

DHAULAGIRI

A MOUNTAIN OF STORM

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This year, the annual expedition of the Mountaineers' Association of Krishnanagar was scheduled at yet another 8000m peak – Dhaulagiri-I, the seventh highest peak in the world at 8167m beckoned us. Situated in the western region of the Nepal Himalayas, Dhaulagiri-I is not as difficult a climb as Kanchenjunga or Annapurna, but its uniqueness lies in the fierce winds around the peak. Mountaineers have named it the "Mountain of Storm". In an 1808 survey Dhaulagiri was conferred the honour of being the highest peak of the world, and this status remained intact till 1838, when another survey transferred it to Kanchenjunga. Before Dhaulagiri, the crown remained in possession of Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador. In clear weather, Dhaulagiri is visible from the entire north of Bihar and even Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh.

Dhaulagiri is encircled by 12 peaks of more than 7000m altitudes, and 37 more who are more than 6000m high. Dhaulagiri itself is really a series of six peaks marked Dhaulagiri I, II, III, IV, V and VI, but only Dhaulagiri I is a 8000m plus peak. Naturally, the region is known as the Dhaulagiri Massif. A circumnavigation of the massif is a dream for trekkers – the trek begins at Beni, the confluence of Kaligandaki river and Magdi Khola which can be reached from Pokhara in Nepal and proceeds along Magdi Khola, reaches Dhaulagiri base camp, crosses French Pass and via Marfa reaches the bank of river Kaligandaki, along which one can get back to Beni. With Dhaulagiri I at its centre, this circular route is the famous Dhaulagiri circuit trek. Trekkers from across the world rush in here, mesmerized by the exquisite landscape around.

On April 13, 2013, Debasis Biswas and I flew in to Kathmandu from Kolkata, in company of three friends from Howrah – Malay Mukherjee, Kiran Patra and Subrata Sinha. Malay would be our comrade in the expedition, the other two would return from Dhaulagiri base camp. Spending the next day in Kathmandu, we set out on the 15th towards Beni. We will approach Dhaulagiri base camp along the bank of Magdi Khola, though one may go there also via Marfa, crossing Dhapa pass and French pass. This latter route saves time, but due to heavy deposition of snow at this time of year on the route, it becomes impossible to go with porters or horses. We reached Darban from Beni by bus the next day. Our trek would begin from here. On April 17, with our luggage on horseback, we started alongside the Magdi river, moving through great natural beauty and passing frequently through villages that thrive on farming done on rock tables grooved out of the mountains by the river. The first night was spent in a village called Khamla; these villages provide facile accommodation to cater to the numerous trekkers who come by. The second day was spent in the village Boghara and the third at a place called Dobang. Boghara was the last of the villages, but roadside hotels stand to serve fooding and lodging needs of trekkers and climbers. On April 20 we reached the Italian base camp where six nights had to be spent, because the first two days stalled us with heavy snowfall and on the next

four, porters ferried our luggage from here to the Base Camp. The horses have gone back from here. We arrived at the base camp finally on the 26th and put up our tent at 4750m altitude upon the Chhonbardhan glacier. Other teams of Dhaulagiri climbers have already come here – French, Polish and Spanish teams and a Japanese lady. The 3 member French team and 8 member Polish teams have come here on April 9th & 10th respectively accompanied by no Sherpas, while the 3 member Spanish team has one with them. The Japanese lady has two Sherpas with her, and we have three. The French and Polish have already set their second camps, but have failed to advance farther.

