

After Bethartoli

In rope there were 5 persons, with Ang Kami remaining free. He was going up and down to help each person. He will clip himself anywhere and help a person.

No 1 was Nitin Patel, No 2 Passang Temba, No 3 Gnappa Sherpa No 4 Arun Samant No 5 Kusang

The way avalanche came tumbling, it threw the entire rope in air. Some landed on a height and some landed in a crevasse. The crevasse immediately fills with soft snow and that did not allow anyone inside to breath or survive. No 1-3-5 landed in a crevasse and were dead. Ang Kami was thrown out- one does not where? He was never found. Rope broke and No 1 Nitin was dragged down the slope and his completely reverse-bent body was found. Only body that was found. Passang and Arun fell on lip of a crevasse. Arun in fact was little inside. But Passang was free and rope had cut in-between Passang and Nitin. He came out and looked of survivors and he found only Arun alive. No sign of others. As Arun was in poor shape he tied him with the cut-out rope between him and Nitin and started dragging him, leg first. It was super human effort. They reached camp after 2 hours where I was there, and we went out to receive them hearing moans and groans.

Once they were in the camp we left to look for others though Passang said no one has survived. We found Nitin's body but left it there as it was so badly bent that it was impossible to carry down. Next day we went back and searched thoroughly but only Nitin's body was found. We photographed it and decided to bury it in a deep crevasse. That was the end of action on mountains.

We had three days of hard walk to reach Joshimath. All staggered – fell and walked again. Nights were grim, and talks were absent. Finally, we reached Joshimath. As a deputy leader I had admn work to do. So, went to District Magistrate gave a full report and asked for death certificates. He gave for Nitin as body was found but refused for others, this was required for insurance. Anyway, at Mumbai we managed it through high LIC officials we knew.

While I was with DM, uncle of Nitin and cousin came to out Rest House. They were angry agitated but Jagdish Nanavati dealt with them with sympathy. Our leader Prof R G Desai had gone nuts. Could not handle anything and talk anything. That night we all did not sleep, and as hard liquor was available some of us, including me got drunk. Nanavati was pure Gandhian and hated drinks but he did not say a word. If fact sometime in middle of night I jumped over and went across him to vomit.

We were at Mumbai in next three days. News had travelled, and people gathered. We explained everything, sequence of events and explained that it *vis majeure*- act of god, a true accident, which no one could foresee or avoid. A condolence meeting was held. Like true nervous-wreck our leader Desai did not turn up. Worse, when asked why he did not come, he replied "I forgot". That was last I heard of him. So now all facing of music was with me.

The expedition was sponsored by the Climbers Club. One of oldest and popular clubs then. We submitted report and pictures to the committee it was all accepted with sympathy. After about a year came a bombshell. Without our knowing a group led by Lalit Chari was planning trouble. They were gunning for Jagdish Nanavati-(JCN) President of

the Climbers Club. I was called over dinner and talked and many others had gathered. I was suspicious what is happening. Then slowly they said, "All that light eyed bastard says is not correct. You get out from him". Nanavati had light eyes. I fully defended that JCN is stating what is truth as our leader is a nervous wreck. I was then treated as an enemy.

Soon came a detailed letter, made public before we could react or read. It said we the expedition were irresponsible for the deaths-, why I did not go to main peak, why another climber Boga stayed back, why we did not see the storm coming, and rescue was faulty and many such points. We protested, and matter went on being discussed at CC committee meetings almost for a year. We said that as a Club you cannot censor your own expedition. In tragedy the Club must stand up with the party. Here without showing us the comments you want to publish it? On committee was one Ashok Madgaonkar, a retired high-level bureaucrat. He kept talking with high pitched voice and as if everyone had to respect him. I did not, and I insulted him a lot. So, one lady next to me whispered in my ear: "Ashok has a heart problem, so do not oppose him". I jumped and said, "than he should be seating at home and not poke his nose here."

Finally, over a year of discussions, out of 37points/ charges they had made against the team, except one, no other remained. That one was why most experienced guys did not go to peak I, they did not accept that best of Sherpas was there. They passed this circulated to all and in response JCN and myself drafted a reply and sent it to all. Many wrote in our favour, particularly from abroad. The day we sent it at a CC Committee meeting JCN resigned as the President of the Club and I resigned even as a member. It was the end of CC.

In about a year it collapsed, they were running good and popular rock-climbing courses that stopped, and membership dropped. Finally, it became dormant in 3 years. After a decade I had the last laugh. I had formed my own unique club THE MOUNTAINEERS (another story). We were strong and independent. So, CC then President Mr Batliboi called me and said I should take over CC with all its assets and goodwill. I said yes. Then he said that CC's existence should remain. I got wild. "That means you want a slave to run what you could not. Once this club is with me, I can do what I like- dissolve, apologise for past of the Club and whatever I feel like". They pleaded but refused to budge. That was end of CC and it lay dormant till its natural death.

That was almost the last nail in coffin of dead on Bethartoli. Even today, amongst old timers this is discussed, and regrets expressed that all that happened later should not have. But who can change history.

After another three years or so, there were headlines in a Gujarati papers: "Dead climber returns alive as Sadhu". It was a story that Nitin Patel had arrived as sadhu and stayed with his mother. As his was the only body found this was strange. We thought that someone is duping her. One of our friends near to her house visited. He said this is kind of sympathy. When the Sadhu came, young sadhu, she kept saying where is my son, where is my son. To console he said, "Ma I am your son". She cried and fell in his lap. The Sadhu stayed for a week and disappeared. We do not what happened further to the family.

