

SIACHEN PEACE PARK

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We were staying in army bunkers at base camp on the Siachen Glacier. In the next room I could hear my son, Nawang, then a young man of 20 years, talking with equally young lieutenants and captains of the Indian army. They were discussing their exploits on the glacier, the war and agitatedly talking about the friends being wounded and killed all around them. One well-meaning officer pointedly said to me as I entered the room to join the discussion, "I am ready to fight for my country and defend the Siachen. But sir, I am young and I do not want my children and grandchildren sitting on this high forlorn Saltoro ridge defending the Siachen Glacier. Why can't we have some solution to this wretched problem?" Another young officer added, "Look at the glacier a pristine mountain area which has been polluted almost beyond repair. It will take decades, if not a century for the glacier to rejuvenate. Something must be done". These youthful, well-meaning and dedicated officers of the Indian army left a seed of an idea in my mind. This world was a legacy for the young, an area like Siachen belonged to them. They were ready to guard it with their life, they meant well. My son, excited with the prospect of defending the country with other young officers, worked hard and joined the Indian army as a Gorkha Officer. Soon thereafter he fell to a terrorist bullet in this bloody war in Kashmir. The seed of an idea became a *raison d'être* of my life...I began to work on a proposal for peace on the Siachen Glacier.

Mountains have traditionally been haven for people seeking peace and spiritual solace. Nowhere has this been more so than in the Himalaya. It is ironical than that it is in the Himalaya, or to be more exact in the Karakoram, that a bitter and deadly, heroic but absurd conflict is being fought. Now for 20 long years armed forces of India and Pakistan have fought for the control of the Saltoro ridge which guards the Siachen Glacier towards its west. This is the highest battlefield in the world and India occupies the entire Siachen Glacier but at a great price.

The history of the glacier is long. Sir Francis Younghusband first looked at it in 1887 followed by Dr. Tom Longstaff, the intrepid British explorer who approached it from two different directions in 1910 and established its true extent. Dr. Fanny Bullock-Workmen with her husband William, visited the glacier on two long trips in 1911 and 1912, climbed peaks, surveyed the area and stood on the northernmost point of the glacier which she named as the Indira Col. Prof. Daineli, the Italian scientific explorer camped on the glacier on 1930 and returned by a new pass to the east which he named Col Italia. After a visit to the Terong valley, a subsidiary valley of the Siachen in the east by Dr. Ph. C. Visser, the Dutch explorer in 1935, the glacier was left alone for a long time, except few visits possibly by the intelligence parties from India. Political agreements between India and Pakistan from 1949 till 1972 left the delineation of the Siachen Glacier very vague. The Shimla Agreement of 1972 demarcated the boundary lines till a point known as "Grid point NJ9842" near the Shyok river and beyond that left it with a vague statement "and thence north to the

glaciers". There was neither habitation or nor troops in the desolate area and there was no compulsion to be more precise. This vague definition – or more precisely the lack of it – had caused no problem till then. These five vague words became a ticking time bomb which led to the long war.

It was mountaineering expeditions that brought matters to a head. Pakistan began organising and permitting expeditions to the Siachen area consisting of foreign nationalities but always accompanied by military officers as liaison officers. These expeditions, particularly from Japan, starting from Pakistan, crossed over from the Bilafond La and climbed high peaks like Teram Kangri, Singhi Kangri, Apsarasas and others. These were magnificent climbs, exploratory in nature and difficult in ascent. But with Pakistani flag with the Japanese flag flying on each and every peak that was climbed, they were also making a political statement. This *ad hoc* control via mountain climbing was a very different ball game and a different *modus operandi* from the famous 'Great Game', which has been played for centuries in the Karakoram valleys. Despite living in Switzerland and abroad for most of his life Aamir has retained his Indian passport proudly with commitment to his country of origin. This is how prejudices work.

India sent two of its own army expeditions in 1978 and 1981, both led by Col. N. Kumar (retired then) which also climbed peaks and reconnoitred the area from a military viewpoint. Both the countries interpreted "thence north to the glaciers", including the Siachen and Saltoro ridge, according to their perceived interests. Finally an expedition authorised by Pakistan with the Japanese mountaineers was to cross over to extreme east of the Siachen to climb peak Rimo I. This cartographic and physical extension would have literally linked up valleys with the eastern trade route, which runs along the Chinese border across the Karakoram Pass. Pakistan was already publishing maps through western sources, drawing a line from NJ9842 to Karakoram Pass, which would have ceded large areas to Pakistan, particularly backed up by the *de facto* mountaineering claims. The Indian army landed on the glacier on 13th April 1984 to prevent this expedition from proceeding further and there were reports that Pakistan may occupy the glacier soon. "Guns and Roses" announced headlines in the Indian press - the glacier war had begun. The Siachen Glacier named after roses, (Sia in Balti means a rose) was from now on to witness bitter fighting and the sound of artillery guns booming.

