

Kashmir Valley -- First Glimpse

Site visit and summary- by Ganesh Achuthan

It was with slightly nervousness that I boarded the Indigo flight to Srinagar, for my first ever foray into the conflict-marred “heaven-on-earth” - Kashmir. My first glimpses of the snow-capped mountains and green-meadowed valley took me back to memories of my trip to Switzerland -- but upon flying closer, the reality sets in: bedraggled shacks dotting the landscape rather than fancy little cottages. Despite the evident penury, it sure does retain the rustic feel and heavenly mountain air, still very natural and breathtaking, dotted with streams and the beautiful Dal lake. It is nothing like the eyesore of a ghetto that greets you while landing in Mumbai airport, with its lines and lines of blue tarpaulin roofs. You could see at a glance that these people were trying their utmost to maintain their original home, unlike an influx of slum dwellers. But the abject poverty stood in stark contrast to the beautiful landscape as the plane was landing.

My first look as I disembarked the plane was quite intimidating -- the airport was fortified with a lot of police and army people. Security was tight, and all I had was the contact number of a driver who was supposed to pick me up. A bit of panic (and hilarity, in hindsight) ensued when I learned that no pre-paid cell-phones work in the entire valley! They have turned it off for security and tracking purposes. So I had to figure out how to reach my sole contact waiting outside the airport whom I had never seen before and who didn't know English, and me not knowing Hindi or the local language! Finally with the help of the airline employee who called and talked to the driver, I located him standing outside with a placard amidst scores of army people all armed to hilt with heavy ammunition.

It was an adventure, to be embarking on a drive with an unknown local whom I couldn't communicate with. At one point I was left by myself in the car stranded at the roadside, with avidly staring passersby curious about me, while the driver disappeared, apparently for getting directions, a reason which I only learned later on.

But my first impression once on the road to Srinagar was like stepping back in time 3-4 decades, not into a prominent city but rather a village frozen in the 1980s. There were ramshackle little homes, nothing fancy, no chain stores or organized retails, no Coffee Day, Subway, Reliance or Airtel showroom, no known names or even a modern-looking store that flashes in front of your eyes upon landing in even most major towns all over the rest of India.

A more close-up look from the streets of Kashmir

Eventually I spoke to Adhik on phone with the driver's help, finalized a plan, and picked up Salima Bhat along with her toddler son, and we set out to Anantnag.

We passed the scenic Jhelum river, in full flow, and quite muddy and gushing due to recent rains.

We passed by the Education Department building which had gone through 2 militant attacks, right off the National Highway outside Srinagar, completely gutted, windows blown out.

We passed the Saffron valley, with fields of saffron and rows and rows of saffron shops and vendors lining either side of the road,

At every crossing I noticed heavily armored carriers, so much army presence. Every few hundred feet, I found soldiers not only armed but with their fingers on the trigger! There was an army convoy from north-east.

The drive was quite slow - taking almost 2 hours to Anantnag what with the traffic and people flagging down the cars randomly. This is the only highway, and the road is slushy. There is no bus service or public transport of any sort - Tata Sumos flagged down to share are the way to go. It was somewhat sadly funny to see the Sumos plying the highway fit to bursting, picking people and dropping them off as needed, sometimes 10-12 people packed into a Sumo, men and women literally sitting on top of each other.

Another common sight I am quite accustomed to in almost every city or town in India is the scores of women and young girls on scooter, but made highly conspicuous by their absence were these ladies in Kashmir's streets. During the entire ride, or even my entire stay in Kashmir, I saw ONE girl on a scooter, which somehow stood out in my mind as a statement of the women folk's mobility here!

Anantnag -- Excited children, Powercuts, Cold floors, Warm hearts

Anantnag is a large town. It was college closing time, when we drove in around 5.30 p.m. and we saw lot of children just coming out of college. The BWF home is somewhat interior in the city, and we reached close to 6 p.m. The girls were all peeping to see who has come, and Adhik was also already there. All the children were very excited and curious to greet us and welcome me, to take my bags and bring me in, to show me their home.

Zahoor, a local resident and teacher involved in the Education Department was visiting Adhik at the time. He also monitors some of the children's education. Immediately after the introduction, Adhik turned on the heat on my account and suggested I tuck myself inside a comforter and inserted the electric heater into the comforter too. It was pretty cold that day, almost as cold as the outside and there is **no sustained heating in the building**, in any of these houses; only temporary, localized heating when and where immediately necessary, something that still leaves me in wonder when I think how all these children manage without complaint.

Then one of the little children brought me some milk (specially for me, as I do not drink tea) and biscuits as per Kashmir custom. By the time we settled for the refreshments, we lost power. I came to know this was a regular occurrence - there is a **3 to 4 hour city-wide power cut EVERY SINGLE EVENING!!** So they brought out LED rechargeable lights and we spent some time talking under LED lights.

