



Sunuwar and Lakpa fly tandem off Everest



THE MEN WHO LEAPT OFF EVEREST...

... AND PADDLED ALL THE
WAY TO THE SEA

Sano Babu Sunuwar and Lakpa Tsheri Sherpa shared a common dream: to paraglide from the summit of Everest. In January last year the accomplished paraglider and the skilled mountaineer made a pact. Lakpa would accompany Sunuwar atop the mountain and the latter would then ferry his fellow expeditionist back down. But their mad adventure didn't end there. After touching down, the duo kayaked on the Kosi river in Nepal and the Ganga in India all the way to the Bay of Bengal. **Bibek Bhandari** travels to Syangja in Nepal to meet the two men who are strong contenders for the National Geographic Adventurers of the Year award that will be announced this month

OUTDOORS

On a starry night in the village of Shorek in Syangja in western Nepal, Sano Babu Sunuwar and Lakpa Tsheri Sherpa are discussing cloud patterns and wind direction. Earlier that afternoon Sunuwar flew tandem twice around the hills of Syangja, while Lakpa recorded a personal best solo flying time of one and a half hours. The following day, says Sunuwar, gazing at the sky, will be good for paragliding. Tomorrow's flight, from 1600 metres atop a hill in Syangja, is the domain of pretty accomplished paragliders, but it really doesn't compare to what the duo did about eight months ago.

In May last year, Sunuwar and Lakpa summited the world's highest mountain, paraglided down and then paddled all the way down from Nepal to the Bay of Bengal. Right, let's go through that again: climb 8,848 metres, create a world record by paragliding at 8,865m, and land in Namche Bazaar, the gateway to the high Himalaya, after flying cross-country for 25 km, and then spend the next six weeks hiking, flying, and kayaking 850 km on various rivers in Nepal and the Ganga in India before finally entering the ocean. Their extreme adventure sounds even madder when you consider that Sunuwar, an experienced kayaker and paraglider pilot, was not much of a mountaineer before the expedition (the Everest was his first eight-thousander), while Lakpa, who has summited Everest thrice, doesn't know how to swim. Sitting around a burning fire at his paragliding resort that will start operating from April, Sunuwar points to his chain-smoking friend and says, "I trusted his mountaineering skills, he had faith in my paragliding and water skills."

For the record, only three other people have flown off the summit of Everest. The first such successful attempt was made by French alpinist Jean Marc Boivin in 1988. Twelve years later Claire Roche-Bernier and Roche Bertrand flew tandem from the summit.

As a child in Ramechep in central Nepal, Sunuwar, 28, used umbrellas to jump off trees. So the first time he saw a "foreigner flying with the help of some ropes and glider", he knew he had to do it. A rafting guide and kayaker since 15, Sunuwar chose to work part-time at a paragliding school named Blue Star in Pokhara. It was here, about two years ago, that Lakpa, 37, first met his future expeditionist. The former had come to the school to buy a glider after spectacularly crashing his previous one into a tree. If Lakpa was a skilled mountaineer, he was not very good at flying despite spending much time and money in trying to get better at it. But he had always harboured a dream: to fly from



Lakpa (left) and Sunuwar at the latter's paragliding school in Syangja



Atop Everest

atop a mountain. When they both got talking, Sunuwar realised that his recent acquaintance and he shared a common ambition. "I told him that we shared the same dream," says Sunuwar. The two hit it off and in about two months it was decided that Lakpa would help Sunuwar get to the world's highest point, and the latter would help him fly from there. Of course, it didn't end there. Sunuwar also

wanted to kayak to a lower base. His dream had another episode: to keep travelling after they made a touchdown and journey from summit to sea. Lakpa says he thought the plan was incredibly crazy, but naturally, he promptly agreed.