It was a very different war that Indian soldiers began to fight. There was no enemy to be seen face to face, except for sporadic incidences. It was mountains and the harsh environment, which were the real enemies. Mere existence at those heights is an incredible hardship. The base camp is at 3600 m and there are some army posts with heights up to 6700 m. 97% of the casualties have been due to altitude and weather, rather than enemy action. In winters the temperature dips to well below minus 40° C, blizzards can blow over 150 km per hour and crevasses claim regular victims. To sustain at this altitudes, the army had to bring in supplies, kerosene and other fighting gear by helicopter. The Indian army has the highest helipad, dropping zone and the highest telephone booth in the world on this glacier.

For Pakistan things are easier, their base camp being more accessible at 2750 m and their advance posts at lower altitudes. It has become a political imperative to establish a post on the Salto ridge as they do not overlook or own an inch of the Siachen glacier. It has been equally imperative for India to prevent this. This has led to heroic battles, the most dramatic one being in 1987 when, in a daring mountaineering exploit, using fixed ropes and ladders, Pakistan established a post on the Salto ridge, 'Quaid post'. In an equally heroic challenge, this post was captured by a volunteer force of 60 men from the Indian side. It was named the 'Bana Post' in honour of Naik Subedar Bana Singh who led the final ascent. The sea-saw continued and the toll both in terms of men and environment, mounted. The pollution and degradation of the environment resulting from thousands of men living here is appalling. The mountains of cans, drums, fuel containers, oil and lubricants, tetra packs of fruit juice, aluminium packaging, medical waste can neither be burned nor destroyed, nor has it ever been possible to take back. And imagine the amount of human waste which does not decay at this height, -- 20 years on the glacier an average at least 800 people creating 100 gms a day! All this garbage and waste will end up in the Nubra, which flows into the Shyok into the Indus on the waters of which millions depend. The Himalaya is the water tower of Asia and to juggle with the environment is to gamble with the lives of the millions.

It was in this situation that we started working for a proposal for Trans-boundary Peace Park. This would ultimately enable both the armies to withdraw in conditions of honour and dignity and it would not prejudice their positions in Kashmir as a whole. It would stop further degradation of a magnificent mountain area, save hundreds of lives, billions of rupees and possibly give an indicator to solve the Kashmir imbroglio.

Boundary Parks are not a new idea. The first one, Waterton Glacier International Peace Park between Canada and US was established 70 years ago and today there are 169 such parks, involving 113 countries. Several of these trans-boundary parks are specifically designated as Peace Parks, which are intended to provide a peaceful solution to a conflict or a potential conflict or rehabilitation of an area after a conflict. In Asia and around India the concept of trans-boundary parks is well known for there are parks between India and Bhutan, India and Nepal, Pakistan and China and Nepal and China. There has been a dramatic increase in trans-boundary parks in the recent years, a demonstration of their viability and usefulness. In 1988 there were 50 parks as against 169 today. There are plans for few more trans-boundary parks.

One very strong supporter and mover of this idea was Aamir Ali who lived in Geneva and having worked for the United Nations, knew how to approach this matter. We prepared brief notes and plans and sent it to various officials and organisations in India and Pakistan. But with these countries at the height of war in the 1990s, our proposals hit a blank wall. When I met one of the senior secretaries in the Government of India, he dismissed the idea with contempt and even raised the usual Indian question, 'why is a foreigner and a Muslim (Aamir Ali) interested in the Siachen Glacier?' Despite living in Switzerland and abroad for most of his life Aamir has retained his Indian passport proudly with commitment to his country of origin. This is how prejudices work. Officials refused to listen to my pleas, suggesting that all

I could do was to file a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court. Fortunately the Indian army was more open to this idea. Today most of the senior officers are in know of this plan and supportive of it. Of course, without their political masters deciding in the matter no further aims can be achieved, at least in India.

The political tranquillity and climate again changed and stopped all rounds of negotiations between India and Pakistan. Finally on 13th December 2001, armed militants attacked the Indian Parliament and the troops were moved. The countries were on the brink of war. One had to keep the hope that situations change, people change and the dawn always comes only after the darkest period. And we waited for dawn on the Siachen. Positive signs seemed to emerge as the idea was kept alive.

