

# EVEREST WITHIN



*An ascent of aspirations*

**Dr. USHA HEGDE**



BlueRoseONE  
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

## BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Usha Hegde 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE<sup>com</sup>  
Stories Matter  
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,  
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

[www.BlueRoseONE.com](http://www.BlueRoseONE.com)

[info@bluerosepublishers.com](mailto:info@bluerosepublishers.com)

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-6744-095-2

Cover design: Shariq Ansari

Typesetting: Simran Maurya

First Edition: September 2026



| | Sri Shivarathreeshwaraya Namaha | |

**Jagadguru Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswamigalu**

Jagadguru Sri Veerasimhasana Math, Suttur Srikshethra-571 159

---

Sri Suttur Math (Mysuru Branch), Mysuru 570 025

2.5.2026

## **Message**

It gives us immense joy to place a few words of appreciation at the beginning of this inspiring work authored by Dr Usha Hegde. In every age, society is uplifted by individuals who demonstrate that human potential is far greater than what the mind often imagines. Dr Usha Hegde stands as one such shining example.

To excel as a triathlete, marathoner, and mountaineer demands not only physical endurance but also discipline of mind, courage of heart, perseverance of spirit, and unwavering faith. These are the very values celebrated in our ancient spiritual traditions. True victory lies not merely in conquering the outer world but in mastering oneself. Thus, every mountain ascended, every race completed, and every challenge overcome becomes a sacred pilgrimage of inner growth.

Dr Usha Hegde's remarkable ascent of Mount Everest, the highest peak on earth, stands as a symbol of the sublime heights that determination, grace, and divine blessing can lead one to attain. Yet beyond medals, records, and summits, what is most commendable is her power to inspire - especially women, youth, and seekers of excellence - to

believe that no obstacle is insurmountable when dedication is united with noble purpose.

The Everest Within: An Ascent of Aspirations is not merely a chronicle of achievements in sport and adventure; it is a testament to resilience, balance, and the spirit of service. As a doctor and achiever, Dr Usha Hegde demonstrates with elegance that one can harmonise professional responsibility, personal aspiration, and contribution to society. Such luminous examples are greatly needed in our times.

We hope that readers of this work will draw encouragement, strength, and renewed enthusiasm to pursue their own goals with sincerity and courage. May this book inspire many to cultivate health in the body, clarity in the mind, and purity in the heart.

May her journey continue to inspire countless souls across the world. May God shower abundant grace upon her with wisdom, peace, and joy.

With best wishes

Jagadguru Sri Shivarathri Deshikendra Mahaswamiji

---

Srimath (Mysuru): 0821-2548220, 2548221, Suttur: 0821-232223, 232224

Mahavidyapeetha: 0821-2548212

Suttur Sadhana, Bengaluru: 080-22970101 \* e-mail: jsashram@yahoo.com

## FOREWORD

Every once in a while, a story comes along that reminds us that the greatest mountains we ever conquer are not always the ones that rise above the clouds, but the ones that exist within us. *Everest Within* is one such story—an extraordinary journey of self-belief, unwavering discipline, and the relentless pursuit of human potential.

In a country where a culture of lifelong participation in sport is still evolving, it takes exceptional conviction for an individual to look beyond conventional expectations and ask a simple yet profound question: *What am I truly capable of?* Dr. Usha Hegde has spent a lifetime answering that question—not with words, but through action. Her journey is a testament to the fact that potential is not discovered by chance; it is revealed through preparation, perseverance, and the courage to embrace challenges that most would consider impossible.

What makes this book remarkable is that it is not merely the story of climbing Mount Everest. It is the story of a woman who excelled as a student, built an accomplished professional career, became a devoted wife and mother, led a department in a prestigious medical institution, and still found the determination to pursue extraordinary sporting dreams. From marathon running to becoming an Ironman triathlete, and ultimately standing atop the highest point on Earth, every achievement was earned through countless

unseen hours of discipline, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment.

As I read these pages, one quality stood out above all others—dogged tenacity. It is evident not only in the demanding training schedules, the physical hardships, and the setbacks that accompanied her mountaineering journey, but even more so in her remarkable ability to balance the many roles life entrusted to her. The discipline required to nurture a family, excel in a demanding profession, and simultaneously prepare for some of the world's toughest endurance challenges is perhaps an even greater achievement than reaching the summit itself.

Sport has taught me many lessons, but one stands taller than all the others. The greatest competition in life is not against another individual; it is against oneself. One need not represent a country or stand on the world's biggest stage to experience the highest form of competition. Every day presents an opportunity to challenge our own limitations, to overcome our fears, and to become a better version of ourselves than we were yesterday. That, to me, is the purest essence of sport and perhaps the greatest lesson this book imparts. Dr. Usha Hegde's journey is, above all, a triumph over self-doubt, discomfort, and perceived limitations. Every marathon, every setback, every difficult decision, and every step towards the summit was ultimately a victory over herself.

One of the most compelling messages woven through this book is the importance of preparation. Success, whether in sport, profession, or life, is never accidental. It is built patiently, one disciplined day at a time. Dr. Hegde's meticulous preparation for Everest demonstrates that extraordinary accomplishments are forged long before the

moment of triumph. Even the heartbreak of missing the Boston Marathon—a dream she had cherished for years—became not a defeat, but another stepping stone in preparing for an even greater challenge. Such resilience transforms disappointment into opportunity.

Yet beyond the medals, mountains, and milestones, this is fundamentally a story about the human spirit. It reminds us that age is never a barrier, circumstances are never permanent, and that the boundaries we perceive are often self-imposed. It is a story of resilience, humility, optimism, and the courage to keep moving forward despite uncertainty.

I have little doubt that readers from every walk of life will find something of themselves in these pages. Whether you are an athlete, a professional, a student, a parent, or simply someone standing before your own metaphorical mountain, this book offers a powerful reminder that extraordinary achievements belong to ordinary people who choose not to give up.

Dr. Usha Hegde's journey is far more than an ascent of Mount Everest. It is an ascent of character, purpose, and the indomitable human spirit. May her story inspire countless others to discover, challenge, and ultimately conquer the Everest within themselves.

— Javagal Srinath



## DEDICATION

To every soul,  
who refuses to surrender, rises after a  
fall and continues to dream big;  
May this book remind you that the strongest  
force in the world is not talent, luck, or  
circumstance—it is an unbreakable will.  
**This book is dedicated to "YOU".**



## PREFACE

Through every challenge faced — physical, mental, and/or emotional — the book proves that true strength comes from within and pursuing one's dreams demands fierce determination. In every heartbeat, the mountain calls; in every step, a dream rises. Unstoppable passion, unbreakable will, unforgettable journey — it is about one woman's fight to conquer her "Everest" time and again.

The book unfolds more than just a chronicle of climbing the world's highest peak. It takes the reader through the inception of the idea of attempting the Everest summit, to introducing "Boss Force," the hero of the story. The narrative vividly portrays the challenges encountered along the journey — not merely of scaling Everest, but of life itself which is marked by peaks and valleys. It reinforces that challenges are inevitable, and one should learn to accept changes and embrace them gracefully with an open heart and mind. It reveals how with patience, attention to detail, and unwavering focus, one can continue to strive towards the pinnacle of goals once they are set in motion.

It captures an intimate account of each day of the expedition along with the facts and profound moments experienced through years of preparation and the demanding two-month climb towards the summit of the world's highest mountain. And when the journey finally culminates, it leaves the reader with a deep sense of

introspection — reflecting the path travelled before setting forth once again towards the next great summit of the self.

To those who believe they are too old to begin something new, may this story remind you that it is never too late to embark upon a new journey. To busy professionals balancing endless responsibilities, may it serve as encouragement that extraordinary achievements beyond one's career are indeed possible. To women whose lives revolve around family and children, may it inspire you to pursue your own passions and dreams with equal conviction and courage. For anyone who dares to dream big and refuses to settle, may this story ignite your own ascent.

Writing this book has been a deeply rewarding experience. With every word, the adventure has been relived countless times, each memory stirring waves of nostalgia. This is far more than a journey to the summit; it is a powerful testament to breaking limits, defying expectations, and embracing the transformative power of personal goals. As a professional with a full-time career, a mother, a wife, and a dreamer, I have learnt to embrace the many roles I play and balance them with intention as I chase the goals. That balance is an art which each of us must discover for ourselves, and the first step begins with a simple belief: "I too can do it."

The key take-aways especially from the Everest Summit have been heart touching. I realised that the experience was never just about conquering a peak, but was about confronting the self, embracing fragility, and recognizing that no summit is complete until it is shared by actual presence.

## BEING REAL – BEING THYSELF

Futile are my efforts to heed to the dictums of the world,  
To follow the protocols of life –  
Neither my heart nor my soul listens.

Wasted are the energies spent trying to reason with the  
madness,  
Trying to bring meaning and mindfulness within myself –  
Neither my mind nor my body reasons.

Tell me of the impact of these liaisons,  
Not just for myself, but for those involved –  
Neither do I worry, nor should they.

Should I be the wiser one, (Older and wiser, as they say...)  
Make strong resolutions –  
Neither do I feel older, nor wiser, just sweet sixteen.

Life is beautiful,  
To be lived fully, consciously, without boundaries –  
Neither will the world understand, nor do I want it to.

I accept my life

I live today, cherish the delirium —

Neither do I resist embracing it, nor refuse to treasure the memories.

Being human, kind, empathetic, hopelessly romantic and honest

Honest to myself and to my feelings, upholding integrity in my beliefs —

That's who I am, I will dream on and live on.

*- Usha Hegde*

# CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                        |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter 1: DEEPLY PLANTED - "The Seed of an Inconceivable Challenge" .....                                             | 1   |
| Chapter 2: USH - "The Boss Force" .....                                                                                | 5   |
| Chapter 3: ACCEPTANCE - "The Strategic Decision to Move On" .....                                                      | 11  |
| Chapter 4: Sometimes Things Don't Go as Planned - That's called LIFE .....                                             | 19  |
| Chapter 5: REJUVENATION - "A Fresh Start to the Dream Journey" .....                                                   | 27  |
| Chapter 6: MIND CONQUERED, Foundation Built!!!! ..                                                                     | 33  |
| Chapter 7: Final Preparations.....                                                                                     | 46  |
| Chapter 8: Journey to Everest Summit .....                                                                             | 54  |
| Chapter 9: EVEREST BASE CAMP - "Hunt for Who I am Yet to Become, Begins" .....                                         | 64  |
| Chapter 10: THE HARDEST TEST - Patience to Wait for Right Moment .....                                                 | 94  |
| Chapter 11: Dare it, Desire it - Just Do it.....                                                                       | 112 |
| Chapter 12: Believe You Can Do It and Keep Pushing Yourself .....                                                      | 128 |
| Chapter 13: When You Reach the Summit, You Are Only Halfway There and Suddenly Discover That All Roads Lead DOWN ..... | 134 |

|                                                                           |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter 14: The Fulfilling Realisation of an Expedition .....             | 143 |
| Chapter 15: Mountains are the Last Place Where You Can be truly wild..... | 148 |
| Acknowledgements .....                                                    | 154 |

# CHAPTER 1

## DEEPLY PLANTED - “THE SEED OF AN INCONCEIVABLE CHALLENGE”

It was early 2021. The seed to summit EVEREST was sowed. Thanks to Sharath, the idea of even thinking of this adventure was possible. To me Everest was something that only the great mountaineers do. Sharath, my running friend from Mysuru, working with Tata Steel, Jamshedpur, introduced me to Hemanth, the then head of Tata Steel Adventure Foundation (TSAF) and an Everest summiteer. After interacting with Hemanth, my aspirations started to soar and made me believe that even ordinary people with good fitness, appropriate training and money to spare, can think of it. I felt my heart beating fast at the hope of reaching the top of the world. I was fit, hard work was nothing new to me, could give it my all and had saved money too. So, what was stopping me, NOTHING!!!!

My thoughts took firm hold in Aug 2022 after a trek to Dzo Jongo (6250m/20,600ft), through the beautiful Markha Valley with its dramatic gorges, rivers, and rock formations. I went on this trek with the TSAF team and one of the participants was an Everest summiteer.

He gave a lot of input and reinforced that it is very doable if we are focused and train for it. He also told me that I was strong and fit and needed to train and become mountain fit

from being just fit. On my way back from the Dzo Jongu summit, I travelled with Uttam Singh, the VP of Tata Steel Foundation. As we got talking, both of us shared our desire to summit Everest. Now this was serious business. We both decided to prepare and attempt it together. Although I had discussed my dream earlier on with Hemanth (in 2021) and he had put a tentative plan for me, the plan became stronger with Uttam and me deciding to do it together. Uttam would follow it with the TSAF team for planning and mobilizing it. Life looked very interesting with the new challenge.

*A new dream soared and a new seed took strong roots, thanks to my dear friend Sharath for introducing me to this madness.*

***A new dream soared & a new seed took strong roots -  
Courtesy SHARATH ADANUR***



***Dzo Jongo Peak (6280m) with the TSAF team***



Usha Hegde

*With Uttam Singh as we discussed Everest Summit over coffee*



## CHAPTER 2

### USH – “THE BOSS FORCE”

I am Usha which means “Dawn / Morning Light”, true to my name I light up the path (even if it’s my own path), keeping my goals and visions clear. “Ush” is what all my dear friends call me.

I was born and brought up in Bangalore where I finished my school and Pre University College. I had a very humble upbringing with 4 other siblings (3 older sisters and one younger brother) and extended uncle’s family. Growing up was a lot of fun. My childhood days are memorable, and it was well balanced in both studies and other activities. I had a go-getter attitude, was very hard-working and wanted to make a mark for myself in anything I participated in. I grew up being mothered by my older sisters as my mom was busy managing the house for so many of us. I was my dad’s favourite, and I often relied on his support to get out of situations, especially after arguments with my younger brother. Looking back, I realise that I sometimes took advantage of this, shifting blame onto him and getting him into trouble.

I was not easy as a child, I was bull-headed and tough. I guess being the 4th girl child and finally a boy child just after me made me a demanding and attention seeking person. I clearly remember this one incident. I told my mother that I

wanted to eat pumpkin payasa (a sweet dish). It was not the season for pumpkin. But I was adamant and created a big hue and cry scene. My mom somehow hunted for a pumpkin in remote markets, got it and prepared the dish. Guess what happened then???? Once it was prepared, I refused to eat it, OMG I was such a brat and wondered how my mom managed me!!!!

There was another incident where I had a fight with my brother and I started to cry inconsolably just as I heard my father's office jeep arrive and my father was at the doorstep. Yeah, the timing had to be right, I waited till my dad arrived and was at an ear's distance to hear my sobs. Dad picked me up, scolded my brother and got me a packet of eclair toffees. I was pacified and did not budge from the door till I completely polished the whole packet which was just a kilo!!!

As a child I indulged in a lot of activities, Bharatanatyam classes (cleared even my junior exam), yoga, gymnastics, Hindi and Sanskrit Pratham, Madhyama and Uttama exams, participated actively in school sports and activities such as debate, recitations, dancing, singing etc. I always had this josh (zeal) to do everything under the sun.

Life took me to Mysore in 1989 to pursue a bachelor's degree in Dentistry (BDS) at JSS Dental College and Hospital, which I completed in flying colours (University 1st rank and 4 gold medals). I was a university long distance runner (5k and 10K) and represented Mysore University in long distance running. I bagged the best athlete award of my college (JSS Dental College) and the streak continued even at SDM Dental College, Dharwad, where I completed my master's degree in Dentistry (MDS). Thereafter I started my professional journey by working in my alma mater college

at Mysore. Eventually I got married to my BDS sweetheart Ajay Hegde, becoming Usha Hegde from Usha SC.

During my undergraduate studies at Mysore, I met Ajay Hegde and started dating him in my very 1st year of college itself. Both of us were focused on our studies and were ambitious about our future. He was one of the college's heart throbs with the most sculpted body, winning the title of Mr. JSS Medical College and Hospital, not once but thrice for his awesome physique. He was a good sportsperson too, and played cricket, athletics and football. Our love affair was the talk of the college as he was the son of Professor and Head of the Orthopaedic department at the same college. Soon our affair reached my father's ears in Bangalore. I got an urgent call on the landline (yes, those days there were no mobile phones) at the hostel telling me to get home immediately. I got to know the agenda before going and was scared that dad would not send me back to college because of my affair. I somehow wanted to inform Ajay before I left Mysore. I knew he was watching a movie with a friend in a theatre near college. I went to the theatre; the movie had begun. It was no fancy theatre, sort of run down mediocre one. I was desperate to get to him. I requested the security guard outside to let me in, but he refused. So, I told him to get this person out for me instead. In went the security guard and in the middle of the ongoing movie, he screams in the local Kannada language, "Ajay Hegde, Ajay Hegde, come out. Usha is waiting for you outside." Ajay was embarrassed and completely flushed when he got out. And I was happy to see him before I left for Bangalore.

That was me, impulsive and compulsive. Get a thought in my mind, I do it without any hesitation. Although with time and age I have learnt to mellow down a bit, have I????

With marriage, two sons and career building for Ajay and me, life became hectic. I took a sabbatical from work just before my second son was born, to be with my young children. Initially after quitting my job, I suffered from FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). But when I look back now, I feel it was one of the best decisions of my life. In the beginning I had trouble adjusting to being a full time “mom”. Being naturally optimistic, sulking and cribbing did not suit me. I soon indulged in a lot of activities. I had a jolly good break doing lots of things. I became a hardcore gym person (even did a certification – Les Milles), a certification in hospital administration (IGNOU from Ramaiah hospital, Bangalore) guitar classes for a year (which I eventually gave up as even after lot of practice and hard work I just could not get the hang of it; music was just not my cup of tea!), cooking classes (loved them) and a complete reveller and party person. I started running and cycling with my children and their friends. Just imagine cycling 50 to 60 kms with 6-8year olds. Blessed times and times away from work well spent - doing things I loved and being there for my children and family at the same time.

My passion for music exists till date. I listen to a lot of music and in fact want to take classes in light music singing sometime in future. This passion for singing reminds me of one funny incident with Ajay during our initial dating days. We were on his bike (the famous RX100 Yamaha bike with the seat shortened so that the pillion would sit snugly to the rider), and as we were riding, I sang a song for him, a Kannada romantic song with total indulgence. A few lines sung, suddenly he burst out laughing. Poor fellow, he was controlling himself but could not bear it anymore and was in splits. That was the end of my singing to him. Even to this

day, we have a good laugh about it, especially when we hear that song.

The honeymoon period came to an end with me rejoining my professional job in 2011, after 7 years of sabbatical. I did not feel guilty about going to work anymore as the kids were in school for a good 7 hours. Also, by now the fitness bug had bitten me and I started to run, gym and cycle along with my job, home chores, and kids. It was also the year that I turned 40 and just to remind myself that I was getting older only on calendar and not physically, I went ahead and summited Kilimanjaro peak 5,895 m (19,341 ft), the tallest peak in South Africa, mid-life crisis or whatever one may call it.

My runs and cycling became more serious and I became an endurance athlete running marathons, cycling long distances and even started learning swimming at 45 years hoping to become a triathlete. My personal best in a marathon (42.2kms) has been 3:47 hours and I have qualified for the coveted Boston marathon thrice.

From breaking both my arms due to a fall during 200km cycling Brevet event in 2012 to cycling 300km in 16:30 hrs in 2016; not being able to swim 25m in the pool in 2016 to swimming up to 4 kms in 2019 in open waters, I have come a long way as an endurance athlete. My dream as a triathlete to become an Ironman triathlete came true on 1st Dec 2019 after crossing the finish line of the Busselton Ironman Triathlon, Australia (3.8km swim; 180km cycling; 42.2km running) in 14:30:24hrs. This timing earned me the 1st rank amongst Indian women ironman triathletes for the year 2019 and I was simply over the moon.

Don't forget that I also had a full-time job, was a Professor and Head of the Department while I pursued my passion in endurance sports. My academic performance was equally satisfying with publications, research and teaching activities. I had learnt to balance it all by prioritising and delegating interests and time wisely between my duties as an academician, endurance athlete, mother, wife and a friend. Being an early riser and early to bed person, my day typically would start by 4:30 am and end by 9:30 pm. That's a whole lot of time to fit in many things I would say!!!!!!

With Covid hitting us hard, in early 2020, I just focussed on being fit for the next year. Finally, running the Boston marathon dream was becoming a reality after qualifying for it yet again in 2022 Bangalore marathon and getting a slot for April 2023 Boston Marathon. I wanted to tick this off my bucket list and work totally thereafter on EVEREST expedition which was running on my mind since 2021. The plan was to train hard for Everest after the Boston marathon in April 2023, for at least a year or two before attempting it in 2025 or 2026.

Man proposes, God disposes; I have always been a strong believer of this, accepting what is disposed and moving on. I believe that when things don't work out as planned, there is always something better waiting for us. This has been reinforced time and again and with the next few happenings in my life it has been further fortified.

## CHAPTER 3

### ACCEPTANCE – “THE STRATEGIC DECISION TO MOVE ON”

Once the realisation that Everest Summit could be attempted even by non-mountaineers after proper training dawned on me, the wish and the desire to attempt Everest summit was strongly ingrained in me. After the Aug 2022 Dzo Jonggo peak expedition, I had envisioned summiting Everest.

My target at hand was to run the Boston marathon in April of 2023 and focus totally on Everest training after that. Now I had a partner in Uttam, who was interested in it too. My marathon training was going fabulously, and it only added to my fitness levels as a climber.

In Feb 2023 the TSAF team suddenly planned a technical training session for Uttam and me. In India the various mountaineering schools offer BMC (Basic Mountaineering Course) and AMC (Advanced Mountaineering Course), each for a month-long duration. Most mountaineers prior to attempting peaks like Everest complete both these training. Although I was planning to undergo at least BMC, I found out that the age limit to join these courses was 45 years, and I was already past 50 years. Luckily TSAF came to my rescue and offered the technical training needed for mountain climbing. Since most of my hard training for Boston was

done, I agreed to go ahead with the TSAF plan. I could come back by mid Feb and still have little more than a month left for Boston.

The training was a 12-day trip, with three days of technical training at TSAF, Tumung camp, Jamshedpur, followed by a trek to Dodital (11,998 ft) from Manjhi to practice and execute the technicalities of snow climbing. The highlight of this trip was meeting and chatting for almost an hour with Bachendri Pal madam (the first Indian woman to summit Everest in 1984) at Jamshedpur. Ms Pal is an amazing personality, full of life and zeal to do more, even at 69 years of age. The experiences that she shared about her different expeditions were truly motivating. Mr. Raju Pal (Bachendri Pal's brother, also an Everester), Mohan ji and Asmita madam (TSAF team) saw to it that both Uttam and I got a full insight and complete exposure to all the equipment and technicalities. We were introduced to the different knots, its applications, use of equipment like crampons, ice axe, snow trekking boots, seat harness, pulleys, carabiners etc. We received hands-on training in ladder crossing, rock climbing, rappelling, jumaring, and mastering the use of ascenders and belaying; thus, preparing us for every challenging ascent.

In the meantime, I kept reading and viewing a lot of stuff about EVEREST. It gave me goose bumps to watch the clips, scared me about the crippling outcomes and deaths. It made me question why I was willing to take on such a perilous challenge, knowing that if nature chose to unleash its fury, there would be almost nothing I could do—completely helpless and at its mercy. The dilemma of going for it kept haunting me time and again, despite which I kept training and dreaming of it.

Once back home from mountain climbing training, I completely focused on my running and Boston marathon. Now Everest training had to wait till I got done with Boston.

