

CLIMB FOR PEACE: Mt Rubal Kang 6187m

Muntasir Mamun Iman Mountaineering is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. At 2007, we are still in its infancy. The good thing is that over time, the idea of mountaineering has gained ground. In 2003 on the fiftieth anniversary of the conquest of Mt. Everest, Bangladesh cheered along with the world. At that time there was great jubilation among the small community of mountaineers and the public in general. It was possible, through that gesture, to indicate to the world that Bangladeshis too were drawn to the extreme sport called mountaineering. Initially we were focused on the Hill tracts of Bangladesh – Bandarban, to be exact. This hilly part of our landmass lent us the primary experience of trekking, along with the experience of its breathtaking scenery. With a humble beginning on these tropical trails, we began to dream of greater heights. Nepal was our ultimate destination for high-altitude trekking. Some of us registered in mountaineering schools in India for perfecting our technical knowledge. There were many impediments at the beginning – all we had to start with was the names of a few people in India and nothing else! Our training at the mountaineering schools sharpened our skills considerably and we began to look forward to tougher challenges. Sitting in Bangladesh, it is difficult to envision the world lying at our feet – considering that we are a flat alluvial plane, through and through.

The highest altitude one can gain is a mere 3172ft at the Kewkradong Peak in Bandarban Hill Tracts. Most of the Himalayas and some of the greatest trek-worthy mountain peaks are geographically located in India. It is tragic that despite the contiguity, cross-border politics continue to dissuade climbers.

Border issues notwithstanding, the expense of joining an international expedition is immensely daunting. The situation is more difficult in Bangladesh because of the low priority mountaineering enjoys as a sport. Despite that, those who dare, refuse to acknowledge the odds and hang on to their seemingly impossible dreams.

At long last Kewkradong Bangladesh, a youth-based outdoor conservation community, was able to organise an international mountaineering expedition in the Indian Himalayas in 2007. Our mission was to carry forth a message of peace and harmony by taking on the 6187m Himalayan climb jointly with India. The first of its kind in Bangladesh, the expedition took place in May-June 2007.

to certain formalities at Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF). The rest continued to Chandigarh. As a foreign expedition team, we received full cooperation from IMF. The Secretary of IMF was kind enough to meet with us in person and at the end of the discussions hoped this expedition would open up a new gateway for Bangladeshi mountaineers. After Delhi, we headed for Kulu. The bus ride was least enjoyable because of cramped conditions and the heat; the discomfort went unnoticed amidst our concerns about the grueling task ahead. The same thought ran through our minds – to keep the promise we had made not only to our friends, families and ourselves, but also to our beloved motherland. As night fell, we drifted off to troubled sleep.

The shivering light of dawn welcomed us into the Himalayas. As the bus moved slowly through the narrow roads of Himachal, we were truly enchanted by the raw beauty of the mountains. As foreigners, we were required to report to the ITBP (India-Tibet Border Police) and the local police. Both assured us of their utmost support. Thousands of miles away from home, their warmth and generosity was extremely reassuring. At the present time it would be difficult for us to convey to anyone, just how much these gestures meant to a highly stressed group. It is worth mentioning that each time we received appreciation and admiration, it made us stronger.

We reached Barseni in late afternoon. The forward team waited for us at our guide, Chaman Singh's wooden, two storied, house. Chaman Singh has been a guide in this part of the Himalayas for over twenty-five years and knows every route like the back of his hand. This polite, responsible and well mannered person was a high

It was organised along with MAK (Mountaineer's Association of Krishnanagar), one of the leading mountaineering clubs of West Bengal, India. Sponsored by Bangladeshi enterprises AB Bank and GMG Airlines, this two-nation joint expedition was named: Kewkradong Bangladesh, A Climb for Peace. Mt. Rubal Kang (6187m), located in the Parvatee Valley of Kulu Himalaya of Himachal Pradesh, India, is an important destination in terms of contemporary mountaineering. Four Bangladeshi and eleven Indian climbers participated in the expedition and shared a unique experience. Every single moment of the expedition proved beyond doubt that when climbers from the two nations reached the summit and held hands, they were indeed embodying a message of peace and harmony.

In Dhaka the members trained and worked hard in readiness for the rigours of the climb. We boarded a Dhaka-Kolkata GMG flight on May 13 to join the rest of the team. Later the same day, the Bangladeshi flag was handed to the team by Mr. Md. Imran, the Deputy High Commissioner in Kolkata, at a simple ceremony in Krishnanagar. We were deeply moved as we held the flag up in front of hundreds of cheering spectators. It wasn't just about us, it wasn't about Kewkradong Bangladesh, it was as if the entire nation's prestige lay in our hands. In December 2006 when we began to look for a partner, we established communication with MAK and requested them to select a peak suitable for contemporary mountaineering. Within a short while they came back to us with the name of the nominated peak. Besides that, very little other information was available. Even the internet ran dry. The peak, we eventually found out, is located in the Kulu Himalayas, and stands tall over 6187 metres from sea level. Mt. Rubal Kang is renowned for its varied trails.