I saw further signs of hope. First was at the Banff Film Festival in Canada where I could interact with a group of senior IUCN representatives. They seemed interested and we formed a small committee. With their contacts in Pakistan, we could carry the matter to the right quarters there too. But the advice from both the Governments was to keep the issue open, lie low and push it gently. That's what we kept on doing. In 2001, the area of Aletsch, the longest glacier in the Alps, was designated as a World Heritage site. We thought, why not aim for the same for the longest glacier in the Himalaya? Major support from UIAA (Union International des Associations Alpinistes, (International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation), which looks at interests of mountaineers worldwide). gave a major fillip to the Siachen Peace Park proposal, which in collaboration with the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature, supported by many governments and with offices world-wide) started taking keen interest in the matter. The UIAA supported and organised a 'Summit Climb' in the Alps where Indian and Pakistani mountaineers would participate together. And so it was two of us from India and two climbers from Pakistan teamed up in Geneva and stood on the summit of the Monch peak. On the summit, perhaps for the first time in several years, flags of India and Pakistan were unfurled together on any mountain in the world signifying that we mountaineers and environmentalist appeal together for peace in the mountains, a fact particularly significant in the 'International Year of Mountains' in 2002.

No sooner, Indian and Pakistani mountaineers met in Geneva, we realised how much we had in common at a people to people level; we spoke the same language we had the same tastes in music, we had same interests (Nazir, a cricket buff like me, kept suggesting, to the former President of Switzerland, 'Sir lets play cricket between our two nations, even before we climb mountains'). There was a strong desire for all of us to visit each other's countries. We realised that it was only political differences that kept us apart. At no time during the climb, tied to the same rope, did it matter to me that my companion was a Pakistani or a Muslim and to him that I was an Indian or a Hindu- our lives depended on each other.

Several recent developments have led the world community, specially the mountain lovers, to pay attention to solving the conflict and lend help to rejuvenate the glacier. This includes the Italian Ev-K2-CNR Committee's proposal to push for a Siachen Peace Park as part of its commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of

K2 and at the World Parks Congress in Durban in September 2003. Talks were held after a long time between India and Pakistan to discuss various issues, specially the Siachen. This was in March 2004 and we hoped that perhaps situation would turned for the better. And – India and Pakistan played cricket in March 2004 after more than a decade ! But soon, it was one step forward and two steps backward scenarios and today we are still hostile neighbours and do not play cricket with each other.

At present, armed military men still face each other across the ridges of the Siachen. On both sides of the line of control, it is said that to honour the blood of brave soldiers that has been spilled, not an inch of territory should be given up. One could say even with more force that the sacrifice of brave men could best be honoured by protecting this spectacular mountain area consecrated by their sacrifice. Again the wheels of peace are moving positively and there is a complete ceasefire in fighting in Kashmir and particularly on the heights of the Siachen for last few months. If the peace returns, the concept of the trans-boundary peace park would fit well in giving a positive dimension to the process. It would work not only towards disengagement, but towards the creation of a park to protect the environment to allow the ibexes and snow leopards to roam, the wild roses to grow and the mountaineers to return to the Siachen Glacier. A majestic area of mountain landscape redolent with the romance of early exploration deserves the best. Our youth, be they soldier or civilian, Pakistani or Indian, they deserve to enjoy such an area .

‘We are nations linked by Himalayan geography. Nations, which do not understand and respect geography are condemned by history. Governments and people of both countries should realise that there is a humanity that binds us together. Whatever our game, and whichever our side of the fence’. (From Acceptance Speech by Harish Kapadia at the ‘Patron’s (Royal) Medal’ award by the Royal Geographical Society).

Peace is achieved by Confidence Building Measures, with no scope for display of one up-manship. Unfortunately, we too were victims of this narrow mindedness. When our flags were unfurled on the summit, my companion gently nudged me and whispered, *Apna flag jara uncha kar de* (Raise our Indian flag a little higher!).

With peace returning to the glacier, there are several proposals to clean up the glacier (involvement of world community and its finances are a very distinct possibility) and there is a proposal that civilian mountaineers from both sides could walk up the glacier from their respective fences and shake hands at the border pass, unfurl their own national flags. A dream ?

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editor of the Himalayan Journal for 30 years. His first visit to the Himalaya was almost 50 years ago. His main contribution to Himalayan climbing has been to explore unknown areas and, in number of cases, to open up climbing possibilities. His son Lt Nawang Kapadia, who was commissioned on September 2, 2000 in the Fourth Battalion the Third Gorkha Rifles, died while fighting Pakistan based terrorists in the jungles of Rajwar in Kupwara district of Srinagar on 11 November 2000. Since then he has taken to lecturing about this conflict, particularly in the Siachen Glacier. He has been discussing a proposal for a peace park for Siachen and cleaning up the environmental damage there. He has written a book on the subject : "The Battle of Roses: Siachen Glacier". He has trekked and climbed on the Siachen Glacier four times, including a full traverse of the Glacier from snout to its head at Indira Col. He can be reached at Email: harikaps@gmail.com. www.harishkapadia.com and www.nawang.com.