

Fleeting Moments At Pahalgam

It was August 15, I was going to Pahalgam after 23 years. Besides the overriding urge to see a beloved place, I was also keen to see the changes in it, that time inexorably brings to almost everything.

Some very happy moments of my life have occurred in Pahalgam. Human happiness is a very complex thing: it can depend upon the circumstances of one's social, economical, and physical lives; the point at which one is at in one's self-discovery and one's goals in life. Needless to say, being in Pahalgam itself must have been a very big catalyst in those moments.

My van passed Anantnag by the bypass road and almost everything about the road had changed: width, quality, traffic, and shops. The change was so sweeping that I even missed spotting my in-laws' former house. Getting closer to Mattan, I was excited by the anticipation of it, but it never appeared, because we were on a new Mattan bypass road. On the way to Pahalgam we pass by many villages and hamlets. They seem so human and primitive that I felt that I should stop at each one of them, to walk through their lanes, do window-shopping, and perhaps talk with some people. The idea of their simplicity: lack of sophistication, guilelessness, and directness were very attractive human attributes for me, especially coming that I was from a highly materialistic, self-centered, and self-conscious culture. But I was unable to stop and indulge in my fancy due to the paucity of time.

For most of the trip, from just a few miles outside Srinagar to many miles before Pahalgam, there is a backdrop of the high mountains. This special drapery gave not only the particular road I was travelling on, but to the whole valley of Kashmir, a special aura. Just journeying anywhere within the valley is a special treat.

Getting close of the periphery of Pahalgam spurred my excitement high. Suddenly, a corner of the familiar ring of the mountains around Pahalgam appeared, followed gradually by the entire ring. Here I was again in Pahalgam! The incredibility of this fact kept me nagging for several minutes, till my subconscious finally admitted that I was in Pahalgam. We quickly passed through the downtown, a strip of contiguous shops, on an arched road. Within a few moments of passing through the bazaar I concluded that almost all of them had undergone changes, either they were rebuilt or were upgraded. Shop signs announcing Kashmiri shawls and handicrafts swarmed swiftly. Horses, highly emaciated, with or without riders on them, dotted the scene. That there were not a large number of tourists in Pahalgam was no surprise to me, as Amarnath Yatra had just ended, on Aug. 12. The lineup of the big three hotels: Hotel Pahalgam, Woodstock, Mountview, on the left side of the main street became visible. After the fleeting initial view of Pahalgam, I directed my mind to find out quickly where I was going to stay. From my homework about it in Srinagar I had concluded that besides the three hotels just mentioned, one could also stay in Grand Mumtaz. My taxi driver suggested considering staying in a hut too. We quickly went to see them and after looking up one of them I decided they were not good enough. After that we went to Mountview and I was shown an available room, which the hotel management said had the better view of Pahalgam compared to others. I liked it at once. Because of the view it commands, its location, and the quality of its rooms, Mountview is one of the better places to stay in Pahalgam.

Years back Mountview Hotel was called Wazir Hotel; then in 1987 its young manager suffered a heart attack, compelling him to sell it. But the name Wazir Hotel had already been changed to Mountview Hotel. In 1995 the hotel suffered a big fire, resulting in its rebuilding.

Immediately after checking in the hotel I went to view the central area of Pahalgam, which I call its "face." I saw the gushing Liddar swarming over the continuous bed of rocks strewn over its path. It is an enchanting sight, one of the salient features of Pahalgam's beauty. Lifting my eyes from the river I saw the magnificent presence of the ring of the mountains surrounding Liddar. In fact, Liddar without these mountains would not have amounted to much. I realized that

Pahalgam, essentially, was still the same as it was 23 years ago, because the mountains and Liddar had not changed, which comprised its essence; rest of the elements were insignificant. The beauty of the mountains is greatly enhanced by the tapestry of the gracefully tall and slender pine trees.

