

After Devtoli

THE HELICOPTER circled thrice over the roof of the hospital. Lying on a stretcher on the floor of the copter I could see the giant red cross painted on the roof-tops to keep off the enemy planes.

'This is the standard practice. Whenever we bring a serious casualty we circle thrice so that all the emergency services are geared up', said the pilot.

I realised that I was the 'serious casualty'. Having fallen in a crevasse on Devtoli (6788 m) at 6400 m, I was carried down for 8 days on improvised stretchers, porters' backs and by other most painful means. Finally I was air-lifted from the Nanda Devi Sanctuary base camp at 4600 m after uncertainties of the rescue. It was lucky that I had survived at all but still I did not know the nature of the injury. I could not move my left leg and had not slept on my back for 8 days and nights, since 13 June 1974, the date of the accident.

At Bareilly Military Hospital, they had to rush me to an air-conditioned room immediately. The helicopter had taken me off from the base camp where the temperature was 8°C and here it was 45°C. By evening after the X-rays were taken it was discovered that I had dislocated my left hip-joint. The next day I was operated on (close reduction) and the joint was set right.

'The X-ray machine was not working but from the noise of the bones we knew that it was set right', the doctor informed me. I was put in a plaster-cast from my chest to below the knees and I totally weighed 120 kg. That night Dr. Rodhan Shroff, a surgeon and a friend from Bombay, arrived with my father. It was quite a relief to have someone you know beside you. He arranged to shift me to Bombay, a long way to home.

For the journey from Bareilly to Delhi a taxi was hired. The front seat had to be removed to accommodate me, and the driver was tied at the waist with the wheel for support. But after the struggle of carrying me on the mountains, this was only a minor variation in the methods employed. At Delhi we changed to a train. I realised that people looked at me from above with curiosity as I stretched on the ground and was carried by porters.

A large number of friends awaited my arrival at Bombay. To bring me out of the compartment they had to carry me side-ways as the corridor was too narrow. The job was easily accomplished by my mountaineer friends. Luckily, the gloomy atmosphere changed and girls started teasing me. My wife Geeta was climbing on Deo Tibba in Manali and had not yet been contacted about the accident.

I was taken straight away to a hospital and Rodhan brought Dr. Rasik M. Bhansali, an Orthopaedic Surgeon, to examine me. This calm and cool surgeon leaned over me and said, 'First I'll examine your heart. How did you survive the pain for 8 days? Here a patient with a dislocated hip shouts at the smallest touch. And then I'll examine Dr. Shroff, he worried so much for you.'

I was kept in the hospital for a day. The plaster was to be kept for 6 weeks and I was allowed to go home. With me in the hospital room there were two other patients. One had broken a leg in a car accident at Bombay, while the other had broken his back falling on the bathroom floor. At least I had been out there of my own will and for my chosen sport.

Geeta arrived 3 days later. It was hardest for her to look after me and of course she was my constant support throughout the ordeal. Life was soon routine. First it was my 1½ year old son Sonam who objected. He would not come close to me and would shout from the balcony *chiu Baba la ghe* (sparrow, take away my father). He did not like a non-playing father who hogged all the attention. My story with a photo

of Sonam and me appeared in the newspapers. My father-in-law never tired of showing Sonam in that photo to everyone, instead of me.

I was in great spirits—still. Putting a typewriter on my plaster I could finish all the post-expedition reports and accounts. We saw slides, discussed mountains and the days were hectic with many visitors. The reactions of people varied; elderly relatives sat grimly with the advice ‘now never again’ written on their faces. Some were with the ‘I told you so’ expression. Many came out of curiosity to know the story, which I repeated hundreds of times. But those friends who knew me came with plans for the future, laughter and support. They knew that a dislocated hip would not keep me away from the mountains for long. Dr. Pravin Shah, a homeopath and a close friend, would come for lunch everyday and I would make preparations for his ‘visit’ with Indian classical music records and cassettes. We listened to a new raga everyday. Six weeks passed quickly and the day came when the plaster was to be opened. Little did I know that it would be a day of reckoning.

Dr. Bhansali looked at me with an expert eye. ‘You have total avascular necrosis. I will not permit any weight-bearing for 2 years’.

‘No problem doctor, I will not carry any weight. Someone else will carry my rucksack in the mountains’, I replied rather naively.

‘In medical terms this means that you will not put weight on your leg, be on crutches for 2 years. The hip-ball may disfigure or collapse even by the muscle weight. If that happens we will have to operate again and no more steady walking for you. You will limp’. This hit me like a bullet. Crippled at the age of 29 years! ‘I will go to the mountains, even on crutches, if required’, was my only thought.

Time passed and a deep depression and despair gathered. Friends rallied around, there were many whose support rose like a mountain. Dr. Shah started a long treatment with his homeopathic drugs. Physiotherapy and learning tricks on the crutches was the order of the day. The first check-up was due after three months. I sat tense as Dr. Bhansali examined the X-ray.

‘It is a Himalayan wonder’. He was nodding his head. ‘The joint has started recovering very well. This is rare. But still we will wait 2 years to give nature the full period to act’.

I was relieved, but then two years is a long period. I tried to be as normal as possible. Started going out for walks on crutches. Then came the treks on crutches on Sundays (totally 33) with climbing up to Matheran (767 m) as the height record. Twice I went to Pachmarhi in Central India, which was my annual outing. I had a scolding from Dr. Shroff when I planned to rappel on one leg!

As the summer approached, I was on my way to Sonmarg in Kashmir with Geeta and friends. We camped at the snout of the Thajiwas glacier and I climbed up on crutches to 5400 m. A hail-storm caught us and my crutches would slip on both sides. Help from a nearby army camp had to be called for to rescue me. The one-leg-dance-celebration on army rum is another story!

All along I kept up the physiotherapy, homeopathic drugs and regular check-ups, which reflected in big grins from Dr. Bhansali everytime. I wrote *Trek the Sahyadris* (2nd edition) with Thrity Birdy giving all the editorial support. I learnt many wonderful lessons on the goodness of human nature. In local buses someone always immediately offered me a seat, or the Kashmiri shikarawala prayed a special namaz for my recovery. On a rainy day at Bombay’s Marine Drive, literally a dozen cars stopped without my asking to offer me a lift, which otherwise is an impossibility. I continued walking in the rains, hikes and working. The strength and the spirit were winning.

It was in late January 1976 that the doctors finally cleared me to walk with a stick, instead of a crutch.

‘Sir, don’t let him do everything. You don’t know what all he will do’. Dr. Shroff worriedly told Dr. Bhansali.

'Let him go to the mountains or do what he likes. This is as good as a new hip, a miracle. He can play football on the summit of Everest for all I care!' Dr. Bhansali was beaming with confidence. It was back to the old days and a new life for me. Still Dr. Shroff, care as he did, made me walk slowly with a stick for months till he was satisfied. It was only in early April that I was allowed to walk, run and be fully normal. Within a month, on 1st May 1976 to be exact, I was on my way to North Sikkim for a long Himalayan trek.

With just one companion, Zerksis Boga, I covered 240 km over 4 high passes in 30 days, covering almost 15,500 m up and down on that hip. Dr. Bhansali, Dr. Shah and Dr. Shroff refused to examine me upon my return. To them and the mountain spirit I owe a hip, which is still going strong.