

► Mountains Of Hope!

A mountaineer's tale

When Ed Hillary signed up for John Hunt's expedition to Mt Everest, he had no idea he would end up building a slew of schools, clinics, and airstrips as well as undertaking natural and cultural conservation initiatives that would not only transform the Khumbu but also inspire other mountaineers around the world to follow suit. In India's Garhwal Himalaya, that torch has been seized by Dr Harshwanti Bisht, a mountaineer who also teaches economics in a local college.

In 1981 Harshwanti Bisht, Rekha Sharma and Chandra Prabha Aitwal were the first three women to summit the main peak of Nanda Devi (7,816m). Bisht was also a member of the Indian expedition to Mt Everest, in 1984. "When I was in Khumbu with the 1984 Indian Everest Expedition, I saw the great effect of Sir Edmund Hillary's work to conserve the natural environment and to bring economic opportunities to the Sherpa communities," she recalls.

"This inspired me to work in Gangotri," says Bisht about her work in Gangotri on the lines of Khumbu. She had remarkable success in restoring the birch forests around the sacred Gau Mukh (Cow Snout), the terminal area of Gangotri Glacier, in an attempt to stabilize the receding glacier at headwaters of the Ganges. She has also organized eco-awareness campaigns, propagated endangered medicinal herbs, and introduced ecotourism standards to an area that has been ravaged by unregulated tourism. Dr Bisht's treatise on the economics of tourism in the Garhwal is regarded as a blueprint for sustainable development throughout the Himalaya.

"My interest in economics is trumped by my passion for ecology," she says.

Mountains, according to her, should not be places where you go, have fun and litter to your heart's content without a thought for the ecology. "Since they provide us with recreation and livelihood apart from being significant for various other reasons, we need to be responsible towards them."

Bisht points out that our frivolous approach to mountain management has already had painful repercussions. The June 2013 floods in Uttarakhand, which killed more than 800 people and caused damage estimated in billions of rupees, has been characterized as a "man-made disaster" with environmentalists and conservationists tracing it to ill-conceived development projects as well as unregulated tourism in the region.

Kumar Mainali, president of Mountain Legacy, says that "this hands-on approach is an extremely positive development."

But, considering the geographical and historical context, it is not entirely anomalous. Bisht is herself a daughter of Uttarakhand, home of India's first environmental movement, the Chipko Andolan. In the 1970s, the Chipko "tree-huggers" attracted worldwide attention by using their own bodies to protect their communal forests from commercial timber operations. This grass-roots intervention inspired similar actions all around India, and inspired the tactics of Greenpeace, Earth First, and other international groups; and resulted in slowed rates of deforestation and environmental destruction.

Mountain Power!

After thirty years working alone or with a few collaborators, Bisht says it is time to broaden the base of her efforts by helping women see opportunities in challenges, and to act on them. "There are many opportunities for women, but the difficulty for most of us is finding those opportunities and taking advantage of them. We need to develop the habit of seeing every challenge and every setback as a chance for improvement, for us as individuals, for the community, and for the planet."

She says that women in remote mountain-communities first of all need to be acquainted that they are stakeholders in the mountain economy. "What I have learnt," says Bisht, "is that the efforts of women are exploited in every domain. They work day and night in their homes, but hardly spend a single penny according to their wishes. For example, a woman, apart from doing domestic chores such as caring for the children, preparing meals and collecting firewood, also feeds her cow and milks it, but the milk is taken to the market by her husband; he sells it and simply pockets the money."

Similarly, Bisht goes on to say, most tourism related jobs, such as running travel agencies, serving as guides, and managing hotels, are carried out by the men. "This can be traced to the fact that girls get limited education, and have little exposure to the practical logistics of the tourist trade. They forfeit all the rewards of life in one of the world's great recreational regions."

This has prompted Dr Bisht to embark on a new project in collaboration with Mountain Legacy, a Nepali NGO. Mountain Power aims to set up a network of women's mountaineering clubs affiliated with colleges and universities throughout the

Himalayan region.

The project's mission statement reads: "A 'sport for development and peace' program, building trans-boundary highland-lowland cooperation among women for challenging recreation, responsible tourism, health, entrepreneurial leadership, and sustainable stewardship of the natural and cultural legacy of mountains."

Bisht notes that Sport for development and peace is a UN theme which has not drawn nearly enough attention, but is quite germane to the challenges and opportunities in the Himalayan region.

Sports, she says, are particularly important for the empowerment of women, and that the empowerment of women—on all levels, from individual to community and policy-making—is vital for social harmony as well as sustainable development.

"Women need the confidence and the skills to become entrepreneurs, leaders, and policy makers," she observes.

"As mountaineers, they will combine sports with practical work in recreation planning and economic development. They will undertake projects of their own choosing; be it waste-management, afforestation, trail improvement, infrastructure design or whatever seems useful."

According to Sue Badyari, CEO of World Expeditions, sports opportunities for women have lagged far behind than those for men in developing regions thereby depriving women of recreation, physical challenges and leadership training.

"Mountain Power clubs would not only provide girls and young women experience in sports such as climbing, trekking, skiing, and rafting, but would also foment interest in conserving nature, protecting cultural sites, and developing economic opportunities in remote communities."

She notes that "these young climbers will go on to take jobs, launch companies, serve in government agencies, and raise families, where they will spread their commitment to mountain recreation, conservation, and empowerment of local communities."

Dr Bisht has been designated to receive Sir Edmund Hillary Mountain Legacy Medal for her contribution to ecological conservation in the mountainous region of Gangotri in Utrakhand. The Award would be presented to her by Peter Hillary, the son of Sir Edmund and an adventurer and philanthropist, at the headquarters of the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu, Nepal.

"I am extremely happy that I am being conferred with this Award. To me, it simply means that my inspiration has turned into reality," she says.

The author is a senior Indian Environmental Journalist

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