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Day2- July6 Sonder to Hanzal

(yellow line on map)

[The Route of the Great Trek from Kishtwar to Baltal](#)

It was not such an early start this day as Om and myself were enjoying each others company over breakfast on their terrace. Farook, my porter turned up at 7am as agreed looking no different as to when I saw him last night. Already he was asking for cheroots which I declined to supply. Dressed in black kurta-pyjamas and wearing plastic shoes I was already wondering how things would turn out with this shylock.

We left for the lower village of Tachna eventually. The track winds down the hill and crosses the gorge with a typical cantilevered bridge made of deodar trees. On the left in the valley is a mill powered by water from the gorge. These are often outside villages and use the fast moving rivers to grind locally produced wheat or barley. Up and down the hill to reach the smaller village of Tachna. MD, Dr. Bashir's servant had given me a contact there to meet. When we did find him we were invited for the inevitable tea and biscuits. Then along comes the CID telling me quite firmly that the area we are about to enter is unsafe and we should not go any further. Yes , I was a little unnerved as they all seem to think that the terrorists were just waiting to have a pot shot at me. I guess up to now I had been thinking that leopards or black bears would be the main danger.

I guess in the end I began to doubt their knowledge and presumed answers that were being given were long ago scripted and had never been reassessed. Probably what most motivated me to continue on was the thought that I might have to retrace my steps to Akhala. It was then that I decided I would be a journalist seeking the truth and hoping that by writing an article on the area reopen it to tourism. And in any case I informed my CID friends that their was nothing set out in the information on India prescribing that I couldn't go ahead.

So onwards to the next stoppage. Shortly after leaving this house we ran into a large group of villagers on an Yatra pilgrimage up the Nanth Nala river. This seem to be all the villagers from that area as well as a police and military protection squad. No problem going the Yatra way but certainly strong reservations about going to Hanzal. Somehow they let me go down the hill to the police station where I had to give all my details again and go through the story of my determination. Nods, and hand shaking and a couple of hours later we were finally allowed to go. However we were provided with a police escort to the village of Sirshi. Sirshi is less than a km from Tachna. To get to Sirshi you cross another big traditional wooden bridge with a deep gorge under you. Why the escort I will never know. He was also unarmed and therefore probably of no use in a crisis. Just when I was getting used to him he disappeared.

This section turned out to be great walking country. Farook suggested some short cuts for which I was suspicious at first. We followed the levees protecting the rice paddies until we were upstream of Sirshi. We then started to climb until we reached a water supply channel. Walking along the water supply channel turned out to be a great idea as the gradient is very gentle. We seemed to follow this for quite a while entering deodar forests with beech, walnuts and other deciduous trees along the valley floor. At times we had to leave the channel as it crossed gulleys in conduits made of the deodar tree. On the right side as we walked the Marau River roared. In some places it tumbled over boulders at a frightening speed and then leveled out with a quiet and inviting beach of white sand.

Another villager from Hanzal joined us. So we stopped when tired or needing a drink of water from one of the side streams but otherwise saw few others or habitation. Needless to say it was beautiful and in every way unspoilt. Nothing like having an area proclaimed dangerous to protect it from dhabas, rubbish, barb wire and all the detritus that happens when humans invade an area.

It was a long day with only a break at a dhaba for Farook's lunch. He had been moaning for ages that he was starving. Rice and dal 20 rupees. I couldn't bring myself to eat what was on offer. It is quite easy to diet under such circumstances. I just watched the chickens around my feet looking for morsels.

We arrived in Hanzal towards evening. On the outskirts of town was a dhaba where the men congregated and I guess talked about the days events. I sat down with them and asked where we might stay the night. No one really came up with anything or so I supposed. (not much was really understood as no one seem to speak English) So I was about to set off and do some sort of door knock when one of the elders Shamtar announced that I would be the guest of his home. So it turned out that we were shown a lovely room with lots of Persian type carpets in a traditional deodar wooden house. The only real change to the building is that the long split shingles made of deodar had been replaced with sheets of corrugated tin.

Hanzal is a Moslem town. The women are in general dressed smartly in trouser/top combos. I always wonder how they look so tidy when they toil all day either carrying wood or working in a dusty environment in their homes over a wooden fire.

The toilet was the bush and showering was the bucket but at a common area on the edge of town. Toilets or wash facilities seemed to have been made but were no longer used.

During the evening many of the townsfolk would visit and wish to know more about me. But it was a nice place to stay as the military presence wasn't there and the town seemed to get along quite well without any help from the outside world. Needless to say there was no mobile reception and the shop that I visited was very poorly stocked. Horse traffic in this village also seemed to be much less than in all the other villages that I visited or would visit.

That just about finishes day 2.