In Dhaulagiri, teams usually set three camps after the base one. Four would be ideal, but after the third one, no safe space is available where one can put up. At the base camp, three days went by to settle down with our things, and then on the 30th we set out on the long trek to Camp I – a seven to eight-hour journey at the least. There are high risks of snow slides on the route which also includes rock fall areas, so we decided to begin the ascent while it was still night, taking advantage of lower temperatures that will keep the snow and rocks frozen and stuck. Moving out at 2.30 a.m. we walked over the glacier for about half an hour, finding our way by head torches, and reached the foot of a steep ice wall. Climbing about 500 feet with the help of ropes and zoomers up the steep side, we walked east along a slope and came to a snowfield which took a long time to traverse. The sun now had begun to shoot its first rays: we were marvelled at the heavenly play of colours on Dhaulagiri, which appeared to sight on our right, i.e. south. We were deprived of such sights from the base camp because a huge rocky chunk blocks, (looks like famous Igar peak) the view of Dhaulagiri there. Now we saw the moon, looking like a decorative piece over Dhaulagiri. This journey offered many moments of ethereal beauty which was greedily lapped up in our cameras. There are plenty of opened or covered crevasses in the area and we moved with caution. At a few places we found ropes over these crevasses and could jump over the cracks, but noted with alarm the many remains of snow slides strewn around. Again we had to negotiate a wall of ice, with ropes because the slope was a steep one. At 9 a.m. we arrived at Camp I at 5800 metres. Next morning, our two Sherpas Dawa and Pasang left for Camp II with ration, tents, oxygen etc., and on the way back they descended straight to the base camp. The following day, we three with Pemba Sherpa approached Camp II. This part of the ascent is a safer bet – ropes need not be fixed, there are no risks of snow slides or hidden crevasses – only a slow climb through soft snow. After some time we viewed on our east the peak Annapurna which we had scaled last year. There are marking flags stuck on the path at intervals for us to go along, but as we came close to the second camp we found the flags no more. We were the only team up here though.

Soon as we came to the doors of the second camp, a dense snow began to fall that immediately clamped a whiteout all around; nothing remained visible even at a hand's stretch, let alone our tent, as we groped blindly on. But it was getting stiff every moment and we decided to call it quits, abandoning the wish to spend the night at the camp. And then, to cap it all, we lost track on our way down and had to try erecting a cave of snow which failed miserably. In the face of great danger, the

effort to climb down was renewed and, finding the track back at five in the afternoon, we returned to Camp I after a ten-hour ordeal. It was nevertheless a rare and rich experience. The day after was spent in recuperation as Pemba went to the base camp. On May 4, Dawa and Pasang returned to Camp I, and we all climbed to Camp II, this time smoothly enough, and passed the night there before coming back to base camp.

Now came the phase of the great awaiting – for the ideal day when the winds over Dhaulagiri would be calmer and the sky clear and shiny. We had learnt at first that May 13 could be a clear and probable day, and our Sherpas had accordingly gone up with the others on May 8 to fix ropes between Camps II and III. This is a steep thousand-metre climb along the northeast ridge of Dhaulagiri; rope-fixing the whole track is a tough job that would take two or three days in the least. It is such a task that other climbers have gone back from Camp II admitting defeat. By the time the Sherpas returned on May 10, the team of French climbers had been replaced by a German one of six climbers and three Sherpas. On the same day we set out for the French Pass, just to stretch our limbs after a rather long vacation at the base camp. On the route to French Pass we had a clear view of Dhaulagiri and our way to the summit. It took six hours to visit the French Pass. On returning, the Sherpas told us that a little part of the route to Camp III was left to lay ropes on, and they would finish the task on the day we would finally occupy the camp.

We learnt from the Spanish, Polish and German teams that May 19 had been forecast as an ideal day for reaching the summit. Our agency too informed from Kathmandu that the weather would remain good and the winds slower at the top on that day. Based upon this, all of us made a decision to attempt the summit from Base Camp, beginning on May 16. But the previous afternoon brought the news that wind would blow at 40-50 miles per hour at the Dhaulagiri summit on May 19, and the velocities would be lower on the 22nd. So our plans had to be scrapped again, and days went by in anticipation at the Base Camp, enjoying the incomparable beauty of nature around the open stretches of the camp. May 19 had been scheduled as the day of our final journey.

