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Bachendri Pal: The First Indian Woman to Stand on Everest

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Bachendri Pal: The First Indian Woman to Stand on Everest

Bachendri Pal became the first Indian woman to reach Mount Everest's summit on **23 May 1984**. Her later work helped other women train for expeditions.

Summit: the highest point of a mountain.
Avalanche: snow and ice moving rapidly down a mountainside.
Expedition: an organised journey with a planned purpose and a team.

The 1984 Everest climb

Where did her mountain training begin?

Bachendri Pal was born on **24 May 1954** in **Nakuri, Uttarkashi**, in present-day Uttarakhand. She grew up in a family of seven children.

She trained at the **Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM)** in **1982**. Her early climbs included **Gangotri I and Rudugaira**.

Training and selection were separate steps. Learning mountain skills prepared her for an expedition, but selection did not guarantee reaching Everest's summit.

She joined **Everest '84**, India's fourth national Everest expedition. The mixed team included **6 women and 11 men**.

Sources: edustud.nic.in; economictimes.indiatimes.com; himalayanclub.org; arvindguptatoys.com

What happened between the avalanche and the summit?

On the night of **15–16 May 1984**, an avalanche struck **Camp III at 24,000 feet**. Snow crushed the camp while climbers were resting.

Pal survived with help from a companion. Climbers from a lower camp helped the injured return to base camp.

More than half the group abandoned the attempt because of injury or fatigue. Pal continued with the remaining climbers.

She reached the summit on **23 May 1984 at 1:07 p.m.** The climb came one day before her **30th birthday**.

Pal became the **first Indian woman** and the **fifth woman worldwide** to climb Everest. A national first and a world first are different records.

The avalanche and summit were roughly a week apart. The avalanche night was not the date of her summit.

Sources: cbseacademic.nic.in; economictimes.indiatimes.com; himalayanclub.org



Bachendri Pal receives the **Padma Bhushan, 16 March 2019**. President's Secretariat / PIB, via Wikimedia Commons. GODL-India. Photograph reproduced without changes.

Keep the three dates separate

24 May 1954 — birth Nakuri in Uttarkashi, present-day Uttarakhand.
15–16 May 1984 — avalanche Camp III at 24,000 feet; the team suffered injuries.
23 May 1984 — summit First Indian woman on Everest, one day before turning 30.

Birth, danger and achievement belong to different dates.
Sources: edustud.nic.in; cbseacademic.nic.in; economictimes.indiatimes.com

> **Quick check 1.** Check 1. Bachendri Pal was the first woman in the world to climb Everest. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** Check 2. Pal reached Everest's summit one day before her 30th birthday. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Honours and later expeditions

How do her civilian honours differ from sporting awards?

Pal received the **Padma Shri in 1984**. It is India's **fourth-highest civilian honour**.

She also received the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's **gold medal for excellence in mountaineering in 1984**. That medal belongs to a mountaineering organisation.

The **Arjuna Award** recognised her sporting achievement. Dates given for her Arjuna Award differ: **1985** and **1986** both appear in published accounts.

Do not use those conflicting dates as an undisputed answer. The award itself is confirmed.

In **2019**, she received the **Padma Bhushan**, India's **third-highest civilian honour**. The year came **35 years** after her Everest ascent.

A civilian honour recognises a person's contribution. Reaching a summit is an achievement during an expedition, rather than an award ceremony.

Sources: padmaawards.gov.in; tatasteel.com; tata.com; edustud.nic.in; indmount.org

Did eighteen women summit in the 1993 expedition?

In **1993**, Pal led the **Indo-Nepalese Women's Mount Everest Expedition**. **18 climbers** reached the summit, including **7 women**.

The number eighteen describes all summiteers from the expedition. It does not mean eighteen women reached the summit.

The word "women's" in an expedition's name does not make every support climber a woman. Keep the named women's team separate from all summit participants.

Sources: tatasteel.com; tata.com

> **Quick check 3.** Check 3. All eighteen summiteers in the 1993 expedition were women. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How did the 1994 journey use different skills?

In **1994**, she led the **Great Indian Women's Rafting Voyage**. The team included **18 women** travelling down the Ganga.

The route ran from **Haridwar to Calcutta, now Kolkata**. The voyage lasted **39 days**.

Published distances differ: **2,155 km** and **2,500 km**.

The exact distance should therefore be treated with care. Both accounts describe the Ganga voyage, rather than the later Himalayan trek.

Rafting required coordinated movement on water. A river journey and a mountain climb call for different skills, even when both require teamwork.

Sources: tata.com; economictimes.indiatimes.com; edustud.nic.in; m.rediff.com; vajiramandravi.com

What needs care in the 1997 trek figures?

The **First Indian Women's Trans-Himalayan Expedition** began in **1997** with **8 women**. Pal led the team from **Bomdila in Arunachal Pradesh**.

Her route continued towards the **Siachen Glacier**. Accounts of Pal's journey give **over 4,500 km in 225 days**, crossing **about 40 high passes**.

The original group split after roughly four months. Three women continued separately with Himalayan Club support.

The separate party's record gives **4,500 km in 198 days**. Its pass count includes **39 above 3,000 metres** and **15 above 2,000 metres**.

Those figures describe different parties after the split. Do not combine the separate party's duration with Pal's entire journey.