The day after the flag giving ceremony, the team was briefed on the nature of the expedition by the team leader Basanta Singha Roy of MAK. The climb plan and team strategy were set. Then came the time for the team to buckle up and take the train from Howrah to Chandigarh. The Bangladeshi participants, the team leader and the liaison officer split from the rest of the team at Delhi to attend

altitude cook in his early years. Our supplies were weighed and found to be over 760 kg. We needed many more porters to carry the load to the base camp but none were available. This set us back by a day. We then decided to take horses instead of porters to carry the supplies but were again held back because nineteen horses could not be immediately arranged. Early next day, we started the trek to Khirganga. Horses carried the team's supplies in blue plastic barrels labeled 'Indo-Bangladesh Joint Expedition 2007' - it was an inspiring sight for us. On TV before, we had seen similar marked containers carrying loads for different expeditions. This time it was real - an expedition in which the containers had the word 'Bangladesh' inscribed on them! The river Parvatee roared along the right edge of the road through which we were moving. The road ended in a junction where a hydro-electricity plant was under construction. We had breakfast there with alu-parata. Twenty minutes later, we were across the

river and on a rocky trail. The destination for the day was Khirganga. At times the trail was very narrow and the steep slope made it fairly dangerous. We were deeply disturbed when we learnt that one of the horses had tragically fallen down the 200ft ridge, with supplies strapped on its back. Until base





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CLIMB FOR PEACE:
Mt Rubal Kang
6187m

camp, the team comprised fifteen climbers, two cooks, three Sherpas, one guide, eighteen horses and a few other men. Pine and fir stood tall all along the trail. Numerous small streams intersected our trail. The exquisite flora of the Himalayas surrounded us as we headed for Khirganga.

KHIRGANGA (2730M)

A chilly breeze and the crashing sound of the Parvatee welcomed us into Khirganga. It began to drizzle as we caught sight of our camp. The last few minutes were difficult as the gradient tilted up. The four Bangladeshi members, Muntasir Mamun Imran, Shirajul Haq Sagor, Saad Bin Hossain and ARK Reepoon, shared the same tent. The kitchen was in a nearby deserted cabin. Khirganga is 2730m from the sea level and is famous for its hot springs. We saw plenty of foreign tourists gathered there. It was a pleasant surprise to find all amenities such as electricity (from generators), hotels, restaurants and shops in this rather remote location. Later that day, some of us visited the hot springs. The day's exhaustion was easily washed away by the prophylactic action of the warm water. The sun was about to set when we finished dinner and got into our sleeping bags. The next day we were to head to Tundabhuji which is two to three hours away.

TUNDABHUJ (3335M)

By the time we reached Tundabhuji we had, depending on individual speed, identified our climbing partners. We moved through the trail in small groups of three or four. The name 'Tundabhuji' is derived from the tree 'Bhuji'. In ancient times, the bark of this tree was used for writing. We saw many Bhuji trees all around. Later in the afternoon, we moved further up to gain height. Shagor led the way with our four-legged friend Hutch who had accompanied us all the way from Barseni. We returned to camp as it threatened to rain again. The next camp was to be at Thakurkua and it was not going to be an easy climb.

THAKURKUA (3515M)

To head for Thakurkua, we had to cross to the other side of the river. The gradient had become steep. We moved past juniper bushes into the moraine zone. The sun shone bright as we made our way through the maze of huge boulders. When we reached Thakurkua we saw that the whole place was surrounded by rock boulders and exquisite rhododendrons – pale pink high altitude flowers. The hydro-electricity project which we saw back in Barseni was supposed to be built in Thakurkua initially. We discovered deserted cabins which had been the living quarters and project offices.

The next day, after a long and hard trek up to the Rutiruni Glacier, we established and occupied our base camp. This had been the hardest climb so far. Just half way up, rain came slashing down

the roaring Parvatee to its right.

RUTIRUNI GLACIER: BASE CAMP (4050M)

At the base camp, it felt like the end of the first phase of our expedition. A green valley surrounded by snow-covered mountains spread on both sides and the Parvatee streamed with crashing force down the ridge. Moss covered rock boulders of various shapes and sizes were strewn all around. It was home for us far away from home; closer to our dream- the snow-capped mountains. After catching our breath, we started to set up camp. The sky turned dark and our shelters had to be ready. The kitchen was up and working first. The rain came right after we occupied our tents and stored our supplies.

