

The high life

Masahiko Kaji has multiple passions, from mountaineering and India to people management and the task of taking TCS Japan to new peaks

Asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest — this in the days before anyone had made it to the summit of the greatest one — mountaineering legend George Mallory said, “Because it’s there.” It’s the kind of reasoning that would sit right with Masahiko Kaji, the president of TCS Japan and a man who knows a bit about peaks. Mr Mallory died while (or probably after) making his extraordinary quest; Mr Kaji lives by the rules of the high places he has journeyed to.

Mr Kaji is a thoroughbred mountaineer, a veteran climber who has been a member of expeditions to Nanda Devi (the second-highest mountain in India) and to Kangchenjunga (at 8,586 metres the highest in India and third highest in the world). Mountaineering and software may seem incongruous, but then Mr Kaji is no IT ace. “When TCS approached me to join the organisation, I told them I wasn’t an IT expert,” he recalls, “They said that didn’t matter; they were looking for management skills.”

TCS wanted Mr Kaji to take the organisation to another level in a market that’s far from easy for foreign IT companies to penetrate. “They thought I was the person who could help them get there,” he says. It has been seven years since then and TCS now has about 800 people working for the Japan geography, with 300 professionals stationed in the Tokyo and Yokohama regions, and a future that promises ample growth.

The story of how Mr Kaji connected with TCS cannot be told without explaining his “experience with India”. His maiden visit was in 1969, as part of a small Japanese mountaineering expedition that came to climb Hanuman Tibba, a 6,000-metre mountain in Himachal Pradesh. “Somehow, India had always fascinated me,” says Mr Kaji. “I had this impression that it was an extremely rich country; I was in for a shock when I got there. But India has changed so much since then. The most significant change, from a business standpoint, is the confidence that Indians now have when dealing with the outside world.”

Mr Kaji’s own worldview was shaped by a life-defining expedition to Nanda Devi, “the most memorable and eventful of my life”. It was 1976 and this was a joint expedition involving the Indian Mountaineering Federation, with ten Japanese members and six Indians. “We were attempting to climb Nanda Devi’s twin peaks at one go, something that had not been accomplished previously,” says Mr Kaji.

“Organising the expedition and coordinating everything was such a task,” he adds. “This was the age before email and faxes and just getting a person on the phone was a minor miracle. That aside, the approach to Nanda Devi is probably the most difficult climbing passage in the entire Himalayan range and we had 200 porters come up with us to our base camp; the scale of operations was immense.”

The expedition lasted three months and there were all kinds of challenges, but Mr Kaji and the team managed to realise their objective. “That was the first Indo-Japanese mountaineering expedition and I think we made history by conquering Nanda Devi in the way we did. The Kangchenjunga expedition, which happened in 1984, was larger and technically much tougher, but my best memories are of that Nanda Devi adventure.”

Mr Kaji got interested in mountaineering while he was at university, the big motivation being the chance that it offered to go abroad. “Travelling to foreign countries was far from easy those days — there were many restrictions — and I was extremely excited by the prospect of doing exactly that,” he says. “Going to India in 1969 whetted my appetite for foreign travel so much that I even designed my career in a manner that would enable me to work outside Japan.”

After a stint with Citibank in Japan — the beginning of a career in banking that lasted 35 years — Mr Kaji started getting his fill of the foreign climes he so craved. “I spent 17 years of my life outside Japan: eight in Abu Dhabi, in the UAE; two in Sydney, Australia and seven in India.”



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Mr Kaji spent two-and-a-half years in Delhi with Grindlays Bank, then the largest foreign-owned banking institution in the country. “It was a fantastic experience and it got me into a mindset where I wanted to be, for the rest of my professional life, in businesses associated with India,” he says. In the early 1980s Mr Kaji switched careers, joining a Japanese engineering company and getting busy in building, and then running, a factory in Kalyan (on the outskirts of Mumbai) that would go on to employ 500-plus people.

The TCS offer arrived while Mr Kaji was in Mumbai. “I saw it as a challenge, an interesting one for sure, and I made my decision,” he says. It’s a challenge that operates on many fronts. “The difficulty TCS faces is the exclusivity of the Japanese business community,” says Mr Kaji. “Building relationships and creating confidence can be very time consuming and that’s a difficulty we have to deal with. But things are getting better.”

A bigger challenge probably is the shortage of quality professionals. “It is difficult to hire from the Japan market, especially people who know Japanese and English,” he says. “Japanese engineers typically spend 10 of their school and college years learning English, but they are still unable to speak English. That’s a problem that all Japanese companies have to deal with. We have about 100 Japanese people working with us and we hope to increase that number to 300-400 by 2010. My mission is to have a balanced mix of locals and Indians.”

Beyond the professional life, Mr Kaji’s thoughts often drift to India and the relationships he still nurtures. “I lived in Thane [in suburban Mumbai] for two years and, later, in Navi Mumbai, but it is Delhi that I have my closest Indian friends,” he says of links that have endured. “These are lifetime buddies and with most of them the bond is mountains and climbing. Many of them are from the armed forces and I keep in touch as much as I can.”

Mr Kaji gave up on mountaineering a while back, satisfying himself with treks, not of the garden variety kind but those involving climbs of up to 6,000 metres. “The problem is that once you’ve been on a serious mountaineering expedition, treks and the like begin to seem leisurely,” he explains “The reason I gave it up? My last two jobs have been so hectic I haven’t had the time. But I have a few post-retirement plans. I’m going to get together with my old mountaineering pals from India and elsewhere and we’ll go climbing again.” ●

Philip Chacko