The Children: Following this I expressed a desire to talk to the children, I met the entire group just talking and getting to know them. **There are about 45 children in this home.** At the time of my visit, about 25 children were left, while the rest of the children, whosoever have the opportunity to do so, were taking turns to go visit their family/homes for a two week vacation, before school reopens first week of March. They comprised of different age groups right from kindergarten up to 12th and those about to begin college.

Anantnag Home: I tried to go around and learn each of their names and the girls were so happy with the chance for personal interaction. They took me to their rooms, showed me their books, talked to me about what they are teaching in school etc. **There are 6 rooms and 7-8 girls per room.** There were no desks, chairs or beds. The girls all live there, study there on the floor, and come bed time, simply lay down the comforters on the floor and wrap themselves around - that's what they do. I learned that it is extremely difficult to find an updated rental space (which I will explain in detail in the Beerwah section). The current home also took a hit at the recent stone pelting incident in Kashmir, there were several marks of stone throwing on the building. I also met with the House Mother or Warden, and got to know how the house is run.

It was a wonderful experience, the girls were speaking freely and asking about so many things. Although they are not practiced to speak in English, they were very excited to communicate with me and did their best to attempt conversation in English, even the little ones. Except for the youngest, who were somewhat shy, they were not very timid or hesitant, but could relate freely and happily, which personally for me very heartening.

Eventually, we all had dinner, including the driver and the other guest -- a typical yet somewhat special fare of Chapati, Vegetables, rice and Dal, specially made vegetarian & jain for my sake. It was quite a feast compared to their usually very austere fare.

We never got back power until we left a little after 9 p.m.

The surprising thing for such a large and major city in J&K is that the **roads were absolutely empty at 9.p.m.** - there was not a single person on the streets, not a single shop open, there was no activity, there was **nothing but darkness outside the doorstep except may be a few stray dogs. Without even any active curfew, the whole city was locked down** as people don't want to venture out in the night.

The National Highway is filled with trucks which are the sole means of transporting literally everything essential into the valley. The hope is that once the railway connection is established in the future, it will help the overall economy.

Srinagar

We reached Srinagar close to 11 p.m. And again even in Srinagar there was still no power, and no activity. Except for some parts of the highway, it appears that the **entire Kashmir valley is shrouded in darkness between 6.30 and 10.30 p.m.** But once we reached the home, the children here were all awake waiting for us, excited to see Adhik and myself, eager to pluck our bags and carry them.

Several of the girls here have come from Kupwara, they are in their final year of secondary school and are here to discuss their future options. Many of them want to become doctors and we discussed the requirements and possibilities of taking the National Entrance exam, called NEET. Some of them expressed the difficulties in coping with the NEET syllabus competitively with the rest of the country, the practical realities of getting an MBBS admission with the obstacle-ridden education they received from local Kupwara schools, with minimal facilities and no adequate Math or Chemistry teacher. The lack of Math instruction also seriously limits their higher study options.

The girls prepared warmed beds with hot-water bags underneath for our sake, although the children said they were used to the biting cold.

The phones were not working, finally I borrowed Adhik's phone and was able to check my emails. When I couldn't even check email or do basic things, it gave me glimpse into the extent of hurdles in the lives of these children.

On Sunday night, the children put on a little dance show and skit. I also saw the Srinagar office, good facility, with plans to start a computer lab soon. Srinagar provides the best facility possible amongst all homes, both in terms of education and accommodation/living facilities. **Opened only few months ago, this home has 7-8 rooms, and about 25 children currently.**

I tried to set up a wi-fi network, but it was very difficult - spotty at best and quite frustrating. They took me to the historical Lal Chowk, the only place in entire Srinagar city where there were even a few organized retail stores, that's about it -- in hopes of buying a wi-fi router.

One significant feature I noticed in the Srinagar home, which continued to be reinforced in all the homes I visited, was **how pleasant and clean all the rooms were maintained**, by the children themselves. Every morning, I noticed the girls cleaning the floors, carpets, putting away the sleeping gear, and despite the old and often dilapidated condition of the building itself, attempting to maintain a pleasant and cheerful ambience to their living space.

Kupwara

Abundant natural resources - untapped; Abundant aspirations - on hold

The next morning, after being served with Saffron tea and biscuits, we set off to Kupwara, a 2.5 hour drive. The scenic Baramulla road with snow-covered mountains on all sides, were breathtaking, and apparently the setting for many Hindi movies. The road, maintained by the Indian army, was in excellent condition even compared to some highways in important cities. But the second leg of the journey, through locally maintained roads through Sopore town, was not as comfortable, though still beautiful, surrounded by apple orchards, flowing Jhelum river, pure mountain air, and innocently curious locals staring at us all the way. The whole scenery was just fantastic, despite the winter-barren trees.