As luck would have it, and my jinx with Boston (earlier thrice even though I had qualified I never actually got to go to Boston and run the marathon for one or the other reason), I started developing lower back issues by end of Feb while I was at the peak of my marathon training, feeling fit and ready for Boston. It became so bad that one day I could not get out of bed. An MRI scan revealed a huge disc bulge between L5 and S1. For the whole of March I stopped any form of training. I rested completely, took medication and underwent physiotherapy, all with the hope of recovering and running the Boston marathon in April. I had trained well, so that would suffice and take me to the finish line. Although symptoms did come down, trial runs of 5k in the beginning of April brought back low back pain, radiating to the right leg with tingling and altered sensations. With a heavy heart I took the call to withdraw from Boston. Ajay (my husband, an orthopaedic surgeon) was equally upset and worried for me. He tried his best to get me back to running but running 42.2kms after a long trip from India to Boston was a real concern. In the end, I chose not to go—I couldn't justify to myself the risk in a foreign land, and it simply didn't feel worth the chance I was taking or the cost I would have to bear. I decided to keep the dream alive and promised myself I would attempt it sometime in the future.

The whole of March, April, May and June went in rest and rehab. Since running was out of the question for now, I started walking. I could comfortably walk without any pain for up to an hour. This left me with aspirations to get stronger for the climbs and the eventual EVEREST.

I started swimming to strengthen my back and joined the gym to get stronger. However, I had to be mindful of the exercises and the weights that I lifted at the gym. I religiously worked on it and added breathing exercises. I followed Wim Hoff breathing and reached 3:15 mins breath holds as of July 2023.

A check MRI did not reveal as much as the shrinking of the bulge that I would have loved, so it indeed was taking time, and I had to accept it. I still had low back niggles and occasional tingles on my right leg.

Since walking was comfortable, I incorporated weighted jacket walks, slowly from 3kgs on flat surfaces to 5kgs on hill climbs. But the mainstream of my training was still swimming. The back issue and me became best friends, it kept telling me that it was always there and that it would not let go of me even for a minute. And I was being equally strong trying to tame it.

May till Aug 2023 (4 full months), I worked quite consistently on my back. I did short 1-week yoga for back strengthening and incorporated all those yoga stretches in my routine. I still go into Yin and Yan with my back. Some days it is so good, normal, but some days I wake up with pain. And there are other days when there is no back pain, but tingles on my right calf or nagging pain on my left SI joint. Ufff, I'm still not happy with the behaviour of my back.

The next phase of Everest climbing training was planned for August by TSAF. With a strong mind, I went ahead and signed up for it. A trek to Kang Yatze (KY1) from August 28 till September 10, 2023. This would be a sort of trial and test climb for my back. I wanted to check how it would hold up with all the rehab work.

Sharath, my running friend, was extremely helpful in getting me started with my walks and Chamundi betta (Chamundi hill at Mysore with the peak altitude of roughly 3500 feet) climb. He joined me on my walks and encouraged me to get better despite him having his plate full as he was getting ready to leave for New York for his higher studies. Once he finally left for the USA, the mood was set and I continued it on my own. Being a self-motivated person with an empty nest at home (children pursuing their studies out of Mysore) and Ajay being extremely busy with work, I spent my time well by engaging with the preps for Kang Yatze 1 (KY-1) @ 6400 metres/21,000 feet.

I found out that there were 12 participants doing KY-1. I was very happy and thought the more the merrier. I started packing for August 28 a week prior.

Thus, with my dream marathon “Boston” flying out of the window, I had no choice but to accept it gracefully. I decided to make peace with the sudden surprise and look forward to the new beginning. My plan was to recover from my back issues as I continued to mindfully train for the future expeditions with the ultimate focus of Everest expedition.

*Once again, I started basking in the glory of my magnificent self and the big goal ahead. I told myself that everything is going to be ok in the end and even if it does not, it will not be the end.*

Usha Hegde

**Mentors at TSAF: Bachendri Pal Ma'am  
RR Paul Sir, Asmita Ma'am, Mohan ji**



**With Uttam Singh & Asmita Ma'am**



**Technical Training at TSAF, JAMSHEDPUR**





*Execution of training at Dodital*



**AND SOME**



**FUN MOMENTS**



## CHAPTER 4

# SOMETIMES THINGS DON`T GO AS PLANNED – THAT`S CALLED LIFE

*But by Changing the Plan, Life Can Get Better  
So, Don`t be afraid to “CHANGE”*

It is said that the only constant in life is CHANGE and your life does not get better by CHANCE but by CHANGE. So here I was raving to go after my new goal. I believe that if you want to live a purposeful life, tie it with a goal and not people or things. I forgot all about my lost opportunity with the Boston marathon and started focusing on training to reach the top of the world.

August 28 to September 10, 2023, was the expedition to KY-1. This expedition was supposed to be a test for the EVEREST climb that I was eventually planning to sign up for. All was well, I did not carry a heavy backpack but opted for yak to carry my luggage since my back was just recovering. We reached the base camp and did the first round of ferry loading to the upper summit base camp. We got back to the base camp, rested for a day and were all ready for the final push - from base camp to upper camp, and from there to the summit. I do not know what came over me, and so very unlike me. 10mins into the trek from the base camp, I gave up mentally, turned around saying I cannot do it and returned to the base camp. I had to spend 2 nights alone with

only the cook as my companion at the base camp as we waited for others to return.

I did not summit KY-1, and had failed my training trial climb. It was devastating, but some sort of solace when two days later got to know that only 3 of them summited out of the whole lot. I know it sounds crazy, but it was sort of comforting to know that I was not the only one who could not do it. It might sound very unsportsmanlike conduct of me, but at that point it did comfort me. Uttam also had given up, and since both of us were planning on Everest together, this was reality slapped on our faces.

The result of this expedition was a complete meltdown of my confidence, and it made me rethink about “Everest”. Uttam and I discussed the matter with Hemanth, and he advised that we were not ready for Everest and that we need to train for it by climbing at least two 6000m plus and two 7000m plus peaks in 2024, get some more technical training and attempt Everest in 2025.

The experience of this expedition got me thinking and I could draw many conclusions:

1. I had mainly trained for it with swimming workouts and realised that endurance by swimming workout was not enough for mountain climbing.
2. I needed to train regularly with weights, do long walks - uphill and downhill.
3. I needed to train stair climbing with weights.
4. I had to incorporate strength training.
5. I had to become mentally strong from being away from home for a long duration.
6. Learn not to be fussy about food, whether you like it or not / whether you are hungry or not – JUST EAT.

7. Be ready to improvise, things do go wrong, if you don't have a hydration pack, so what!! Use a water bottle instead (my hydration tube cut and that played on me mentally during KY-1).
8. Have a personal sherpa one on one for yourself, you are no mountain expert, so do take help of an expert.
9. Be realistic, work towards the goal with complete knowledge and realities.
10. Do not think of the big picture, rather focus on the next few steps and keep going, which is the key mantra in endurance activities.
11. Remember you are the lucky one who has got an opportunity to experience all this, so do not throw it away.
12. Gratitude and more gratitude for all things.

For nearly 10 days or so after the KY-1 expedition I had completely given up on the idea of the Everest expedition. But the desire to not give up started to creep in again. I started to analyse myself and why things did not work out in the KY-1 summit. Somehow the experience of KY-1 was not very positive or supportive, I felt there was a lack of people behind me to teach me and push me to keep going when I was weak, as only self-motivation was not enough. There were only two sherpas for the whole lot. I needed more attention and help in learning, which I could not get. As most of the fellow trekkers were also struggling, there was no chance of getting help from the fellow climbers. Although I was fit, I was not a mountain climber or mountain fit which I realised was a totally different ball game. So, do I just give up thinking I am not good for mountains or work hard on the lacunas and come back stronger????

I decided that I will not give up on my dream but work towards preparations to reach my goal and then take a call. As much as I knew and had accepted that I was not ready for such a big expedition just yet, the thought of training hard and trying it sometime in future kept glaring at me and kept me alive. I discussed all these confusions with Shamala, which was a wise move.

Shyamala is a beautiful human being with a heart of gold and hails from Mysore. I had met her a couple of times earlier very briefly during walks and runs in Mysore. Both of us belonged to a WhatsApp group called "Mysorerunners". She is a retired journalist in her 60s and an avid trekker who has plenty of climbing experience. Shamala has a big list of expeditions to her credit, has trekked with TSAF and Bachendri Pal ma'am too. She has been my single strong motivator. Having known TSAF from close quarters, she introduced me to another dear TSAF friend Chetna Sahoo, an Everester, who had summited in 2016. She felt that Chetna would be the right person to guide me further.

Chetna was a humble soul. My first call to her over the phone and first chat with her got me hooked on her. She is based in Kolkata. She spoke so easily that I felt like I had known her for ages. She started sharing a lot of tips in training with me. My only problem with her was the language. She spoke mostly Hindi, and my Hindi was barely manageable. She was sweet and did not mind my language. She patiently listened to me in my broken Hindi. On her suggestion I went on to read the book *"Think Everest: Scaling Mountains with the Mind"*, by Atul Karwal and Anita Karwal. The first few chapters were slow, then it caught up. I loved the way the book is written; it felt as though I was climbing

Everest as I read through. The author is highly knowledgeable and has read a lot. Loved the quotes in his narration. I want to read the book again and mark a few pages.

I started training as per Chetna's advice (climbing stairs and hills with weights, breathing exercises, walks with weights and strength training at the gym), reading books, articles about Everest and gathering all possible information.

In any expedition, the choice of "SHERPA", our guide during the whole expedition becomes the single most important decision, especially for a commercial climber like me. Having a good experienced sherpa is invaluable for climbers like me with not much climbing experience. It was Chetna again who made my job easy in this matter. She suggested that I go with her sherpa (whom she fondly called "Daju" – older brother in Nepali), "Phurba", for the Everest expedition. Phurba sherpa had summited Everest 9 times earlier and had the experience of taking 50 plus year olds to the top. She introduced me to him over the phone. He wanted to know about my fitness, and I shared all my endurance events of marathons, triathlons and the very few climbing experiences that I had. Finally, we decided that Chetna and I go for a winter trek along with her Daju - Phurba Sherpa in December 2023. This would help me get to know him one on one and he would be able to assess my fitness and readiness for mountains. And I could take the call about EVEREST after this winter trek.

In the meantime, TSAF were planning a winter trek (Dec 2023) in Ladakh for Uttam and me as a part of our training. I conveyed to Uttam (my Everest partner) that I would not be joining the TSAF for winter trek or for the Everest expedition. He and TSAF were gracious enough not to probe

and let me be. Uttam and I had to part ways in our dream of attempting the Everest expedition together.

I started training hard from the end of September through October, November and December. Stuck to walks with weights on my back, starting from 5kgs gradually reaching 9 kgs, with 30 mins to 2hr walks. I also started stair climbing in the gym. The gym had 3 floors and a total of 75 steps. Started with 20 reps \*75 steps to 60 reps\*75 steps. Chamundi betta (hill) climbing by - road, steps and trail and strength training at gym were other things I incorporated.

With my progressive step by step training, I started feeling stronger and positive for the winter trek. I knew that I had to work harder if I was thinking of EVEREST and I was determined to do it. All this would be decided after the winter trek and of course only after my sherpa's approval.

Most of the training was regular and consistent for the past 2 months plus, except for the small little breaks with akka's (my older sister) health issues or me falling sick or with small trips. Fitness wise I felt ready for the winter trek to EBC via Chola pass and Gokyo Ri; My sister's health issue got me thinking. I was in two minds to go ahead as she was advised radiation treatment for the recurrence of her thyroid cancer. I did not want to leave her and go away for 3 weeks. Also, from previous experiences I realised that I start getting home sick after 10-12 days, lose my appetite and crave to get back home. But with my niece deciding to come and stay with my sister during her treatment, I had no excuse not to go ahead. This would be the right challenge to prepare me to get mentally very strong. In a small way, I guess this would be a good prep for EVEREST.

Eventually, I went ahead, left Mysore on December 12, with a positive mind and telling myself, “I know I will survive”. By the way, my back has been ok, though not completely free of pain, the radiating pain and the tingles were almost negligible, only creeping in at times. The early morning stiffness and pain after waking up was almost gone, but the nagging at the SI joint, especially on the left side, was still there and at times painful too. I have been working on recovery with a fancy “HYPERICE” recovery system for back and legs.

*I should be fine; I will be fine. No one gets, rather one must create - second opportunity in life by learning from the shortcomings of the first opportunity. I had learnt my lessons from not summitting KY-1, this time around I had decided not to repeat the mistakes, had mentally accepted to be ready to make changes and adapt to conditions and most importantly to be mentally strong.*



Usha Hegde

## **TRYING TO MAKE PEACE WITH SELF**

*When you are at peace with yourself, All desirable things will come to you*



## CHAPTER 5

### REJUVENATION – “A FRESH START TO THE DREAM JOURNEY”

*When things don't work out as planned, one must always reflect, renew and accept changes to find solutions in making dreams a reality. Many times, small changes are just not refreshing but become game changers.*

When I decided that I needed one-on-one attention in climbing and wanted to get to know my sherpa personally before the expedition, rather than during the expedition, I had to take a rather bold step by accepting to go on the EBC winter trek with Chetna and Daju. This move turned out to be absolutely impactful. By the end of the winter trek, I realised how fantastic the change was, felt rejuvenated knowing that I was with the rock stars.

Chetna's company was excellent, and I got to know Daju from close quarters (soft spoken and man of few words). Although the climb was real, terrain was tough, temperatures were bone chilling, weather was unforgiving and the air was thin, I found the mountains scenic and loved it. Company matters a lot and probably my mind was more accepting of all the toughness that I had to face too.

All the few treks that I had done in the last couple of years had been in the Leh region where we had to pitch our own tent and take it down too in the killer cold, with fingers

completely frozen and non-functional. But the winter trek with Daju was in Nepal, and there were ready tea houses everywhere. That was an absolute luxury with toilets, cots with comfortable beds and quilts to sleep in and dining halls with heaters. Probably these helped too.

Most of all I got a lot of info about climbing the “EVEREST” from Daju and Chetna. It was a big eye opener for me in many ways. I got to know the entire schedule of the expedition, a lot of stories of previous expeditions, the cost, things to carry, what to expect and how to handle it all. Chetna and Daju together tested me by pushing me to limits. One of the days, Chetna faked illness and said that she would not accompany for the trek ahead. She wanted to see if I would continue without her and thereby test my mindset. I readily agreed and said that I would go ahead. As we set out, Daju asked if we could finish the two-day trek on the same day as Chetna would be alone. I agreed and completed the set task without hue and cry. Only after we got back did I get to know that it was a mental and physical test for me, and I passed it.

Every day after the day`s trek, Chetna and I would settle in the dining area with a book and pen, I would shoot out questions for her and take notes about her life. The idea was to write a book about her once I got back home. Her story needs to be told to the world. This time around even on such a long trek I was not home sick at all. This boosted my confidence to stay almost 2 months away from home during the Everest expedition. I did not make a fuss about eating too. For once I felt good thinking of Everest and ready to take up the challenge in all ways – monetary, family, food, staying away for so long, the cold, the bathroom and so on. No amount of thanks to Chetna will suffice. I had met a pure

soul, who was so positive about her outlook in life and loved her sense of humour. I headed back home filled with a lot of gratitude and totally rejuvenated for the EVEREST expedition.

## **A Lesson in Letting Go . . . . .**

I returned to Mysore on the night of December 30<sup>th</sup> with a smile on my face, though my body had weathered a storm.

While I was in Gokyo, midway through the trek, I received news that shook me to the core. My younger son, Aryav, who is currently studying to become a doctor, met with an accident. He had fallen off his bike and sustained multiple bruises, along with a fractured finger. What pained me more was knowing that this injury came just a day before the Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences, state level weightlifting competition, for which he had trained hard. There was no way he could participate, not with his hand in a cast and a broken bone. To add to that, he had an important exam paper due soon.

I remember the moment vividly. My heart cringed; my whole being ached for him. I wanted to drop everything and rush back home. That night, I lay in bed in the Himalayas, thousands of feet above sea level, silently crying, feeling helpless, torn between two worlds.

But there was nothing I could do. I was far from home, on a trek that had no easy way back. Time, however, did its magic. Two days later, I found I could breathe a little easier. The ache softened, though it never quite left. Regular calls with Aryav and Ajay, thanks to surprisingly decent internet connectivity, helped me stay connected and feel somewhat reassured.

Simple words, yet they held me together when I could have fallen apart. Life doesn't always offer us control, but it does offer us perspective. Being so far from my son when he was in pain was excruciating, but it also showed me that sometimes, letting go is the most loving thing we can do. We grow not just in comfort, but through adversity. Both Aryav and I came out strong not just from his injury and my helplessness—but from the grace with which we learnt to accept what we could not change.

A few days after I got home from the winter trek, I got a call from Daju saying that both he and Chetna felt that I was ready and could go for the Everest expedition in April 2024 itself. It was great news for me, and I was ecstatic. The winter expedition was indeed a fantastic boost to my confidence. Now with my sherpa's acceptance and endorsement that I was ready, there were no second thoughts. I decided to sign up for the April 2024 Everest expedition as per my Daju's advice and not wait till 2025. I went ahead and revelled in the New Year celebrations at Mysore with Aryav and Ajay. I had a wonderful time. Aryav was doing good, he cleared his subject in distinction and his hand was healing. After superbly surviving the 25-day expedition and emotional *athyachar* (atrocities) of Aryav's mishaps, this expedition taught me some profound truth - "It is what it is" and important lesson - "This too shall pass."

Post new year celebs, I applied for permission to leave at my workplace for the Everest expedition. I finally started to work on my fitness from 9<sup>th</sup> of January, determined to put up all the hard work and give my best.

Although I started working on my fitness from 9<sup>th</sup> of January, till about the end of Jan I worked on regaining my

fitness levels prior to pre EBC trip. Starting from Feb, I got a clear plan.

Psst... I've finally finished the book on Chetna—"Unstoppable Chetna". I had a rough version typed out before I left for my expedition in April 2024, but once I got back, I knew it needed more work. I've spent the past year editing, reworking, and adding photos to bring her story to life. And now, as of May 2025, it's finally complete.

*I'm genuinely happy with how it's turned out. Chetna's journey is so powerful, so full of grit and heart – I truly believe that anyone who picks up this book will not put it down until the very end. I really hope she finds a publisher soon. Her story deserves to be out there, in print, for the world to read and be inspired by.*

### ***Pillars of Support: Phurba Daju & Chetna Sahoo***





*Life is meant for GOOD FRIENDS & ADVENTURES  
Finding both in one person was a "BIG BONUS"*



## CHAPTER 6

# MIND CONQUERED, FOUNDATION BUILT!!!!

*Time to sculpt the body and build the STRUCTURE*

*"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."  
- Benjamin Franklin.*

You don't reach the summit by chance, but only with a strong deliberate plan and a strong action plan isn't optional – it's "THE" path to the goal. Thus, I had a neatly planned schedule of training starting from February 2024.

### **Diary Notes: February – March 2024 (2 months)**

**Monday:** Complete rest day

**Tuesday:** Stair workout (with weights on my back and ankle) @ gym and evening yoga at home with Sathya instructor

**Wednesday:** Cardio + Gym strength training

**Thursday:** Walk with weights starting from and ending at home. 45 mins to start with, up to 2hrs (with weights on my back and ankles). Evening yoga at home with Sathya instructor

**Friday:** Chamundi betta steps workout (with weights on my back and ankles) / Indoor interval cycling workout

**Saturday:** Gym strength training and evening yoga at home with Sathya instructor

**Sunday:** Long walks and climbs on Chamundi road and steps (2hrs in the beginning to up to 5hours towards the end with weights on my back and ankles)

**Weights:** Started with 5kgs and max weights of 14kgs on back and 0.5kg on each ankle

As we entered February 2024, training was going great and the niggles in my SI joint, my constant companion – some days loud and unforgiving, other days just a dull, nagging reminder of its presence. It never truly left me.

I became more conscious than ever. I focused intensely on strengthening my back and prioritised recovery after every workout. I invested in **Hyperice**, a sophisticated recovery system, essentially creating my own personalised physiotherapy setup at home for my legs, arms, and back. Yet the uncertainty around my back lingered in my mind. The fear of “what if” quietly followed me everywhere.

But I have always believed in hard work. There was no looking back. I chose to give it my absolute best – to stay positive, stay motivated, and surrender to Sagarmatha.

I know I am a ziddi (stubborn), but in a nice way. Once I decide, I commit fully to face the challenge, come what may. Deep down, I knew my fears would only dissolve if I confronted them head-on. So, I made it real. I paid an advance amount to seal my commitment. There was no turning back now. It's amazing how financial commitments seal deals!!!

I had to start collecting my gears. I shopped online for my summit push mitts – Rab 8000 Mitts, from a store at Gurgaon

- “Trek Kit India Mountain Gear”. Karthikeyan, a Navy officer, whom I had met during KY-1, guided me in the purchase of these mitts. I was yet to procure the inner gloves. Karthikeyan and his daughter Kaamya were also attempting Everest in 2024. They were experienced climbers and had a lot of knowledge. I almost bought the wrong mitts from Canada through a friend’s relative but managed to return it just in time after Karthikeyan’s advice.

As I approached the middle of February 2024, I was feeling good with all the workouts. But the addition of yoga did not seem to be doing good. I don’t know if it was a coincidence or if yoga triggered the issue. My back niggle started again. There was a constant painful niggle, very vague, shifting from left to right and sometimes at the centre. I decided to stop yoga and stretches for the back and continue only with pranayama. This worked wonders. Within a week of stopping yoga practice, my back settled down. I started feeling strong, pain free and continued my workouts in full swing, but had to skip strength training at the gym for that one week.

4 days of workout and three days of pranayama in a week continued in March too. I continued pranayama practice on my own even after stopping with Sathya, my instructor. Yeah, I used to feel a bit lazy to do it on my own, but I pushed myself every single day and got it done. I am feeling solid, indestructible and good, with no back issues either. I have gained 1kg weight and I don’t feel comfortable, but Chetna wants me to put on at least 3-5kgs.

I paid the complete amount to Daju, picked up my insurance ASC 360 with ASC 8000 plan for 60 days and booked my flight tickets onward Bangalore – Delhi – KTM for April 3<sup>rd</sup>. My leave from college got approved and my

long vacation from March 25<sup>th</sup> to May 25<sup>th</sup> was all set. College authorities have been supportive, and sponsored a banner, tee shirt and cap with the university logo. Sree, my colleague got them done for me, thanks Sree.

**After a storm comes the calm; Don't try to calm the storm, calm yourself and the storm will pass.** In the beginning of the last month (March 2024) before I was heading out on my expedition, my father-in-law suddenly became unwell and critical. He was in the ICU for 3 days and then in the private ward for another 3 days. His condition was quite scary, and it got me all worked up thinking about my expedition and leaving him in that condition. Ajay was very supportive, told me not to worry about it all, that they would manage and asked me to concentrate on my expedition. Kiran and family (brother-in-law who lives in Bangalore) would also be coming to spend about 15 days at home during my absence.

Luckily, my father-in-law started responding well for treatment and was discharged from hospital. However, he was not free from his illness and was still very vulnerable. I stopped worrying and told myself that - life will go on, they will manage in my absence (surely), but maybe a bit difficult (my feelings). Once I made up my mind, I stopped worrying about the things that were not in my control and started to prepare myself for the task at hand. This was an important lesson of detachment in attachment for me. Going away did not mean that I did not love him enough. But when others could handle the situation in my absence and there is only so much one could do, I needed to learn to accept that I was not indispensable.

**Ajay**, my sweetheart from my college days, my husband, and my closest friend, has always been the wind beneath my

wings. He comes from a deeply protective family where, especially for the women, life was carefully sheltered and they were often accompanied by a male family member wherever they went. My upbringing, on the other hand, was completely different—I was raised to be independent and encouraged to find my own way in the world. In the early years, it took him some time to understand my adventurous spirit and willingness to take risks. He would often go silent when I shared my plans, but never once said “No.”

Over the years, he has come a long way in understanding what drives me and has become my strongest supporter, taking immense pride in all my seemingly crazy pursuits. Together, we have grown stronger and learnt to appreciate each other’s differences. There was a time when I would delay telling him about my goals, simply to spare him the worry. Today, however, I excitedly share my dreams and plans with him, and he listens with a calmness that reassures me. I say “calmness” because I know he worries deeply, but he also wants me to live life on my own terms and remain true to who I am.