A team meeting was held in the afternoon. It was great to watch the rain from inside the

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accompanied with bone-chilling wind. Conditions worsened as we struggled to reach base camp. We were hit by a blinding blizzard and had to fight to keep up the pace. According to the plan, the base camp was to be established on the edge of Rutiruni Glacier. Due to bad weather, our team separated into two. Debashish took the lead of the faster half and kept moving. But soon we realised that they had moved past the destination. So, they had to trek back. We gathered around the huge boulder that marked the spot where we were to camp and helped unload the horses. Our base camp was a gully, with a rock wall on its left and

tent. It started snowing after a while- the green disappeared under the cold harsh snow. So did the warmth in our hearts.

BASE CAMP: DAY 2

The first sunrise at the base camp hinted at the start of a new day and the next phase of the expedition. The cook, Raam Lal, woke us up with mugs full of smoking tea and a smile on his face. The breakfast call brought us out of our tents. Our next plan of action was to ferry some of the supplies to the next high camp, Camp-I, which would be established that day. Camp-I was four



hours away from the base camp, at 15,500ft. We had to move through the moraine zone where there was no fixed trail route to follow. The supplies were distributed amongst us into our packs and the load ferry begun at ten in the morning. Happy Hutch took the lead as usual. Almost immediately the trail disappeared into the harsh moraine; nothing but rock boulders as far as we could see. We kept moving upwards for hours in this rough terrain and came to a jagged ridge. Over the ridge, there was a narrow passage of rock and ice beside an almost frozen stream—this was the location for our first high camp. It was unbearably chilly up there; winds of sub-zero temperature kept roaring persistently. We would have to camp there from tomorrow. After unloading our packs and storing the supplies, we started our descent. Halfway down we were hit by a blizzard. We arrived at the base camp covered with snow. In the afternoon we split into two teams. I, with four others was in Team A. Team B would follow Team A to the higher camp after one day.

CAMP-I: DAY 1 (4480M)

Next morning, Team A was scheduled to leave for the high camp while Team B was going

to ferry some more supplies to Camp-I. The route was known from the last day's load ferry. Once again, we moved up the seemingly lifeless moraine zone to Camp-I. After a tiring four hour ascent, we could see the tents of Camp-I over the ridge. Almost immediately after completing their load ferry, Team B left for base camp. We were left alone in Camp-I. We gathered in the kitchen for the last bit of heat radiating from the burner. Outside, the wind howled along with the endless snowfall.

CAMP-I: DAY 2

In the morning we found out that no one had slept the night before. Most of us were distracted by the solitude. We communicated with the base camp by radio and came to know that they had experienced excessive snowfall since last afternoon. Team B was scheduled to occupy Camp-I that day while we were to establish Camp-II at 16,500ft. But the snow delayed their start by two hours. We began the climb to Camp-II in the morning and ascended through the ridge beside the snout of the West Glacier. Snowfall the night before had made the terrain hazardous. The weather turned for the worse and we were exposed to a frosty blizzard. There being no

shelter, we had to keep moving.

CAMP-II (4980M)

We started early in the morning to occupy Camp-II. The weather was clear and the route a bit more familiar than the last time. Team B followed us with supplies to ferry to Camp-II. Camp-II was on a ridge of the West Glacier; as far as we could see there was nothing but snow all around. Life was frozen there. We had our first view of Mt. Rubal Kang from there. Team B returned to Camp-I after storing the supplies. Five of us, our Sherpa and the cook stayed back in that white, lonely, world. The thing that was uppermost in our thoughts was to keep our bodies warm and think of our enormous objective—to carry the red and green Bangladeshi flag to the peak. Apart from that, little else made sense to us at that time. In the afternoon, we were called out of our tents by Basanta. It was amazing out there. A thick veil of mist surrounded us and over that towered Mt. Rubal Kang - the Turtle Neck peak was visible in the late afternoon sun.

CAMP-III: LEAD FERRY

We started to ascend to 18,000ft to establish Camp-III. A kind of strangeness gripped the

Bangladeshi members. It was unbelievable how close we were to the Turtle Neck; but we knew a lot more had to be endured before glory was achieved. The climb route was through the ridge of the West Glacier— a cold lifeless desert of white snow. On our way up, we could see Black Peak and White Peak on the northern horizon. The structure of Black Peak reminded us of Mt. Everest. Rubal Kang was visible all the way. We were immersed in snow up to the waist and struggled hard to maintain balance. We turned northwards as we climbed the ridge up to the gully of Rubal Kang. It was an active avalanche zone. Thoroughly exhausted, we moved further up as quickly as possible. To our great relief we could see the tents of Camp-III in the distance. We unloaded our packs and started descent. Returning to the safety of Camp-II, we had dinner and dragged our worn out bodies to the sleeping bags.