We reached Kupwara town past noon. This was the town Adhik first started his work in and he recollected those days, showing me the landmarks and the streets from where BWF literally sprang up, recounted the early struggles including the days when he had to literally carry 50 lb LPG cylinders on his shoulders and walk home half hour, as there were no cars and no money for any transportation or hired-help more than the public bus ride.

The swollen Talri river was rushing past us, and Adhik explained how despite such bountiful natural resources and so much water, they had no way to store it, channel it or harness its potential for hydro-electric energy. Thus all the water flows past them into Pakistan. This is partly because of natural reasons such as there being not enough gradient to dam the water without flooding the entire valley, and partly also because of the prolonged conflict. Another hassle that thwarts any developmental initiatives someone might consider taking is that the intense security issues make it impossible to wander anywhere outside of the town center to venture doing anything or take any risk, where you are simply on your own.

Arriving at the home, we met the children, about 30 of them who were staying back, another 20 again off on vacation. Here also there were 6 rooms with 8 children, and the rooms were clean and well-maintained. Remembering their names was now beginning to get difficult because many of them started sounding similar. We talked about everything ranging from school, to general knowledge of the world, to Bollywood movies and their favorite stars, to cricket.

Practical Challenges: There is no internet, and there is no proper cable network, but for one small 20 inch old TV. But they definitely beat me on my limited knowledge on Bollywood. There is no computer lab. There is no library except a single one in the main college. There is lack of books -- neither to supplement their studies nor just literature on general knowledge or even incite their thirst for learning.

Their entertainment is pretty much limited to downloading a few songs on their mobile phones and listening to / dancing to these latest tunes, or playing badminton or cricket outside in the summer months.

Curfew: When Kashmir was under curfew for 5 months (mid-June to mid-November), they literally had nothing to do and could do nothing. Some of them had to be sent home due to security concerns, and the rest were simply locked in with nothing to do except talk among themselves. Some of them did not have access to their books from school, and several had to skip a school year as a consequence. Some of them were set to complete their final year, but were unable to do so!

The most heartening part of the experience was to see that despite all the difficulties they have been through, and all the strife they continue to face, you could not see any of it haunting their eyes. They are all so bold, confident and cheerful. The situation on ground is indeed pretty grim. It is an active conflict zone, and the security situation is really very tough. But somehow the children don't show it and keeping very good spirits in working through it.

Something was being done right for them, which keeps them going.

They were happy about the shelter, education and opportunities they were getting, aware that they had something that many others around them do not and their main focus was to learn. I talked to all the children personally, learning about their aspirations -- and they all have their dreams; some of them want to be doctors, some engineers or want to travel, or the ultimate dream - to settle in America...

Although they are coming from some seemingly-forgotten village, in the far north-western Kashmir, given a chance they want to become something in life and make a difference.

Ordinarily if they were provided conducive environment and the facilities and opportunities of most others, you can see that these children could have accomplished a lot, because they are all quite bright, intelligent and energetic, but despite the heavy toll that we can readily see the ongoing conflict has taken in their lives, their eagerness and aspirations are still aflame. But you can see the changes already happening on the ground, that whatever facilities have been provided are being used to their utmost despite ten children living cooped up in a room, despite the cold, etc they still want to keep going to reach their goals, always looking forward to what to do and how to overcome the limitations placed upon them.

About 6 of the girls who have graduated are now involved with the Women Development Center nearby.

Apart from the House Mother and/ Warden, there is a cook and a helper, a watchman, and another 1-2 as cleaning crew, all paid monthly salary.

We also went to meet a friend of Adhik at his home in Kupwara, who has been helping BWF since the initial days and whose father was recently deceased. He also expressed very deep respect and appreciation for the BWF program, not only for the safe home provided for the girls and how they have grown up and been given solid education, but also other programs such as providing ambulances (new ambulances are due to arrive shortly in Kupwara) and how the entire community was eagerly awaiting these kind of services to reach them. You could see that they were all anxious that some development has to happen in this part of Kashmir also, not only in Srinagar, Anantnag or the other bigger cities. These remote villages also were in dire need of assistance. You could gauge the mood of the people - they were extremely appreciative of the donors of BWF.

Beerwah -- Tight Quarters

Hour and half from Srinagar is Beerwah, overlooking the Gulmarg mountains and the beautiful Sukhnag river -- it was very picturesque.