His acceptance of my decision to take on the Everest challenge is perhaps the greatest testament to how far we have come together. He knew the risks, understood the sacrifices, and was fully aware of the dangers that come with attempting the world's highest peak. Yet, instead of allowing his fears to hold me back, he chose to trust me, support me, and stand firmly by my side. I know the thought of me being on Everest worried him immensely, but he never asked me to abandon my dream. His quiet faith in me gave me strength when I needed it most and reminded me that no summit is ever climbed alone. Thank you, Ajay, for being my anchor, my biggest cheerleader, my partner in every dream,

and, most importantly, for simply being you. At the end of the day, all I need is to see you smile, and I feel ready to take on the world.

**My dear sons, Akarsh and Aryav**, had no say in this matter, although they protested vehemently when I first revealed my plans for the Everest expedition. They have never quite understood why I choose to take such risks in life, and perhaps they never will. Yet, despite their concerns and reservations, they have always stood by me with love and support, ultimately smiling and reminding me of the only thing that truly matters to them – that I return home safely.

I have been fortunate to have **in-laws** who, despite considering my Everest expedition completely irrational and worrying deeply about the risks, never direct their concerns at me personally. Instead, they choose to share their worries with my sons, which I can certainly understand given the nature of the challenge. What I appreciate most is their respect for my choice – they may disagree with my decision, but they do not repeatedly question or pressure me about it. In the context of preparing for something as demanding as Everest, having one less source of emotional friction to manage feels like a genuine blessing.

**Nanda (my eldest sister), whom I call akka (which means older sister)** was most worried and cursed me for setting such a risky target this time around. She has her own way of expressing her love through her worries and banter. Her curses are just her prayers in disguise. My second sister Shobha and Asha (3<sup>rd</sup> sister) have been having a tough time with some domestic issues since mid-October 2023, and I was worried about them. There is really nothing I can do to help but talk to them on a regular basis, which I do. I haven't

told my brother and family who reside in the USA, I just don't want them to worry that's all.

**My parents** were not very aware of the expedition; they thought that it was one more trek that I was doing. I left it at that, and didn't want them to lose sleep over me. My childhood neighbours in Bangalore knew about it and Abhi (neighbour friend) gave me money to buy sunglasses for the expedition.

**Sharath Adanur**, although now in the USA, is a strong pillar of support in all my yin and yan and turmoil. Despite himself being busy settling in with his studies and school in America, he always finds time to help me with online searches for purchases or make time to talk to boost my morale. Sometimes he gets scared and wonders why he even introduced me to this crazy challenge. He never forgets to check on me. I have never met someone so sensible with a crystal clear thought process. Whenever I have trouble choosing between options, he has always helped me. Sharath had planted the seed of summiting Everest in my mind and became the driving force behind my decision to pursue the challenge. He helped me kick start the training at Mysore, connected me with TSAF in Jamshedpur and supported me throughout my training there. He was benevolence personified – always making that extra effort to give me his TIME. The short coffee chats after our training sessions in Mysore was something I used to truly look forward to – not just for the conversations, but for the filter coffee as well!!!!

**Rama**, my biggest accompaniment ever, played a key role in my long training sessions. Ramanuja, had completed his engineering degree and was working at Bangalore. On weekends he would come home to Mysore and selflessly

accompany me on Sundays for my long workouts lasting to 4 or 5 hours. I am truly blessed to have had him around. I never had to ask him; he would voluntarily offer all the help and spoil me. Before I met Rama, I was comfortable doing all my training on my own. But after meeting him, he accompanied me in all my training, be it marathon running or cycling or the Everest expedition this time around. We have been training together for almost 4 years, since the time he joined engineering, finished it and started working. He leaves for the USA for further studies in August 2024. Hence, I know that this phase shall pass too, and his company will become a memory to cherish, just like all the runs and cycling training that are history now. I guess I should be grateful for what I had and will nurture it dearly. Thanks Rama. You would tell me that it is not necessary to thank you at all, but being grateful and expressing gratitude is something I truly feel from the heart. Your gestures really mean a lot.

And yes, my **dearest biggest and most genuine cheer leaders were the ladies of JSS 89 batch** (my classmate girls from my bachelor's degree – Leka, Zainab, Kavi, Latha, Shashipriya, Bharu, Sandy). Leka and Zainab arranged a beautiful bon voyage party for me at Race club before I left. And Kavi (my worrier friend) and Sajith (her husband) came down from Kerala and surprised me.

**My department friends – Sreeshyla and Priyanka** knew about my new challenge and have been supportive throughout. Others found out that I was headed for Everest a week before I went on leave and wished me well. Premakumari, the department technician with whom my relation goes back to 30 plus years, was teary eyed; one she was scared for me and two she would miss me at work.

Sreeshyla, Priyanka, Premalatha, Shwetha and Prema, all wished me well and gave a warm goodbye.

**Brinda, Jaishankar and Sujit**, were a few other dentist colleagues from college, who knew about my expedition. Brinda worries a lot for me and checks with me every now and then. She also checked my teeth and did all necessary treatment before I left. Jaishankar joked that in case I cannot summit, I could always come back, click a picture at the snow world (a replica of snow mountain in Mysore) and that nobody would know. Sujit has huge confidence in my abilities and says that I will reach the top.

My other family members, very few friends in and outside of college knew about this expedition, and I preferred to keep it that way. I wanted my action to speak rather than my words and did not want any attention till I got back safely and successfully???

**Finally, the time to take the plunge was here (last week before I left).** My last working day was Saturday, March 23rd . Serving as head of department I had responsibilities and had to hand over all those to my colleague next in line in the department and bid goodbye to all my department staff. I had about 10 days off from work to spend in Mysore before I left. I needed that to spend time at home, especially since Akarsh (my older son), was at home awaiting results after his final MBBS exams. I also had to visit my parents in Bangalore and have a decent time to do all my packing peacefully. The idea of going had settled in nicely and I was looking forward to the expedition wholeheartedly.

I had pulled out and arranged most of the things I needed for the trek to pack and shopped for things that I needed (ready-to-eat food, cotton full sleeves tees and medicines).

At home I stocked groceries in the kitchen, toiletries for Ajay, and ground masalas (for chicken and fish) in the freezer. All clothes were washed and ironed for Ajay. Aryav (my younger son) came a few days prior to me leaving, to spend time with me and went back to Mangalore as his 2<sup>nd</sup> year MBBS classes had started. Kiran (brother-in-law) and family came down a few days prior to me leaving. I caught up with akka too. 30<sup>th</sup> March, Saturday went to Mysore Union (club) with Ajay and Akarsh. Gayathri (my friend) and her daughter Aadhya joined us. After a drink, I spilled the beans on my Everest expedition to Gayathri. Otherwise, my girl gang of friends in Mysore were clueless.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, Tuesday night, I left home by 11:30 pm. My in-laws, Kiran and family were all there. It was indeed very emotional to bid bye to all of them who walked me up to the car. I was trying to hold back my tears, but a couple of them just spilled out. Akarsh took me to Manipal hospital to see Ajay and say bye. I was all teary eyed because Ajay was held up at his work, could not come home early to see me off on such a big send off. I met him briefly at the hospital and Akarsh took me to the bus stand. I had made up my mind not to make a fuss about Ajay having not come home, if I did, I knew I would carry the bad feeling. So, instead I decided to let it go and just say bye. As we reached the bus stop, Ajay being Ajay, had to charm me in his own way. He landed up at the bus stand to my surprise. That was the Mangaram cream biscuit to which I fell once again. The bus finally left Mysore bus stop at 1:30am, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2024.

God, I could not believe it, I was actually on my way to EVEREST; will I make it to the top??? Will I make it to the top and back safely???? These were questions that were on the back of my mind. The fact that I was on my way was the

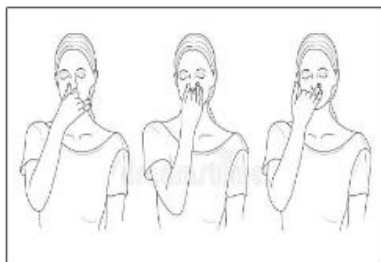
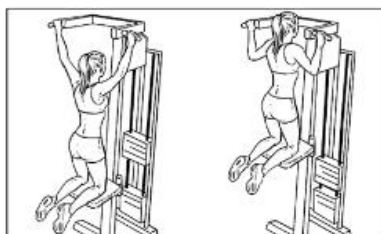
first step. From a scared person with a lot of doubts about this and doubting myself about my decision, to being strong to keep going despite everybody's concern and much against their approvals, who could not fathom why I was taking such a huge risk, the journey to start itself has been a roller coaster. I know that my family is worried, even though they seem to be sending me off with a smile. I have left a notebook with all the financial details so that they should be aware of it all in case I don't get back.

*I have written a love note to Ajay, Akarsh and Aryav saying that my best years have been spent with them and that they should not feel sad and grieve if I do not make it back. I tell myself – "it is what it is, and that there is no thinking back now, Stay positive and march on". I am sorted with everything and without a worry I head towards one of my biggest journeys.*

**Walking with weights on  
back and ankle**



**Pranayama Practise**



**Strength training at gym**

**Stair climbing at gym with  
back pack & ankle weights**



***My core training buddies – Sharath & Rama***



## CHAPTER 7

### FINAL PREPARATIONS

*When making experiences, attention to detail matters - Richard Branson*

**Ultimately, the joy in the journey of my BIG GOAL had arrived.**

**3<sup>rd</sup>- 5<sup>th</sup> April 2024: Mysore to Kathmandu**

I reached Bangalore airport by 4:45am on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, and to my pleasant surprise Rama called saying he was on the way to the airport and asked me not to enter but to wait for him. I had a lot of time and such a sweet gesture of Rama, travelling all the way to the airport at that ungodly hour. Met him around 5am, it was truly an emotional and blessed feeling. He gave me a dark chocolate that I treasured, we took some pictures, bid goodbye and I entered Kempe Gowda International airport's Terminal 2. Once all formalities were done, I went near the gate and waited. I had a lot of time and messaged Lakshmi and Sudhee (dear friends from college) telling them about the expedition. One can only imagine their disbelief; out of the blue I message them saying that I am going on an Everest expedition!!!!!! But somehow I felt I should let them know, they are two important people in my life and what if I do not get a chance to speak with them again.

My flight to Kathmandu was via Delhi; Bangalore - Delhi - Kathmandu, Vistara flight, Departure: 8:00 am from Bangalore and Arrival: 4:00 pm @ Kathmandu (KTM) on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2024.

I had a sore throat and was feverish throughout the journey. I picked up betadine gargle at Delhi airport pharmacy, took paracetamol and kept salt in my throat, which made me feel a bit better.

I knew that Chetna was coming to KTM to get things ready for me but was unaware of the surprise that awaited me. I met Chetna and her son Vihang (Naanu) at Delhi airport. We were on the same flight from there, so I was not alone anymore. I got to know that both were accompanying me till base camp. Imagine my happiness. More was to come.

On reaching Kathmandu (KTM), Daju was there at the airport to receive us with warmth, the way only Nepalese do with a white scarf (referred as Khata) and namaste. He took us to our hotel - "Jampa Hotel", in the Thamel area. At the hotel we met Chetna's friend Suman, her husband Gopal and their daughter Surabhi. One more bouncer for me. Suman and Gopal planned to trek till Namche, while Surabhi would continue till base camp along with us. I was grinning from ear to ear after I heard this. This was not just it, Chetna revealed to me that there was a father son duo who had also enrolled for base camp trek with Daju. They were NRIs and were due to arrive at the hotel on the 5th by midafternoon.

I took a shower, had some hot soup in the room itself and went to bed very early, (8 pm), only to wake up feeling sick at 10:30 pm. I spoke to Ajay and started off on Azithral 500mg antibiotics, and did regular hot water salt gargling.

What a beginning to my expedition, really. Thanks to Chetna, she kept checking on me.

Calls to family and dear friends kept me going. And of course, regular messages to my girl gang (JSS 89 batch girls) cheer leaders. I did not tell them about being sick, I knew they would worry unnecessarily.

I slept well that night and woke up on the 4th morning feeling a lot better. I had breakfast at the hotel itself in the nice lawn area, got back to the room, took a paracetamol and slept again till 11am. Daju came to my room along with Chetna, and the three of us went out for my final shopping. Chetna had helped me make a list of things that I still needed to buy after inspecting all my stuff. We went to Vinod bhai's shop in Thamel (one stop solution for all stuff needed for the expedition ) and got most of the stuff. I had decided to get my down suit stitched locally and had given all my measurements during my visit to the same shop in December during my winter trek. This was very cost effective as against the branded stuff. I had also placed an order for my expedition boots previously. We decided to go for a good brand of shoes (La Sportiva), since well-fitted shoes are crucial for an expedition like Everest. I could not take chances of getting frostbite. With my small feet, getting size 6 boots was not easy. Vinod Bhai promised that he would procure it and send it to base camp in a few days and that we could go ahead with our climb. Daju had taken care of other stuff like crampons, harnesses, sleeping bags, ascenders (Jhumars), descenders etc (all borrowed from Chetna). We also picked beautiful, branded ski goggles (Julbo). Going for cheap goggles was not an option at all, I could not risk my eyes. With the googles and the headlight

purchased I finally had everything in place, and we decided to leave without the summit boots.

We had Nepali thali (Dhal bath, Tharkari) for lunch at **“Thakali Kitchen”**, went back to pick up all our stuff from Vinod Bhai and finally got back to the hotel by 5 in the evening.

Chetna had another friend in KTM, incidentally also called Suman. We met her and the three of us chatted away in Chetna's room. Slept in the evening for a couple of hours, dinner at a place just outside our hotel, back to room – some calls, inhalation, medicines and sound sleep.

I was feeling 90% recovered when I woke up on the 5th morning. I wanted to recover completely before the start of the trek. Luckily, I had one full day to rest and pack. After breakfast at Jampa, I slept a bit. Chetna and Daju came to the room, sorted out things for me and I finished packing. Packed stuff for the summit push separately. We ate lunch at Thakali again, roamed the streets a little hunting for the Indian flag that I had forgotten to carry for the summit. Despite meticulous planning, I had missed this. As we did not get the flag anywhere, we went back to the room and slept for a couple of hours.

Briefly I met Suchir and Ekanksh (father and son), who arrived this afternoon. We went out for chai (tea), roamed the streets a bit, got back to room, finished off the final packing, made a lot of calls to everyone, had dinner in Chetna's room (soup and cup noodles) and slept from 10:30-11:45 pm. Ajay's call woke me up, had a bath, got ready and we finally checked out of the hotel by 1:00am, all eight of us – Chetna, Naanu, Myself, Suman, Gopal, Surabhi, Suchir and Ekanksh. The 8 of us plus Daju and the driver set out

from KTM to reach Ramechaap. It was a long 5-hour drive, and the roads were terrible. The van was comfortable and even in that potholed drive I managed to sleep a bit. We reached Ramechaap airport, a small airport at 1619 feet by 6 am on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2024. We had our packed breakfast at the airport as we waited for our turn to fly out. There were a whole lot of people waiting to fly to Lukla. Each aircraft could take around 14 people at a time. There were about 4 aircraft plying up and down continuously. From Ramechaap to Lukla it was just a 20 mins flight. We finally flew out by 7:20am by “Tara Air” and reached Lukla by 7:40am.

Lukla Airport (LUA), also called Tenzing-Hillary Airport is at altitude of 9,334 feet (2,845 metres). It is located in Solukhumbu district area, Sagarmatha National Park, Nepal. Its runway is only 527 metres and slopes uphill. It does not even have the option of going around and heavily relies on visual navigation. Therefore, the pilots had to be highly skilled and trained for its challenging landings and take offs. Only small, fixed-wing planes and helicopters operate in this region.

*For anyone who wants to experience an adventure of a lifetime with memories etched forever, I totally recommend the flight to Lukla, the world-famous gateway for Everest Base Camp trekkers. The unpredictable weather at this high-altitude airport, having a short , sloping runway without turn around and in a mountainous surrounding, is one of the world's most dangerous airports. Yet the electrifying and exhilarating experience is something that one needs to undergo.*





Ajay @ Mysore bus-stand  
&  
Rama @ Blr airport



Summit Shoes (La Sportiva)  
8000m Mittens (Rab)  
Summit Down Suit (Local)



Embarking on a fabulous trip of a lifetime  
Flight to Lukla – 14-seater flight



*Everest Within: An Ascent of Aspirations*



## CHAPTER 8

# JOURNEY TO EVEREST SUMMIT

*Starts with “Everest Base Camp”  
as the first destination*

### **Lukla to Everest Base Camp trek: 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> April 2024 (8 days)**

Lukla - 9,383 feet (2860m) (6<sup>th</sup> morning)

Phakding - 8,563 feet (2610m) (6<sup>th</sup> night)

Namche -11,286 feet (3440m) (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> nights)

Tengboche -12,687 feet (3867m) - Deboche 12,532 feet.  
(3820m) (9<sup>th</sup> night)

Pangboche - 13,074 feet (3985m) - Dingboche 14,469 feet  
(4410m) (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> nights)

Lobuche - 16,210 feet (4940m) (12<sup>th</sup> night)

Gorakshep - 16,942 feet (5164m) – EBC (5364m) (13<sup>th</sup> night)

Everest Base Camp (EBC) trek is a popular trek that attracts about 1 lakh people every year from across the globe. And among these 30,000- 40,000 people complete it annually. Improvements in infrastructure, such as better flight connections to Lukla and the development of comfortable teahouses along the route have all made the trek more accessible to a broader range of trekkers. The trek offers a

unique opportunity to immerse oneself in Sherpa culture, visit ancient monasteries, and experience the hospitality of local communities. Following the footsteps of legendary mountaineers like Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay adds a sense of reverence and connection to this journey. And most of all it sends a sense of achievement among trekkers standing at 17,598 feet (5364m), the base of the world's highest peak 29,031.7 feet (8,848.86 m).

After tea and an hour break at Lukla, we started our trek by 9:00am. We stopped on the way for about an hour for lunch and continued till we reached our destination for the day – PHAKDING by 2 pm. We stayed in the same hotel as we had during the winter EBC trek, it was “Hotel Sherpa Phakding”, room no 133 and my roommate was Surabhi. I freshened up and rested a bit. Met Kaamya and Karthik (father-daughter duo), who were staying in the same hotel with their team, Asian trekkers with 8 members attempting the summit. In the evening all of us caught up in the beautiful dining room. It was quite full, we had tea, played UNO, spent time there and returned to our rooms only after dinner. This place has a good garden space outside and has a lot of flowering plants. I did not have to buy wi-fi as the same password of my previous stay worked. I could connect with people at home. I was blessed and slept like a baby. I had recovered completely from my sickness and was feeling great. Surabhi was such a sweet company, entering her 11<sup>th</sup> grade, level-headed and humorous girl.

The Asian trekking group had very few Indians and looked like a quiet group being to themselves, unlike my group who were very chatty I was happy that I was with this group as they were all happy go lucky people, not stressed about climbing and their goal was to reach EBC only. Among my team-mates, I was one of the strongest and my

teammates completely believed in me and put me on a pedestal. They believed that I could reach the summit and were very supportive and forever encouraging. That boosted my confidence, making me feel like a mountain queen.

The Asian trekking team had group meetings, strategy discussions and so forth. Most of their team members were youngsters with muscular well-built bodies. I was not sure what to make of it all. Also, in the back of my mind I knew I had not summited Kang Yatze 1, whereas both Kaamya and Karthik had summited (we had gone on that expedition together), plus they had the experience of climbing many other mountains and peaks which I lacked. They would discuss climbing and many preps regarding it. Thanks to Karthik, I took some tips from him, but used to always feel under prepared, less experienced and ill informed. I would get intimidated by their experience and begin to have self-doubts about myself. Sometimes when I looked at the other team, I questioned myself if I had done the right thing by signing up for this and doubted myself and my capabilities.

Our team was lively , laughing around and not thinking too much. Anyways, I decided not to get bogged down, but to put forward the best of me and keep going. Had 100% faith in my sherpa and left it all to him to guide me and decided to follow his instructions 110%. Having an experienced sherpa becomes mandatory, especially for a commercial climber like me.

**7<sup>th</sup> April, Sunday:** Our breakfast was at 6:30 am and we headed out of Phakding at 7, took an hour break on the way for lunch and we reached Namche by 2 in the afternoon. We stayed at hotel “Hill Ten”, again the same place that I had stayed during my December trek. The owner of this place

had run the EBC marathon and there was a photo of it exhibited in the dining area. We got our rooms on the first floor with cozy beds and blankets. We reached the hotel by going into Namche town. It was beautiful, there were lots of lovely cafes and street shops. Once we freshened up at the hotel, had tea and some pakoras, Surabhi, Naanu, Ekanksh and I went back to town. We went to a fancy café and had some apple strudel. Naanu had some coffee. Met the Asian trekker team again at the café. Once back to the hotel, breathing exercise, dinner and sleep. Surabhi became my permanent room partner. There was a laundry option here and I got a few of my clothes laundered.

**8<sup>th</sup> April, Monday**, was rest and acclimatization day at Namche. After the usual morning breakfast, we went on an acclimatisation hike and visited the “Sherpa Culture Museum”. The museum housed various historical equipment, utensils, videos of different cultures, posters of climbers and just everything about the sherpas and climbers. Back to the hotel, lunch and sleep. In the evening we played some card games, had dinner and slept. We asked for apple pie; it was way too much to eat. I was in a great positive mood.

**Tuesday the 9<sup>th</sup> April** was a long trek day. We had to trek from Namche to Tengboche and then to Deboche. We headed out by 8 am and reached our destination only by 4 in the evening. The first half was easy, mostly downhill, and then came the uphill climb in the second half. I saw people climbing with guitars, singing and playing along. We had lunch at around 2. I had shoulder niggles all these days with my right shoulder being more painful. But somehow that too disappeared. It was only looking better for me, and the team kept me in great spirits. At Tengboche, we had a pooja session, a special one for me (for the summit climb), at the

highest monastery in the world (Tengboche monastery). All of us got blessed by the lama and a red sacred thread was tied around my neck. Since all hotel rooms were full at Tengboche we went down to Deboche. It was hardly a 30 mins walk and a beautiful one amidst the trees. Collected some thin paper like shreds from the bark of the trees, *Betula utilis*, the Himalayan birch or bhojpatra, supposed to be used as paper in earlier days. At Deboche, we stayed at a beautiful hotel called "The Himalayan Culture". One of the best accommodations. It was in the middle of the forest, trees all around and very cold. The specialty of this place was that the beds had heated blankets, not that it was very warm, but the thought that we had that it kept us warm. I sort of took a bath, after reaching the hotel. The bathroom was very clean, so I stripped myself and washed up in ice cold water and changed into fresh clothes and did my stretching and breathing exercises. In the evening, we sat in the dining room, a very cosy place. There was another group there. I especially remember meeting Aida Rose from Dubai and Dr. Suresh (an emergency intensivist at Apollo hospital, Bannerghatta Road, Bangalore). Aida was a warm friendly person and somehow believed in me and had no doubt about me reaching the summit. We exchanged numbers and decided to keep in touch. Today Aida and I are friends exchanging notes on our adventurous goals.

We had a gala evening, singing songs and making merry. Suman was a very good singer, Chetna was not bad either and I joined them as a chorus singer. Suman had carried her flute with her. She played a few songs on it, mesmerizing all of us with her stupendous talent. We finished our dinner, chatted with the other group and slept very well.

