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12 elderly women mountaineers are set to kickstart a Trans-Himalayan Trek

Led by 68-yr-old Bachendri Pal, first Indian woman to scale Mt Everest



By *Sneha Bhura* Updated: **March 11, 2022 12:15 IST**



Some 10 years ago, Bachendri Pal discovered she was having trouble with her knee.

The famous mountaineer, who in 1984 became the first Indian woman to reach the summit of Mt Everest at age 30, was also the chief of adventure programmes at Tata Steel and director of Tata Steel Adventure Foundation (TSAF) then. She consulted doctors from Siliguri to Mumbai who seemed certain these were early signs of arthritis. Pal could not, or refused to, believe her ears. "I was like, 'nothing doing.' I packed my

rucksack and went off to the mountains. Karo ya maro (It's either do or die)." remembers Pal with glee in a phone interview.

"Before taking off, one doctor said you are 56, about to reach retirement, you are having this issue with your leg and you want to climb mountains? But not only did I manage to climb, I ended up climbing down a day faster than the healthiest mountaineers on that trip. I continue to lead trips and several expeditions. There is no pain in my knee," says Pal from Jairampur town of Arunachal Pradesh.

She is on her way to Pangsau Pass, perched on Patkai hills on the India-Myanmar border, where the 68-year-old will flag off her most unique expedition yet on March 12. Fit@50+ Women's Trans Himalayan Expedition '22 will have Pal conduct a diverse group of 12 women, all in their 50s and 60s, for a five-month odyssey traversing the Himalayas from east to west. That is from Arunachal to Ladakh covering a distance of 4,977 kilometres, crossing 37 mountain passes. It is being organised by TSAF in collaboration with the Union ministry of youth affairs and sports under the FIT India banner. Two men will join them as support team.

The idea struck Pal around 2019 when the central government's Fit India Movement had become a talking point. "I was about to retire from Tata Steel and I realised that I am 65 and still successfully leading expeditions and treks. So why not lead something for people who are in my age group under the Fit India movement? What could be a better message about fitness when this age category which is usually dismissed as unfit decides to take on this ambitious trek? This is my dream project," says Pal who has carefully selected her 12-member squad of seasoned mountaineers who are also mothers, grandmothers, homemakers, retired professionals, have "100 percent self-belief" and who are bonafide team players. From Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh, the team will trek through Assam, West Bengal, Sikkim, Nepal, Kumaon, Gharwal, Himachal, Spiti, Leh Ladakh and conclude their journey at Tiger Hill in Kargil. In fact Pal had conducted a similar all-women Trans-Himalayan expedition in 1997. But all her teammates were in their 30s and 40s then. The Covid-induced lockdown turned out to be a wonderful period of productivity, preparation and stamina-building for Pal who convinced her 77-year-old sister to go on long, rambling walks of up to 14km in her native village in Uttarakhand much to the amazement of locals. "The lockdown gave me a new lease of life. I just kept walking. Aap fit hai to hit hai," says Pal.



There is limited research conducted on the fitness requirements of elderly mountaineers. And mountain sports necessarily demands an advanced degree of physical fitness. "A normal ascent rate of 300 metres per hour (up to 3500 m) requires an altitude-dependent relative oxygen consumption of 18-22 ml x min⁽⁻¹⁾ x kg⁽⁻¹⁾ or an ergometric performance of 1.2-1.5 watt x kg⁽⁻¹⁾ below the individual anaerobic threshold," says one 2004 research paper under PubMed. Last year an 81-year-old Spanish mountain climber, Carlos Soria Fontán, was in the news for taking on the challenge of becoming the oldest person in the world to summit all fourteen 8,000-enders. He has scaled 11 of them since turning 60. At 62, he was the oldest to climb Mt Everest. And at 70, the highest peaks of all seven continents. But what about elderly women mountain climbers?

Bachendri Pal did not just rest on her Everest laurels. Instead she went on to create more 'Everesters' and mountaineers in the profession. Especially among women. Under her guidance, Arunima Singh became the world's first female amputee to scale Mt Everest and other peaks. Her 1993 Indo-Nepalese Women's Everest Expedition created seven world records in a single expedition. Shamala Padmanabhan, 65, a retired IT professional, avid mountaineer and marathoner is also inspired by Pal's achievements and is part of the current Trans-Himalayan trek.

"Mountains do not distinguish between gender, money, caste, creed or religion. Life expectancy has gone up in recent decades and if one invests in physical fitness, one can do anything. Most of us in this trek have at best blood pressure issues," says Padmanabhan who was also part of the 1991 pre-Everest expedition to Mt. Kamet led

by Pal. "We have been planning for about one and a half years for this. We have kept ourselves fit with proper diet, yoga, gymming, climbing and trekking. All 14 of us have specific roles here. One is responsible for cartography, one will look at rations, another at first aid. I look at communications and outreach," says Padmanabhan who informs that unlike climbing Everest where a mountaineer has to focus on one peak over a small period of time, a Trans-Himalayan Trek is more rigorous as it lasts longer and covers a wider stretch of difficult terrain. It happens once every 10 years or so. "It is not as common or as frequent as the regular treks and climbs. Needs lot of time to cover such long traverse. Trans-Himalaya also needs various permits as you will be moving from one end to other end of the Himalayas. In this case from east to west," she says.

The high-altitude trek also includes Chetna Sahoo, who in 2016, had scaled Mt Everest. She and her partner went on to become the oldest Indian couple to achieve the feat. She was 50 at the time. It also has 56-year-old Bimla Negi Deoskar who has summited 15 peaks. She has also trained some 14 tribal youths drawn from schools in Maharashtra to scale Everest in 2018 and 2019. Some five of them were women. "Training them went beyond physical fitness. They had never seen mountains in their lives, nor travelled in buses or trains. We had to get them to develop a taste for certain kinds of survival food in the mountains, including Maggi. They didn't know Hindi, and when you are at Everest dealing with life and death situations, crossing dead bodies on the way, you will need help from the sherpas and porters who mostly communicate in broken Hindi," recalls Deoskar of those heady days of tutoring the adolescent climbers who know hardships from the closest range.

At 55, Deoskar knows her body is going to have to suffer great hardships of its own to complete the trek. But she is determined to set an example and inspire other elderly women to stay fit and dream big. For her, mountaineering is the greatest of all sports. "In the mountains, your original qualities and true colours as a person come to the fore. In fact, mountaineering is not the same thing as swinging a racket or a bat. In such sports, people don't have to worry about what and when they will eat, where will they stay or get water from, how they will prepare and plan for an adversity the next day or on day 30, about fuel and ration," says Deoskar. "It teaches you to plan for everything. You will be in trouble if you forget to pack even your matchstick. And in remote areas even when you achieve something, there will be no one to pat your back. But the self-satisfaction then is better than any external validation."