Faith and protein never sit easy, but nowhere is it more evident than at 4,500 metres above sea level in our kitchen tent. Which is being pummelled by hail. And slapped and roughed up by shrieking winds. The glacier under us moans and rumbles, the hollow grinding of ice and rock flooding our flimsy shelter.

“You shouldn’t have brought the eggs and canned fish,” Sundar says. “Now the gods are angry.”

You might think the Himalaya’s higher reaches are godforsaken places best left alone, but when Sundar, our local guide, speaks, they seem more alive than us dreary-eyed souls in down suits reflexively rubbing hands in a losing battle against steadily dipping temperatures.

Behind us—four days’ walk over badlands of boulders, shifting surfaces of sand and rock, meadows abuzz with insects that sting and bite and across roiling rivers—lies Badrinath, the holiest of holy Vishnu shrines, from near which, Khairo gaon, to be precise, we began our journey. Ahead, over four full days, awaits even more challenging terrain: soft snow, steep inclines and vast expanses of glaciers riddled with crevasses that give way to precipitous valleys of rock and rock-fall all the way to Madhmaheshwar, the temple dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Badrinath to Madhmaheshwar is one of the most difficult treks you can set out on in India; the thrills on offer become all the more memorable thanks to the risks and tales of caution that pepper mythology.

Text and photographs by SANKAR SRIDHAR
Porters make their way up to Parvati Col, at 5,200 metres; the going is tough, crossing channels dug out by water melted by the sun’s heat.
We are, in a manner of speaking, at Middle Earth, caught in the crosshairs of the preserver and destroyer.

For sure, this neck of the mountains in Uttarakhand’s Garhwal region is hallowed as much in legend as in history. The former speaks of a priest from Kedarnath who walked all the way to Badrinath in a single day to light the temple’s lamps. Even in that age before time, though, he had a wife who nagged him about staying home longer. When he turned a deaf ear to her pleas, she called on Shiva himself to help her out. After the mandatory thathastu, it is said, Shiva ordered Neelkanth, a peak, to rise on that route, and then carefully peppered the rest of the way with obstacles too great for a human to overcome.

What became of the poor priest after that no one knows, or cares about, although the legend endured enough for explorers Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman to try and find out for themselves how good Shiva was at setting up insurmountable hurdles.

They would have given the God an AAA rating, considering that beyond a col of the Satopanth Bank, in a place called the Gundarpongi gad, they found themselves trapped between ice-walls on one side and bear-infested forests on the other. Then, as they tried in vain to forge a way forward, they ran out of food and just about managed to live to tell the tale, surviving on bamboo shoots for which they had to go “fighting with the bears”.

The duo was among the luckier explorers. A party of two trekkers from West Bengal who tried to repeat the 1934 route in 1984 was never heard of, or seen, again. And these are only the documented stories. The mountains keep their secrets well, and with each disappointment or disaster on the trail, the route grew only more silent.

“It is a testament to my father’s very special approach to mountains that, with the Himalaya crawling with climbers of ever-increasing technical ability, not one in the 64 years…has even looked at the possibilities of mountain re-connaissance in this area. Indeed, as far as we know, the Panpatia glacier and other possible routes to connect Badrinath and Kedarnath are still untouched,” John Shipton wrote in the Himalayan Journal in 1999.
on the western flank of the climb and entering the shadow of the eastern side—a place of deep snow and steep drops—by the time the effects of the solar warmth kick in.

We plough on in slow, steady motions, digging our ice axes in, taking turns to open a route by beating down the snow and waiting for drifting clouds to clear. As each layer of cloud clears, they reveal yet another heaving mountain waiting to be climbed.

At midday, we finally climb the last hump, beyond which the land flattens to a tabletop, bringing with it a different kind of disorientation—a desolate nothingness with little to lead us on. Many a past traveller may have found himself lost on this stretch—climbing down the wrong valley, finding his advance blocked by an armada of crevasses and beaten back by winds too difficult to battle against—keeping him from connecting the final dots joining the Parvati and Panpatia cols.

But today the weather is clear, windless, and among the peaks that ring this plateau, we can easily identify Chaukhamba, the palace of Shiva, under whose gaze and in whose direction we will be walking the next two days.

There is no hurry any more. We will be traversing the plateau and, in its flatness and fullness of snow, the area seems one huge, perfect campsite.

“There’s no more need to hurry,” Avilash says. “These are the promised views for which we have gone through all this trouble. Let’s enjoy them.”

And then he adds, on a more sobering note, “Just make sure you keep an eye out for the crevasses.”

That will be the only danger, but having eggs at the lower altitudes now proves a boon. The storm that had Sundar worried has dumped enough snow on the higher reaches to seal the crevasses well, making our journey a cakewalk.

There is better news still. The Panpatia col itself will not be a cause of great grief. We are already at 5,200 metres, about the same height as the col.

We are done with climbing. The col, when it comes, will only be a signal for a downhill roll, a sign of leaving this rarified world and heading to greener vales. But, that is if we discount storms.

The weather remains unpredictable throughout after that. We are drenched by rain, battered by hail, baked by the sun and blinded by whiteouts over the next two days, all the way to the Panpatia col, now reduced to a nursery hump we hardly take notice of. Only the stump of a rope and the precipitous drop on the other side reminds us of what great odds the col might have posed to parties that attempted this route from the other side.

We begin the slow march downhill to a valley patterned by wind and thin channels of water towards our destination for the day: the unmissable yellow tents that shine in the otherwise white surroundings.

With the most dreaded sections of the trek behind us and the adrenaline levels lower, all we crave now are dry socks and the views of carpets of grass in more merciful valleys. And by the time we get to Madhmaheshwar, I am assailed by thoughts of just about managing to limp across the finish line to the roadhead at Raansi.

And then I remember: I won’t be surviving on bamboo shoots and wild mushrooms. We have enough eggs and canned tuna to help us all sail across in high spirits.

Even Sundar would agree. 

A photographer and travel writer, the writer specializes in documenting remote regions of the Himalayas by living with the tribes that call these spaces home.