

Nilkanth Expedition 2007

An Expedition sponsored by The Himalayan Club,
organised by Kolkata Section

Report by Jagdish Nanavati

Ombudsman
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1. The leader AVM (Retd.) Apurba Kumar Bhattacharyya, of the H. C. Nilkanth expedition 2007, has clearly revealed that the 11 climber summit party has not reached the highest point 6596 m on Nilkanth, which the two previous expeditions, one in 2000 led by Martin Moran and another in 2001 led by Marko Prezelj had reached. The leader of H.C. 2007 expedition in his description of the climb as well as markings of final location reached on the West ridge and other features clearly shown on a photograph, which leads one to the above conclusion. These indicate that the mountain was left unclimbed of the last nearly 200 m in length and about 100 odd meters in height, although no accurate figures could be determined from the information available.
2. The leader repeatedly reiterated that his summit party had reached the "Summit" and the ascent of Nilkanth was made in 2007 by his expedition. This proclamation is based on his incorrect perception of the Summit of Nilkanth as a ridge containing 1st, 2nd and 3rd cornices at the same level connected to the Southern slope.

The leader has furnished a photograph showing the spot where the summiters had reached. He has marked the spot with a triangle and captioned it as –

“SHOULDER RIDGE OF THE 2ND CORNICE (MARKED)”

On another print of the same photo is captioned:

“11 JUNE 2007 – 1431 HRS SUMMIT RIDGE WITH 2ND CORNICE”

(See Photo No.1 and 2)

In support of the same spot being the "Summit", he has attached a photo from the Slovenian expedition (2001) of the same location with caption –

“SHOULDER OF 2ND CORNICE RIDGE (MARKED)”
“SLOVENIAN CLIMBER (2001) ON WAY OF SUMMIT”
(See Photo No.3)

Notice the Slovenian climber and the further extent of rising Southern snow slope with rocks seen higher up beyond. The rectangle mark was not the end of the climb as suggested.

This Rectangle marked location was taken as the summit by the 2007 climbers where they took group photos. All the eleven summiteers had confirmed to the leader that there was no higher point seen except for the 10-12 m high cornices on either side which the leader advised them on wireless to avoid climbing.

The spot was reached at 1407 hrs by the first climber Debraj. The climbers stayed there up to 1530 hrs. However the weather was cloudy which preventing taking any clear photos of the views around, except for the group photos. It was stated by the leader that their summit was on the ridge between 1st cornice and 2nd cornice on the "summit ridge".

3. In support and clarification of the above position, the leader has sent two photos, one taken by the Slovenian Expedition (2001) and another by Martin Moran (2000) (See *Photo No.4 & 5* respectively).

On *Photo No.4* the leader has shown –

- a) "FINAL ROUTE TO SUMMIT"
- b) "POINT REACHED BY DEBRAJ"
- c) "FIRST CORNICE"
- d) "HC CALCUTTA SUMMIT POINT"
- e) "SECOND CORNICE"

Similarly on *Photo No.5* the leader has marked –

- a) "DEBRAJ ON FIRST CORNICE SLOPE"
- b) "HC SUMMIT POINT"
- c) "SECOND CORNICE"
- d) "THIRD CORNICE"
- e) "MORAN'S SUMMIT SLOPE"

It will be observed that Slovenian *Photo No.4* is taken from a higher slope on the West ridge, and "HC CALCUTTA SUMMIT POINT" is distinctly lower than the camera location.

The same conclusion can be drawn from Moran's *Photo No.5*. "HC SUMMIT POINT" is far lower and at considerable distance from the camera location.

4. Now examine both photos carefully. One comes to the inescapable conclusion that the location of "HC SUMMIT POINT" is much lower in altitude than the Photo locations in *Photo No.4 and 5* of 2001 and 2000 Expeditions respectively. The "Moran Pix" (*Photo No.5*) shows the " First ", " Second " and " Third " Cornices. The "First Cornice " is obviously not in level of the camera location. Notice the larger top area of this cornice seen as compared to the Second Cornice which appears to be in level with the camera location on "Moran's Summit Slope". From the arrow point on top of " SECOND CORNICE " the snow line appears in level. The Second Cornice is

supported by broad snow shoulder which is much higher than the spot of “HC SUMMIT POINT”.

