

Printed from

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Valley of flowers, not a bed of roses

TOI Crest | Jun 26, 2010, 12.23 PM IST

It was a hot June afternoon in 1937. English climber Frank Sydney Smythe stood by the shade of a boulder at Vishnu Prayag, some 13 km north of Joshimath, and watched hundreds of pilgrims wind their way towards the shrine at Badrinath. "Few seem to enjoy their pilgrimage, yet their faces are intent, their minds set on their goal...What was the force that impelled them from their homes in the far-off plains to the Himalayas?" he was to write later. Inevitably, Smythe asked that question of himself. What had drawn him back from England to the harsh Himalayas? The answer, he wrote, "perhaps lay in this upward bending valley with its dark forests and the distant glimmer of the high snows."

Seventy-three summers later, the question returned to haunt members of a trekking team that had gone up that particular bending valley and into the high snows. "Why the hell are we here?" The thought flickered on and off as the danger of getting trapped in a growing field of snow loomed through 20 fateful hours.

The party was retracing Smythe's 1937 journey across two high-altitude passes in the Bhyundar and Amrit Ganga valleys of Garhwal — a route probably never again taken. They set out from Delhi on May 28 and by June 2 they were above the snow line. For high-altitude treks like these, bad weather is always factored in. But what they got was probably more than what they had bargained for. At one point — at Garh (5,400 metres above sea level) — the situation looked ominous even for an experienced trekker like Ashutosh Mishra, a management consultant who was leading a 22-member team that included eight trekkers, three guides and porters. "In 20 hours, we got more than 3.5 feet of snow. At night, we took turns to come out every hour and clear the snow piled up on our tents to prevent them from collapsing," says Mishra.

It is situations like these when climber Reinhold Messner's words ring true: "The mountains are not fair or unfair, they are just dangerous." Team members thought about the good things they had left behind. IT professional Bharat Tomar, who works with IBM, felt he should have had more of the ghee sweetmeats he normally avoided. The thoughts of the married men, Mishra and Rajesh Jadhav, veered towards their wives and kids. "Had we stayed on another night at Garh, I doubt if we would have been able to return," says Mishra.

The expedition's inspiration, Smythe, was one of the leading mountaineers of his time. In 1931, he led the first ascent of Kamet (7,756 metres), the highest peak to have been climbed by then. Two years later, he had a crack at Everest. For two nights, Smythe and his mate Eric Shipton camped in the death zone without oxygen, waiting for the weather to clear. With Shipton taking ill, Smythe attempted the summit solo — falling short, but reaching as high as any man had gone before.

But it was the memory of his Kamet climb that brought the mountaineer back to Garhwal in 1937. After descending from the peak in 1931, Smythe was coming down into the Bhyundar valley when his gaze was "arrested by a little splash of blue". He writes: "Beyond it were other splashes of blue, a blue so intense it seemed to light the hillside." These were primula flowers growing wild in alpine meadows called bugyals. "The valley was the most beautiful any of us had seen. We remembered it afterward as the Valley of Flowers." The name stuck and in 1937 Smythe returned to revisit the valley, collect seeds and explore a few high-altitude passes. The journey is chronicled in his book, *The Valley of Flowers*.

It was the romance woven into Smythe's narration that attracted 41-year-old Mishra. "This was a trail that promised the joy of discovery, a chance to explore areas seldom seen by the human eye." The team was well prepared. Apart from the usual high-climbing gear, they had an expert guide, Jai Singh, radios and a GPS device. They were to go up to Bhyundar Pass (5,092 metres), cross into Rataban glacier, move onward to Bankund glacier (4,950 m) and finally cross Gupt Khal (or Secret Pass at 5,835 m) into Nakthani glacier and exit to Badrinath via Mana.

"It is quite an untrodden route with no comfort of quick exits to safer locations and the challenge of crossing back-to-back passes at fairly high altitudes can be daunting," says Maninder Kohli, secretary of the Himalayan Club. A few years ago, Firdous Talyarkhan, the son of former Sikkim governor Homi Talyarkhan, fell to his death in the Bhyundar glacier area, he adds.

When the team first encountered bad weather just before Bhyundar Pass, it came stealthily and swiftly. "There was an impending stillness in the air," says Rajesh Jadhav. "We reached the top at 12.40 pm. Within minutes, the sky darkened and we were in the midst of a blizzard. There was thunder all around us and all of us threw down our aluminum tent poles to avoid attracting lightning."

The weather seemed to have formed a pattern — clear skies in the morning and snowfall from late afternoon. The team made

slow progress but the promise of clear mornings kept them going. By the time they reached Garh, they had used up an extra day and left behind the option of a quick descent to the safety of Gamsali village.

When the snow didn't stop for 20 hours, the team began to run out of options. Going back meant crossing a difficult snow field that would have filled up even more in the heavy fall. A quick ration check showed the team's porters had eaten much more than had been provisioned for. Water was running low as well. "Often, a single decision can be the difference between life and death," says Jadhav. So when their guide recced up to Gupt Khal and radioed back that they should follow despite bad weather, Mishra took the critical decision of pressing ahead. "When we reached Gupt Khal, magically the sky cleared," says Jadhav.

The group spent three more days in high altitudes — making it five successive days in elevations of around 5,000 m or more — before descending to Badrinath. The trekkers slipped a few hundred times — in one instance, Suraj, a 34-year-old teacher, anchored himself with his ice axe just as he was about to fall off an ice cliff. They tumbled over boulders, climbed up ice slopes at 70-degree angles, lost a tent and a stove and went almost without food in the last two days. "More than a week after we returned to Delhi , I still couldn't feel my toes," says Jadhav.

So, why did they do it? For Mishra, it was the bliss of being in those locales. "Those spellbinding moments are worth all the trouble." And will they do it again? Sitting across a table in a Delhi restaurant, six members of the team — Mishra, Jadhav, Suraj, Tomar, Arun Negi and Ravi — nod. Somewhere up there, Smythe would be smiling in approval.