

Conquering nature's fury

Sunday Herald

Roaring winds from Mt Nanda Devi East were crashing the tent at our camp set at 5200 meters; one lift would take the tent down 300 meters onto the other side of the ridge. Ice axes, three-foot snow stakes and walking sticks that were used in anchoring the tent loosened out in no time. I used all that was in the tent to hold the three corners and stood firmly near the fourth and I knew I was losing ground and had to get out to safety abandoning the tent, my backpack and other essentials, which were ready to be dragged out in a matter of a few minutes.

After one bigger round of pounding, I heard Bharath and Talpa, as they rushed in locking down the anchors into the snow and we were holding on to the tent for the next 45 minutes till Nanda Devi calmed down.

Locals believe that the Nanda Devi range is one of the most powerful and dangerous range in the Himalayas. They offer prayers to Nanda Devi to ensure that her fury does not bring doom. For a mountaineer, peaks in Pindari Glacier have always been the most challenging quests, given its inhospitable terrain and highly unpredictable weather conditions, but Pindari Glacier is also one of the most beautiful regions, and our quest to climb Mt Nanda Khat (6611 Meters) started for Loherkhet.

Abundant flora and fauna

The trek from Loherkhet to Pindari Glacier (the glacier has receded in the last two decades) is scenic for the entire 50-km stretch; the trail is a traverse all through the huge rocky hills on one side, river Pindari gushing right below and rocky and lush green hills on the other side with several waterfalls that join river Pindari at the base. The rich forest cover on both sides of the river houses an amazing assortment of flora and fauna, birds like Eurasian Jays, Rose Finches, Snow Partridges, Snow Doves, Fly Catchers etc are found in abundance.

Even though the Rhododendron flowering season was over, there were still some pink patches here and there in contrast with lush green surroundings. The clear water in the river splashing the huge rocks, sound of the waterfalls all around and the wind was soothing. Dairi, our first camping site gave us a 180 degree trailer of the snow covered peaks like Maikoti, Cream Roll, Sunderbunga Col, Pinwali Dwar, Bhanoti, Nanda Devi and its outer sanctuary ridge.

As we hiked up and down the hills crossing Khari, the chirping of the birds and the sound of the pleasant breeze was replaced by the roaring river; with water gushing down rapidly slamming the huge rocks in its way, and making its presence felt. Tiny brown dippers did entertain us for a while but the sound of the river was too loud to be ignored. As we reached a place called Dwal, where the water flowing from Kafni and Pindari Glaciers meet, it was a different world all together; the enormity of the water was so much that the hills on both sides are literally invisible.

As we moved to higher altitude, the trees and shrubs were replaced by grass and the trail opened into the meadows covered with the bright yellow Butter Cups and over four to five colours of Potentilla. With clear blue sky, and ice covered peaks far ahead, it looked like a carpet of flowers just laid out to shoot a scene in Yash Chopra movie.

As we approached the basecamp, the view of the magnificent peaks, constant noises of the avalanches and rock falls welcomed us. Given the logistical difficulties for



LOCAL SPECIES Sheep and other livestock is the main source of livelihood for locals.

a 12-member team to manage itself for 20 to 30 days, we decided to set up our advance basecamp closer to the peak we would be attempting. As we got closer, we could sense that the furies of nature got stronger, calmer nights were replaced by thicker snowfall and the day with gushing avalanches. At the advance basecamp, it was indeed a 360 degree effect, as we were completely surrounded by the peaks, Lamcher, 1, 2, 3, Nanda Kot, Changoch, Trails Pass, Nanda Khat, Pinwali Dwar, Buljuri.

Our movement to higher camps got slower than planned, and sometimes we stayed in the tents for 24 to 48 hours. Route to Camp-I was about four hours with two rock faces of 150 to 200 meters each, an ice wall and an altitude of 900 meters.

Occupying Camp-I with all that we needed took us eight days, and the approach to summit camp from there on was a snowfield filled with crevasses, snow bridges and a climb of three to four hours. However well trained or experienced mountaineer one could be, there is no possibility of competing with bad weather or taking an unsafe route trying to challenge nature at its worst.

For the love of mountains

After days of waiting for the weather to get better, we finally got a clear window and the summit attempt started after splitting the team into two. As it was an alpine style climbing, we could do better with two teams and also the risk factor would be much lesser in smaller teams.

As one team conserved their energy at Camp-I the lead team successfully attempted the summit, which took over 20 hours. The weather got worse at the end of 11 hours, but reaching the lower camp safely was a priority. The next day, the second team did not get lucky. They were to start the summit ascent by 10 pm but the weather never cleared. Heavy snowfall and a complete whiteout along with strong winds forced them to move down to safety with heavy hearts.

Every expedition, every summit attempt may not be always successful, but what drives a mountaineer to these mountains again and again seeking new highest and new challenges is the sheer love to be amidst magnificent peaks. Mountains do really bring out the best in you; one would look at them and wonder how tiny and insignificant human beings really are.

For a true mountaineer surviving the cold, facing the challenges, climbing the mountains is not a sport but it's an attitude they love to live.

KAVITHA REDDY