5. Similar conclusion can be drawn from the “SLOVENIAN PIX”. Here one Slovenian climber is shown traversing the Southern Snow slope of the Shoulder leading to the Second Cornice overhanging on the North face of Nilkanth.
6. Despite these photographic evidences the 11 Summitters of 2007 party had stated to the leader on walkie-talkie that there was no higher point over their location on the “Summit ridge” reached by them, except for the “10-12 m” high 1st and 2nd Cornices which rose on both sides to their final point and where group photos were taken. This misconception may be due to the location being in the shadow of the Second Cornice and its broad shoulder which would prevent any view towards the east, along the continuation of the West ridge etc. Cloudy weather may have aggravated visibility.
7. It may be noted that climbing beyond the “HC SUMMIT POINT” was accomplished by climbers of 2000 and 2001 expeditions, as illustrated by the two photos (*No.4 & 5*) sent by the leader with his letter dated 23-1-2009.
8. Despite the positions revealed by *Photo Nos.1, 2, 3, 4 and 5*, what is the basis of leader terming the HC expedition’s “summit point” to be the 6596 m summit of Nilkanth?

Leader has interpreted that including the First Cornice, the Second and Third cornices are at the highest altitude of 6596 m summit of Nilkanth and are in one level on the somewhat undulating summit ridge. As per his concept, reaching any point in between the cornices is as good as climbing the summit of Nilkanth.

Thus in reply to my query he has no hesitation to state –

“Moran and HC team did not reach the same point on summit. In fact Moran went over the shoulder of the second cornice, descended down the eastern slope of the second cornice & traversed northern slope of the third cornice, thus avoiding all three cornices to reach the slope which he considered as the summit on the eastern end of the summit ridge. The HC team on the other hand was on the eastern slope of the first cornice which lies on the western end of the same summit ridge”

The leader’s concept of the summit ridge is illustrated by *Fig 1*.

The summit concept as per *Fig.1* is revealed on the basis of following statements by the leader:

The leader contends that all the three cornices were on the summit ridge itself and have the same altitude being on the summit of Nilkanth, i.e. 6596 m.

He writes:

a) "The first cornice is on the summit ridge itself, whereas the west ridge ends short of the summit ridge" (Sr.No.4& 5, letter dated 23-1-09)

b) In reply to my query "what must be the estimated altitude of the 1st Cornice? How much 1st Cornice was below the summit?" Leader writes:

"Where is the question of the first cornice being below the summit when we perceive the entire summit ridge as the summit of Nilkanth" (Sr.No.2, letter dated 23-1-09)

He further states:

c) "The entire summit ridge of Nilkanth is true summit with cornices formed as temporary appendices which are definitely unsafe" (Sr.No. 6(e), letter dated 23-1-09)

And finally he writes:

d) "I am attaching still shots (Marked No.5) of Moran's Film ... and also one Photo (Marked 4) of the Slovenian expedition, which will help in getting a better perspective of the summit area". (Sr.No.10, letter dated 23-1-09)

In the opinion of the leader Cornices 1, 2 & 3 were on the "Summit ridge". In answer to another query he estimates the length of the "Summit ridge" to be 74 m, within which all the three Cornices were situated. He also adds that the Summit ridge of Nilkanth is undulating with marked depression between Cornices. The Cornices are connected by ridges towards Southern Slope. There is no pinpoint top on Nilkanth.

Now examine the markings given by the leader on "Slovenian Pix" (*Photo No.4*):

"Final route to the summit" is shown by dotted red line terminating near the edge of the ridge, at the Western base of the "Second Cornice", which too is so marked on this photo, and thus identified the spot as "HC Calcutta Summit Point". Just below and in front of the "First Cornice" is marked a spot with words: "Point reached by Debraj".