The Beerwah home was the most challenging so far -- **there are only 5 rooms, with 10 children per room**, the rooms once again well-kept, but the worst challenge is **with 50 children sharing 1 toilet and 2 bathrooms!**

The most pressing difficulty is finding another suitable place - nothing is really geared for 50 people to live, most only suited for 8-10 people. Current building regulations, not to speak of expenses, poses a lot of challenges to simply extending or renovating the existing space and facilities. We went to see a potential rental place, but it was similar and also not available for another few months.

Despite best efforts for allocation of resources, the expenses are also daunting, with even the smallest houses demanding Rs.25,000/mo. For example, in Anantnag, each child needs Rs.750/mo. for their School Bus, to be paid either 100% or 75% even through the curfew when they don't attend school. At least in Beerwah, the schools are closeby, so the children can walk to school. And yet the rental problem is formidable

The fundamental problem is there is no new construction. Combined with the need to accommodate the influx of tourists in summer months, finding reasonably priced rental housing is extremely challenging. Unlike most other cities in the world, Kashmir is in a literal standstill, either as a result of the curfew, or the lack of resources, or the weather. Every time I return to a city like Bangalore or Shanghai after 6 months or a year, I have become accustomed to see the face of an entire neighborhood changed, with sprawling new constructions, and old buildings torn down and turned to apartment complexes. But half-completed buildings are the sight to see everywhere I went in Kashmir valley.

Winter months by default are impossible for construction, but in summer time when activity can happen, there is the security problems and curfew, and what limited transport is still available, is devoted for essential goods.

Then we went to the Educational Institute where Mr. Sheikh Zahoor, who heads the Teacher Training program of the Budgam district.

That night, after dropping off Salima, we returned to Srinagar home. We met two people from Tata Institute of Social Science who were visiting, and who help with Women's empowerment programs. And they have been working with some of our older girls and

providing job opportunities for women. They were very appreciative and so happy to see how far these children have come along under BWF's care and guidance, these are very difficult things to accomplish in such a short time given the conditions.

Two instances of the generous hearts of these children stand out in my mind. When we arrived, some of the girls were overjoyed to share with me how much their friends at school liked the chocolates I had brought for them. I expressed my surprise and protest that I brought those chocolates for their own enjoyment and not to distribute. But they disagreed, saying: "No uncle, *whatever* we get, we like to share among as many as possible!!"

That evening, Adhik requested through Tabeena, a third-standard student, for the cook to prepare some Maggi noodles for us. When she brought us our plates, we insisted that she sit and partake the dish with us, a favorite especially among most children. When we finished, Adhik asked if we could have more, and Tabeena eagerly jumped up to fetch some more. From her smiling enthusiastic face, I would never have guessed anything suspicious, but Adhik realized that there was no more noodles left, and the 8-year old had contrived to transfer her own portion to bring to us, with no regrets! These are but such young girls, who rarely get anything fancy or wishful, and yet their self-sacrificing largesse touched my heart most deeply.

Finally, after spending a relaxed morning with the children, taking some pictures and bidding good-bye to the already very attached children, I returned to the 'super-secure' airport where I had to go through security three times -- first scanning the entire car and baggage, then once before check in, and then again after check in, I boarded the flight to Bombay. I looked back nostalgically upon the snow-capped peaks, trees and crystalline streams, vanishing into dots -- that which we would pay thousands of dollars to see in the Alps, but which I was blessed to spend three days in, for next to no cost, amidst impoverished yet clean shacks, and chilly homes yet warm hearts.

Summary of Homes

Anantnag Home: Around 45 children, staying in 6 rooms; 8 children per room
Cleanliness and upkeep: Good
House quality: Average

Srinagar Home: Around 25 children. 8 rooms.
Cleanliness and upkeep: Very Good.
Quality of Home: Good

Kupwara Home: Around 50 children, 6 rooms; 8 children per room
Cleanliness and upkeep: Good
Quality of Home: Average

Beerwah Home: Around 50 children. 5 rooms; 10 children per room
Cleanliness and upkeep: Good
House quality: Average

Kupwara Home has solar panels installed on the roof, which provides them with limited amount of energy. Every home has recently been donated with Inverter & Batteries, it is in the process of being set up. So hopefully by next time, the children are no longer studying under LED lamps but with proper lights on battery backup.

Daily Routine: All children rise between 6 and 7 a.m. They have breakfast of Roti and Tea/Milk at 8 a.m.; some of the younger children may have rice and vegetables for breakfast around 9, before going to school. They usually pack a lunch of Rice and vegetables.

They return from school by 4 o'clock. After a light snack, they have some recreational/play time. Then they do their homework/studying, and have dinner at 8 p.m. They complete any remaining homework or study (under LED light), and go to bed at 9 p.m.

All the donations and contributions are currently going through BWF. Few years back, some homes were getting specific donation for vegetables or milk. However, currently any and all donations are pooled through BWF, and almost all contributions are monetary rather than donations in kind.