On the agreed day we set out for Camp I; climbers from the other teams had followed us and set out at dawn too from the base camp. We arrived early this time and Pemba Sherpa who had come with us proceeded to Camp II. Dawa Sherpa had been at Camp II the day before with Pasang, he now came down to Camp I. The next day we moved up smoothly to Camp II, in company of other teams. Camp II (6400m) stands precariously under an icefall where cutting ice slopes tents have been pitched. All the tents are huddled together on a small space, but this is the only safe spot here. Standing here, one can see to the east many peaks of the Nilgiri group and the Annapurna so vividly that one feels one can touch them. To the west, the whole route up to Camp III opens to view and towards north and north-west Tukuhe and peaks of Dhaulagiri Group. On May 21, we began our climb together towards Camp III, which should normally take 9 to 10 hours up the steep slope, though the whole track had been roped beforehand. Achieving this climb without oxygen is a test of one's stamina; we reached Camp III (7250m) at 3p.m., having started at 7a.m. Tents at Camp III have had to be put up with great difficulty and

sheet-anchored with separate ropes lest they are blown away with the mad winds. We put up two tents and had begun our rest in them when a fierce wind began to blow, threatening to uproot our tents, going on and on despite our earnest prayers. At about 10p.m. all the teams except us went out for the summit but returned about three hours later, thwarted by the stormy blows. For the whole of the next day too, the wind blew with similar intensity; the Polish and German teams abandoned the attempt and went back to the base camp. There remained only two climbers of the Spanish team with their Sherpa, and the lone Japanese lady in a tent 200 metres above us.

On 22nd at about 10 in the night Kesab, the Sherpa with the Spanish team, told us they were going out for the summit. I fell into a worry because the wind was blowing still, though a little softer. Finally however, we too decided to go up and six of us started out at 10.30p.m. Since Camp III stood on a slope of hard ice everyone had to attach safeties to their ropes once they stepped out of their tents, else one could slip into nowhere. For the first 200 metres there are ropes to climb by, far ahead we can discern the flashes of head torches as the Spanish team moves up. In about two hours we came up to the Japanese lady's tent, and they joined us in the climb. Our friend Malay Mukherjee was falling back for some time, so we advised him to stay back there with Dawa Sherpa for the night, and wait for us the next morning at Camp III, as we moved on. Here again ropes were fixed for a distance since the gradient was high. We moved forward, all together, gathering our strengths, garnering our courage. Two hours ahead there were ropes no more and our climb slowed because the leading man had to move with extreme caution. We led the climb by rotation: sometimes one of us stepped first and sometimes one from the Spanish. The lights of dawn touched upon our climb; weather was clear but a strong gust of wind often brushed past us, sprinkling snowy dust on our bodies and faces. My woollen cap flew away with one such gust, and such a quantity of snowflakes hardened on my snow goggles that I could not wipe it clean and had to wear another. The terrible gales further slowed our movement which had to negotiate two rocky areas in the meantime. It was already late, yet we were quite some distance away from the summit.

It was about 3p.m. then and we were 100 metre away from the summit. Temperature had fallen sharply due to the wind. We were moving rope-up, led by Kesab Sherpa and his Spanish climber, Juanjo Garra. Behind them were the Japanese climber Chizuko Kono and her two Sherpas followed by the four of us and Lolo Gonzales, the leader of the Spanish team, alone. Suddenly, we saw Kesab fall down and pull Juanjo down with him in a snatch, and then the two of them rolled up and bounced down like a football. We stood dumbstruck, not knowing what to do or where they would slide, down to what abyss. About 300 feet below, Kesab suddenly stuck to something and Juanjo, rolling down after him, hit him and also got stuck a little below. We had never witnessed such an accident before – it confounded us for a time. When we regained our right senses, we pondered over what to do: in the meantime Lolo had arrived and was shouting in Spanish some question to Juanjo. Kesab has stood up, Juanjo is tossing about but failing to stand up. The Japanese lady has begun to climb down, we too took a quick decision to regress. Turning back,

we saw both Kesab and Lolo arranging for rescue to Juanjo. We were coming down slowly with blurring eyes as darkness descended and head torches had to be put on. Our pace became slower and slower. All on a sudden Debasish cried out "Basantada!" He was unable to walk any more. Glancing at him, I too sat down on the snow and almost immediately, inexplicably, lost all my strength. I failed to stand up again, all my energy seemed to have drained out. I appealed to Pemba and Pasang to carry us down on their backs, knowing full well that it was utterly impossible.

