

## NO SAFETY NETS IN TREK TO MOUNT DURGAKOT

# To peak & back, via road less taken

**BITAN SIKDAR**

Calcutta: Asansol-based trekker Raju Chakraborty will never forget the unpredictability of the mountain.

He'd merely sat down to tighten his bootlaces after hours of steep climbing towards the Kanakata Pass in the Kumaon Himalayas, Uttarakhand. The rock "beneath me was apparently stable", but suddenly began lurching, sliding downwards. For a brief moment, the expedition's most experienced climber stood "inches away" from a fatal fall.

Such incidents usually do not usually happen in the mountains nowadays during organised trekking expeditions.

However, this single moment captures the very nature of the recently completed Mount Durgakot-Kanakata Pass expedition. For the team of five climbers — Chakraborty, Runa Dey, Tilak Pal, Sumanta Bose and Balram Singh — the feat is defined less by summits and more by uncertainty and survival in this lesser-known hilly corner.

Unlike well-known climbing routes dotted with signboards, campsites or backed by rescue gear, the uniqueness of this expedition was its misty-covered terrain where navigation solely depends on experience.

The climb to Mount Durgakot itself was unusual. At 5,791 metres, it's not one of the tallest peaks in the Himalayas. Durgakot's significance lies in its relative obscurity. While trekkers flock to popular routes in Uttarakhand, Durgakot remains largely untouched, hidden behind steep ridges



The expedition team at Mount Durgakot summit

and almost inaccessible valleys.

The team set up Camp-2 at 5,106 metres on an exposed ledge where space was so limited that even pitching tents was a problem. Chakraborty said: "Our kitchen tent hung above a sheer drop."

The climbers recounted how the load carriers were forced to descend immediately after unloading equipment. "We were left with a narrow weather window. It was a moment to decide — either reach the summit and descend safely the next day. Or else risk being trapped," said the team leader.

The crux — mountaineering literature may celebrate summits, but experienced climbers know that it's not the whole story.

Ascending Durgakot requires technical skills.

Near 5,338 metres, the team used jumar ascenders (also known as hand ascenders) and ice axes to negotiate the frozen section of a steep ice wall before powering through deep snow towards the summit.

"On June 17, we pushed forward into a hostile wall of rain and blinding white-out to establish Camp-1, moving aggressively to outrun the weather," said Bal-

ram Singh, a Delhi-based climber. They reached the top on June 19, 2025. The upper trail rewarded them with views of the celebrated peaks — Nanda Devi, Nanda Kot, Trishul, Maiktoli and Panwali Dwar.

For one team member, Calcutta's Runa Dey, 49, the summit carried added significance. The Hatibagan resident and a schoolteacher became the first recorded female climber to summit Mount Durgakot. "It was a moment of pure elation," she said.

Nevertheless, the expedition's charm extended beyond the summit.

The team did not take the conventional route to descend, but deliberately chose a little-used and less-known trail towards the Bhanar Valley before attempting the Kanakata Pass. "The route is feared even by local shepherds," said Chakraborty. Why? "The thick fog erased any sense of direction. Many times, when visibility dropped to a few feet, we had to navigate across loose rocks almost blindly."

The Kanakata Pass itself is remembered locally for tragedy. On October 11, 2021, four Bengali travellers and local guide, Khilaf Singh Danu, lost their lives amid blizzards while crossing the pass. The expedition paused at the top to pay tribute to them.

"The main challenge of the route that you have to trek down long stretches without water. We were exhausted, pushing forward with empty bottles until a tiny glacial melt stream provided relief," said Sumanta Bose, another team member from Gai ghata.

The team crossed the

pass on June 21.

The final obstacle came in the forests of Bhushil Udiyar as the climbers had to face leeches, slippery slopes and confusing shepherd trails.

"On top of it, torrential rain made the descent more of a struggle for balance. Technology did not work here. What we followed were discipline and teamwork," said Calcutta-based team member Tilak Pal.

And that is what made this expedition stand out. Setting aside satellite navigation or commercial trekking packages, the Durgakot-Kanakata climb offered something rare — exploration and a test of tenacity. It was not merely a climb but an expedition into the unknown.



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