

November 22, 2009

Between the lines



Line of Control (Tithwal): Deepa Alexander on her lone woman's journey into no man's land

'If on earth there be a paradise, tis' on a horseback it lies.' Hardly. I am doing all I can to keep myself upright on a saddle-less horse as I negotiate the road home from the Line of Control at Tithwal. It's dusk and the pony-track is illuminated by only two Maglite torches. My family rides ahead while behind me walks a young Army captain so smitten by Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam that I can hear him recite it on a star-spangled night. We pass Sharif, our driver, still trying to fix the Scorpio's tyre that was torn to shreds on our onward journey and I hear pine trees rustle in the breeze and smell the sharp twang of wood fire.

My innate cynicism has restrained many a hare-brained scheme. But the Army wife in me gives in and I agree to be driven in kamikaze conditions by Sharif, to the border town of Tangdar, in

Kupwara. It's supposed to be 'all quiet on the Western front'. "But the front is never quiet," the alarmist in me whispers, "It would no longer be the front if it were."

And then there's Sharif who subscribes to the karma school of driving. The road from Baramulla, via Handwara, Kupwara, the picturesque forests and gushing brooks of Trehgam and Choukibal is strewn with the mangled wrecks of vehicles that challenged these narrow, pot-holed mountain roads. Pratap Post glazes over in the mist and I'm furiously rolling the beads of my rosary. My mobile phone dies out and I gaze stoically at the stark, rocky defiles of the Shamsbari range.

The landscape is cold yet undeniably beautiful — fast-melting ice blocks turn into slushy streams and bridges and culverts almost seem to fall away as we pass. Signboards by the Border Roads Organisation reading "Be Gentle on My Curves" and "Better to be Mister Late than the Late Mister" make me laugh but as we dart across another corner without guardrails, I have a growing sense of kinship with Lord Cardigan, the luckless commander of the charge of the Light Brigade. Way below me, in an unending abyss, I can hear the Kishenganga roar its way to Pakistan.

Sadhna Post

Ahead of me, like a castle in the sky with flags fluttering and bells tinkling lies Sadhna Post, at the head of the Nastachun Pass, surrounded on three sides by Pakistan. Its wildly windy and a lone kite circles above. As we are hustled into the relative comfort of the ante-room, cheerful soldiers welcome us with hot tea and churmas. Legend has it that yesteryear Bollywood star Sadhna visited the post — her pretty portrait smiles from a showcase lined with books by Leon Uris and Manohar Malgonkar.

The view from the glass-lined room is magnificent. Various Army posts on the higher reaches of the Shamsbari are perched like birds' nests in a white and brown candy world. The room is lined with pictures of long-gone Army heroes with their personal memorabilia. Their medals gleam like burnished copper — an inch of metal for miles of motherland.

Its all downhill from here, and Tangdar, which lies in the bowl of a valley, crowded with walnut trees and clusters of wooden houses surrounded by ochre mountainsides, glows soft in the rays of the dying sun. The cantonment is aflame with colour — the red of roses, the silver water and foamy whitecaps of the Kishenganga, and the greys and maroons worn by farmers ambling home. Children laugh as they play cricket. Men ride bare back on horses and women walk barefoot in the central meadow. A hail of walnuts heralds my arrival home and sunset brings with it a frosty nip. The rooms are heated by a huge keroheater. I request instead for the traditional bukhari, which creates a warm, toasty zone surrounded by chilly borders. By bedtime, the bukhari and I are locked in an embrace.

We hop to the border the next day — Tithwal is an hour's drive away. And when the Scorpio gives up, we walk. The first 20 minutes is a breeze, but by the last few yards when I skid through a deep narrow track and come up holding clumps of grass, I feel like one of those characters in a Jack London novel who wants to lie down and let the wolves pick her bones.

Unlike the Attari-Wagah border or the one at Hussainiwala, at Tithwal, there is no concertina wire, no buglers at dusk or border guards strutting menacingly as the national flags are lowered. Zero Point here is a place of puzzling ambiguities.

Tithwal, a town of walnut furniture-makers, has had a second lease of life after a devastating quake in 2005. A new community centre, a school and houses have been built by the Army. I walk down to the bridge that spans the Kishenganga and look at the Indian, Pakistani and PoK flags fluttering fast. A visiting family on the other side looks on curiously while I click pictures. I step gingerly on the swaying bridge, and then suddenly it's there — bang in the middle, a fading white line that forever marks where geography ends and history begins.