# *Story of Himalayas*

It had been snowing lightly all day, the long mountain trail was covered in white. Grey clouds hung low in the sky. Chilling winds were tearing through the canopies of our polaris anoraks, freezing our ear lobes. It was late in the afternoon when we stumbled upon a small entrance of the cave. Inside was dark and silent, the only sign of life was the faint sounds of water trickling somewhere and the heavy voice of a male reciting some strange mantras. We had left a lengthy pattern of footprints outside on the fresh snow leading upto the cave.

The dark silence inside the cave was broken by the rumbling sound of an avalanche thundering down some mountain ridge far in the distance. It had been a very long march, we were cold, wet and totally exhausted.

A husky voice from inside the cave, suddenly said; *"Aap dev bhumi mein ho…. shaant raho" (You are in the domain of gods…. remain at peace).* I switched on my maglite torch, the darting beam of light gave us hope that there was nothing to fear, we felt reassured,

Surviving through unknown and utterly desolate wilderness, after seven days of camping and walking across high mountain passes and encountering Himalayan bears, we had eventually found our way to the cave.

Devoid of vegetation, there was nothing around, except a few patches of lichen and moss. The tree line had already been left far below. It seemed like an immortal world of high mountains, wind filled silences and snow covered ridges. Infinite sights of Himalayas met the eyes in which ever direction we turned our heads. We were above the edge of a long glacier, at an altitude of 3704 meters.

The sun was beginning to set. A tall man in his early sixties emerged from the dark: *"Raat yahin par bitaa lo, kal laut janaa, aage jane ka rasta nahin hae……." (spend the night here, go back tomorrow, there is no path to go any further…….".* It was difficult to see the man's face clearly, his silhouette suggested he had shoulder length hair and was wearing a cloth around his waist. An avalanche rumbled again somewhere.

It was a fitful night, despite of our warm down-feather sleeping bags, we were not able to sleep, due to lesser oxygen at that altitude. Around 3:15 am we became aware of the chanting of some Sanskrit mantras, we seemed to be living through a strange kind of experience and were unable to decide if it was real or some fantasy prompted by higher altitude effects on human mind.

The clouds had drifted away, some hours later the sun rose, streaks of light began to dissolve the darkness inside the cave.

It was a new day, one which was to remain firmly etched in our mind for ever. It was the day we discovered the **Story of Himalayas**. The man handed us a bowl of boiled rice cooked in wild rhubarb and gently introduced himself: *"I am professor Kaul".*

We were taken by surprise, the man spoke perfect English: *"You may like to call me an eccentric professor or a gentleman in exile, obsessed with the genesis of the Himalayas or you may call me a hermit of some kind",* he paused. *"I have been living here for nearly two and a half years, trying to further my understanding about the Himalaya, I am a Geologist".*

The morning had just begun. It was a fateful rendezvous with a stranger who seemed to have devoted himself to unraveling the great mysteries of the Himalayas. We decided to spend the day in the cave, learning from him. The man comanded great knowledge.

The Earth's landmass was once connected. It was a mega-super-continent known as 'Pangea'. Approximately 200 million years ago, it broke away into fragments which began to drift across the vast Earth. These fragmented landmasses, eventually came to rest at different geographical locations forming the present day continents, now inhabited by humans.

The formation of Himalayas was the result of a 'tectonic event' that took place between '50 to 40 million' years ago. Geological studies showed that about 225 million years ago, the landmass which we now call the 'Indian subcontinent' was a large island near the Australian coast. It was separated from the Eurasian landmass by the Tethys ocean. It kept drifting northwards across million of years and finally began to collide with the Eurasian landmass, triggering the closing of the Tethys ocean, which eventually disappeared completely.

This event kicked-off the process of the emergence of the Himalayas. The thicker accumulated sediments of the Tethys ocean's floor began to get scrapped-off, leading to the upward wedge like formations, which we today see as the grand Himalayan mountain range.

He continued: *"And this tectonic miracle extends over 2900 kilometers and it reaches a maximum elevation of 8848 meters at the top of Mount Everest, the highest point on the Earth. The Indian landmass has not stopped moving northwards and the Himalayas are still rising by roughly 0.7 to 1 centimeter each year….."*.

After Antarctica and the Arctic, the Himalayas are the third largest deposit of 'snow and ice' on our planet. Their freezing terrains sustain about nearly 15000 glaciers which store about 12000+ cubic kilometers of fresh water. We sat there completely awed by his narration. It was afternoon already when the professor opened a wooden box, it contained a few fossils of the remnants of a coral, sea plants and other marine life. *"Today, it is impossible to imagine that these Himalayas were once an ocean bed, thriving with countless marine creatures",* there was a thoughtful look in his eyes.

The next morning, we began our return march back towards civilization. The snow on the trail had partly melted. We heard the loud noise of a sudden crash, an enormous chunk of glaciated ice and debris had broken off from the glacier somewhere behind us. As we walked along the path, we could not stop wondering about the prehistoric times, before life existed on our Planet and the unimaginable tectonic processes ever active under its Earthly crust.

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