Looking at the “face” of Pahalgam I felt that it was just an unsophisticated patch of land, bald at many places, with weeds growing at other places, just a few flower beds adorning it. What a waste of a great opportunity! Here was a place which could have been turned into a beautiful garden, having benches in it, sitting on which one could linger on the magnificent valley around. The state government, the custodian of the land, has not thought much about beautifying it. They have thought that keeping the land free of commercial and private buildings is the highest care they can bestow upon it. Their lack of imagination has been a great disservice to Pahalgam, the top attractor of visitors going to Kashmir. It could have called for proposals to landscape the area from internationally renowned park landscapers, and then the winning design could have been implemented locally. The state has followed such a route in the development of tunnels and a cable-car project. Exactly the same is the fate of the Gulmarg “face.”

I took a trip to Aru, a hamlet about 8 miles from Pahalgam. Throughout the journey the scene was so lonely that you felt nature whispering in your ears, “I am here.” Magnificent views of Liddar valley are present. I repeated taking a photograph of the site that I had taken 37 years ago, but the results showed that the earlier one was superior. Aru is a very low-key hamlet, which only swells to life during Amarnath Yatra. I could not but think of the life the local people, Gujars, lead. They are a nomadic people, who live in the mountains. It is quite apparent that they lead a very simple life, shorn of the fuss we city dwellers make. Above all, they lead a truer life. Living on bare essentials, in the intimate company of nature, they feel the pulse of life which many “civilized” people do not.

There are many new hotels in Pahalgam ; among them Grand Mumtaz is one of the better ones. A beautiful golf course has been constructed last year, which

happens to be next to the hotel. The downtown has expanded at the town entrance area. Some roads have changed. Pahalgam is not a place for entertainment, that is, there are no bars, nightclubs, casinos, movie halls, etc. Because of the prohibition on serving alcohol, no hotel can serve it, and there are no shops selling it either. So, the drink lovers feel unfairly punished, but the smart ones among them bring their liquor with them. In my short experience in Pahalgam, I did not have much luck with the quality of food. Dinner at Woodstock was a disaster, experience at Mountview was just a little better. A Hotel Pahalgam restaurant (outside it) did not serve Kashmiri cuisine.

Pahalgam is a dreamy place, as is the characteristic of most of the Kashmir scenery. No wonder that has influenced Kashmiris to be dreamers. We can also say that Kashmiri scenery is meditative, but that has not helped Kashmiris to be so in the modern times, though in the ancient times they were steeped in it.

Memories of the past numerous trips to Pahalgam flashed in my mind. In 1959 I spent about six weeks here with my uncle, who was the chief physician of this place at that time. I was in a transition between my appearance in the intermediate college exams and their results. My parents and siblings were in Cairo, Egypt. Here was an interlude free of work, social responsibilities, and stress of any kind. It was as if I was travelling in a boat, on a calm river, surrounded by breathtaking scenery, journeying without a destination. My uncle and I were the only two occupants in his apartment for some time, which later changed with the arrival of his niece, with whom I got along very well. Day after day was an enchanting experience. I fell under the spell of a nurse working under my uncle. The sadness of her life penetrated me deeply and stayed with me for many years. Even more than the circumstances of her life, I was struck with the way she was facing them. She lived her life with a calm dignity and heroic acceptance of the tragedy. She had a poet's appreciation of life. For years I wanted to meet her again but the practical difficulties hindered that.

I was also reminded of my trip here in 1974 when my parents and another uncle and aunt were with me. It was a splendid vacation for more than one reason: right

time in life, right company, right mood. All the four have left the world. Each one of them was a special person. Only the memory of their personalities, conversations, time spent together, and good deeds remain.

Every day I went out for morning walks to Liddar bank, looking at the marvel of the total scene, feeling that man was not alone, he was in company of a lofty spirit.

On Aug. 17, two days after arriving in Pahalgam, I decided that I must move on to the next place in my ambitious trip to Kashmir. Much as it made me sad that I was walking away too soon from one of my most beloved places, but I had no choice.

The fleeting moments in Pahalgam had revived my old self, dreams, and love of life, even as they were accompanied with some of my old pains.

On leaving Pahalgam I felt pretty confident that I will be returning to it in not too distant future.

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