I had later realized that shortage of oxygen had caused our collapse. Pemba with great effort convinced Debasish to walk down and began to arrange it, but Pasang climbed down leaving me prone and unable to get up. I lay there, at 7800 metres, helpless under the open sky. I faced my destiny, clear and irreversible and pitiless, on this last night of my life. A melancholy sea pulsed over me, with countless memories bobbing up, and the face of my 17-year old son. Yet these, again, passed away. I have been a seasoned mountaineer who has coursed through plenty of dangers and tackled stiff situations in my favour by the strength of my coolheaded and firm decisions. I have scaled many formidable peaks, powered by my varied experience, although this was a novel situation even for me. A strange confidence arose from an unknown corner of my mind, telling me I won't die, I will definitely return alive. Some voice inside me reminded that Dawa Wangchu Sherpa, who was in the third camp now, would come up in the morning with oxygen and carry me down. These were really only frantic flashes crossing my mind – sometimes my heart beat so fast it seemed it would burst.

I do not know when I had fallen asleep; on sudden waking I saw rays of light in the eastern sky which brought the happy suggestion that the sun would rise now, giving me warmth and a lease of life. Sleep took me over again. Oscillating between sleep and waking, I again saw light flooding everywhere, and then discerned Pasang Sherpa coming up. He comes to me, stays for a while and goes down again. Dawa comes up then, and my assumption comes to reality as he puts me on oxygen which supplies a little strength to my completely immobile body. My throat had turned a desert from thirst, I begin to chew the ice that Dawa had brought up in his bottle as water. After this, Dawa begins to help me down – with great labour, sitting squat on the ice sometimes, slipping and sliding, I am able at length to arrive at the tent of that Japanese lady, and find Debasish, Pemba and another Sherpa there. Resting for the night at the tent, Pemba took me down in the morning to Camp III on 25th, and thence to the Base Camp, hung from a helicopter that after a while transported me to Kathmandu. After two days at the Intensive Care Unit of a Kathmandu hospital, I felt a little better.

During recuperation, a volley of sad news met me. Chizuko Kono, the 67-year-old Japanese lady, had fallen close to where I was lying and succumbed to death in the night as her oxygen ran out. One of her two Sherpas rested at Camp IV and later returned with us to the Base Camp. The other one descended to Camp III, but then somehow went insane and no one found him ever again. The 50-year-old Juanjo Gara fought a heroic, unequal battle against nature for three nights – for May 23, 24 and 25 he fell under the sky with no support. Finally on May 26, when a team of

Sherpas went up to him with oxygen and medicines did he admit defeat. His Sherpa could bring him quite some way down from the spot of accident and never thought of abandoning him though Juanjo's severely injured ankle had rendered him unable to walk. After his demise, other Sherpas brought Kesab down and moved him to a hospital at Pokhra via helicopter. All other climbers and sherpas came down to Base safely. When I was fallen in the open night Pasang Sherpa, in spite of my repeated and earnest requests, had not stayed by me, but hid close to me behind some rock and had come up to me as soon as morning light dawned. And Dawa Wangchu Sherpa! Words are paltry things, they would utterly fail to describe how he brought me down – to the camps, to life, to this beloved world! My head bows down in gratitude and wonder at the simple virtuosity in the heart of this young boy. The Himalayas have turned me away this time, after decades of giving me galore, and this time has taken a price – three fingers from my foot.

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