**10<sup>th</sup> Wednesday** was about a 6 hrs trek, from 8:00 am - 2:00 pm, Deboche to Dingboche via Pangboche. We stopped

for almost 45 mins at the Pangboche monastery and had an elaborate pooja for my Everest summit. The whole team came as they wanted to see the Yeti skull that is housed in this monastery. The trek was a breeze with a flat course having ups and downs, a very good hike. We had an extra rest day here. Evening was usual, playing cards and chatting away in the dining room. We even taught the Uno game to Phurba Sherpa, and he joined us. The dining room here was quite busy and packed, but we found our corner. I washed a few clothes, since we had one extra day here. I bought the wi-fi card here and made calls to everyone. Spoke to Ajay and got to know of his clinic technician Ravi's wife's death. I was sad about it and kept thinking of him. Called him up and spoke to him the next morning. The poor fellow was heart-broken and was weeping. Ajay was not keeping well too, fever, cold, bad throat, was on antibiotics, but not resting at all, working as usual. I don't know how he does it day in and day out. I got to speak to kids, my girl gang, Sharath and akka.

**11<sup>th</sup>, Thursday**, we did a height gain climb at Dingboche. It was Eid, so there would be good biryani back home at Mysore. It was very very windy and cold today, so we mostly sat in the dining area the whole afternoon and evening. It was good that I took the wi-fi, Suman and Suchir used it too. The owner of this place had also summited Everest and he had pictures of many distinguished sherpas displayed in the dining area.

From Dingboche, we headed out on **Friday the 12<sup>th</sup>** morning by 8:00 am. The terrain was downhill first, then uphill till we reached the memorial ground at Thokla pass (4830m). The memorial at Thokla (or Thukla) Pass is a high-altitude memorial ground on the Everest Base Camp trek route in Nepal's Khumbu Valley just outside the village of

Dughla. It commemorates climbers and Sherpas who died on Mount Everest. This somber site features numerous stone memorials, each with a name or memorial plaque, serving as a powerful reminder of the risks of mountaineering and a place for trekkers to reflect on the human spirit's resilience and the legacy of those who have gone before them and pay respects. While somber, Thokla Pass is also known for its breathtaking panoramic views of the Himalayan peaks, including Nuptse (7,861 metres), Pumori (7,161 metres), and Lhotse (8,516 metres). The combination of memorials with the stunning natural landscape makes the stop a memorable and moving part of the Everest Base Camp trek.

After the memorial, the trek was almost flat. I had a good appetite and ate a good lunch. Once we reached our hotel at Lobuche, we freshened up and sat in the dining room. The dining area was very crowded and very stuffy. Again, it was the same place where I had stayed during winter trek and Chetna had stayed put here and sent me alone to touch EBC and get back as a test of my mental strength and physical endurance. By evening I had a mild headache and body pain. Ekanksh and Suchir had bad headaches. Suman and family were not feeling great either. Generally, everyone was not in the best of spirits. The toilet here was terrible (two western style commodes, which get overfilled by end of the day with water spillage all over). Hence, I planned to wake up by 5 in the morning and finish off the loo. Somehow, I could not sleep well and I woke up a lot of times at night. At this altitude the number of tea houses was few and this was one of the best.

Suman and Gopal had planned to trek only till Namche and then go back. Surabhi was supposed to reach till EBC along with Chetna and Naanu and then trek back to Lukla. Suchir and Ekanksh had booked heli services from

Gorakshep after EBC to reach back to KTM. Once Suman and Gopal reached Namche, they got tempted to come up till EBC. They shopped a bit at Namche for warm clothes and decided to continue. It was so good to have the whole team till base camp. They were all fine till Lobuche. But at Lobuche, all of them started having bad headaches. Yet they were real sports, did not drop out, continued till base camp.

It was the final day, **13<sup>th</sup> Saturday** to reach my destination – Everest Base Camp. We started a bit early by 7 am itself, since it was going to be a long day. We reached Gorakshep, had lunch there and continued to reach base camp. From Gorakshep to EBC, the path was not easy, climbing with huge boulders on the path. To add to it the weather became gloomy, started to snow and was super cold. Daju did not allow anyone to quit, tagged along with the slowest person and made sure that everyone reached the destination – EBC. At the base camp a huge hoarding of Tensing and Edmund Hillary was erected, right next to the hall mark stone boulder. There were a lot of people at this photo point, clicking pictures and celebrating their base camp climb.

We had decided to celebrate by making Suman play the flute. But when everyone touched base camp, they were so exhausted that they just wanted to click a few pictures and head back to Gorakshep. Everyone hugged me, wished me well and within minutes disappeared leaving me all alone.

Bidding goodbye to my team-mates was not easy, but not too hard either. I had mentally prepped myself up for that situation and stayed strong for my bigger mission. They were the best that I could have asked for. Suman was very sentimental to leave me. Everyone wished the best for me. I will miss them for sure. All of them were going back home and the thought of that was so heart-warming and tempting.

But consciously I decided not to let that get into my head. I was here for a purpose and especially after almost 3 years of planning. I was grateful that they all accompanied me till the base camp, resolved to be strong and thankful.

Daju told the others to carry on with the descent. He and I waited for Dr. Suresh (the same doctor whom I had met at Debouche) to finish off his photo session with the India flag. Finally, after almost 30 mins waiting, they were done. I borrowed the India flag from him for my summit and promised to return it to him, (which I promptly did). Daju accompanied me till my tent at the "Snowy Horizon" camp. It was an extra 30 mins walk from the EBC photo shoot point. He showed me my room (tent), the dining, kitchen, toilet and pee tent and introduced me to the kitchen staff. He left me at the camp and went down to Gorakshep. He had to see that the rest of them got their helicopters back to Kathmandu (KTM) the next day. All of them decided to take the helicopter back to KTM, from Gorakshep. Naanu was tired, and so was Suman and family. Chetna had no choice but to go with them all. Daju got them good offers and they all managed to fly out of Gorakshep on 14<sup>th</sup>, reached KTM and back to civilization and luxury.

*"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."*

— A.A. Milne

*Yes, I had this wonderful bunch with me all this while. I know I am going to miss them, but I have miles to go and a goal to achieve. I decided that this would be my true journey, alone but not lonely.*

*Everest Within: An Ascent of Aspirations*

Tenzing – Hillary Airport (2846m)



8 day trek from LUKLA 6<sup>th</sup> April



EBC @ 5364m : 13<sup>th</sup> April



L-R: Chetna, Gopal, Suman, Usha, Surabhi, Naanu, Suchir, Ekanksh, Daju



## CHAPTER 9

### EVEREST BASE CAMP – “HUNT FOR WHO I AM YET TO BECOME, BEGINS”

Once Daju left me, I went into my tent, arranged my stuff, had Horlicks to drink, and sat in the dining tent. My team was called “SNOWY HORIZON”. I met my teammates Javier from Chile and Babar Ali from Bangladesh, Furba sherpa (Javier’s sherpa) and Bire (Babar’s sherpa). Furba Sherpa was in his 40’s, chatty and always smiling. Bire was a young strong quiet chap. Javier did not know English, only Spanish, so conversing with him was a bit of a challenge. He did not talk much either. Babar was very friendly, got to know that he was a doctor, 34 years old, experienced climber, runner and cyclist. Javier has been trekking and climbing technical mountains since the age of 20 and he is currently 48 years. So, I was the weak link here. I did not let that bother me much and both never made me feel any less capable. Looking at my age Babar started calling me didi (older sister). We had dinner by 7:00 and went to sleep. It was snowing in the evening, but my tent was cosy. Javier and Babar were leaving the next day for Lobuche peak summit, a part of acclimatization climbs. Hmm my sherpa had told me that we would not be doing that, so I was like am I missing out on my training???? But my Daju felt that it was not needed, told me not to worry and I was okay with it. The good thing about myself was that I entrusted complete faith

in my sherpa and with his experience I was sure he would know best.

EBC was like a small village with each agency having their own territories. Snowy Horizon territory was small. Each one of us, climbers, sherpas and helpers had a tent for ourselves which became our home for the next one month. There was a common dining tent for the three of us and another one for the rest, a common loo tent with a western commode and a big plastic bin below it to collect all the pooh, a tent for peeing, a kitchen tent, a storage tent and a tent for bathing. Once the expedition season is over, the big blue bin would be taken down and the contents disposed of.

My room had a small verandah that led to the main room. The main room was comfortable and had a bed over which I spread my sleeping bag and slept in it. I arranged my stuff neatly around the bed so that everything needed was easily accessible. In the verandah we could place our equipment, shoes etc. The tent room even had a window and pouches to keep our stuff.

**14<sup>th</sup> April, Sunday, Rest Day:** First morning at EBC

I had disturbed sleep the previous night and kept waking up through the night. I had forgotten to fill hot water in my flask, so I did not have water to drink. I ended up having a mild headache and a little sore throat. I woke up around 11:30 pm, needed to pee, for which I had to step out of the tent. Luckily, I managed to fall asleep after that. Finally, I got out of the tent by 5:30 am. It was very cold and I went and sat in the dining room. Breakfast was always at 8 in the morning, lunch at 1 pm and dinner at 7 pm. In between, the dining was always open, we could have hot water, tea, coffee, milk with Horlicks or Boost and some munchies.

After breakfast, I sat in the dining room and continued to read the novel "Krishna" that I had started. I watched people practicing jumaring from my tent. Jumaring (or "juggling") is a climbing technique using mechanical devices called jumars/ascenders to climb upwards with the help of a fixed rope. Climbers attach two ascenders (one for each hand) to the rope, slide one up, bear weight on it, then slide the other. This motion is repeated, making it a powerful (although strenuous) way to move vertically even on featureless surfaces. Had an early lunch by 12 itself, took a paracetamol and slept off to wake up only at 2:30 in the afternoon. My two teammates left after breakfast, so I was alone. In the afternoon I went up to the internet connection tent and got a wi-fi connection of 50 GB for 350 USD. Got to speak to Akarsh (my older son) and got to know that he had cleared his MBBS final year in first class and was super thrilled. He is a balanced kid, managing sports, gym, studies and socializing. Love you, my son. The wi-fi connection was very sketchy, luckily I got the connection in my tent itself at midnight, could speak to Ajay and slept peacefully after that, even though there was continuous snowfall throughout the night.

**15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April**, we did not do much. I was regular with stretches, pranayama and a little bit of Wim-Hoff breathing. On the 15th, **Monday I managed** a French bath and washed clothes. Akarsh, Aryav (my sons) and Dev (son's friend) visited akka's (older sister) thota (farm). I made a video call, and it was ecstatic to see and speak to all of them. They were having akki rotti (rice bread) and yennegai (stuffed brinjal dish), delicacies that I love. Dev was thoughtful, had taken sweets to give akka for passing MBBS. At home, the huge cover of glass in the living area on

the first floor had crashed into a million pieces. Poor Vibha (my sister-in-law) and Gowri (my maid) had to clean it up. Luckily no one got hurt. Kiran (bro-in-law) was saying that when it fell on the ground it made a huge explosive impact. These chats made me feel at home.

By evening another teammate, “Andrew” who had taken permission till Lhotse arrived. He is a Britisher, settled in Australia. His plan was to climb only up to camp 3 and hence the Lhotse permit and not Everest permit. We had dinner and went off to our respective tents by 8:30 pm. There was no snow today and I slept well.

Sitting idle was getting onto me. I walked around EBC for 2 hrs on **16<sup>th</sup> Tuesday** and realised that it wasn't easy at all. Physically not at my best, developed loose stools and niggle at left SI joint. There was snowfall throughout the afternoon and night. I sat and finished the novel “Krishna”. After that, I got thinking about my fitness and doubts about how I would summit Everest started lurking??? My mental strength was good. I kept telling myself not to think of the big picture, I was scared even to dream of reaching the summit. The fear of not summiting would creep in every now and then. I had resolved to put in a lot of hard work during my training and later too during the expedition and not quit easily. Memories of mentally quitting Kang Yatze-1 so easily on the day of the summit push, just after 10 mins of walking, were still fresh in my mind. It was gnawing at me largely and in fact was a learning that made me stronger. The lesson that I learnt was not to give up till I fell dead.

Since it had snowed the whole of 16<sup>th</sup> night, we did not venture out on **17<sup>th</sup> Wednesday** either. Following the daily routine, I started reading a new novel “Lanka's Princess”. By 11 am Javier and Babar returned after successfully

summiting Lobuche peak. Chatted with them, sharing their experiences, dinner and sleep.

Would hear some strange rumbling noise at night. Next day I got to know that it was the sound created by avalanches that happen in the Khumbu glacier. Got to see a few during the day time in the coming days got so used to it that those rumbling noises became background music for me without evoking any emotions or declaring its presence.

### **18<sup>th</sup> April Thursday:**

News from home was that Akarsh and Aryav had left back to Mangalore; Aryav had started his classes; his hand had recovered after the fall from the bike and finally, he rode his new bike to Mangalore from Mysore. I hope he studies hard.

My summit shoes were supposed to arrive, but they did not. I spoke to Daju saying, "We are not doing any training and others are doing so much". He told me not to worry and not to compare, he would get me ready and that my time would come too. Hearing it from him was sort of reassuring, because others had already done Lobuche as training and were experienced climbers. Here I was not even getting my summit shoes, an inexperienced climber and having left SI joint niggles.

Finally, we did some training today. After breakfast, Daju and I went hiking up to Pomori base camp (5650m) and got back. The route had loose gravel, big rocks and boulders, but I managed it despite a slight low back niggle. It was a total of 5hrs trek up and down, from EBC to EBC. I had good buff curry and rice for lunch. And the highlight of the day was "**HOT BATH**". Bath never felt so good. Indeed, it was a very

satisfying day, climbing, good lunch and hot bath. I slept like a baby after that. Later in the evening and the whole night I had a slight nagging headache. My SPO<sub>2</sub> was low (73), and breathing was little laboured with deep breaths, especially on lying down. I had to take deep breaths after every few normal breaths. Despite it, I went into a deep slumber and managed to get good sleep. Guess what, **I dreamt that Leks (my dear friend) visited me at base camp**, he... I was so thrilled to see her, even though it was only in my dream.

### **19<sup>th</sup> April Friday:**

It was a resting day at the base camp. I had no headache and my SPO<sub>2</sub> improved to 85, clear indication of body acclimatizing to the base camp. I guess the acclimatisation climb to Pomori base camp helped. I was feeling very good. Made upma for breakfast which Babar and I had with boiled eggs. I spent the whole morning in the kitchen, helping Pemba make buns and croissants. I loved working with him in the kitchen.

Lunch and post lunch nap and yet no trace of my summit shoes. The whole team of Snowy Horizon were busy getting the mantap (the holy rectangle) ready for the pooja (holy ceremony). It is quite a laborious task, building something like a rectangle katte (a raised square flag post), starting from foundation to super structure. They erected a huge pole at the centre and decorated the surroundings with a lot of prayer flags. My my, these sherpas and helpers are super strong, lifting huge blocks of rock, breaking them into pieces by pounding them with a huge hammer and cementing it all to build the structure, total masonry work.

The members in our SNOWY HORIZON included four kitchen staff - Pemba (head cook and chef), his bubbly 21year

old son Dharma, Pankha with long silky hair who does not talk much and the ever smiling and warm Huzoor. There were 4 sherpas for four of us, Furba, Phurba, Bire and Mingma.

**Pemba**, the head cook at the camp, is a talented chef with certifications in many cuisines. He is very diligent and has excellent innovative presentation skills. He could bake complicated stuff without an actual oven. He had his unconventional inventive methods. The highlight of the day was the upma breakfast (my all-time go to comfort food). I enjoyed it thoroughly. I want some action to kick start; it's already the 19th and the official Everest route opening is not complete. It is late this year due to less snow and a lot of open crevasses in the Khumbu region. The ice fall doctors are finding it difficult to open the route in Khumbu ice fall region. Generally, by now 2 rotations would be completed and we had not done even a single rotation or any training on the snow.

I started my monthly period at around 4 pm, had no cramps or aches. If you (especially women) are wondering how one manages with periods on mountains, my answer is simple. Don't treat it any differently. I have never given any extra importance to period days, probably I am one of the lucky ones who doesn't struggle with severe cramps during those days. I have always continued my routine, yes even exercising and swimming too. One can always use a tampon for the swim time. The concerns at the mountain would be maintaining hygiene and discarding the used pads. I generally carry wet wipes which I use generously to keep myself clean since bathing is a luxury in the mountains. As for the used pads, I used to wrap them up in paper, collect them all together in a disposable bag and put them in the bin

kept for waste at the camp. I guess it would be hard to manage the periods on a summit push as stripping down in that extreme cold to change the pads would be a total pain. Luckily, I did not experience that.

I downloaded a movie called “STOLEN” from Netflix. Andrew, Babar and I watched a bit before dinner at the dining. Javier was not interested because it was in English, and he could not understand it. Around dinner time my stomach became very queasy, throwing up the soup and hot chocolate that I had consumed earlier on. I felt better after that. Forced myself to eat some rice, cucumber and apples. It is very difficult to chew food and swallow it.

I saw the first batch of trekkers at around 8:30 pm doing their rotation through khumbu in the night. It was a beautiful sight of headlights in a line going up in the darkness. I had a good sleep. Sleep has never been an issue and luckily it never was even in mountains, which is for many. I would sleep through the night despite afternoon naps.

### **20<sup>th</sup> April Saturday: Jumar practice day**

It was a very good day. After breakfast of porridge and 2 boiled eggs (this was my staple breakfast), all of us went for jumar practice except Andrew who went hiking to Pomori base camp. My shoes had still not arrived when we left for practice. So Daju made me practice the basics on the flat surface. Babar and Javier did the Jumar and descend practice. As we got back to the camp after practice, a surprise awaited me, my shoes had arrived. So, just the two of us, Daju and I, went back and practiced on the khumbu slopes. It was not easy; I needed to do more to get the hang of it. It was a fruitful day. Lunch was rice and buff curry and post

lunch had a sound afternoon siesta. Woke up in the evening to an even greater surprise, I guess today was the day of surprises after all. At JSS Dental College and Hospital (JSSDC and H), the dental college where I work, there was a change in the heads of departments. I saw it on HODs WhatsApp group. I was heading my department when I left for the expedition. But today, hardly a month after I had left, there was a change in leadership. I was not upset, but it was uninformed and sudden, therefore the astonishment. Spoke to Ajay and kids and a few friends at work. They were very cool and in fact said probably for the better, now I could concentrate more on my work without the added responsibilities.

I had very little dinner and slept off listening repeatedly to the only piece of downloaded music that I had - Barfi India's 5mins Kannada songs medley. They are a beautiful group with soulful music.

## **SPECIAL DAY, Pooja day at our camp: 21<sup>st</sup> April Sunday**

This morning, I woke up feeling good after struggling to go to sleep at night because of the changes that happened at my workplace. All thoughts about the workplace were running in my mind. It was a bit of turmoil that I went through subconsciously without me consciously thinking of it.

Today I had a special breakfast, pancakes. After that we went for jumar practice again. Daju said I was much better. I was watching people from neighbouring camps practice it too. I was not bad at all on the first easy slope, where I saw many others who were worse than me and few others far better than me. It was some relief, because I had two

teammates who were experts, and I was lagging a lot. We then moved on to the next level of toughness, and could manage, but with breaks. I realised that I need more practice. Daju is a tough cookie, wants me to do everything on my own, doesn't lend a helping hand easily, which is good for me, I guess. He wants me to become stronger. For me walking in the Khumbu region with summit boots and crampons itself is new and challenging. He wants me to be confident and take confident steps without being scared, especially on slopes. At the practice session I met Jaffar Ismail, an NRI from the USA, a very friendly guy, who I thought was my wavelength when it came to climbing skills. His cool jovial demeanour was a welcome break amongst all the serious climbers around. It feels good to meet such people because it gives some comfort and reduces stress levels.

After reaching the camp, I had a good burger lunch, **BATH (especially because of my periods)**, washed clothes and pampered myself in my tent by applying cream and lotion. By then it was time for pooja, around 4 pm. The 4 of us Andrew, Javier, Babar and myself were made to sit in a row in front of the mantap. Lama, the priest, along with his two helpers started the elaborate pooja. We were squatting on the floor, and it was not easy sitting on the floor for almost 2 hours. We kept looking at the holy book that Lama was reading from, eagerly waiting for him to reach the last page. Once that was over, all 4 of us got blessings from the Lama and each one of us gave around 3,000 Nepali rupees to him as an offering. I sincerely prayed for everything to go smoothly for all of us. They gave us chocolates, soft drinks and alcohol to drink. I tasted the local wine "KHUKRI", had a swig of Jhonnie walker black and a cup of Saipal (Wine

full of stories), a type of sweet red Nepal wine. The alcohol got me loosened up, all of us were in good spirits. The sherpas went into their dining, we all to ours. We had Javier playing Spanish music and all of us danced. He and I danced the most and we even did a jig together. It was fun dancing with him; he had the moves. The other two were a bit shy but did join and were sporty. Javier enjoyed his drink and let loose. Dharma and Migma joined us for a bit. Dharma made a beautiful 5 min reel of the 2hr pooja and shared it with all of us. We clicked a lot of pictures; it was one memorable day, I should say. Spanish music is great and Javier has a huge collection of different genres; more than 5000 songs downloaded, and he plays it 24/7. He said, Miguel Bose, Chayyne are popular Spanish singers. The music by Vices and Reggaeton was good too.

**Javier:** I don't know much about him. It's very difficult to converse as he speaks only Spanish and any chatting is done using the mobile translator. He is a clean shaven and completely bald guy. He is hard core into Free Masons, keeps reading the Free Mason book and makes notes of it too. But doesn't divulge what they do there, saying it's secretive. He is diabetic, has a sensor on his arm that monitors his sugar levels continuously. He is an engineer involved in building big ships. He loves music and listens to various genres of music.

**Andrew:** He told us about his love life. He is British, wife an Australian, got married to her and moved to Australia. He is a bit reserved and watchful but has a great sense of humour. He is 54 years and very good to converse with. He has two grown-up kids, a girl and a boy. The boy is aspiring to become a musician, and the girl is working as an IT professional.

**Babar**, a doctor with an MD in public health medicine. He freelances and takes up projects, finishes them and then takes off from work doing the adventure stuff that he likes. He is currently single and doesn't want to get hitched. He feels that it takes a lot to be in a relationship. He is a very well-read guy and knows a lot about Hindu mythology. He is not the conventional religious type, having strong beliefs that his community people usually have. He is a very lovable guy, always smiling, calls me "Didi", forever encouraging with a positive attitude. He has climbed a lot of mountains and runs a lot too. He has covered 2,000 plus kms on foot, walking through all 64 districts of Bangladesh. He has also cycled solo, self-supporting himself from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. He has a whole lot of friends and is a damn friendly guy.

My stomach has still not settled down. I need to go to the loo after an hour of eating anything and it is loose. Dinner is the toughest for me, I just force myself to eat. It's amazing how Javier and Babar can eat so well.

We all retired to bed by 8:30 pm, after a very special and fun evening. I kept tossing, and couldn't sleep. Read 2 chapters of the novel "Lanka's Princess". My mind was running all over the place, lots of thought and finally I slept by 10:30 pm. Our sherpas were supposed to leave by 11:30 pm to camp 1 and 2, for load ferrying. But they all partied and drank too much, so they cancelled it.

Ajay went to Chandrakant's (friend) farm in the afternoon itself, caught up with all the boys and they had a blast partying by the pool till late night. I am glad he had company and spent the Sunday well. If he had stayed at home, he would have felt lonely and I felt guilty !!!

Spoke to Vikku, Niharika, Maha, Vibha and Kinka (relatives). They were all catching up for lunch in Bangalore. Spoke to Pruthvi and Sudhi too (friends). Both were happy and supportive.

Dozed off feeling blessed and thankful for everything.

**P.S:** Asmita ma'am (TSAF trainer) sent her wishes, and was super thrilled to hear from her.....*highlight of the day.*

## **22<sup>nd</sup> April Monday:**

Today was spent walking around EBC with the summit shoes. After morning pranayama and breakfast Andrew and I went together, it was comfortable. Met 3 Indians, Rama (who is from Himachal, but currently working in Bangalore) and 2 guys, I don't remember their names.

