

Taking the high road

Bachendri Pal's life is an affirmation of the can-do spirit, but the greater challenge for the first Indian woman to climb Mount Everest has been learning how to manage budgets at the Tata Steel Adventure Foundation



Her life has been a repeated affirmation of the phrase she uses frequently — ‘can do!’ From conquering tradition to become the first woman graduate from her village in Uttarkashi, Garhwal, in North India to setting seven world mountaineering records, including becoming the first Indian woman to top Mount Everest, Bachendri Pal has shown time and again that she definitely ‘can’!

She can lead a corporate programme in leadership building, she can provide a home and support for poor children seeking higher education, and she can teach youngsters a thing or two about adventure.

She owes all of this to the ethic she learnt from her parents. Says Ms Pal, “It’s their gift to me — the *sanskara* (culture) of hard work and the faith that anything is achievable through effort.” That ethic found an echo in the Tata group culture. “There’s a similar emphasis on sustained effort at Tata Steel,” she says, “which is uniquely seen in the Tata Steel Adventure Foundation (TSAF), with its focus on addressing challenging situations to build a ‘can do’ spirit.”

THE BEGINNING

Tata Steel was possibly the only corporate organisation to have a full-fledged sports department when Ms Pal joined it in December 1983, days before she set off for the historical climb that made her the first Indian woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest.

On her return, among the many congratulatory messages that came her way was one from former Tata Sons Chairman JRD Tata! Tata Steel held a felicitation function at which the then managing director Russi Mody announced the setting up of the TSAF and the appointment of Ms Pal as its chief of adventure programmes.

Though she was excited — “I couldn’t have asked for more!” she recalls — the young mountaineer was also intimidated at the responsibility. “I had no knowledge of corporate organisations, budgets or staffing,” Ms Pal says. “The office work was tougher for me than

climbing mountains and I felt out of place in the closed space of the office.”

‘CAN DO’ SPIRIT

But she learnt quickly, and then set about planning the programmes, scouting the terrain around Jamshedpur. The Dalma Wildlife Sanctuary near Jamshedpur became the new playground. As she explains, “Adventure can be found everywhere and there were several opportunities to bring people out of their sheltered existence to experience the impact of challenging themselves.”

Initially, the focus of the foundation was on young people. “Getting people, especially women, to join was difficult. I used the fact that I am a woman to convince families to allow young girls and women to come out and experience the power and potential of adventure,” she recalls.

Soon the activity plans underwent several changes, broadening in both scope and geography. Alongside, Ms Pal began to improve her own skills, learning how various long-established adventure institutes were organised, and exploring the scope for a wider range of activities. Tata Steel saw the foundation as a possible platform for her personal development and invested in building it as such, encouraging her to attend training courses at institutes like the Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre in New Zealand and Outward Bound School in the Lake District of England.

“These visits helped us learn how to use our programmes as something more than outings or ways to challenge the self. We learnt how to use our programmes to develop personality and confidence,” says Ms Pal.

SOFT SKILLS ON HARD GROUND

Over time, the foundation has grown in depth to become an important soft-skills learning ground for Tata Steel. Take, for instance, the Himalaya-based activities. “With 30 or more people — most of them strangers to one another — coming together for the intense 10-day programme, the team leaders have to learn to deal with people very quickly. In ▶▶

The foundation as teacher

The Tata Steel Adventure Foundation (TSAF) today has a permanent base at the foothills of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand, in addition to its camps around Jamshedpur. Activities have graduated from basic rock climbing and trekking to a multi-activity range that includes caving, rappelling and braving water- and mountain-based obstacle courses.

The foundation has proved itself an ideal learning ground for corporate leadership skills. The programmes are unique learning exercises for building motivational and communication skills and confidence, helping in recognising and

honing leadership qualities, building and strengthening relationships. “The climbs and other activities require the ability to set proper targets that are achievable and sufficiently challenging. These also require clarity in communication, a problem-solving attitude, motivational skills and so on,” explains Ms Pal.

Different programmes have been designed for students, working youth, corporate leaders, Tata employees and so on. Management schools in Jamshedpur and Bhubaneswar have made it mandatory for students to participate in at least one TSAF programme.

the challenging physical environment, they also have to quickly learn to communicate effectively, assess realistic goals and work with the team to achieve these. The situation teaches them to be patient and develop a problem-solving attitude,” expounds Ms Pal.

For each day’s activities, Ms Pal designates a new leader for every team. And at the end of each activity, each team discusses the performance of every member. “This is a crucial part of the development process. It’s not just a learning exercise, it’s also important to the overall experience of bonding and building trust.” Most participants emerge from the programmes with a heightened confidence that comes from having successfully dealt with the challenging demands of a new task in an unfamiliar environment.

NATURE AS TEACHER

According to Ms Pal the climb is like a classroom “with nature as the greatest teacher” where people learn the value of working in teams... and, thereby, the qualities of a leader. “For such a great teacher, reverence is a must,” says Ms Pal. Teaching respect for the

environment is another crucial element of the programmes, one that is especially dear to her heart. “I start every outdoor activity session by distributing five toffees,” she laughs, “and end by asking each participant to return the five wrappers. Anyone who cannot return either the toffees or the wrappers is penalised.” The programme organisers are exacting in ensuring that every camp leaves the environment in pristine condition.

Another of her passions involves supporting the education of poor children from Nepal and her native place Garhwal. This initiative began when the children of a sherpa who accompanied her on her first climb to the Everest summit were left orphaned. Ms Pal took them to her home and Tata Steel offered support in educating them.

Her dream — as that of everyone else at the foundation — is that the institute becomes a centre of excellence for leadership training. For someone of her determination and energy, this is doubtless something that she and her team ‘can do!’ □

— *Suchita Vemuri*