Lakpa and Sunuwar started planning for their expedition in February last year. If Sunuwar exhausted all his savings,

SANO BABU SUNUWAR & LAKPA TSHERI SHERPA; BIBEK BHANDARI



The duo paddled around 850 km from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal



Sunuwar and team were robbed in West Bengal but they subsisted on wild fruits and kept going

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Lakpa says he sold his land in his ancestral village to fund the trip. (A permit to climb Everest costs about \$40,000 (Rs 20 lakh).) They also worked their contacts and friends in the adventure industry who either part-funded their adventure or helped them in sourcing their gear. A month later the only

thing that eluded them was permission from the government of Nepal to paraglide from Everest. As summer approached and their tryst with the mountain drew closer they decided to show their middle finger to the bureaucratic red tape and fly anyway. "We could have never done what we did if we had waited for permission from the government," says Sunuwar.

After spending a week acclimatising in and around Namche Bazaar, the duo started their ascent of the mountain in the first week of May along the classic South Col route. But Sunuwar, unacquainted with the altitude, found the going tough.

"When you see the mountains in a photograph, you wish to be there and imagine of heaven," says Sunuwar. "But the struggle to get up there is killing." They camped at the Everest Base Camp at 5,364m and then made their way to Camp 1 (6,065m) and Camp 2

(6,500m). "I knew it was difficult for him at Camp 2. I could tell from experience," says Lakpa, who especially remembers a scary night on Camp 2 when the wind howled right till dawn.

"I didn't know if it was 5,000m or 8,000m, so I wasn't scared to be honest. We were never scared. And what would I have done even if I were scared?" says Sunuwar. Sensing his friend's nervousness on those rarefied heights, Lakpa says he made every effort to get him to relax. He sung songs and cracked jokes as they made their way up the mountain. A recurring favourite on those icy heights, says Sunuwar, was *Gorkhali ko choro ho ma, Gorkhe mero naam*. ('I'm a son of a Gorkha, Gorkhe is my name') "He would make for an excellent comedian in the movies," says Sunuwar.

The weather deteriorated at Camp 2 and on their way up, more trouble lay in store for the two adventurers. One of their oxygen cylinders was stolen and Lakpa sacrificed most of his share of the remaining cylinder in order to ensure Sunuwar could advance without any problems. The final ascent from Camp 4 (7926m) took them over 11 hours. Finally, on May 21st, they stood on the table-top of a summit at about 8 am in the morning. Like all previous summiteers of the world's highest mountain, Sunuwar was overwhelmed by his achievement and the otherworldly view from the top, but he didn't want to be consumed by the grandeur of Everest. He had a job to do. If Lakpa had got him atop the mountain, it was now his turn to ferry his friend back down. With more than 4,600 flying hours and a cross-country paragliding flight to his credit, this was the ultimate challenge for Sunuwar. "There wasn't enough space, we had unconventional clothing (for paragliding), and we couldn't talk because of the oxygen masks," says Sunuwar. Lakpa laughs and adds, "I had three cameras but no supplemental oxygen."

But when Sunuwar lifted the glider and they floated above the world's highest mountain, Lakpa says that all their anxieties disappeared. The duo took off from the northern side of Everest, flew over the summit and then, across the Western Ridge and into the Everest basin. On their way down they also flew past the regal Nuptse (7861m) before landing at the Syangboche airstrip in the Khumbu region. If the ascent took them over a month, they flew down in barely 45 minutes. After landing in Syangboche, where they were welcomed with "beer and garlands" by a multitude of local mountaineers and paragliders, the two made their way to Lukla, near Namche Bazaar. Meanwhile Sunuwar and Lakpa's ultimate descent had attracted the attention of Nepalese mountaineering authorities who were curious about their permit-less flight