Tummy is still rumbling, and I have loose stools. I took an Eldopar tablet (anti-diarrhoea tablet). By lunch I was very hungry, ate well. Javier and Babar had gone to the Pumori base camp and got back. I rested in the afternoon by reading a book, as I couldn't sleep well. In the evening in the dining room, Javier showed us photographs of his home and town. We played a few games (dot game and others), it was a fun time. I could not eat well, forced myself, but had looses again after that. Rushed out and had to clear my stomach, right next to the tent as I could not hold on until I reached the bathroom tent. I took another Eldopar and went to my room (tent) by 8:30 pm. I couldn't sleep for a long time, so I kept looking at all the photos in my phone gallery. There was no wi-fi connectivity the whole day, and I couldn't speak or message anyone. But I was ok, managing better and better. I just want my tummy to be alright. Finally, I slept around 10 pm.

Our sherpas – Furba, Phurba, Bire and kitchen help Pankha finally left for 1<sup>st</sup> rotation @ around 11 at night. Our other kitchen help Huzoor went back home. He was suffering from piles, was in a lot of pain and said that he was not gonna come back. So now Dharma and his dad Pemba manage the kitchen work.

Andrew had been suffering from cold and congestion since the time he landed at EBC and struggled to eat. Slowly he recovered from it; his appetite is back and he eats well.

I am so blessed to have such amazing teammates. All are very positive, lively and lovely guys with a great sense of humour.

Our 1<sup>st</sup> rotation will happen soon, excited but scared of the unknown. I know it's not going to be easy, praying to God to keep me in good spirits, to give me physical strength and mental toughness. Rotation is starting the climb from the base camp, crossing the Khumbu region and reaching Camp 1. Upon reaching Camp 1, we spend a night there and get back to base camp. We do a 2<sup>nd</sup> rotation after a few days. On the second rotation we spend one night at Camp 1, head to Camp 2 the next morning and stay there one night. On the third day, we start from Camp 2, go halfway till Camp 3, and get back to Camp 2 and spend the night there. The following morning we trek back from Camp 2 to base camp in one stretch. These are part of acclimatization climbs that we are supposed to do while staying at the base camp. Generally, by the last week of April both rotations should be done. But this year since the route in Khumbu region is not fixed till date, we are still waiting, without a single rotation done.

**23<sup>rd</sup> April Tuesday:** Walk around EBC with summit shoes.

The camp area is quiet. All the sherpas have gone on rotation, two kitchen staff less, no Pankha and Huzoor. I had breakfast and went for a stroll around EBC with Javier and Babar, an easy stroll with my big boots and a lot of stops. I met Kaamya and Karthik and had a good chat with them. They had been to Khumbu and said that it did not look all that treacherous or difficult, it was some consolation.

Saw a bunch of ecstatic Indians @ EBC photo point, who had successfully completed EBC trek and clicked a lot of photos. All the girls were applying lipstick, rouge and dolling up with the help of a small hand mirror before taking pics. Reminds me of Krish (my running friend from Bangalore who loves her lipstick, carries it with her in a race and applies it just before the finish line). When we got back to camp, I showed Javier and Babar my lipstick and all of us were in splits.

I took an omeprazole before lunch. Could eat well. Spoke to Ajay after 2 days as the net was down. I retired to my room, no sleep though. I wrote a poem, read a bit, took an Eldopar, did pranayama and went to the dining room for tea. Showed the poem to my team, of course Javier could not read or understand it. I titled it "STRANGER", for the strangers that I met, strange places and..... I wish I had a copy; I can't find it now.

Guru, my doctor uncle in the USA, gave a good review of akka's (my sister's) cancer treatment and that was a big relief. In the evening, we played a bit of UNO in the dining hall. It was a good time until dinner. My tummy was better; I could eat better. Again, an eldopar and omeprazole after dinner. Briefly got wi-fi in the evening and I spoke to Ajay, akka and Sharath. It was good to hear that Sharath got selected for an internship job. After that brief network, the

whole evening and night there was no connection. It was very annoying. I couldn't sleep till 12 at night. Read a bit, did a lot of day rather than night dreaming with eyes wide open, my favourite time pass. It was one of the BEST nights in terms of dreams, which kept me very happy and positive and simply on a HIGH.

### **24<sup>th</sup> April Wednesday:**

Walking around the EBC with my new summit boots was the task for the day. I walked about 3.5kms.

Tummy is better, no eldopar, only omez (acidity tablet) morning and night. Breakfast was a bit different today; We had Tibetan bread and bull's eye egg. It felt like poori and egg that we ate back home, loved it. Been drinking a lot of water and a lot of peeing too. The 1litre bisleri water bottle cut into half at the centre has become my pee bottle in the tent room. It's such a saviour; I don't have to get out of the tent during napping or at night to pee.

The walk was okay but I still had some unsettled feeling about the long climb to Camp 1, as a part of our rotation. Daju is back from load ferrying. He was saying that the route through Khumbu is longer this year as there are a lot of crevasses (due to less snowfall) and we need to go around them. He was not happy with the ice doctor's job. He felt the safety was compromised in three areas which looked very dangerous with rope fixing jobs not done well. My fears are more now. Just praying to give me good health and energy to keep going.

Before we even start the rotation, the ice fall doctors inspect the Khumbu region, which is a glacier that keeps moving, changing the position of the crevasses every day.

Hence, they regularly inspect this area and alter the routes (rope and ladder fixing) accordingly. There are also sherpas identified by the Nepal government who fix the rope from base camp till summit, called the route opening. Once they complete it, the rest of the climbers follow the same safe path to the summit.

No wi-fi today either, hoping to get it by evening. Yippe, did get in the evening for a bit. Although I was already aware and had forgotten about the change in the heads of the department at work, today there was a reminder of it yet again as my name was removed from the Heads of Department WhatsApp group of college. Managed to speak to Ajay, Akarsh and Aryav. It calmed me and Akarsh told me stories about his 1<sup>st</sup> day as an intern. He was posted in the public health department and in a peripheral hospital. It was his first day and the regular doctors there were absent. He was a bit jittery having to suddenly play a doctor's role all on his own. The nurses told him not to worry as only a couple of patients would come. But that day there were 12 patients, and he managed it with the help of the nurses and by getting input from his seniors over phone calls. He was sounding so excited. AJ Shetty Premier League, his college cricket league teams were made. He and Aryav were in two different teams. Sadly, there was no auction, just selections by the managers. Ajay is not keeping tummy issues very well, and we exchanged notes on constipated effects of eldopar, it was funny. The connectivity with family and banter kept me sane.

Managed to sleep very well in the afternoon and at night too, probably the aftereffects of less sleep the previous night. I had to get good sleep as tomorrow was my first walk in the Khumbu region. I was excited and had butterflies too.

## **25<sup>th</sup> April Thursday:**

Looking forward to an exciting day, as we are to hike in the Khumbu region today.

I woke up feeling good in my head and my stomach. I had a local breakfast called “Sampa”. It is like our local food “hurihittu” (a cooked ball of ragi grain powder). We three dressed up with complete gears, harness and boots and left by 7:30 am for the much-awaited walk in the Khumbu glacier. Initially I was very careful taking precautionary steps. Daju kept telling me not to be scared, to have firm footing, especially while going down the popcorn of ice. It was not bad and not as dreadful as I had imagined. But we had done only about 170m altitude gain and not crossed any crevasse. Therefore, it was too early to speak. At least I got the feel of the Khumbu terrain.

We were back in the camp by 11:15am, and had an early lunch of rice, dal, and buff curry. There was a good network, I spoke to Ajay, my department staff and messaged a lot of people. I tried to sleep but managed only a 45mins nap. Decided to sit in the dining tent and ended up finishing the novel “Lanka`s princess”. I got hungry, had two bowls of cornflakes and started to feel sleepy, it was only 6 pm. Spoke to Ajay, Akarsh, Aryav, Bharath, Sharath, Mahesh Bhai. Watched the last 45 mins of the movie “Stolen” and hit the sack by 9:30. I had a very good sleep, with a wakeup call for loo once during the night.

## 26<sup>th</sup> April Friday:

**EBC - Camp 1 (5364m-6100m/17,598ft-20,013ft; 1.62 miles)**

Today was a rest day. A routine had set in. I used to wake up by 5 or 5:30am, do pranayama, loo, go to the dining tent by 6:30, brush, wash my face, have local tea with sampa powder and salt and then breakfast. Babar would join in the dining by 7 and Javier the late latif (*late latif/lateef*) is a popular South Asian idiomatic phrase used humorously or sarcastically to describe someone who is habitually late or always arrives after everyone else). only by 8:30. I would get just about lukewarm water to wash my face and brush. My face would become cold immediately after washing.

After breakfast, I sat with Daju to discuss packing for the rotation climb, went to my room and got the packing done. I hung around in the room, listening to some music and picked up the novel "Sita's sister", to read next.

The afternoon and evening were uneventful, hanging around in my tent and dining, just resting. I had an early dinner and managed to sleep well till 12 midnight. All of us got ready and met in the dining room, ate cornflakes and the three of us Babar, Javier and I left for the first rotation (and the only rotation that we were going to do) sharp at 1 midnight, led by Phurba Daju.

The route through Khumbu, gosh, one must experience it, just cannot describe it. Babar went ahead; Javier and I was together with Daju. Daju warned us that it was a long route this year and would take 8-10hours. It started off almost flat with uneven surfaces, few ups and downs and then a small jumar climb. Next the paths became curvy, narrow with hard and slippery ice. There were many narrow climbs,

many big steps, many slippery paths and many jumps across crevasses. Then, came the toughest vertical wall. Although there were some small steps on the wall, the climb was difficult. Daju had to help me from above by pulling as I put effort into climbing the wall. It was exhausting and I was breathless by the time I reached the top. It was just one super-duper challenging and exhausting path.

After the big wall, we crossed about 5 ladders (horizontal and vertical climbing up and then down). The ladders were wobbly, but doable. The last couple of hours were relatively simple, snow was soft, but the altitude gains and continuous walking for more than 6 hours was tiring us out. I just had to be strong and keep walking. It felt like never ending and Daju kept saying just a bit more even when we were hours away. Finally, we saw a few tents. I was overjoyed thinking we had arrived. But our tent was somewhere at the far end and from the first tent that we saw it took us almost 30mins to reach our tent. I was like, why did Daju have to put our tent so far away. In hindsight, it was good that he did that because we got the advantage of starting a bit ahead the next day.

Finally, we reached Camp 1 at 11:00am, after a full 10-hour treacherous climb. Daju and I shared a tent and Javier and Babar shared another. But the three of us (Javier, Babar and I) huddled in one tent the whole afternoon chatting, while Daju was busy working on collecting snow. He used a spade, dug into snow, collected it into a huge sack and kept it outside the tent. He kept melting and boiling it and stocked enough water for us to drink. With two small butane gas stoves, it really takes ages to first melt the snow and then boil the water. Daju kept feeding us green tea and gave us an early dinner of fried rice. By 6:30 pm we were done and

huddled into our sleeping bags. My breathing was very deep, and I found it difficult to sleep. I also had a mild nagging headache. After a while I managed to sleep and slept well, although I woke up once to pee, which was managed inside the tent as Daju was fast asleep and thanks to the pee bottle. The winds were very strong; the tents were shaking outrageously but were strongly pitched and withstood the horrible winds.

From EBC to Camp1: Bowl of corn flakes at base camp, en route some chocolates, water and a cupcake. I had 2 boiled eggs after reaching Camp 1 and a bowl of fried rice for dinner. Of course, the green tea was flowing. Clothing was layered, three layers both on top and bottom, and I did not use the down suit.

We started from EBC on 26<sup>th</sup> night, 27<sup>th</sup> morning, 11am we reached Camp 1, halted that night there and on 28<sup>th</sup> morning started to Camp 2.

## **28<sup>th</sup> Sunday:**

**Camp 1 - Camp 2 (6100m-6400m/ 20,013ft-20,997ft; 1.74 miles)**

Although we had planned to start early, by 6 am, we started only at 8:30 in the morning. There was a lot of wind and Daju had to melt snow and get our water ready. I woke up by 5:30am and got done with morning chores (potty was in a snow dug out pit).

The entire walk from Camp 1 to 2 took us 3 hours. The walk is in an open football field-like area, called the Western Cwm (cwm is a Welsh word for cirque or glaciated valley, with a horseshoe type of mountain topology). It is 2.5miles long "U" shaped valley starting at the base of Lhotse Peak,

carved out by the Khumbu Glacier. This dangerous area is heavily crevassed. Most of them are hidden by thin snow bridges and few can be crossed only on ladders. It can also reach high temperatures of 37°C. The sun's reflection off the snow/ice-covered walls of the valley makes it extremely hot. This valley is surrounded by the west shoulder of Everest to the North, Lhotse to the East and Nuptse to the South. It is the gatekeeper for the traditional route to South Col. It has a nickname, Valley of Silence because it is eerily quiet when the wind stops. Camp 2 is located at the easternmost point of the Cwm and serves as an advanced base camp and a launching pad for the summit.

Even though the climb from Camp 1 to Camp 2 looks quite easy without any variations in the terrain, it is a slow walk on the gradual uphill slope and no way easy. I used two sticks to climb, and the back was good. I started counting 1000 steps and took a breathing break after every 1000 steps, which helped me to keep moving ahead and ahead. The pace was decent and I was on the go continuously. We had to cross a few crevasses, stick to the fixed ropes in a few areas and most regions did not have any fixed ropes where we had to follow the path marked by the flags. Since it is very dangerous in the sense of having hidden crevasses, I could not venture to the sides away from the marked path, even though it appeared flat. I had to use anchors to cross a few areas with every step being highly focused and taken with precaution. When we neared camp 2, we saw the tents and a euphoric feeling with a sense of relief. Trust me, getting to the camp from the first sight of it takes at least 30-45mins. And our camp as usual was way ahead, the terrain suddenly changed from smooth snow areas to gravel and rocks with challenging rocky climbs. It

was torture till we reached our tent. From 100- steps count down it became 30 steps for a breather break. Slowly but steadily finally we reached our tent at 11:30am.

It was a very hot afternoon. Pankha Dai, our cook, had already reached Camp 2 a few days prior and had cooked good food for us. It is a luxury to have hot food at this altitude. Hence Camp 2 is popularly called the advanced base camp. No such luxuries are encountered at Camp 1, which is as basic as possible (no hot cooked food, no toilet tent and twin sharing of a single dome-shaped small tent). Dozed off in the afternoon after lunch, then spent time at Javier`s tent listening to music. In the evening Daju asked me to walk around a bit and have at least 3 litres of water. Managed the walk and 2 ltrs of water. Had dinner, wore the dangri down suit, slept in it as the temperatures dipped to - 20<sup>0</sup> to -22<sup>0</sup>C. It was very cold. I had the luxury of a single tent, so using the pee bottle inside the tent was not an issue. However, it was a daunting task in the cold and getting it done in the down suit was no easy task. Got good sleep, no headache. I guess the water intake helped.

## **29<sup>th</sup> April Monday:**

**Camp 2 - Base of Camp 3: 20,997 ft - 21,981 ft (6400m-6700m)**

Camp 3 is at 23,293.96 feet (7100m), but we touched 21,981 ft (6700m) as part of training.

The fall was at 6:30 am in the dining area. We had porridge and headed out in our down suit, harness and complete gear. I was mentally ready for a long, real tough day. Initially we started with summit boots, then had to add crampons @ crampon point that was 15mins away from the

start point. It was a slow climb, huffing and puffing every step. Daju was not keeping very well. He had little breathlessness, chest pain and was dizzy. He wanted me to turn back along with him at 21325.46 feet (6500m). I told him that since it was a straight way up in a large open area, no dangers, I would go slowly a little further and get back and he could rest and wait for me till then. But he did not listen. He kept climbing behind me. We met the NRI Indians from the Sattori team here – Raj and Jaffar Ismail. Jaffar was struggling, Raj was doing good. Comparing myself with their team members, I was pretty good, and it was some reinforcement for me. It was Raj's 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt at Everest.

We touched 21,981 ft (6700m) and decided to turn around. From Camp 2, initially there are uneven rocks for a short distance, then comes the crampon point. After that it is completely covered with snow, parts being hard ice. On the way we get small sections of steep climbs where we need to jumar. Once that is crossed it is simple terrain wise, but steep slow gradient that makes the walk challenging. Again, the strategy of counting 300 odd steps and a breather helped me here. Eventually it became 100 steps. Once we reach 21,981 ft (6700m), the next climb is a cliff. It requires lateral traversing over a thin edge (probably half feet), tricky cross overs and then a steeper uphill climb. Till here there is no human traffic, because there is no fixed rope and you really don't have to walk one behind the other. But after this with the fixed rope and the path getting narrow the actual traffic starts. We generally start using the oxygen mass point.

Standing at the base of the cliff, I stared hard into what I would have to do next. It looked impossible to me. The cliff was rocky, there was no snow covering it, we had to jumar and climb. My climbing skills were okay but not great, I

started worrying about it and was really scared with all doubts creeping in. I was thinking that maybe I should have climbed the cliff, just to get the experience and confidence. But Daju was totally against it. His view was that we need to acclimatize up to (6700m), and we would be wearing oxygen masks after that point, therefore it was unnecessary to climb beyond this point and waste our energy. I listened to him, even though I had this feeling that I should climb a bit more. We turned back, trekked down, reached Camp 2, were tired, had lunch and went into my tent. The sun was bright, so quickly changed into regular clothes from the dangri. Rested till 3 pm, and I was wide awake after that. All three of us spent time @ Javier's tent listening to music. His music, though Spanish, was a saviour. He had solar panel chargers and was all set. He too was cribbing that we did not touch Camp 3 and, in his mind, had thought that that was the plan, just like us. Little chatting and sunbathing before tea, dinner and retired for the night.

### **30<sup>th</sup> April Tuesday:**

#### **Camp 2 – EBC:**

The reporting time was 5:30am at the dining tent eat a bit and head out at 6. All of us maintained time well, and we started by 6am from Camp 2. We reached Camp 1 by 8am. Although it is a simple downhill, except for the initial climb down through the rocks, it is not a cake walk and requires effort. After some tea and resting at Camp 1, we started climbing down by 9am. What a journey through Khumbu. 9am-1:30 pm, took 4 and half hours to reach base camp, but felt longer and never ending. Daju was getting restless when I was scared and taking time to cross in a few areas. Javier and Babar were ahead. So, it was only Daju and me. At one

point I twisted my left knee and my left Iliotibial Band (ITB) got hurt, and it was painful. Also, when I jumped over a crossing, my left knee hit the ice block on landing. The direct impact got my left knee sore and there was still an hour of climbing down. My knee was alright, but the left ITB was nagging continuously, and it was painful on lateral stepping. Now I was even more focused, trying to step as straight as possible, watching every step and using my right leg more in stepping down. Finally, I reached my room at EBC and was thrilled to be back home. I changed my attire, had lunch and rested the whole afternoon. The evening was spent in the dining room.

Various agencies offer a night stay with food at a cost (around \$200) for people who trek to EBC and want the experience of EBC. Our agency too had that offer. They had separate dining rooms and tents, and we were kept away and not in contact with them so that we would not contract any infections. Tonight, an Indian trekker called "Shesh", was spending one night with our agency for the base camp experience. He was alone and spent all the time in our dining room. He was a welcome break, nice to talk to, an IT guy from Indore working in Texas, USA. We all played a game of UNO and finally went to bed peacefully.

There was an internet connection, and I spoke to Ajay, children and Akka. I was telling Ajay that the Khumbu region is so scary and I would never want to cross it again. The first time around is unknown, so you go with an open mind. But having experienced it, I definitely did not want to cross it again. But there was no option, we had to cross it during the summit push. This evoked new apprehensions. All was well today, and I decided to sleep over it.

*The mountains don't judge anyone, they are neither fair nor unfair; they are just dangerous. The challenge is within ourselves, to step into that danger and find our way through. If you have already decided to go, then you must go with your heart and soul. Hesitation under a hanging serac is your greatest enemy. Courage isn't having the strength to go on when there is no fear, but going on even when you are in fear.*

**Team Mates, Life mates @ EBC:**

## Javier, Myself, Babar



**Andrew, Javier, Myself, Babar**



## Home & Companions Away From Home



*Everest Within: An Ascent of Aspirations*

**My Home (tent) for 2 months**



**Dining Tent @ Base Camp**



**Kitchen tent @ Base camp**



**Variety of Food @ Base Camp,  
Yet Upma was my favourite !**



**Four of US with the PRIEST @ POOJA, EBC**





### *Training @ EBC*



*Everest Within: An Ascent of Aspirations*



## CHAPTER 10

### THE HARDEST TEST – PATIENCE TO WAIT FOR RIGHT MOMENT

Our rotation was done and this sort of ended the training at base camp for us. Now that the training was over, we started eagerly waiting for the green signal (good weather window) for the summit push, which could take anywhere from a week to two weeks.

Many trekkers go down to Namche or some even to KTM during this period to rest, recuperate and come back stronger for the summit push. Since the acclimatization is done and it is believed to last up to 30 days, it really doesn't matter if you go down to lower altitudes. In fact, it is beneficial because you can get away from the mundane waiting at the base camp, recover and come back fresh for the summit push. Since the three of us were comfortable at the base camp itself, we did not budge from there. We hung around EBC, doing short walks, mostly resting and waiting. We used to visit the neighbouring tents, interact with the trekkers and spend time.

Our wait started from 1<sup>st</sup> of May and went on till 13<sup>th</sup> May, a good 13 days which felt more like a month.

These 13 days I followed the same routine of waking up early, finishing off stretches and pranayama, morning chores of loo, brushing, Nepali tea, breakfast (which was porridge

and egg on most days, except for poori and bhaji one morning), chilling in dining or my tent, reading, watching movies (Article 370, Amar Singh Chamkila, DeAr, Laapata Ladies and HIT 2), nursing my injured ITB, and helping Pemba in kitchen. I would connect with my family and friends whenever there was good wi-fi. Most of all I could sleep well and ended up taking naps after breakfast and lunch.

The weather during most of these 13 days was bad, snowing continuously, chilly and windy (wind speeds going up to 75kms/hr). We could not step out much, but managed to walk around EBC, explore the camps around and meet a lot of trekkers of whom few became good friends and are in touch even today.

Andrew got back from his rotation a day after we did as he had headed out for the rotation a day later than us. He shared his experiences. He used an oxygen mask at Camp 2 itself. His goal was to reach Camp 3 but managed till 6500m and turned around. His expedition was done with this. He will be leaving EBC in a couple of days. Andrew had a lot of cough issues and no appetite for a long time. He recovered just before the rotation and his appetite was crazy after that. I struggled to eat, almost eating  $\frac{1}{4}$  of what they would eat.

The thought of Andrew heading home was making me envious of him. I want to go home too, getting tired of the food here. Praying that the summit window comes fast, that I give it my all out and go back home safely. Some days I was totally not in my elements, would go quiet and withdrawn.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> May, Friday:**

The four of us had one last breakfast together, took pictures and bid goodbye to Andrew. Hmm it is not a great

feeling to see any member leave; first all my friends left me at base camp and now Andrew. Grateful that I still had Babar and Javier. I kept myself busy after Andrew left by doing laundry and a bath as the weather was bright and sunny and dozed off a bit after all the hard work. Thank God I had carried novels to read; it kept me occupied. I was immersed with the novel "Sita's sister". Breathing is a bit laborious. Javier was up, so both of us listened to some music and chatted a bit with the help of the translator.

Not keeping very well, some kind of uneasiness in my stomach, missing home too. I feel like quitting everything and just going back home (homesick). But then, I tell myself that I am here for a purpose and tell myself to hang in for a few more days and that it will all be done. We have our soup, dinner and dessert, f\*\*\*ing wi-fi is not working, especially when I want to talk to Ajay and kids.

Our sherpas, the Phurba, Furba and Bire left to higher camps (C3 and C4), at night with logistics to set things ready for us at higher camps.

The following day, **4<sup>th</sup> May, Saturday** a mild Khumbu cough set in. I was coughing non-stop and it worsened on lying down. I am trying to control it with hot water, ginger and Pranayama. I had heard a lot about the famous Khumbu cough, now I got to experience it.