SUMMIT CAMP/ CAMP-III (5480M)

Camp III would be our last high camp, from where we would attempt to reach the summit of Mt. Rubal Kang within the next three days depending on weather conditions. We started for Camp-III very early in the morning on May 29, 2007. The trail was frozen hard. Ice and snow





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crackled underneath our boots. Numbness and a strange consternation gripped us. We lost appetite during the last few days of this incredible journey but had to swallow something or other to stay alive and keep our bodies warm. If everything did go according to plan, all the sweat and the effort would pay off tomorrow. We ascended at steady speed. We reached Camp-III at about noon. The weather was clear. We took a long time staring at the peak. All the cooks were in the lower camps, so the Sherpas were busy preparing food for the team and fixing rope to open the route to the peak. Basanta kept an eye on Sherpa Thendu and Pema from the camp through binoculars, as they left Camp-III to fix ropes. Two anxious and edgy hours passed as the weather began to change for the worse. After a few more minutes, we saw the smiling face of Thendu approaching camp from the gusty background. The route to the summit of Mt. Rubal Kang was finally open. Darkness sunk in as the day faded; but our clock said otherwise. There was no source of heat anywhere near to comfort us except the thoughts of our friends and family back in Bangladesh. Every now and then we kept thinking of our aim and somehow the thought lent warmth to our hearts. This kept us alive for long. Basanta, Imran, Shagor, Tonmoy, Biswajit, Thendu and Pema were the first team to attempt summit the next day. We planned to leave the camp at 3am.

SUMMIT (6187M: MAY 30, 2007)

It was the day we touched glory; the longest and the most strenuous day for us. The wake-up call was given at 2am. It was freezing, even in the tents, as all the water in our flasks had turned to solid ice. We struggled to gear-up and make last moment adjustments. We were in a sense, infatuated. There was only one recurring thought - we have to make it. We started towards our destination in single file. The hazy darkness made us feel like a group of pilgrims moving towards the unknown. The gradient was about forty-five to fifty degrees at the beginning. It took us some time to get used to the surroundings. Our crampons were biting down on the hard ice. We had to change the route because last night an avalanche had dismantled a part of the fixed rope. We kept climbing up as Camp- III beneath us turned into a tiny dot in the middle of white plane. The sudden appearance of a glow around us reminded us of dawn. Shagor soon came to realise that he had left his protective eye-gear behind. No way could he climb any further with his eyes exposed.

Fortunately, Imran had a spare set which saved the day for Sagor. The light grew brighter as we climbed higher. This time we moved up through a cornice; one after another. By that time, we had been climbing through soft, unstable snow for almost six hours. To catch our breath, we had to lean on our own feet. There was a huge overhanging arc following the summit with an opening span of seventy-five to eighty degrees. That part of it was a breathtaking climb. The only sounds we could hear were the instructions given by the Sherpa and the gusty wind howling around; at times, the sound of distant avalanches would waft in. Our feet were awfully numb in plastic boots. Our hands were almost frozen but still working. The only thought going around in our mind was to move ahead to the summit of Turtle Neck!

When we had just reached the bottleneck of the summit, our route disappeared into an almost vertical rocky region up to the summit. The peak of Mt. Kulu Makalu was visible in the background. We

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climbed the rocky part gradually. The summit was just a few metres away now. Among Bangladeshis, Imran was the first one on the rope. We wanted to go to the summit all together. Shagor was a bit behind. So many thoughts crossed our minds as we waited for him to catch up. A long process, an ardent dream made real, an urge to reach higher than ever- the end to all of this was just five metres away.

The glory of carrying the red and green Bangladeshi flag to that height is something we still can't express in words. We took the last few steps towards the summit shivering in exhilaration and looked at our watch. It was exactly 11:28 am local time. This has gone down in history - never before had any Bangladeshi team climbed higher. At the summit, we felt blank - a kind of glorious vacuum filled our souls. We were crying - tears of joy brought us together. All the exhaustion and drowsiness went down as tears. We held the red and green flag of Bangladesh before the camera proudly; we made it! ■



*FLIGHT DATES: Subject to availability at the time of booking and will be booked to suit the accommodation dates.

**ACCOMMODATION DATES are valid between: 27 Nov - 18 Dec 2008 OR 6 Jan - 10 Feb 2009 OR 26 Mar - 12 Apr 2009