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**No direction down**

We have a poor understanding of people who are the true heroes and heroines of our country. While cricket is a national passion, and one cricketer after the other has ascended the pedestal of a hero, few of us recognize the mountaineers of our country who have performed incredible feats and who are known among climbers around the world from many countries because of their courage and determination to fight the odds.

Muhammad Ali Sadpara, from the village of Sadpara on the outskirts of Skardu, is one such man. He has been missing since February 5 after attempting a winter ascent of K-2, the world's second highest mountain, and is now presumed dead. This has been done after many attempts by the Pakistan Air Force and other high-altitude climbers including his 21-year-old son Sajid, who has followed his father up the cliffs and crevices of the world's highest mountains. Sajid, after a desperate search, says there is no real possibility of his father and the two foreign climbers he accompanied remaining alive on a mountain known as 'The Savage Peak'.

Muhammad Ali Sadpara was no ordinary man. He had climbed eight of the world's 14 highest mountains, all of them over 8000 metres. He was eager to reach the top of K-2 in winter, without oxygen. A Nepalese expedition had climbed the mountain in winter with oxygen a few weeks earlier.

Like other mountaineers in Pakistan, many of whom we do not know even vaguely and have no information about, Sadpara was born to a poor family and had begun mountaineering as a porter who climbed peaks covered in crevices and glaciers, with winds which blew temperatures well below zero degree centigrade, even in summer. At the time, the team, which included a Chilean and an Icelandic mountaineer apart from Sadpara, began its final attempt to reach the peak of K-2, temperatures on the mountain in winter were reported to stand at below minus 60 degrees centigrade. Sadpara was recognised as a king of the mountains; he knew every stretch of territory and was renowned for his ability to conquer all conditions. But of course, in the end, the mountains have proved stronger than almost every climber.

Sadpara, like other porters before him, began climbing the highest peaks in the world, including K-2 – the world's second highest mountain after Mount Everest in Nepal – as a young man, who had only flip-flops and flimsy socks, and inadequate clothing in which to manage his ascent of the peaks, carrying heavy loads for the Western climbers who travelled to the country to climb. Despite his status among these climbers, he was never recognised in the country. There are others like him. The mountaineering community is small, and also comprises women, such as Shakila and Nadeema, both from Gilgit-Baltistan who have accompanied male climbers on ascents of peaks over 8000 feet. Both are known for their courage and their fortitude. Shakila has climbed even after the death of her brother Imtiiaz in an avalanche some years ago.

The question of why we are unable to acknowledge heroes who overcome all odds to perform tremendous feats is an open and important one. This is true when it comes to mountaineers. And it is also true of others who have performed in the fields of science, in medicine and in other areas, winning global acclaim, but gaining very little acknowledgement in their own country.

However, mountains hold a special mystery, a special magic. Sadpara, known as the 'mountain whisperer' was known for this. He understood the mountains better than any other and had in the past said that climbers from overseas often made sure that they themselves made the final ascent to a peak, but that Pakistani climbers who accompanied and guided them were not in this final contingent that eventually conquered the peak. To overcome this, Sadpara had as a young man purchased second-hand equipment and clothing from Skardu and used it to perfect his own skills on the mountain peaks, making him one of the world's best-known mountaineers.

The question of why mountaineering and the mountaineers of Pakistan do not get better recognition is difficult to understand. There have been many heroic feats by mountaineers such as Sadpara and also others both from the village he belongs to and also other areas of Pakistan's north. Like the Sherpas of Nepal, the feats by foreign climbers could not be possible had it not been for these men and the porters from these villages who carry the loads and set up camps for these mountaineers. Quite often, the help they receive in terms of clothing and finances comes from overseas climbers and not from any Pakistani organisation.

It is also sad that we often accept the beauty of mountains, but not the tragedy that they can bring. An avalanche in the Gojal area of Hunza in 2010 led to the washing away of the village of Attabad and the creation of a lake in that spot blocking off the route for many days. For the people of the area, it was a tragedy. Some families lost members who will of course never return.

Today the Attabad lake has been turned into a resort with hotels and cottages to be used by the wealthy tourists of the country and from outside located along what is now indeed a beautiful lake with its crystal turquoise waters. We can only hope the tourists will not destroy it. Of course, tourism will bring in revenue for local people. But greater acknowledgement of the people of Attabad who died while in the creation of the lake would be welcome. The people who live in these tall mountains of the country where temperatures fall well below freezing point in winter are extraordinary people. Their culture is unique, their philosophy is one that goes into great depth and has enormous thought lying beneath it.

It is time we looked beyond cricket and a little beyond the idea of precisely who is a hero and what is the sport. The mountaineers of Pakistan, especially those who belong to some of the poorest localities in the country need to be recognised and given greater assistance by the government and those who claim to forward Pakistani spirit and Pakistani expertise. It is sad that so few in the country even know of the tragedy of Muhammad Ali Sadpara and his feats which few men anywhere in the world have matched.

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