9. I now attach following three photos – one from Martin Moran and the other two from Solvenian Marko Prezelj's expedition:

The *Photo No.6* has been taken by Moran looking down the West Ridge from the South Slope of West ridge above the Cornice seen in the lower half of the photo. It may be further noticed that Balakun 6471 m is visible in the upper mid area in this

photo. Cloud covers some part of Satopanth Glacier and a small part is visible below the lower reaches of Balakun.

It should be obvious that the 2nd cornice seen is much lower than the camera location. Now AVM (Retd.) A. K. Bhattacharyya contends 1st, 2nd and 3rd on the west ridge are part of the "Summit of Nilkanth". "On the ground, the ridge is undulated with marked depression between cornices. The cornices are connected by ridges towards Southern slope."

By implication all the cornices are having an altitude of the 6596 m summit of Nilkanth.

10. Now once again notice the "Slovenian Pix" and Moran's *Photo No.4 and No.6* here. Observe the group of rocks jutting out from the Southern snow slopes of the West ridge in both the photos. In *Photo No.6* notice the rocks jutting out on the snow slope at left bottom. Compare them to those in *Photo No.4*. For ease of reference images of these rocks in both the photos are enlarged in two *Photos No.7 & 8*. Each identifiable rocks and snow spaces are marked on both to show the common identity of location shown.

11. The leader's statements and detailed markings on Slovenian's Photo No.4 clearly indicates the "HC Summit Point" on Moran's *Photo No.6*.

Now notice the line of steps on the rising snow slope (50° or so?) and two members of Moran's party following the same in *Photo No.6*.

12. As per the HC leader's report he had rightly instructed from Base Camp that the summit party to avoid climbing any of the cornices. However here is another evidence of rising snow slope away from the corniced snow edge being higher than the "HC Summit Point", which higher slope was left unclimbed towards the true summit.

13. Moran's Photo No.6 clearly dispels any notion of considering cornices 1 (hidden behind No 2 cornice) & 2 to be to be on one level with the summit as the photo shows a downward line of sight to the Satopanth glacier. If these cornices were in one level on the summit of Nilkanth, the line of sight from East to West would not lead to Satopanth glacier but to hit the mountain of Chaukhamba.

(See Fig 2)

Only if the cornices are situated on the inclining West ridge would the line of sight connecting the cornices in this section would lead to Satopanth glacier.

(See Fig 3)

Simple trigo exercise of the data shows an average degree of this line of sight to Satopanth Glacier to be about 27 degrees.

(See Fig 4).

14. A. K. Bhattacharyya contends that based on Google earth photo "the summit ridge spans 74 m approximately between two end points of the ridge. On the ground the ridge is undulating with marked depression between cornices. The cornices are connected by ridges towards southern slope. There is no pin point

top on Nilkanth ". The HC Climber's route is marked to reach the east end of this summit ridge where the First and Second cornices are presumed located.

By implication, from 1st to 3rd cornices and connecting ridges would be within a span of 74 m (horizontally).

Martin Moran had estimated the final ridge, beyond the 3rd cornice to be at least 100 m in length which they had physically traversed across the North Face to the West end where the true summit is. To this may be added the length distance down to the 1st cornice (*See Photo 4 & 5*).

The two points marked by the leader on Google image may be 74 m approximately but there is no evidence to show that this span includes the three cornices etc as claimed by the leader.

15. From the examination of the photographs of 2007 Expedition and of others, it should be obvious that the H.C. 2007 Climbers had not reached the 6596 m true summit of Nilkanth.

Let us now turn to the summit Climb description of the 2007 HC Expedition in comparison with that of Martin Moran, seen with his other photographs and those of Slovenian Expedition of Marko Prezelj.

