Story of Himalayas!

It had been snowing lightly all day, the long mountain trail was covered in white. Grey clouds hung 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 into the small entrance of the cave. Inside was dark and still the only signs of life were the faint sound of water trickling somewhere and a male's voice reciting some mantras. Outside we had left a lengthy pattern of footprints on the fresh snow leading to the cave.

The rumble of an avalanche far in the distance, thundering down some mountain ridge broke the dark silence enveloping us. It had been a long march, we were cold, wet and 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 my maglite torch, we felt reassured, the darting beam of light gave us hope that there was nothing to fear.

Combating the unknown and unimaginable wilderness, after five days of camping and walking across high mountain passes and encountering Himalayan black bears we had eventually found our way to the cave. Devoid of vegetation there was nothing around except patches of lichen and moss. The tree-line had been left far below it seemed like an immortal world of high mountains, windy silences and snow covered ridges. Infinite immensity of 'Himalayas' met the eyes in which ever direction we turned our heads, we were above the edge of a nine kilometer long icy glacier at an altitude of 3704-meters.

The sun was beginning to set, a tall man in his early sixties emerged from the darkness "R*aat 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 his face clearly, his silhouette suggested he had shoulder length hair and was wearing only a loin-cloth and nothing else. An avalanche rumbled again somewhere.

It was a fitful night, despite of our warm down-feather sleeping bags we were unable to sleep, the effects of lesser oxygen at higher altitude made us restless. Around 3:15 am we became aware of the chanting of sanskrit mantras, we seemed to be living through some strange experience and were not able to decide if it was real or some fantasy prompted by effects of higher altitude on human brains. The clouds had drifted away, a few hours later the sun rose, mild streaks of light began to dissolve the darkness inside the cave.

It was a new day, one which was to remain 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 introduced himself *"I'm 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 call me a hermit of some kind"* he paused.

"I have been living here now for nearly two years trying to further my understanding about the Himalaya, I'm 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, acquiring knowledge from him.

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 50-40 million years ago. Geological studies showed that about 225 million years ago the large landmass which we now call the 'Indian subcontinent' was a large island near the Australian coast, it was separated from Eurasian landmass by the Tethys ocean. It kept drifting slowly northwards through million of years and finally began to collide with Eurasian landmass starting the closing of Tethys ocean which eventually disappeared completely.

This event kicked-off the process of the emergence of the grand 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 range.

He continued *"And this tectonic miracle extends over 2900 kilometers and 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 every year".*

After Antarctica and the Arctic, these Himalayas are the third largest deposit of snow and ice on our planet. Their freezing terrains sustain about 15000+ glaciers which store about 12000 cubic kms. of fresh water. It was afternoon already, we sat there completely awed by his narration. The professor opened a wooden box which contained few fossils of the remnants of a coral, sea plants and other marine life.

"Today it is impossible for us to imagine that these Himalayas were once an ocean bed, thriving with countless marine creatures", there was a thoughtful look in his eyes.

Next morning we began our march back towards civilization, the snow on the trail had melted. We heard the 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 unfathomable tectonic processes ever active under its Earthly crust.

- *Neel Thakur (Author)*