

True Tales of a Traveller Series

07: Just a Businessman

As we set off on the road again, I remarked that the scenery and the road reminded me of Switzerland and Austria. This was entirely true, but there was one significant difference I failed to mention, even though I could not possibly have failed to notice it: I had thus far seen no roadside barriers of any kind at any point on the road, even though there had already been a number of points at which, had the car come off the road, it would almost certainly have resulted in fatalities. I didn't want to bring such negative observations into the mix of morning high spirits, and besides, I reasoned, India was not as wealthy as either of those two European countries. I guessed that only the most treacherous parts of the road had been equipped with roadside barriers, and I did realise that we were not yet at the highest point on the road. I somehow also felt that this lack of roadside barriers would somehow become more of an issue and a danger if I brought it to other peoples' attention.

After we left our rest stop behind, the state of the road deteriorated rapidly, and I wondered if Haleef, intimately familiar with the route as he was, deliberately chose to stop at the location we did in order to 'psyche himself up'? Now entirely unsurfaced, and in parts only one lane wide, there were thousands of potholes and also very large pools of icy water here and there. It was also only too obvious what had made those depressions in the road, and at one point we came across what had evidently been a recent landslide, which had for a time covered the road. Again I was overcome with a sense of inadequacy. I couldn't help but marvel at the courage of the men who had cleared the landslide rocks from the road. My imagination quickly ran away with me, with mental images of workers removing rocks, only to inadvertently loosen others, and cause a second landslide! I quickly put those images out of my mind. I had to maintain a positive state of mind.

By this time, our car was the only one on the road. The trucks that had been ahead of us for so many miles had pulled further ahead during our stop, and no other vehicles travelling in our direction had yet made an appearance. Nothing could be seen coming from the other direction, either.

As we approached a settlement of few dozen shacks named Sonamarg, we all noticed something unwelcome, though none of us mentioned it for at least several minutes. Finally, Arun commented with a shake of his head that the sky ahead did "not look very friendly". In fact, the clouds were almost black in parts, in sharp contrast to the white of the mountain snow. Add to that the lush green of the grassland in the area, which was still bathed in sunshine, and the result was a vivid and contrasty scene that made me regret that I hadn't bought colour film for my camera. For a few moments, I was able to take my mind off the road and the weather ahead, as Haleef pulled to a stop to allow me to take a couple of photos.

Back in the car, Haleef then told me this approaching section of the road was "a tricky bit", but once passed it, we shouldn't have any further trouble. Optimistically, I asked if he meant that the quality of the road improved further on?

He shook his head. "No. It's better in some parts, but what I mean is that it's less likely to snow after the pass ahead. Snow can be a problem here."

I wanted to ask if there were more roadside barriers in the section up ahead, but I couldn't bring myself to voice my concern at their lack; I didn't want to expose my own fear.

We then saw a vehicle approaching from the other direction, a British Land Rover, and I commented that I hadn't seen that make of car before in India. Haleef told me it belonged to the Indian government's road transportation department.

As the road was barely more a lane wide, we had to reverse the car a little to find a spot wide enough for the Land Rover to pass. But as it did, the Sikh driver of the other vehicle wound his window down, and Haleef did likewise. Several sentences of Hindi went between them. I was sitting directly behind Haleef, leaning forward to observe the driver and the other three occupants of the Land Rover, even though I couldn't understand a word of what was being said.

At some point, the Sikh's expression seemed to reveal a frustration, and he switched to English, addressing me: "It's now snowing on the pass, sir. I was just saying that you should not proceed unless you really have

to. It may be better to wait in Sonamarg for a while to see if the weather gets better. That's what we advise you to do. We will be going back up in a couple of hours to decide if the road has to be closed."

I was a little flattered to be considered part of our expedition's decision-making process. "What do you think, Haleef?" I asked.

"I think we have to push on, because we do have to be in Kargil this afternoon." I had the feeling he was simply repeating, in English, what he had just told the Sikh driver in Hindi.

The Sikh gave a shrug, told us to drive carefully and wished us luck before pulling away.

I couldn't escape the feeling that had I been the driver, the man would simply have told us to turn back and wait at Sonamarg until they had decided whether or not to close the road. He would certainly not insist that Haleef turn back. That was the way all things seemed to be with Haleef, and I didn't mind at all. I was proud to be a part of this 'Team Can Do', albeit the weakest link!

But I was also aware that there was a far, far greater force at work in the mountains than the relatively puny efforts of our team.

Within a few minutes, we drove into light snow and poor visibility, with the edge of the road quickly becoming barely visible. A few minutes later, the edge of the road, presumably to the right of our car, was not visible at all. With headlights on full beam we could barely see more than a few metres ahead of us. We proceeded like this at a snail's pace for about 20 minutes. It would have been faster to walk, but there was no way we could risk travelling any faster, Haleef pointed out, finally giving mention to the matter that had been in my head all morning: there was nothing to stop us going over the edge if we came away from the road. Then, for what seemed like the longest time, but was probably only a matter of minutes, we fell silent. Neither Arun nor myself wanted to distract Haleef from this difficult driving task with unnecessary conversation.

We then entered an area with rock walls - or ice walls; I could not be sure - on both sides rather than just one, and Haleef breathed a sigh of relief. He seemed to know where we were. I would have assumed us to be in a tunnel if it hadn't been for the obvious fact that it was still snowing heavily.

For a few moments, the atmosphere seemed a little more relaxed. Then the car stalled.

Looking at the driver's mirror, I clearly saw Haleef's eyes widen. None of us spoke as Haleef tried several times, without success, to re-start the engine.