 people from Rajouri and nearby villages were thus martyred.* To know what happened then <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume1/Fault1-Bloeriatext.htm>. The Bhawan was made in their memory; some pictures depicting those dark days are on display here.

Poonch

Poonch was a Hindu kingdom in 1947. It is known for Shri Dashnami Akhada, the Nangalia Sahib Gurudwara and Budha Amarnath Temple that attracts thousands of devotees every year.

I woke up to a recital of scriptures from loudspeakers atop the *akhada*. Interestingly, here and elsewhere in the Jammu region, temples are allowed to recite scriptures through loudspeakers — a facility that at least Hindus of Mumbai and Uttar Pradesh do not have.

Here locals complained of lack of employment opportunities and consequent migration of Pahari speaking peoples. As the quality of education and environment was inferior to that in Jammu, local students could not compete in state-level competitions; so they want reservations in government jobs for Pahari-speaking people of Rajouri and Poonch. A happy and prosperous border population is the first line of defence against an aggressor.

Poonch is home to a large number of Brahmin Sikhs. There was something very likeable about Poonch and its people. In spite of living in a corner of the country, the people are very aware.

TV and WhatsApp keeps them connected. The culture of Poonch is closer to that of Rawalkot in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and different from that of the Valley. Houses destroyed in the recent heavy rains and flood in Nowshera, Rajouri and Poonch were mostly made of mud. Assistance from the state government was yet to arrive when we visited the place mid-October.

Poonch is home to seven lakes Nadan Sar, Chandan Sar, Sukh Sar, Katora Sar, Bhag Sar, Neel Sar and Kali Dachani, which are at an altitude of over 11,000 feet amidst scenic surroundings. One needs to trek to get there. One hopes the incoming state government will promote tourist visits to these lakes. Surprisingly, love jihad exists in Poonch too. In the last two years there were about five cases involving Hindu and Sikh girls. To see pictures of Poonch <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Poonch.aspx>

Mughal Road

I had read that the drive through Mughal Road (that connects the Valley with Poonch) was awesome, but was disappointed. Locals said that the road, made by the PWD department, was yet to be officially declared open by the state government. To see pictures of Mughal Road <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Mughal-Road.aspx>

Anantnag

In Anantnag, I visited the Surya Mandir (Mattan). It was Kashmiri Pandits from Mattan who met the ninth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur in 1675 to narrate their tale of woes.

This writer met with some Pandits, too, who said if the Government wanted the community to return to the Valley, it must address the reason why the genocide took place. After all, it was the seventh exodus of Pandits from the Valley. The earlier six happened under alien Islamic regimes.

The plight of Kashmiri Pandits

Doles have their limitations. It might be a good idea if the Central Government gave Pandits land and a one-time subsidy for small businesses like hotels, which would become a source of regular income. I also saw deserted homes of Pandits, a grim reminder of what happened in the 1990s.

Entrance to the Martand Temple was blocked by apple boxes. The sign board with a brief history of the place was rusted; what was left of the writing was illegible.

The ruins gave an idea of how magnificent the temple was. There were little or no signs of restoration work. To see pictures of Martand Surya Mandir <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Martand-Sun-Temple.aspx>

Verinag

From Anantnag, we drove to Verinag. It was dark and we almost lost our way. Every time we stopped and asked for directions, here is how the conversation went:

Car stops, the local man first looks at the car number to ascertain where the car is from — JK01 is Srinagar, JK02 is Jammu, JK03 is Anantnag, JK10 is Ladakh etc — peeps in to know if you are Hindu or Muslim, tries to know which part of the country you are from and then comes the advice!

In the Anantnag market, we saw school girls with their heads covered with scarves and a number of young and middle-aged women in *burqas*. During our early morning walks, locals in Verinag and Kishtwar asked whether I had visited Srinagar. When I said no, they looked aghast as if I had committed a crime. Jhelum (Sanskrit name Vitasta) rises from a *kund* (pond) in Verinag. During an early morning walk, I asked a local man how a small stream could cause so much of damage in Srinagar.

He said the stream was joined by smaller rivers but avoided referring to the construction over water outlet channels in Srinagar. In an aggressive tone he asked whether I was a journalist. “Why all this quizzing?” I said I was improving my general knowledge. He smiled and told me the source of Jhelum was a question of the type Amitabh Bachhan might ask in the popular tele-quiz series “Kaun Banega Crorepati”. To see pictures of Verinag <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Verinag.aspx>

Kishtwar

The drive from Verinag to Kishtwar through Sinthan Top is spectacular. The road is good in the Valley area but bad once you enter the Jammu region. The Sinthan Maidan is a great and popular place to camp. To see pictures of Sinthan Pass <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Sinthan-Pass.aspx>

Kishtwar has a 1,000-year recorded history. Its first ruler Kahan Pal was from Bengal who settled here in the period 900-1000 AD. Yet attempts are being made to club it with the Valley when its history and culture are different.

I was suprised to see saffron grown there because I thought saffron was grown only in the Valley. The locals are unhappy here as well. Recently they held a *dharna* (sit-in protest) demanding repair to one of the key roads. In spite of the river Chenab flowing along the foothills of the town and the Dul Hasti power project (390 MW); there is a major power and drinking water problem in Kishtwar.

The town is on a plateau. It is scenic. A policeman who stopped us laughed when we told him we were tourists. “What is there to see?” he asked. Kishtwar is base for many important pilgrimages — Sarthal temple is the temple of Sharika Devi, the presiding deity of Kashmir and Machail Mata Mandir. Devotees will come, as in Vaishno Devi, when there is awareness and infrastructure. To see pictures of Kishtwar <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Kishtwar-City.aspx>

Rambagh

Lastly, we went to the Rambagh village in Jammu *tehsil* (an administrative division). It is home to west Pakistan refugees who are citizens of India but not permanent residents of Jammu & Kashmir. To know Who is a Permanent Resident <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/The-Kashmir-Conundrum-is-like-Abhimanyu%60s-Chakravyuh-7.aspx>. Their homes were damaged during recent heavy rains. However, the state government couldn't care less. To see pictures of West Pakistan Refugees <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/West-Pakistan-Refugees.aspx>

Back to Jammu

On our return to Jammu, we saw a spirited protest by PoK Displaced Persons 1945, 1965 and 1971. They want an immediate, comprehensive and permanent settlement package. Why was this matter kept hanging for 60 years? The Jammu airport security is manned by the state police and not CISF unlike the case at other Indian airports. When I asked a Sikh police officer why this was so, he said in Jammu & Kashmir, it is the Kashmiris who decide! To see pictures of Jammu City <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Jammu-City.aspx>

Here and nearly everywhere, there are plenty of SBI ATMs, which means one need not carry a lot of cash. I left with a feeling that the Jammu region had immense tourism potential 'the people are hurt due to years of discrimination, but live on with the faith '*aache din aayenge*'.

The author is an independent columnist and travel photographer

Also read

1. E book titled Everything you wanted to know about the Jammu and Kashmir problem <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/Everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-Jammu-ad-Kashmir-Problem-1.aspx>