Today as Babar and I set out for a walk around EBC, we bumped into Babar's friend Sachin, a police officer, @ Makalu adventure camp. We sat down there sipping tea and chatting. With him was his friend Rakesh, who works as a police officer. Both are tall thagada (strong robust looking) guys, but very humble, down-to-earth and fun guys. They were carrying caravan music with them. It was such a welcome break to listen and sing away all old Hindi songs. I

loved it. Akki, a Bangladeshi based out of the UK, joined us. He is attempting 14 peaks in 18 months, a completely sponsored journey raising funds for charity. He shared his experiences about how he had fallen into a crevasse in Khumbu region during his earlier Everest expedition in 2022. He was hanging on to the rope through his safety hook for almost 2 hours as his backpack was obstructing his rescue upwards through the narrow crevasse. He has already summited Everest and K2. Now he is doing it all over again, as a part of the programme called "14 Peaks". Here we also met a girl called Pavla, from Chile, the same place as Javier. She is attempting Lhotse peak without oxygen. Got to know from Javier later that she is sort of an influencer on Instagram. She could speak English.

Back to our dining tent after an hour. Javier showed pictures of his earlier treks and asked a lot of questions about Hindu mythology. I was surprised I could answer his queries.

The Khumbu cough is still troubling me, especially in the evenings and at night when I lie down.

The sherpas are not back yet, so we do not know the situation up there. We got a new kitchen staff today - Mingma, brother-in-law of Pemba. Pemba had an interesting story about Mingma. A few years ago, Mingma was a guide to one German couple for Ama Dablam base camp trek and the girl fell in love head over heels with Mingma. She was ready to separate from her partner and get married to Mingma. Mingma was already married and had two children. As a compensation she even offered 15000 euros to Mingma's wife and offered to take one child with her to Germany, leaving the other one with the wife. Mingma was also ready for it. When he reached home to discuss it with

his wife, she did not allow him to step out, and the love story ended. Mingma is back now as a guide or kitchen help on the expeditions. He is a cheerful young man and always smiling and helpful, yeah easy to fall for him.

The heater in the dining room is not working properly, so we exchanged it with the guest dining heater.

I vividly remember **5<sup>th</sup> May** as it was a Sunday; Ajay was free and wi-fi was good. I spoke to him at length and managed to make a video call. I was happy to see him but also noticed my bedroom was a mess. Mentally recorded that I had to go back and put everything in place, but for now I could do nothing, so told myself to chill.

Rakesh and Sachin came over to our camp along with their caravan (music box). With good music playing, Babar and I played UNO with them for a while.

**6<sup>th</sup> May, Monday** and still no news of a clear weather window. Our agenda for today was to get Javier's spotify working. It was an extremely cold morning, and Javier was upset about his spotify not working. He wanted to go down to Gorakshep to access wi-fi and get it set. He for one cannot live without music which plays 24x7. I offered him my wi-fi, but to get good access we had to go to the main wi-fi centre @ the big white dome tent. So, all three of us, Javier, Babar and myself, went there. The dome tent is luxurious, has nice cushions and pillows. We sat there the whole morning. As it started getting cold, Babar and I got back to our camp leaving Javier there to continue his work. He stayed there till evening. On our way back to our camp, Babar and I visited the health clinic dome, a huge white dome. We met two doctors there (Dr. Nishanth and Dr. Shreyashi), who readily took us around the makeshift hospital. It was a nice space with emergency facilities. The doctors have been posted

there for over a month now. Their role is selfless. Without aspiration for a climb, they spend over 2 months at the base medical camp, attending to the climbers in hour of need. It's always good to be self-prepared with basic health issues as the treatment of any kind up here is way too expensive.

Post lunch I slept a bit and met everyone in the warm and comfortable dining hall in the evening. There was no wi-fi at all. Finally, at 8:15 pm I got a bit of wi-fi and could speak to Ajay and Leks. Leks was troubled by Akki and his girlfriend issues; she was pouring her heart out. I was just happy to be there and listen to her.

Read the novel "Sita's Sister" for a while and dozed off. I love this book. The character of Sita's sister, Urmila is pictured beautifully. Somehow, we all talk only about Rama or Sita, but in this book the heroine is Urmila, and the story depicts a whole lot of emotions that she faces. It gets one thinking.

Khumbu cough has reduced quite a bit; I am sleeping a lot and stopped taking the cough tablets that Pemba had given me. I realised that even walking to the wi-fi tent was not easy, I was huffing and puffing and getting breathless and my mind automatically questioned my summit attempt.

The weather is still bad on **7<sup>th</sup> May, Tuesday** with continuous snow fall. We couldn't get out at all. I was feeling tired, so I slept after breakfast. By 11:30 am Sachin and Rakesh came to our camp and Babar woke me up. Four of us played UNO again in the dining hall till about 1:00 pm. Sachin said that he read a bit. I had finished reading "Krishna", so I gifted that book to him with good wishes for his expedition.

I slept in the afternoon again after lunch and woke up after a couple of hours, feeling very low. My daju, Phurba sherpa had got back after the rotation till Camp 4 and setting up the tents and logistics there. Biere, Babar's sherpa was not back yet, as he had gone ahead to Lhotse to keep it ready for Babar. Babar was doing both Everest and Lhotse peaks. Javier's sherpa Furba was injured when an ice block fell on his leg somewhere near camp 3. He was rescued from Camp 2 and flown to KTM. We are not aware of his condition at this point. If he cannot make it, then there will be a replacement sherpa for Javier. Obviously, Javier is not happy. He is very quiet and has kept a low profile.

There was a lot of snow in the evening which kept us huddled in our dining tent watching movies on my phone. Dinner was good buff meat steak. After dinner I chatted (via translator app on phone) with Javier for a long time, and he seemed okay. Dozed off by 10 pm.

### **8<sup>th</sup> May, Wednesday: EBC**

Daju got back from Camp 4. We are all set for the summit push now and Daju says that we will leave on the 11th night according to weather forecasts. Only 3 days left. It's good that finally we will be going, all the waiting without anything much to do at base camp is getting to me. We will be one of the early batches to start the summit push. Daju is however worried about the C3 to C4 jumar areas and the yellow band region, since I am not so great with my jumar skills. He is even suggesting taking an extra sherpa if available. This section has vertical walls, a lot of hard blue ice, and crampons don't get good grip, so jumaring will be very tough. All this while I had total trust in my daju, now that he is expressing doubts it has sort of started playing on my mind. I tell myself - "of course it is going to be tough,

give your best shot and do not give up easily. If it was easy everyone would have attempted". With these positive insights into myself I keep a very brave front.

Today in our "Snowy Horizon" guest dining hall there was a wedding happening. A Polish couple, who are avid trekkers decided to get married on the mountains and chose EBC as their wedding destination. They trekked till EBC, arranged for a Lama (priest) to conduct the ritual following all traditions. We were lucky to witness a Nepali wedding firsthand. They had one other friend who was attempting the Everest summit as their guest at the wedding. The whole ceremony took a couple of hours and we three musketeers (Javier, Babar and I), sat through the whole experience, with nothing better to do.

We finished lunch, took an afternoon nap and in the evening met up at the dining area. Javier was quite worked up as there was no news about the replacement sherpa. We got news that his original sherpa, Furba, had an ankle fracture and was ruled out of the expedition. Javier is saying that he will attempt a solo climb if he does not get a sherpa and has become very difficult to talk to. He snapped at both Babar and me. Both of us are keeping quiet and avoiding talking or advising him too much.

A good wi-fi day, spoke to a lot of people - Ajay, Prema, Sharath, Bharath, Shyamala, Aryav, Brinda. Listened again and again to the only music medley of Barfi India - Kannada songs (*Ninna Mareyalare, Tanuvu Manavu, Yendendu Ninnanu Marethu, Yelleli Nodali, Bare Bare Chendada Cheluvina Thare, Thamnam Thaman, Ninade Nenapu*). Must have listened to it at least some 10times before knocking out. It was very soothing, and I loved it.

## **9<sup>th</sup> May, Thursday: EBC**

Finally, the weather has improved, it's bright and sunny. My cough is getting better, and it has settled down a lot. I went for a walk with Babar, and we met Sachin and Rakesh. Together all of us walked to the seven-summit tent. It's a huge luxurious agency, has a lot of members and a whole street of tents. Their dining hall is fancy with great ambience and facilities like coffee vending machine, beer and bakery. Met a soft-spoken, innocent Sikh gentleman in his fifties, Malkiat Singh, resident of New Zealand. I had coffee with him. He was mentioning that he fell sick, probably food poisoning, after Lobuche climb. He had severe vomiting and loose stools. He had lost a lot of weight (about 7kgs) and was advised to go back. He had done Lobuche peak as a part of training and acclimatization so far, and no rotation or any training at base camp. It was his in-house Iranian doctor who advised him to stay back, put him on IV fluids and told him that they would try to get him better before he could quit and go. He was on IV fluids for almost a week and couldn't eat much. Slowly he regained his energy and strength. His worry was that he had not done any rotations or training, so how would he attempt the summit. He mentioned that he would go with the last batch of summiteers and try to do one rotation before that. He looked frail but had a lot of josh. That sort of boosted my confidence too. He was a pleasant person to talk to, and I was happy to have met him.

Got back to the camp, continued to read the novel – "Sita's Sister" and finally finished it. I loved the book and the main character. The arguments that she has put forth are fantastic. Lunch, sleep and another evening in the dining hall.

Javier's replacement sherpa was sorted out. Now he is back in his elements, singing and smiling. We were happy that it worked out quickly for him. Biere has still not got back. Babar is patient and lively as ever.

I spoke to daju in the dining hall in the evening and told him to look for a second sherpa if he felt it was needed. He made a few calls to enquire; we might get a positive response by tomorrow, he says. He assured me that even if we do not get anyone, he would be there to take care. After his assurance I decided that there was no point worrying and decided to go with the flow and remained calm.

The highlight was *Adukale* (a Bangalore brand of south Indian ready to eat stuff) upma for dinner and I thoroughly enjoyed the full bowl of it. After dinner, I hung around in the dining hall with Dharma, Javier and Babar. They were using my wi-fi, so I waited for a while before getting back to my room to sleep.

I started my period in the morning. It's been only 18 days since I finished my last cycle; the flow is heavy, I have low back niggle and mild cramps. But I am glad that it started here at EBC and will be over before my summit push. I had disturbed sleep till about 11:30 after which I slept peacefully till morning.

## **10<sup>th</sup> May, Friday: EBC**

Usually in the morning, after breakfast daju told me that it was not possible to get an extra sherpa. It was me and Daju now. There would be another Dai, who is aspiring to become a sherpa himself and has finished all rotations and will be attempting summit push with us. So, he will be around, some solace. Anyways I put my full trust in my daju and in my abilities. I told myself that I would not give up easily,

and put in all my effort till I can't go on. Having made this decision, I sort of came to terms with myself even though I was kind of scared. I should cheer up; both my mates are in good spirits. I am a bit quiet and can't seem to pep myself up. I was putting on a very brave front, but only I knew the jitters in my stomach. "Come on Ush, summit or no summit, keep walking and let's see where you get, be strong now....", with positive talks to myself I was keeping sane.

Had upma for lunch again. It seems to be working well for my stomach. Biere got back by lunch time, his face was totally burnt and looked tired and exhausted after setting up everything for both Everest and Lhotse for Babar.

I have sorted out all things needed for the summit push, kept them aside and will pack it once daju gives confirmation of us leaving. 2<sup>nd</sup> day of my period and the flow is still heavy, but back pain and cramps have settled.

I have spoken to Ajay and Akka. Akka has taken the responsibility of getting Ajay to KTM. Now I can't wait to finish the summit (hopefully successfully) and meet them. Wow the thought is exciting. One more week, God gave me strength to keep pushing myself. Let me be strong both physically and mentally. Please help me to be healthy and I will do my best.

Now we are hanging in there for the summit push to begin either tonight or tomorrow. Babar and Javier are checking the weather forecast on the internet continuously (mountain-Forecast.com; Windy.app). Daju has gone to the neighbouring Satori camp to find out too. Daju is not back for lunch and got back only in the evening. So, my guess is that we are not leaving tonight.

I spent some time chatting with Javier and I broke down. I was so worked up and scared. I guess it was good to let it out. I felt better after that.

In the evening at the dining hall, Daju, Biere, Pemba, Dai, Babar, Javier and I gathered to discuss. All of us were in a good space, laughing and being light-hearted. There was no conclusion about the weather. Javier decided to leave for Camp 1 and continue to Camp 2 tonight. His plan was to wait there at camp 2 for the good weather instead of waiting at EBC. According to the climbers this is not a good idea, as at higher camps it's more difficult to rest and eat. It is advised to start the summit push from EBC after getting a good weather window. Somehow Pemba convinced Javier not to leave tonight. He stayed on for another night. Finally, we had dinner and retired to our tents.

Uff this waiting and uncertainty is killing us.

Another day at EBC, **11<sup>th</sup> May, Saturday**. With nothing much to do, I went into the kitchen and cooked Poha for breakfast, which Babar and I ate sumptuously. On our stroll we found the Asian trek tent, and met Kaamya and Karthik. Instead of waiting at base camp, they had gone down to Namche after training as they got good helicopter fares, they said.

Javier used my wi-fi to download some series to watch at the higher camps. He was leaving late in the night for Camp 2. After dinner, bid goodbye to Javier and went to sleep by 9:30. I was feeling sad to say bye to Javier, it was good to have him around. I was not sure if I would see him again.

I heard Javier leave by 11:30 at night. He was my next-door tent mate, so I could hear him leave. He left alone without the sherpa, as his sherpa was already up there in

Camp 2. Brave chap I must say, crossing the Khumbu region on his own. I prayed that he reaches Camp1 safely.

Javier is a bike enthusiast, has a KTM bike and rides it a lot. He hikes around in Chile, does skiing with his two children and has beautiful houses, one in the countryside with a pool and one in the city. He lives alone, cooks and cleans the house and does all chores for himself. He is a meat and cheese lover, especially beef meat. He says he himself prepares his barbecue and enjoys his meat and beer on the weekends. He is a voracious music listener and sings too. His choices are varied, but all Spanish. Doesn't speak English for nuts. Javier is an organised person. I saw his tent; he had everything required for the expedition so neatly chalked out. It was very impressive. He had even carried a needle and thread, and I saw him stitching his gloves which had torn a bit. Such a neat job, he said he learnt it as a kid from his grand-mom. I borrowed the needle and thread from him to stitch my pants. He saw my stitching and went "that's not neat", yeah, I had not done a good job. He has one friend (I forget his name), whom he used to consult for weather updates while waiting for the summit push. He was tech savvy and had all the gadgets. He wears only black clothes, be they trousers, tees, jackets or whatever. Apparently even back home he wears only black he says. He loves mountains and expeditions, biking, cooking, meat, music and singing along and drinking. I learnt the word *Mansana* which means apple, *Manana* which means tomorrow and *Joder* which is slang for fuck, *Beunos Dia* meaning good morning, *Beunas Noches* meaning good evening / good night, and *Linda* meaning beautiful, in Spanish from him. It was wonderful having Javier as my campmate and spending one month at EBC with him.

Later, the next morning Pemba told me that Javier was crying while leaving. I was feeling so bad that I should have got out of the camp, gave him a last hug before he left the previous night. I was all tucked in bed and did not get out. (However, later on I bumped into Javier in Camp 2 and he denied that he cried at all).

## **12<sup>th</sup> May, Sunday: EBC**

We got news by 7:30 in the morning that Javier had reached Camp 1 safely, omg it was such a relief to hear that. It was good to hear his voice over the walkie talkie, and he sounded happy.

Today was sort of a cheerful day. Javier reached Camp 1 safely, I got to shower, and Babar and I went to Makalu camp to visit Sachin and Rakesh. Since the weather was gloomy and snowing, we huddled in their dining area, played UNO, munched on some crispies and pakoras. Pakoras were yummy. Aha to eat hot pakoras in that cold weather, I downed them like a glutton.

Yippe!!!! I had a bath, probably the last one at EBC. Let me describe the bath process at EBC. The bathroom is a spacious tent with a partition separating the dry and wet areas. It's a covered tent. As soon as you enter there is a place to hang clothes and it is the dry area, you pass through the partition, and you enter the actual bathing area. The floor is filled with pebbles and stones. You can hang the towel and keep your soap and stuff on a ledge. They give us half a bucket of hot water heated over the gas and another half bucket of cold water. We mix it according to our requirements and bathe. Bathing itself is an experience. There is bright sun above the tent, but the moment one removes all the clothes it becomes chilly. And worse, you

start shivering the minute you pour water on the body with only a split second of warmth. Somehow you manage to take the quickest shower possible, get dressed, go out into your tent room. Once in the room (it's warmer), pamper oneself by applying moisturizer generously and dress in clean undergarments and clothes.

The helpers collect the water for whatever purpose (bathing, drinking, cooking or cleaning), in big containers every day from lower areas, carry it to our tents and use it after boiling it.

It has been finally decided that we will be leaving for the summit push tomorrow night. Therefore, I wore the clothes that I had kept for my summit push, comfortable inner garments, a cotton tee and thermal pants, layered with fleece pants and jacket, and a fresh pair of socks.

Such a pleasure to have a bath and feel fresh, especially since it was my last day of period too. I slept a bit, smelling nice to myself. I had told Kinka (my brother in law) to send me a novel through WhatsApp as I had run out of reading material. He had promptly sent one, and could only read a bit of that novel. Record of sorts I should say, I have finished reading 4 novels so far (for someone who takes months to finish a novel, this was too good).

I could not eat dinner. Forcibly ate a bit and while eating I had to rush to the loo as my stomach started making noise. Later, I had a bit of custard that was served as dessert. It was soothing on my tummy.

Oh, my, the stomach issue still exists, not settled at all. The sight of food was revolting; I could not chew or swallow anything. It was a very painful task when it was time to eat. Breakfast was the only meal I could handle well and that was

only porridge and boiled egg on most days. I think I have eaten that for most days except for apple pancake (2 days) and upma (2 days), poha (once) and poori bhaji (once). But I have stopped fussing about my stomach now. Initially I tried taking antacid and diarrhoea tablets but realised it was not solving the purpose. So, I just learnt to live with it.

I took out my new sunglasses that I had bought, the expensive ones. Figured out how to use it. Daju also got an oxygen mask and gave me trial sessions in it as I wanted to get the feel of the mask and oxygen. It was all new to me.

Prathyush, my son's friend, called to wish me. Such a small surprise but brought the biggest smile to my face. I went to bed a truly happy soul. It's amazing how small gestures make such a big difference on the mountains.

### **13<sup>th</sup> May, Monday: EBC**

It was a great day to start off, luckily, I woke up feeling fresh and in good spirits. I got to speak to Ajay early in the morning from my tent itself. I was super happy. I have been missing him a lot and have not gotten to speak much.

I spoke at length with him. I was leaving the base camp for the summit push later in the night today and did not want to miss talking to him before I left. I will not be able to talk to him or anyone for almost a week. He wanted to know about the whole summit push and was totally supportive, prepping me up for the final push. And after one week I would be seeing him, uffh can't wait for that.

Spoke to Akka and she had the travel plans in place.

Now all my focus is on climbing, not to panic, to stay positive and take one day at a time. Having experienced the

Khumbu region earlier, I knew that it was not easy but also knew that I could do it. God, please stay with me.

The whole morning till lunch, Babar and I sat in the dining area and listened to a lot of music from the wi-fi connection on my phone. The connection was good, and I had a lot of data left, which I would not be needing or using. I gave it to Dharma before leaving EBC. He was most happy, having internet access and chatting with his friends. I shared Ajay, Akka and Sharath's numbers with him, my strongest pillars. Dharma created a WhatsApp group with them to give updates of my next few days. Daju would send updates to base camp via walkie talkie and Dharma would update the same in the group, that was the plan. All was well and it was time for me to move. I had an early dinner and went to my tent. But sleep evaded me for a long time.

*I told myself, "Ush, stay cool and calm, finally the day that you have been waiting for has arrived. Listen to the mountain, trust your training, and let the love that you have received from all corners carry you through the most difficult times. A lot of people are rooting for you; You are indeed a blessed soul. Although reaching the top is the dream, do not forget that it is more important to make it back down safely to your own tribe. The summit is just a halfway point. Your true destination is returning safely to the arms of those who love you."*

### **Biggest Challenge**

**Waiting for 13 days @ EBC for good weather window**



## CHAPTER 11

### DARE IT, DESIRE IT – JUST DO IT

*EBC to SUMMIT: 20.5kms;*

*5364m – 8848.86m / 17,598ft – 29,032ft*

**13<sup>th</sup> May, Monday: EBC to Camp 1 (5364m-6100m/17,598ft-20,013ft)**

**(8hrs; 11:30 pm – 7:30 am, 14<sup>th</sup> morning)**

I believed that I would climb Everest and reach the summit three years ago, and here I was all set to execute the exact same dream. Three years of planning, training, turmoil, hardships and uncertainties were all behind me now. It was time to march ahead and live that fantasy.

People often ask me – “How many kms is the climb from Everest Base Camp to Summit??” It’s just 20.5kms. So, what’s the fuss about it, one might wonder. In mountains it’s not the distance that you climb, but the altitude that you gain. From 17598.43 feet (5364m) to a whooping 29,031.86 feet (8,848.86 m) is all the fuss about. Reaching the base camp itself is an achievement where people suffer from altitude sickness. Any climb above this is riddled with challenges. This might be tamed quite a bit by spending almost a month at EBC and getting acclimatized to the mountain, altitude and weather. The challenges could be physical (altitude

sickness – severe headaches to pulmonary edema to cerebral edema) or mental (getting depressed and homesick). Throughout one battles with the apprehensions of injury, frost bites, snow blindness, death and getting buried in mountains, besides facing unpredictable weather conditions (avalanches, high speed winds, heavy snow, bone freezing temperatures, harsh sun during the day) and suffering from Khumbu cough, stomach upsets, loosies, inability to eat food and sleep well. Adding to this is the impatience while waiting for the weather window, and a nagging doubt about the successful completion of the summit. These are the daunting hurdles most of us face during such expeditions.

Finally woke up by 10:30 at night, ate some cornflakes, filled up water bottles and flasks, got ready with the summit boots, harness, and carried the crampon, my backpack. And the sticks for walking. Daju`s friends from the neighbouring tent (Makalu adventure – Raj, Jafer and others), were also leaving the same night but a couple of hours later. Daju and I left by 11:30 at night. Started slow but kept climbing steadily.

After almost 45 minutes of walking, we stopped, wore our crampons and continued walking. It was pitch dark and it was just Daju and I. Almost after a couple of hours we met one more climber. There was noise from the avalanche, and he was alone. He wanted to go back to base camp and asked Daju about it. Daju said that we were going ahead, and we continued.

The route had changed, was much steeper and had a lot more ladders than what we had encountered during the rotation. And since I was all alone, Daju`s focus was all on me. He did not want me to use the sticks but to take support from the fixed rope. But I found the sticks more helpful.

There were huge steps that I had to take and with the stick it was easier although slower. Daju was getting a bit restless and kept shouting at me – “madam if you climb like this how will you do the final summit and blah blah.....”. He also felt that I was not as strong as I was during the rotation. At one point I too got tired of Daju`s nagging, told him that I was doing my best, and he should encourage me instead of scolding me. After that he mellowed down a bit. It was a long night.

Soon the Makalu team caught up and I was happy to have some company. Now we moved together crossing the crevasses and the big ice boulders with overhanging icicles. It was comforting to have people along with me and more so for Daju because I was keeping up with others. He stopped scolding me. After the icicles and crevasses, the path was steep and narrow. There were treacherous climbs up and down. Both were equally challenging. This section was tiring. And while jumping one of the crevasses I landed on the edge of the other side, started to slide down into the crevasse. I held on tightly to the fixed rope and yelled for help. Daju came to my rescue, of course I had to listen to his outburst after that. That was scary, I had my heart in my mouth. Since I am small, jumping over crevasses was not as easy as it was for others. I guess I had a little fear too and Daju was trying to get me out of my comfort zone and telling me to be fearless with my footing. Hmmm that`s something I can work upon and become better at, I will keep in mind.