A mountain pass is a route across a mountain ridge. Crossing many passes means repeated climbs and descents, rather than one summit attempt.

Sources: edustud.nic.in; economictimes.indiatimes.com; himalayanclub.org; alpinejournal.org.uk

Three expeditions, three different measures

1993 — Everest18 summiteers, including 7 women: a count of climbers.

1994 — Ganga18 women; Haridwar → Kolkata: a river voyage.

1997 — Himalayas8 women at the start; Bomdila → Siachen for Pal's route.

The two counts of eighteen refer to different groups in different years.
Sources: tatasteel.com; tata.com; economictimes.indiatimes.com

> **Quick check 4.** Check 4. The 1994 Ganga voyage and the 1997 Himalayan trek followed the same route. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Education and training others

How did one climber help others prepare?

Pal completed an **MA in Sanskrit** and trained as a schoolteacher. She chose mountaineering despite opposition from relatives.

She later served as **Chief of Adventure Programmes at the Tata Steel Adventure Foundation (TSAF)**. Her work included training people in outdoor leadership.

Premlata Agarwal and **Arunima Sinha** were among the climbers she mentored through TSAF. Training gave other women a path towards their own Everest attempts.

Her teaching focused on preparation, judgement and working with others. Helping a team prepare is different from personally climbing every mountain with it.

Her legacy therefore includes both the 1984 national first and later training. The summit record explains her fame; the mentoring explains how her work reached others.

Sources: edustud.nic.in; tatasteel.com; tata.com; telegraphindia.com

> **Quick check 5.** Check 5. TSAF connects Pal's own climbing career with her training of later climbers. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Questions and answers

Was Pal the world's first woman on Everest?

No. She was the first Indian woman and the fifth woman worldwide.

Did the avalanche happen on summit day?

No. The avalanche struck on 15–16 May. She reached the summit on 23 May 1984.

Do eighteen summiteers and eighteen rafters describe one expedition?

No. Eighteen summiteers belong to 1993. Eighteen women on the Ganga belong to 1994.

Why should the 1997 duration be read carefully?

The original team split. Pal's journey and the separate party's journey have different recorded durations.

Practice MCQs

1. On which date did Bachendri Pal reach the summit of Mount Everest?

A. 29 May 1953

B. 23 May 1984

C. 10 May 1993

D. 24 May 1954

See answer ↓

2. Bachendri Pal was the first Indian woman, and which-numbered woman in the world, to summit Everest?

A. Third

B. Fourth

C. Fifth

D. Seventh

See answer ↓

3. Just before her summit push, an avalanche struck Bachendri Pal's team camp. At what altitude, and on which nights?

A. 24,000 feet, 15-16 May 1984

B. 22,000 feet, 10-11 May 1984

C. 26,000 feet, 18-19 May 1984

D. 20,000 feet, 5-6 May 1984

See answer ↓

4. In 1993, Bachendri Pal led the Indo-Nepalese Women's Mount Everest Expedition.

How many climbers reached the summit in total, and how many were women?

A. 9 total, 3 women

B. 17 total, 6 women

C. 18 total, 7 women

D. 25 total, 10 women

See answer ↓

5. Premlata Agarwal trained under Bachendri Pal at which institution, the same as fellow climber Arunima Sinha?

A. Nehru Institute of Mountaineering

B. Indian Mountaineering Foundation

C. Himalayan Mountaineering Institute

D. Tata Steel Adventure Foundation

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.**
   Bachendri Pal reached Everest's summit on 23 May 1984. She became the first Indian woman to reach the top. The date 29 May 1953 belongs to Hillary and Tenzing's first ascent. The later dates do not identify Pal's first Everest summit.
   Review Arunima Sinha: training and Everest records.
   ↑ Q1

2. **C.**
   Pal became the fifth woman worldwide to climb Everest in 1984. She was the first Indian woman to do so. A national first is different from a world ranking. Third, fourth and seventh do not match her recorded place.
   Review Bachendri Pal: the climb and later leadership.
   ↑ Q2

3. **A.**
   The avalanche struck Camp III at 24,000 feet on the night of 15–16 May 1984. Pal survived and continued the expedition. The summit date was 23 May. The other altitude-and-date pairs do not describe this accident.
   Review Bachendri Pal: the climb and later leadership.
   ↑ Q3

4. **C.**
   Eighteen climbers reached Everest's summit from the 1993 expedition, including seven women. Eighteen is the total number of summiteers. Seven counts the women within that total. The expedition's name should not be read as eighteen female summiteers.
   Review Bachendri Pal: the climb and later leadership.
   ↑ Q4

5. **D.**
   The Tata Steel Adventure Foundation is the shared mentoring institution. Bachendri Pal mentored Premlata and Arunima through TSAF. Arunima also finished a basic course at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering. That separate course does not change the institution asked about here.
   ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** She was the first Indian woman and the fifth woman worldwide. ↑ 1
2. **True.** She reached the summit on 23 May 1984. Her birthday was 24 May. ↑ 2
3. **False.** Eighteen climbers reached the summit, including seven women. ↑ 3
4. **False.** The rafting route was Haridwar to Kolkata. The trek began in Arunachal Pradesh. ↑ 4
5. **True.** Pal trained and mentored other climbers through the Tata Steel Adventure Foundation. ↑ 5

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