16. Route followed by HC Expedition is depicted on a sketch on an unnumbered page before Page 89 of the "*Nilkanth Souvenir*". The route on the lower section of the West ridge passes over rocky faces, towers and gullies and sides of buttresses. Goutam Ghosh the climbing leader, informed the leader that they were not sure of their position as they could not see anything ahead of them due to total whiteout. After checking the bearings of Parvati & Chaukhamba which was seen clearly, the leader gave the location as 5900 m and about 200 m below the snow slope. They decided to camp here. Next day on 11-6-2007 the group left camp at 0130 hours. The route proceeded over steep snow / ice faces with some crevasses. Steepness was of 45 to 55 degrees. (See Route mark on *Fig 5*) At 0930 hours all members reached an altitude of 6150m. The climb further was on the south slope along the West Ridge. (See red markings on *Photo No.4* showing the final route and the point reached by Debraj at a location below the east side of the 1st cornice) . It was at this spot that the leader directed Debraj not to proceed to the top of the First cornice. Thus Debraj proceeded along the West ridge to reach the West side of Second cornice and declared as having reached the summit. Time 1407 hrs. He advised the leader that he saw the Golden Dome of Badrinath temple but could not take a photo due to cloud cover thereafter. The next climber joined Debraj after nearly half an hour and others slowly trickled in. Weather conditions had become cloudy. After a photo session the climbers started the descent at 1530 hours. They were benighted on the return.
17. In reply to my queries the leader stated that Debraj could reach the summit alone from the southern snow slope as the gradient was of approximately 40 degrees with knee deep snow.
18. After negotiating the rocky area of the lower West ridge Moran's party made Camp III at 6150 m on the upper West ridge from where the summit ridge rose in a series of open slopes and risers. After an initial riser, the crest eased back, then made a second sweep up to a shoulder, at which point a massive snow meringue, some 80 meters high and overhanging the north face in a curling cornice. Upon climbing to a levelling Moran saw 100 meters of horizontal ridge beyond which was formed the summit of the mountain. Two climbers went up to the ridge but reported it to be knife-edge with slopes on both side estimated at seventy

degrees. The highest point is at the far end where there is a cornice. They must have been five metres lower, but there was no way they could traverse the crest to get to it. Moran decided to give a try to climb to the summit diagonally across a steep slope on the North face, under the edge to gain the true summit. Thus Moran clambered down over the West ridge onto the North face and traversed to the crest of the knife - edge ridge just before the final summit and after a final traverse of 15 metres he clambered on the crowning point of Nilkanth. His three other companions joined him shortly being belayed by Moran. It must be noted that Martin Moran's climb was to the true summit of Nilkanth. The location attained by HC Expedition was situated far below on the West ridge as seen from the *Photo Nos. 4, 5 & 6*.

Martin Moran has sent a photo of himself on the summit after traversing the final ridge. *Photo No.9*. Notice the footprints on the summit snows behind the right knee position.

Another photo of Moran's team while climbing down from the summit is *Photo No.10*.

The Second cornice is marked 'g' behind which the HC Climbers found their "summit terminus". Compare this photo with that of "Slovenian Pix" *No. 4*. Two climbers are in the process of descending and then climbing up to the broad shoulder of cornice "f" and then go down over the south slope of the West ridge.

19. And finally two more *Photos No.11 & No.12* are attached from Slovenian Expedition of Marko Prezelj. *Photo No.11* is showing the pointed summit of Nilkanth being approached by Marko. Notice the pyramid shape of the summit with steep snow / ice faces. This contradicts AVM (Retd) Bhattacharyya's contention, "There is no pin point top on Nilkanth". This photo illustrates the description of "knife edge" summit ridge given by Martin Moran. *Photo No.12* by Marko Prezelj shows vividly the same knife edge ridge running across the Photo and in rear the two higher Cornices whose shoulders were not even traversed by the H.C. climbers of 2007. They found their summit below the second cornice, behind the image of the lower one in *Photo No.12*.
20. It is an admitted fact by the leader and from photo evidences that H.C. climbers had not reached the highest point of Nilkanth, which was reached by Moran and Marko's expeditions of 2000 & 2001. However in order to justify their claim of ascent the leader of H.C. Expedition 2007 has attempted an ingenious device of declaring the whole ridge containing the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cornices being at the same elevation as the final peak on the east end !

CONCLUSION

In mountaineering sport an ascent of a mountain is when the apex is climbed. Accordingly H.C. Expedition 2007 cannot claim to have climbed Nilkanth 6596 m.