Finally, we came to the vertical wall. There was one ladder fixed this time around on the wall and after that it was jumaring with Daju`s help from above. Once I reached the top of the wall, I was totally breathless. The guys in the Makalu team gave me some chewies, we all rested a bit and

started off again. By now the darkness was over and with the sun above us there was good visibility. The terrain ahead was that of never-ending smooth snow slopes. The altitude was hitting, and we were getting breathless. Slowly but steadily without many breaks I developed a rhythm and began to climb. We had to cross horizontal and vertical ladders. Ladder crossing was not scary for me. However, my shoe size was so small that placing the foot engaging the two adjacent steps on the ladder was a challenge. Daju was always with me, ahead of me and taking care of me, but up till the last 3 hours or so, he kept goading me to keep moving and he wanted me to do it on my own. I too became stubborn and did not ask him for help. Quietly but slowly managed it all.

At last, we had finished all the dangerous paths, and we needed to keep going for another 3-4 hours to reach our target for the day. This part of the climb was good. I did not complain, kept moving consistently and Daju was happy. He became relaxed and helpful. By around 8am, on the 14th morning we reached our destination - Camp 1.

Had some tea, something to eat and sat on the snow along with Makalu team members till Daju got the tent ready. Whew the most dangerous Khumbu region was done. It took 8 hours all in all from EBC to Camp1. We had taken 10 hours during rotation. The route was changed (shorter????) or probably I was not bad after all!!!! Daju was happy, he patted my back and said that I did well. Yippe, that was some reassurance. Now I understood why he was so strict all along. Chetna had warned me of Daju's rage and mad strictness but experiencing it while on the go was something else. After hearing his consolations and praise after the climb, I forgot all the madness that I had felt

towards him during the climb. Will I climb with him again??? Yes, yes yes. He is experienced and knows how and when to be strict. One needs to have trust in their sherpas and listen to them without having a mind of their own. That makes everyone's life simple, especially for commercial climbers like me.

### **May 14<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday: Stay at Camp 1:**

We reached Camp 1 @ around 8am, and was tired for sure. I was glad that we took a call to spend one night at Camp 1 instead of heading straight to Camp 2 after resting a couple of hours at Camp 1. That's what many trekkers do, Babar was doing that. So, he will be starting from EBC tonight, meet us at Camp 1 on the 15th morning, rest a bit and head to Camp 2 directly.

I needed to rest at Camp 1, maybe I could have pushed myself to Camp 2, but it would have been hard. At Camp 1, more tea, chatting away with Makalu team members, a little noodle for lunch and then settling inside the tent, resting completely. There was no altitude sickness, no headache. It was quite windy, so mostly stayed inside the tent for the rest of the afternoon, evening and night. It was torture to get out of the tent, walk up to the open toilet pit and unload. I had to do it a couple of times. I had a bottle for peeing, and I managed to get that done within the tent. I ate some fried rice in the evening, tea and tried to sleep. It was not easy to sleep; it was very cold. I got into the sleeping bag and remained in it with many thoughts running in my mind.

Daju slept well, was even snoring. We had to share the tent here at Camp 1. He had worked hard, digging a loo pit, collecting snow, melting it, boiling the water, making tea and cooking ready-to-eat food. Almost from the time we

reached till evening he was working. I managed to sleep on and off.

Ajay and the group (akka and Sharath) had got the news that I had reached Camp 1 safely.

**May 15<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday: Camp 1 to Camp 2 (3hrs; 7am - 10am)**

**(6100m-6400m/ 20,013ft-20,997ft)**

I woke up early, morning toilet visit done, brushed, had some tea and cornflakes and Daju told me to start walking towards Camp 2. Babar had arrived, and was so glad to meet him. He would rest a bit and start later. He was fast, so I needed to have a head start. I started off by 7am all alone. The climb from Camp 1 to Camp 2 was relatively simple without risks. I needed to just keep walking up along the gradual gradient. In a few areas however, I had to fix my safety hook to the fixed rope and cross the crevasse. I managed to do it even though it was not very comfortable with the mitts on. I started counting my steps and took a breather for every 400 steps initially, then 300 steps and eventually for every 100 steps. There were a lot of people along the way, it was bright, sunny and nice. The trekking sticks helped a lot in this region giving all the extra support and balance and was comfortable climbing with the sticks. Enroute asked the other sherpas along the way to pick my bottle from my bag to sip on water, that way I did not have to take down my bag every time that I wanted water.

I walked for almost 2:30hour, Babar and Daju caught up and even though we touched Camp 2 we had to walk for another 30mins to reach our tent. This last 30 mins of steep gradient climb through rough patches of rocks and hard ice

was done without the crampons. Many sherpas climb the earlier sections too without crampons. I remember struggling to climb the last 30mins during the rotation climb. But this time around I did not feel it was so hard. Babar walked along with me. When we reached our tent Javier was there to welcome us with a big smile. He took off my backpack and gave me some water. Oh, what a nice welcome and so glad to see him again, especially when I did not expect him there. Since he had left EBC a couple of days earlier than me, I had assumed that he would have continued to Camp 3.

We soaked in the sun, had some tea, and chilled outside our tents. Pankha, our cook, fed us with fresh hot soup and proper meals. Pankha and Javier became very friendly, managing to communicate in their own way with one another. We were to spend two nights at Camp 2. After lunch, I hung out in Javier's tent, listened to some music. In the evening Babar and I walked around a bit. After that we sat outside the tents soaking all the warmth of the sun till it disappeared. Once the sun disappeared, it started becoming very chilly, mandating us to wear our down suits. Even with our down suits, the cold was quite unbearable. We quickly finished off dinner and went to our tents.

Javier was on his own, not listening to his new Daju either. Neither my Daju nor Babar's Daju interfered. On mountains it's wise to listen to your sherpas, but Javier had a mind of his own. He was an experienced climber, with almost 28years now of climbing. Therefore, he was taking decisions rather than his sherpa doing it for him.

## **May 16<sup>th</sup>, Thursday: Halt at Camp 2**

The weather became a bit gloomy, snowed a bit, and was chilly and windy. Most of the time we stayed indoors, inside our tents or in the dining tent or in the kitchen tent.

There was a toilet tent here at Camp 2 this time around. It was very precariously placed. There were two big stones kept, we had to balance on it, sit down and do the job. It was like an Indian toilet, but we had to aim and shoot. It was quite crazy. I used it for a big job. For peeing I used to empty my bladder sitting behind my tent. Everyone did it in the open, turning their back to the crowd. It was difficult to walk up all the way to the toilet tent to do it. For the guys it was easy, but even we girls managed it and there was nothing one could do, no shame, no inhibitions on the mountains. An experience by itself.

Each of us kept mostly to ourselves in our tents, Babar slept the most. Javier managed to walk to the neighbouring agency to get his music system charged as they had battery backup. He had solar chargers and did not work because of the gloomy weather.

I had kept my phone switched off and safely wrapped in thick clothes so that it would not be discharged in the cold. I wanted my phone at the summit for pictures.

There was another team of three young boys who joined us today. They shared our dining tent. It was refreshing talking to them. One guy had taken off and told his girlfriend that he was doing the Everest expedition only after he had left. He is totally into climbing, spending most of his time doing that. I wonder who funds him or how he manages so much travelling and climbing.

We retired early after keeping everything ready for the next day. We had to get good sleep, (which I did) as we were supposed to head out early in the morning.

**May 17<sup>th</sup>, Friday: Camp 2- Camp 3 (4:30hrs; 7am - 11:30am)**

**(6400m-7200m/20,997ft-23,622ft)**

We woke up at 5:30, finished the morning nature call, brushed, dressed up in down suit, harness and boots. We had breakfast and headed out by 7am. Javier was not sure about his plan; he woke up when we were leaving and was planning to start late in the morning.

As I said earlier, the good thing about our camps is that they are pitched way ahead of the other agencies. This gives us a head start for the next day when we start our hike (although we crib about it as we come into the camp, since we need to put that extra effort at the fag end of the climb).

After walking for about 20mins, we reached the crampon point, wore our crampons and started the climb. At the beginning we encountered a small section of steep climb. During the rotation climb, I had taken Daju's help here. This time around I was alone and managed it all by myself. After walking for about 2hours on a quiet and even terrain came the base of a huge climb. Here Daju said that I had to leave behind my sticks. There was a point where many climbers had stuck their sticks in snow. I put both my sticks along with the pile, not sure of finding them on my way back. When we had come on rotation we had reached till this section and turned around to go back. (21981.63 ft - 6700m).

The climb up the next section was very tricky. There was a very narrow ledge which required us to do lateral

traversing holding onto the rope fixed onto the vertical wall with half our shoes hanging in thin air. Once the lateral traversing was done, we had to climb up on a steep smooth surfaced snow mountain. We were very lucky that it had snowed. I remember looking at the stone mountain when I had come for rotation and being seriously worried about the rock climbing that I would have to do in this section on my summit push. **Sagarmatha** was indeed kind, it had snowed and jumaring was easily doable.

From here onwards, we had to always hang our safety hook to the fixed rope. Till now there was no continuous fixed rope, so we could climb at our own pace and there was no long queue. But from here the climb became slow as we had to go one behind the other in the queue only along the fixed rope. The gradient was almost 60 degrees. In a way the queue here was good, because we got forced rest breaks. Left to Daju he would keep pushing me and never allow breaks. Most times we followed the queue, except at times when it was too slow, we overtook the people in front and went ahead. This section was quite doable, and I did not find any difficulty. We started wearing the oxygen mask from here (21981.63 ft - 6700m). It became our constant companion 24/7 till the summit and back till this point again on our way back.

I had almost 15kilos on me from here. 5kgs of oxygen cylinder, 3kgs of my shoes, 3kgs of my down suit, 4 kgs of my backpack with water bottle, short eats, gloves etc.

Camp 3 was on the slopes. The tent was put on a narrow ledge created by Daju during his previous visit. There was hardly any space to walk. Babar had started about 45 mins later than me and caught up within minutes of me reaching the camp at 11:30am. It was sunny but soon became cloudy

and cold. Stayed inside the tent that was shared by Daju and me.

Javier arrived late in the afternoon. His camp was slightly far from ours. Babar's and mine were next to each other. Daju's work of melting snow, boiling that water, making tea, cooking food for me began, while I rested. Our friends from Makalu arrived sometime in the afternoon. Basically, I spent the whole time inside the tent.

**May 18<sup>th</sup>, Saturday: Camp 3 - Camp 4 (9:00hrs; 6:00 am - 3:00 pm)**

**(7200m-8000m/23,622ft-26,247ft)**

It was very difficult to even pee wearing the down suit. At night I did not venture out at all. Early morning had a strong shit reflex. Got out of the tent and found a small place behind our tent and finished the job. We had tea, something to eat, got ready and headed out at 6am to our next destination, Camp 4. When Daju and I left I saw the Makalu team still getting ready. Jafer was taking a dump precariously on the edge of a ledge. Camp 3 is quite tricky in terms of space, because there is no flat land and it is not easy to walk around or find a place to do the loo jobs. The tent just fits in the flattened area of land on the slope, and one must be watchful while stepping out of the tent as one can easily step out, go down the slope and rolling down the mountain

The good thing about Daju was, he was very organised, used to give me specific time for waking up or to start and I stuck to it. Hence, there was no issue about us not leaving on time. He would give me all necessary instructions and nothing more. I would never know how long, how the

terrain was or what to expect next. In a way it was good, I was fearless not knowing what to expect. I followed Daju's instructions to the tee, did not question much, trusted him completely and left it all to him to lead me to the top and back. I think this quality of trust is something that one needs to have in their sherpa, especially commercial climbers like me need to have 110% trust in their sherpas. Without Daju I had no clue as to what to do. I followed him like a lamb, and it worked fantastically.

Today was a tough day. All in all, we climbed non-stop for 9 hours to reach Camp 4, from 6 am to 3 pm. It was a long climb day with most of us taking anywhere between 7 to 11 hours. It starts off with steep step by step climbs, some sections very narrow, some sections wide. Then we have the famous yellow band to pass. Here again we were lucky because it had snowed and the jumar was easier. Daju had asked one of the Makalu sherpa to just stay with him to help me in case I found it difficult to climb the yellow band area. But I managed it on my own, I was happy, so was Daju. Immediately after climbing the yellow band, we got to see tents, and I assumed that it was Camp 4. I was thrilled as I thought that we had reached our destination. Alas, the happiness was short-lived. Got to know that it was the base camp for Lhotse peak and we still had quite a bit of climbing left until we reached Camp 4.

The climb went on and on after that. There were a lot of rough uphill surfaces to climb, narrow ledges to manoeuvre through and the weather started becoming cold, windy and snowy. We still had to get past the prominent, anvil-shaped black rib of rock, called the Geneva spur, named after the Swiss expedition team who first identified and mapped it in 1952. It provides a critical route towards the South Col and

is a major obstacle for climbers ascending the mountain. This took about 30-40 mins climbing but seemed non-stop and limitless.

Suddenly after one acute turn I saw the tents of Camp 4. We had finally arrived, and I was elated. We were now in the DEATH ZONE where oxygen levels are <40%, going as low as 33% eventually on the summit, causing body functions to decline or shut down. Here climbers undergo different experiences. They get physically drained, mentally disillusioned, lose the ability to judge and experience hallucinations. One needs to be very mindful of the things happening to them and even more mindful of accepting the fact that they are not okay and making the crucial decision of turning back if that's the last choice. The role of a good sherpa is most crucial here. And I think every climber needs to respect the sherpa's judgement rather than their own and take the call accordingly.

On reaching the tent site at Camp 4 I realised that the winds were very gusty and I had to pee badly. I took a leak in the open as Daju was trying to identify and figure out our tent. We occupied a tent that was used by previous climbers, so it was dirty. Nothing bothered me at that time. I just got into the tent and rested. Within the confines of the tent, I felt comfortable, no wind hitting me or pushing me. Apart from the physical tiredness I was absolutely fine but needed Daju's help in even taking off my boots and putting them on again later.

Did not see Babar or Javier. Taking every step in Camp 4 is a laborious task, just can't think of stepping out of the tent. I could hear Babar from a distance; knew he had reached but dared not to step out to talk to him. As usual Javier arrived late in the evening at Camp 4, he did not have a tent, was

wandering around. He came into our tent, stayed for a bit till his sherpa got him a tent. I was too tired even to talk to him but was glad to see him.

Reaching Camp 4 was a fantastic achievement for me. But now I am hungry to reach the top. We were just a night climb away from summiting my dream. I conserved all my energy, rested for about three hours. Daju got me some tea, and made adukale upma (my comfort food), which I had specifically carried to eat before the final summit. I ate half a bowl, Daju did not like it, and he couldn't eat it. Finally, we got ready for our grand finale – SUMMIT CLIMB and enthusiastically headed out at 6:30 pm. It was already dark, and we had to use our head light to guide us. A series of headlights lit the path above us, with many climbers beginning their final push, all anchored to the same fixed rope.

From Camp 4, whatever time of the night one starts, the turnaround time is 12 afternoon next day. This means that the time given to reach the summit is 12 noon and if you do not reach the summit by then, one needs to turn back and start descending from whichever point he/she would have reached en-route to the summit. This ensures a safe descent. Many lose their lives when they fail to adhere to this turnaround time, go ahead and reach the summit later in the afternoon. Although they might be successful in reaching the top, sadly the descent may prove fatal for them. This could be either because they are exhausted, they become totally delirious, suffer from cerebral edema and just collapse or the weather changes drastically by 2 or 3 in the afternoon making the descent very difficult if not impossible.

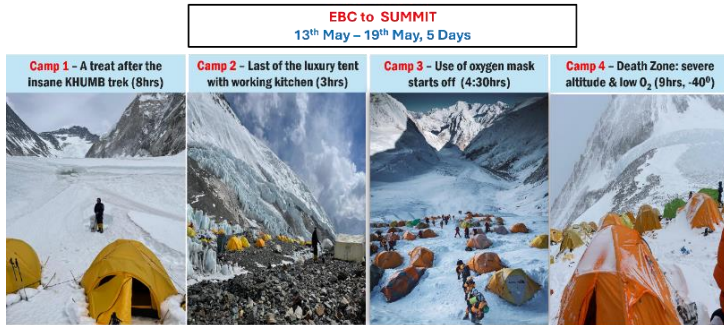
We had decided to start by 6:30 pm and I had no clue how long I would take, although generally people take anywhere

from 8 hours to 16 hours to reach the summit, depending on individual climbing skills and physical and mental attributes. I was sure that Daju would take calls as required and that I needed to break it all into small targets and keep moving.

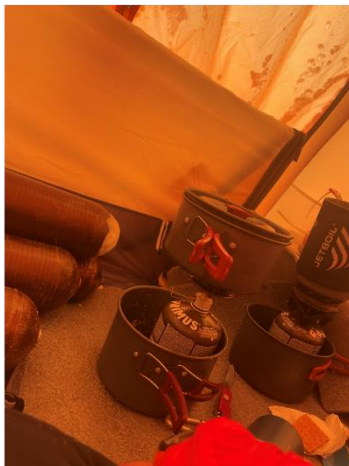
*Big goals are achieved by breaking it into smaller ones. Our approach and focus should be on the immediate next goal along the road map, without ever letting the final target go out of sight. From the death zone to the summit, it is never about the distance to track, but rather the commitment to the next fixed anchor points by dividing the distance by one's breaths. If you can take five steps before stopping, focus only on those five steps. The summit is just a collection of those small moments.*

*"The secret to making it through the Death Zone is to never let your mind wander to the finish line. Keep your mind exactly where your boots are."*

— Reinhold Messner"



**24/7 oxygen mask & Butane gas stove for cooking at higher camps**



## CHAPTER 12

# BELIEVE YOU CAN DO IT AND KEEP PUSHING YOURSELF

The Only Way To Get Past and  
Reach Your Goal Is To Go Through It

**CAMP 4 to SUMMIT: 1.7kms;**

**8000m-8848.86m/26,247ft-29,032ft**

**Camp 4 / South Col (8000m / 26,247ft) – May 18<sup>th</sup> 6:30pm**



3:50 hours

**Balcony (8400m / 27,559ft)**



3:45 hours + 15 mins Rest

**South Summit (8750m / 28,704ft)**



3 hours

**Hillary Step (8790m / 28,839ft)**



50 mins

**Summit (8848.68m / 29,032ft) – May 19<sup>th</sup> 6:10am**

As we headed out, I told myself -

“Let this final push be the reminder of your resilience. Embrace the journey, knowing that each step forward, no matter how small, would take you closer to the dream that you have been carrying within. Buck up Usha, finish this quest with intention and a fierce belief in your strength”.

The climb from Camp 4 started off at 6:30 in the evening of May 18<sup>th</sup>. There was one other sherpa from Makalu who was climbing alone, so Daju asked him to join us so that he might be of help if I needed.

The initial climb was rather simple, and I remember thinking to myself that the final push is not bad after all. But the climb started becoming tougher, say after an hour into the climb. It started becoming steeper and the initial smooth terrain became uneven with rough patches and boulders to climb over. Every step was laboured, and I remember catching my breath after every 5-6 steps. Our first stop was at Balcony almost after 4 hours of non-stop climb. Everyone stops here. We got almost a 10-15 mins rest break, changed to a fresh oxygen cylinder, ate chocolate, drank some water and started off again. This break was such a relief. The crowd started becoming more from here. We had to follow the queue.

After the balcony, the climb was not so bad, all of us were lined up in a queue and followed one another up the mountain. It was a smooth climb. Soon we had a vertical wall and steep sections of almost 40-50 degrees inclination. After the vertical wall climb this inclination should have felt a bit simpler, but I don't remember it being so. It was a continuous suffering that I endured with mettle. With every few steps I was happy that I was progressing. The 4 plus hours of climbing steep snow slopes, steps, a few tough

jumar sections and knife edge traverses were continuous with a split-second stop for catching breath after every 3-4 steps in some sections. It was unimaginably tiring, and I was going breathless. My legs were hurting and getting strained. Daju did not give much choice at all, and had to keep moving up. Even in that state I don't remember even once thinking of quitting and heading back. When the going got tough, tougher became my mind even though my body was crying to stop.

South summit is a well-known landmark on the route from the South Col to the main summit (about 100-130m below the main summit). A challenging narrow, snow-covered ridge lined with unstable, overhanging snow formations called Cornice Traverse. The huge boulder of snow the "Hillary step" connects it to the main summit. South summit is significant as it serves as a resting point and an important cache for extra oxygen supplies needed for the descent to Camp 4. The section from the South Summit to the main peak is difficult and exposed, and can be extremely demanding especially during challenging conditions.

We got a small breather just before reaching the South summit as we walked down a bit. The path curved around and after that it was a long and punishing climb to reach the South Summit. This section was too narrow, and we had to cross it carefully one foot at a time, making sure that we didn't step on our own shoes. That would be disastrous with the crampons on. Also, since the path was very narrow, we had to be careful that our backpack did not get stuck in the narrow path. And, on the narrow path there were huge steps, I had to hold on to the rope, pull myself up with all my strength to climb up.

Went on to cross the Hillary step, which even till this day I can't seem to figure out. After the 2015 earthquake, this

Hillary step has been broken down, and no such steep step exists. No wonder, to the life of me I can't figure out when I crossed it. Daju's motto was "Do it yourself", so he wouldn't even look back or offer help, but kept a close watch and made sure I climbed on my own.

I could see the top or that's what I thought, but the climb continued for at least another hour from the supposed Hillary step. Hip hip hurray, when I looked up, yes there were only clouds above me and no mountain to climb and I **reached the top of the world at 6:10 am on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024.** A deep sense of gratitude and a big relief for having completed it. But very soon I felt the exhaustion setting in and realised that we had a long climb down. Most deaths happen on the descent after the summit because of exhaustion, deliriums, altitude sickness and loss of focus.

I touched the very tip of the flat 2ft by 4ft top. It was covered with prayer flags and from the flat top there were slopes all around. Stepped down a bit and stood tall on the slope for a picture with Indian tricolour. After that I sat down as I felt the gutsy wind was going to sweep me off my feet. Daju arrived with his phone, gave my family and college banners, clicked some more pictures, spent almost 15 mins on the top and it was time to get down. This was only half the battle won. And so Daju warned me not to celebrate yet.

I was careful enough not to expend my energy, rather I saved it by being silent, sitting down and resting a bit, savouring the view at the top. As I sat right at the top, I remember feeling blank and empty. I had done it, that was the only thought and was feeling completely blessed. With a smile on my face, I watched other climbers reach the top, clicking pictures and big groups celebrating together. We were above the clouds, and I watched the surrounding

mountain peaks clad with snow. An interesting feature is that climbers from both south (Nepal side) and north (China side), though start and follow completely different routes, all meet at the same top. The day and time that I summited there were no climbers from the China side. One thing was clear yet again, the euphoria of reaching the final target (in this case, reaching the top of Everest), has never been greater than the actual journey to reach that goal. I don't remember being over joyous or having a eureka moment after reaching the top. Rather there have been many eureka moments since the past 3 years of my training and the past two months of the actual expedition. It's good to have an end in mind, *but in the end what counts is how you travel*. I felt this was very true for me. Even today after the expedition, if I sit back and recollect my Everest summit, it's the bits and pieces of the everyday journey that bring a lot of smiles on my face, give me goosebumps and happiness.