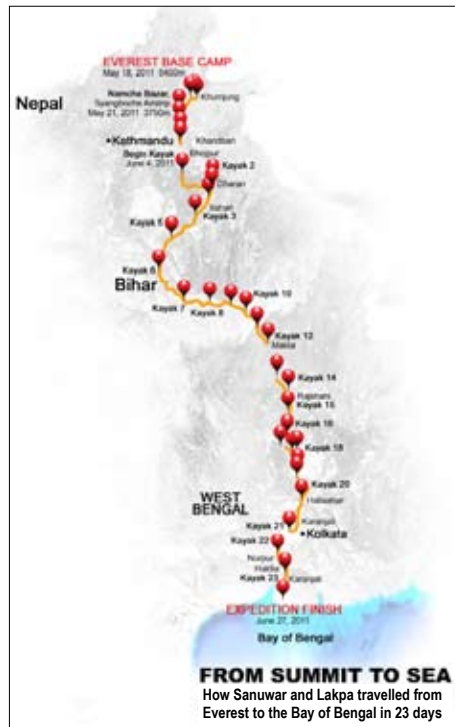


Sunuwar and Lakpa with safety boater Krishna (centre) at Sagar Island in West Bengal

from Everest. So a week after they landed, the two hurried to Khotang Bazaar near the base of the Himalayas with the police hot on their trail. At Khotang Bazaar they were joined by fellow kayaker and safety boater Krishna Sunuwar and the three adventurers set off on the Kosi, a trans-boundary river that flows between India and Nepal. The rivers in the Kosi system include the Arun, the Sun Kosi and the Bhote Kosi which originate in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China.

Once on the river Lakpa says Sunuwar told him that the river wouldn't be as difficult as the mountain, but the latter couldn't have been more wrong. Their canoes — Lakpa and Sunuwar were on a double kayak, with Krishna following them — capsized right at the first rapid. "I thought this was the end," says Sunuwar, who was caught in a whirlpool that flushed him downstream. Krishna managed to rescue Lakpa from the raging waters and paddled downstream in search of Sunuwar and on locating him, they headed back upstream and spent an hour extricating the canoe. "I was shivering after I was out of the water—don't know if it was the cold or I was just too scared," says Lakpa. The trio was dunked in the Sun Khoi river innumerable times. They lost their paddles and their bearings and were swept downstream for kilometres, but they managed to hang on to their lives.

The three friends paddled across to India in the second week of June and found the Ganga to be the very anti-thesis of the manic Koshi. The currents were sluggish, the heat was enervating and there were



false channels all around them. Lakpa, who claims to smoke cigarettes right up till 28,000 feet, was laid low by the humidity. "I suffocated in the heat, I couldn't breathe." But they paddled on, through Bihar, Jharkand and across West Bengal. They saw partially cremated bodies floating on the water, were forced to haul their kayaks over land to avoid venal police officials at checkpoints along the river, subsisted on fruits growing along the banks, were attacked by the first showers of the torrential Indian monsoon and were robbed at knifepoint at Farakka in

AT KHOTANG BAZAAR THEY WERE JOINED BY KRISHNA, AND THE TRIO SET OFF ON THE KOSI, A TRANS-BOUNDARY RIVER THAT FLOWS BETWEEN INDIA AND NEPAL AND IS KNOWN FOR ITS GRADE 5 RAPIDS

West Bengal. Sunuwar says the thieves took most of their money and their cellphones but he managed to keep the cameras safe, and then contacted a friend abroad who wired them enough cash to complete the journey and head back. The three friends paddled past the big cities of Barrackpore and Kolkata, navigating their way around queries from police officials and the attention from curious onlookers, and finally entered the Sundarban in the third week of June. Then, three days after exiting Kolkata, they tasted the salty water of the Bay of Bengal. Lakpa, the accomplished mountaineer, Sunuwar, the expert paraglider, and Krishna, the skilled kayaker, stood at the edge of the ocean and let out whoops of joy.

Hanuman Airlines, a 29-minute film by Hamilton Pevec on Sunuwar and Lakpa's amazing adventure, won the Golden Icarus prize at the Coupe Icare flying film festival in France in September last year.