*From the Launch (Camp 4 to the triangular face), it is all about finding the rhythm in the dark. The first major rest point is "The Balcony" @ 8,400m. It is a very crucial point which allows one to rest and assess their condition. Here changing of oxygen bottles happens and gives a climber a reality check of his/her status to move ahead. From here, one keeps moving ahead not step by step, but rather breath by breath, navigating the knife edge ridge to reach the South Summit @ 8,749m, the point where the true peak becomes visible. The final technical hurdle requiring pure, focused climbing is (rather was) the Hillary Step @ 8,790m. From there on the sheer excitement of reaching the summit along the Summit Ridge is a gradual walk to the top of the world.*

*Once at the top it is heartening - to see that there is nothing else to climb, to feel that sense of completion, to be grateful for keeping me safe, to pray to have a safe descent and to unite me with my loved ones.*

## *Everest Within: An Ascent of Aspirations*

The final SUMMIT Push from Camp 4 to Top of the World, Human Traffic is real even on EVEREST



**Top of the World:  
BEST VIEW AFTER A HARD CLIMB - SURREAL**



**HUMBLED @ the TOP:  
19<sup>th</sup> May 6:10am**



**BESTEST MOMENT:  
WITH FAMILY @ the TOP**



## CHAPTER 13

### **WHEN YOU REACH THE SUMMIT, YOU ARE ONLY HALFWAY THERE AND SUDDENLY DISCOVER THAT ALL ROADS LEAD DOWN**

Climbing down was no easy task; in fact, it was tougher than climbing up. By now the other climbers for the day were reaching the top and we had a huge traffic to manage through.

On my way down, after a 15-minute descent, I met Babar who was on his way up. I took almost 6 hours to get down to Camp 4. My climbing skills down the mountain were not great plus I was tired. Wherever there was rappelling I got down easily, but facing downhill with hands behind the body holding the rope and climbing down was way too nasty. My thigh muscles were tired and were beginning to give way. I took my time, thankfully Daju realised my difficulty, did not rush me, and was very kind and supportive. While climbing up I had not realised the path to be so tricky and hard. Now as I was descending down, I vividly saw it all. Step by step, rappel by rappel with heart in my mouth I reached Camp 4 before 1 pm. Along the way we had to stop and stay still for 10-15mins as there was zero visibility due to a huge windstorm. We just had to hold on to the fixed rope, stand still and wait till it passed.

When we reached Camp 4, I hugged Daju and started weeping uncontrollably. It was only because of his support that I could do it and expressed my gratitude to him. Both of us were dead tired, so we decided to spend the night at Camp 4 and continue descending the next morning. Since we had used only 4 oxygen cylinders and had one more to spare, Daju agreed to it and we spent the night at Camp 4.

We drank a lot of liquids, could barely eat, had some chocolates and slept through the whole afternoon and night. I remember being so out of control to pee, partly wet my down suit and somehow managed to stay in it till I reached Camp 2 the next day.

The news of us having summited and reached back to Camp 4 had been delivered to Ajay. At Camp 4 on return, Daju gave me a surprise. He took out the satellite phone and asked me to talk to Ajay. I called, he picked up, could only say hi and the line went dead. Couldn't get through to him after that. I forgot about it as I was so tired and slept off. Only later did I get to know what stress that call had given him. Ajay had heard from Dharma, from base camp that I had summited successfully and then no news for next two days and he assumed that I must be in danger, that's why the brief call from satellite phone. Poor fellow, he was very stressed for the next two days until he heard that I was back at Camp 2.

From Camp 4 we started descending to Camp 2 the next morning, 20<sup>th</sup> May, reaching Camp 2 by evening. Before the descent I wanted to meet Babar and Javier. I was all dressed, went out of my tent and looked for them. Could spot Babar's tent. Spoke to him briefly. He had summited on May 19<sup>th</sup> by 7am, got down, halted at Camp 4 and was getting ready to leave to base camp of Lhotse, halt there, summit it on May 21<sup>st</sup> and then descend. Wished good luck to him and bid my

goodbye. He was also looking battered, badly burnt. I went around looking for Javier but could not spot his tent. I almost entered one of the tents thinking it was him, but it was not. Taking every step was painful, I did not hang around outside much. Got back into the tent. It was sad that I could not meet Javier. Heard that he had not gone for the summit push on 18<sup>th</sup> night (reached late to Camp 4) nor on 19<sup>th</sup> night (was very windy). So, he spent 2 nights at Camp 4, that's crazy. He was planning to do it tonight and I was headed down.

Daju and I ate a bit and we started descending. My feet were hurting because of the shoes. I knew it was a long way down to Camp 2. Slowly but steadily, we kept moving. In the beginning the climb down was very tricky, narrow paths and even narrower edges, steep steps and crossings (Geneva spur), I was scared. Met Jaffar in this section. He was a great help, kept talking positively and pushing me ahead. Thanks to him I could muster some courage and be a bit slow.

At the yellow band there was a huge rush of people climbing upwards. Since we had to give the right of way to the upward climbers, we had to wait for almost 45mins before climbing down further. When we started descending, I was very breathless. I told Daju about it. He put me up against the slope of the mountain and checked my oxygen, it was empty. He quickly changed the cylinders, gave me his and then we started moving down again. My legs were getting tired. With each step, the leg would sink into the soft fresh snow almost till knee length and pulling the leg out and taking the next step was not easy at all. Luckily after a while, I got clear sections with no crowd and I could rappel down. I was good at that, and it was such a relief. Daju was also patient.

On our descent, we met a lot of people going up for the summit. Both of us climbers, going up and down, had to use the same fixed rope. The right of movement goes to the climbers going up, so every person we passed on our way down, we had to remove our safety and reengage it. Daju helped me with that. At one point we saw one guy almost completely wasted, was not in his senses, hanging on the rope with his safety anchor. He just did not look good, and he was climbing up. I wonder what happened to him.

Almost near Camp 3 I met Malkiat Singh (from seven summit ), the Indian Sikh settled in New Zealand. He was struggling to take even a step. When I heard that he had successfully summited, I was very happy for him. When I had met him at base camp and chatted, he was so frail after his sickness. Grit and determination personify his climb. He did succeed in the summit and was on his way down. Got to know later that he spent one night at Camp 3 before descending to Camp 2 the next day and taking a helicopter rescue to KTM from there.

Daju gave me a short break at Camp 3. We rested for a while, had water and some chocolates to eat before starting to descend again. The last section before reaching Camp 3 was cool, as I could rappel down, but I was getting tired. From Camp 3 downwards it was a slow walk holding on to the fixed rope. The air was thin even with the oxygen supplement. The lateral traverse at 6700m was scary for me and Daju became a bit aggressive again, wanting me to do it on my own. Almost slipped in one area but got up and somehow managed to reach the bottom of the vertical wall. From there it was an easy walk but because I was tired, I found it very laborious. By the way, my sticks were intact, in the same place where I had left them. I was so happy to see them, like uniting with a long-lost friend. I picked them up

and headed down counting my steps and taking a break after every 200 steps. Yeah, getting down too needed breaks. Got to the end of the snow area, removed the crampons and then had to still walk for at least another 15 mins to reach the tent at Camp 2. Daju left me and went ahead. So, I took my own sweet time to reach the camp, and he was wondering where I disappeared.

Reaching Camp 2 was a huge relief. Both of us drank like 2-3 bottles of juice and water. Rested, took off my climbing boots. My feet were hurting. The back of the heel had become very sore and painful. My eyes were burning. I suddenly got scared that I could lose my vision. While climbing down Daju had told me not to remove my ski goggles. I kept taking it off as there was poor visibility with it on because of continuous snow. Seeing me do that Daju told me strictly to keep my goggles on as I could go blind otherwise. Yet at that point I ignored his warnings and kept removing them.

Also, while climbing down, Daju would not give me water breaks, I was completely parched and was thirsty to the core. My mouth was dry; tongue was sticking to the palate. So, I started eating fresh snow from the mountain, oh what a lovely relief that was.

That night I ate a bit and went to my tent early. No Babar or Javier, missed them. I could not close my eyes nor keep it open. It was burning very badly. I kept opening and trying to see if my vision was good. My vision was blurred; I was terrified thinking I was going blind. But I did not dare tell Daju as he had warned me a lot to not take my goggles out. I was feeling battered, body tired, eyes hurting, tips of fingers and toes feeling numb and feet killing me, plus had to get out to pee too. Although I was dead tired, I could not sleep well with all aches and pains and tiredness and

especially with my eye situation. Oh, I could not wait for the morning to just get down further.

On the morning of the 21st, after chores and tea, I can't remember if I ate anything. I started the journey to base camp. My vision was blurred, I had frost bites on my toes and fingers and I was dehydrated. I took a heli ride to Lukla and then to KTM.

At Lukla I had to wait for 2-3hrs for my helicopter to Kathmandu. Luckily there was wi-fi at Lukla airport, I got to connect with Ajay, kids, Akka, Leks and the whole gang and a whole lot of friends. Wishes were streaming down; I could see them and since the internet was slow, I could not reply. The sense of achievement started sinking in with everyone's wishes pouring in.

I met Malkiat Singh at Lukla airport, he did make it down safely and he was so full of gratitude. I met another white man who had not summited. He had turned back after Camp 4 because of bad weather, he said.

I finally got my flight to KTM and reached KTM by late afternoon. Went straight to the hospital to check my eyes. The ophthalmologist said that I had 90% vision loss in my right eye, but luckily it was corneal damage and so a temporary one. She said that it would recover by a month's time. She gave me three different eye drops to use. I spent the night at the hospital and got some IV fluids too. It was a luxury to stay in the hospital on a clean bed, proper pillow and blanket. There was Wi-Fi and I could connect with everyone. The staff nurses were very nice, and the icing was I finally had a proper clean toilet. I slept well at night.

At the hospital I met Jaffar, he was admitted too for severe sunburn and altitude sickness. His face was very

badly burnt, making mine look quite alright. We chatted a bit.

Akka and Ajay landed in Kathmandu the next day and reached the hospital by noon, after all the formalities, I got discharged and the three of us went back to hotel Jampa. We hung around in KTM for a couple of days celebrating my summit and boy was glad they were with me; I could not manage it all (packing up and travelling back home) alone.

The first thing that I did in the hotel room was get fresh clothes out of the suitcase which I had left behind when I had started off for the expedition. I took a long hot shower. Scrubbed every inch of my body. It was a loo day, spending almost an hour in the bathroom. The back of my heel was very tender and painful. It took almost a month for that to settle down.

Sunil Nataraj, the first civilian from Karnataka to summit Mt. Everest (2022), from Bangalore, was in KTM. He had found out that I had summited and reached KTM. He called me and we decided to meet up at our hotel lobby. After the bath and dressing up, Ajay, Akka and I met up with Sunil at the lobby and chatted for almost half an hour. Sunil had taken a group of trekkers to EBC and was going back to Bangalore. We invited him to join us for dinner, but he had to leave. Bidding bye to him, the three of us went out for dinner. We celebrated with some cocktails, good food and got back to the room and slept like a baby.

The next morning when I got out of my room, I met a white guy and we got chatting. He asked if I was here for trekking and that he had just got back from EBC. I smiled and told him that I had just got back from the summit. He was aghast, said that I was the first Everestor whom he had met personally and took pictures with me. Got the first feel

of a celeb. We requested Daju to join us for lunch, and celebrated it all over again with some wine and good food. We completed all the final formalities with Daju, thanked him and it was time to say bye to him, but I continue to be in touch with him even today.

Heard from Daju that Babar had successfully completed both the 8000m plus peaks – Everest and Lhotse and Javier too had summited Everest. Both were safe. It was ecstatic to know that. Though we could not catch up after our summits, we kept in touch with each other and continue to do so even today.

Just a day ago I was in the mountains and could not believe that it was all over, the ordeal of the past 50 odd days. I was grateful to Sagarmatha for keeping me safe throughout, for having a successful summit and reaching back with minimum damage, yeah, the things that I suffered were minimal in comparison to many things that could happen. With a sense of accomplishment and contentment I looked forward to reaching home in Mysuru.

*The summit is only the halfway mark, and the descent requires even greater discipline, precision, and milestone-based thinking. The descent down from the Summit is where gravity assists you, but fatigue betrays you and therefore every fixed line anchor becomes your ONLY lifeline.*

*Reaching back to civilization isn't just a physical return (a fulfilled soul, even if the body is battered, bruised, and burned) – it is the moment your lungs remember what it feels like to truly breathe again with the deepest appreciation for the ordinary comforts. We go to the edge of life to escape it, only to realise how beautiful it is to be warm, safe, and loved. This now feels like a gift earned with every step.*

Reaching Camp 4 after successful SUMMIT & Feeling safe with my DAJU



← Before SUMMIT  
Fresh as a cucumber

After SUMMIT →  
Sun burns  
Stomach upset  
90% Blindness in right eye  
Frost nips in toes & fingers



## CHAPTER 14

# THE FULFILLING REALISATION OF AN EXPEDITION

### *IT DOESN'T DAWN AT THE SUMMIT*

*But When You Return and  
Your People See in Your Eyes*

*The Story Only the Road Could Write*

The news was all over Mysore. The editor of the very popular daily evening newspaper of Mysore “Star of Mysore” (SOM) had contacted Ajay before he left Mysore and had asked him to send a picture of his with me after reaching KTM. We clicked a picture and shared it. It was front page headline news in SOM on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024. Wishes started pouring in.

It was a long journey back home, from Kathmandu to Delhi and from there on to Bangalore. Kiran, my brother, had coordinated with cousins, family and friends to receive me at the airport. Akka and Ajay knew about it, but they did not tell me. As we got into Bangalore airport, a surprise celebration with the airport officials was just the start and as we collected the luggage and got out, a whole bunch of family and friends were waiting with banners and cake. It was unbelievable. I could not trust my eyes, there was so much noise that the onlookers asked what we were

celebrating and when they were told about my achievement, they too joined in, took pictures with me. Neelamma (my mom's sister) gave me a gold pendant of Lord Shiva, there were 2-3 cakes and so many celebrations. It was a wonderful moment. Neelamma had even cooked akki rotti (rice bread) and a variety of palyas (vegetable accompaniments) for me (my favourite dishes). After almost a couple of hours we headed to my parents' home in Bangalore. Mummy welcomed me inside with the traditional aarathi (a traditional practice of sacredly welcoming a person back into the warmth of the home to shield against negative energy). I ate almost 4 akki rottis, chatted more and slept only by 4am. Finally, I was done with the expedition and back home safe.

Brinda (my friend from work) came to my mom's house in Bangalore the next day. She was one girl who was following my journey with great interest and interacting with Ajay on a regular basis. She could not hold back her happiness and so visited me. Such a happy moment to have her beside me. Slowly I started getting more congratulatory calls and visits. By late evening we headed out to Mysuru and home. The whole next day was spent unpacking and resting and getting my room organised. Finally, I was in my own room and my own bed.

The following day I went to my workplace, JSS Dental College and Hospital, as the principal ma'am wanted to meet me and I got chauffeur driven by Brinda. I can never forget the surprise welcome that I got at the entrance with all the students and staff members waiting to greet and wish me. I had tea with Dr. Dakshaini ma'am (principal) in her chamber with a few staff members and went to my department. At the department entrance too, I got a grand welcome with traditional aarathi, cake cutting, snacks and

chatted with colleagues and other staff who visited me. Memorable moments which I am going to cherish for my life.

I went home with a big smile on my face and full of warmth in my heart and soul. On May 29<sup>th</sup>, there were huge celebrations at my college auditorium with his holiness Swamiji himself, principals from all constituent colleges of JSSAHER, administrators, staff members and students gracing the occasion. The official function was followed by dinner at Swamiji's ashram for my family members (both my parents, in-laws, sons, sister and family) and friends. There we all got blessed by his holiness individually. An evening etched in my memory that carries a lot of emotional values and unforgettable happiness. Feeling humbled and more blessed than ever, this was only the beginning of many more felicitations, talks and invites that followed.

*Although I recovered from tiredness within a week, the eye vision problem, stomach upset, sunburn and the loss of sensations on my fingers and toes took almost a month to get back to normal. All these felt very insignificant with the memories of the Everest journey replaying in my mind. I missed the mountains and my teammates dearly. All I have is GRATITUDE for the experience.*



Blessed by His Holiness  
after my return



*Felicitaton by JSSAHER  
In presence of my backbone – MY FAMILY*





*Celebrations @ Kathmandu*  
*AJAY HEGDE - My Bedrock*  
*AKKA - My Beacon*



## CHAPTER 15

# MOUNTAINS ARE THE LAST PLACE WHERE YOU CAN BE TRULY WILD

*A Mountain Without Danger Is Not A Mountain At All!!!*

High-altitude environment throws multiple challenges. The extreme and unpredictable conditions demand a different kind of adaptability for both body and mind. They can be life threatening and non-climbers always wonder why the mountaineers take such risks, which goes to the extent of losing lives and yet forge ahead.

I believe, in life nothing is risk-free. And yes, some things are far riskier and can be avoided. The human psyche is such that we chase the riskier and most impossible challenges and derive super fulfilment. If one thinks that being adventurous is dangerous, then they should try routine, it's LETHAL. Nobody who has ever given 100% in their pursuit has ever regretted and one must take not just "Risk", but "Calculated Risk" (preparedness) to achieve something.

Summitting the tallest peak in the world is no child play. People associate it with the worst possible outcomes not barring death. Although this is true, with awareness, preparation, and timely action, most risks on such

expeditions can be effectively managed, except for the nature's fury which is not in one's hand.

In any high-altitude expedition, hazards are plenty, even a fittest person can encounter multiple issues and there is no easy or fast way. Therefore, it is needless to say that before attempting a high-altitude expedition, one has to train the body and mind simply by exposing themselves to such terrains and altitudes in a step-by-step manner, starting from low altitudes and gradually raising that bar, allowing the body and mind to learn and adapt. During such preparatory climbs it is also important to learn and recognise various issues that one might encounter in such expeditions and also be aware of necessary early remedial measures to be initiated.

While on a high-altitude climb, the most effective way to stay healthy is to ascend gradually (helps in acclimatisation), stay well-hydrated, eat regularly and maintain good energy levels.

The **common altitude related sickness** that appears within hours of ascent manifests typically as headache, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, and disturbed sleep, the Acute Mountain Symptoms (AMS). They are usually mild and improve with rest and proper acclimatization. However, if symptoms persist and lead to further issues such as confusion, difficulty in walking, changes in mental awareness (indicates swelling of brain) or shortness of breath, persistent cough, and unusual fatigue even at rest (indicates swelling of lungs) one should not ignore them. A prompt descent to lower altitude should be initiated without delay. This will greatly improve the condition and prevent complications.

Other common issues that high-altitude mountain climbers experience are **gut issues** like nausea, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, and bloating caused due to low oxygen that stresses the digestive system, disrupts gut microbes making the gut leaky. The condition might worsen if this stress continues, causing inflammation and ulcers of the gut visible as bloody stools. Apart from the high-carb, high-fibre, low-fat diet, proper hydration and electrolyte intake are crucial for gut and overall health at altitudes. Medications and supplements are needed in severe cases. A small piece of advice – don't dismiss stomach upset as just "travel food"; it's a real altitude effect and gastrointestinal bleeding can be fatal and people with existing ulcers should be very cautious.

**The environmental and physical challenges** associated with high-altitude regions are cold temperatures, strong winds, snow falls, harsh sun exposures and very dry air. These conditions can contribute to dehydration, heat loss, increased physical strain, intense sunburn, loss of eyesight (temporary or permanent depending on the amount of damage to the eye) and frost nips or frost bites (long-term exposure to very cold temperatures). One can easily avoid these difficulties by taking proper precautions and using appropriate gears and that should never be compromised.

Most Everest summiteers will experience the famous "**KHUMB COUGH**", which can occur in any high-altitude mountain. It is simply the high-altitude persistent cough that trekkers develop because of irritation to the respiratory tract as a result of breathing cold, dry air in low oxygen areas. Everest climbers generally end up with this once they reach the Khumbu region and hence the name KHUMB COUGH. Managing this cough involves covering the mouth,

staying hydrated with warm liquids, using lozenges, and slowing pace. The cough often resolves on its own with time and rest. In severe cases medical intervention may be needed. Sometimes the cough is so devastating that people experience rib fractures due to continuous coughing.

**Mountain terrain** is never monotonous and boring. It has a mixture of rocky and boulder paths, snow filled valleys, glaciers and seracs. It is more interesting because of small elevations to almost vertical walls and steep descents. Natural hazards such as avalanches, crevasses, falling rock or ice, and slips or falls require careful route planning, proper equipment, and attention to conditions.

One might also encounter **other challenges** such as equipment malfunctioning, navigation difficulties, limited communication, and occasional wildlife encounters. These risks, though not very frequent, are manageable with preparation and good decision-making.

### **MY LEARNINGS:**

- *Preparation, knowledge, awareness, and timely action make high-altitude travel both safe and rewarding.*
- *What a mountaineer experiences prior, during and after the expedition can be comprehended only by the climber.*
- *Besides the physical issues one needs to be mentally strong and emotionally prepared to embark on such a journey as the body achieves what the mind believes. So, the key is in strengthening your mind and body will follow.*

## **AFTERWORD:**

It has been a little more than two years since I summited Everest. I had heard stories, seen photographs, watched documentaries, but words or pictures can never replace the actual experience. Each time I sit back and daydream about my journey of Everest, it gives me goosebumps, and I continue to go back in time and relive my memories.

Reaching the summit of Mount Everest is often seen as the end — the pinnacle, both literally and metaphorically. But as I descended from that frozen roof of the world, it became clear that the summit was never the true destination. It was only a moment— brief, breathless, and suspended above the chaos of the world below. But the whole journey (prior, during and after) is a never ending, breathtaking experience.

The real journey began long before I set foot in the Khumbu. It was born in the quiet hours of preparation, the sacrifices made, the doubt wrestled within solitude, and it continued throughout the two-month long expedition itself. It continues even now, in this return to life at lower altitudes — among my people, where the significance of the climb begins to take root in the soul.

Standing atop Everest, I was surrounded by silence, by sky, by the weight of dreams realised. But it wasn't until I came home — tired, changed, and deeply grateful — that I understood what it all meant. The mountain taught me humility, but my return reminded me of love, of belonging, of the people who never left my side, even when I was thousands of miles away and 8,000 metres up. To those who waited, to those who believed, to those who asked nothing

of me but to return safely: thank you. You are the quiet summit I always carry.

My journey is not about a dream or an accomplishment but is a fine line between security and regret. I chose to test my endurance, make a journey open-eyed, open-hearted, be unafraid to summit the mountain and endure the ascent that finally defined me. I have been known and called Professor, Ironman triathlete, Boston qualified marathoner . . . but now I proudly and humbly embrace being called an “Everester”. I truly feel privileged and humbled.

To anyone drawn to high places — may you climb with courage, descend with wisdom, and return with a heart wide enough to hold it all.

Gratitude for all the blessings life has showered upon me.



## **DARWIN'S THEORY OF EVOLUTION**

With Time & Adaptations as guiding forces  
Growth & Advancement is bound to happen

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It truly takes a village to raise a child. And this child has been blessed with a vast and loving village — parents, siblings, in-laws, extended family, spouse, children, friends, royal orchids, rock on girls, teachers, colleagues, students, coaches, trainers, Mysore runners, motivators, instructors, teammates, mentors, domestic helpers, support groups, well-wishers, and even passing acquaintances.

The list is endless, and I may fall short if I attempt to name each one individually. Some have played pivotal roles; others, though less visibly so, have still significantly shaped the person I am today and continue to do so. With the deepest sense of gratitude, I bow to each one of you.

In Ajay Hegde, I have a devoted partner who offers unconditional love and unwavering support through every challenge and joy life brings. His silent yet steadfast presence has been my guiding light. Thank you for accepting me as I am, for growing alongside me, and for quietly enduring my madness — even when it worried you.

To my dear children Akarsh and Aryav, you have had no choice but to bear with my aspirations. Thank you for all the love.

My dear family members — parents, in-laws and siblings, privileged and fortunate to be cared for by all of you.

Grateful to “Daju” and “Chetna Sahoo”, without whose support this journey would not have been possible.

Special thanks to BlueRose publishers for their guidance and belief in this work. Without their support this book would not have seen the light of the day.

With prayers of gratitude to the Almighty; to each and every one of you — thank you.

