

Příloha – text originálu

Deliverance From 27,000 Feet

Five Sherpas surrounded the frozen corpse. They swung axes at the body's edges, trying to pry it from its icy tomb. They knocked chunks of snow from the body, and the shattered pieces skittered down the mountain. When they finally freed a leg and lifted it, the entire stiff and contorted body shifted, down to its fingertips.

The sun was shining, but the air was dangerously cold and thin at 27,300 feet above sea level. A plume of snow clouded the ridge toward the summit of Mount Everest, so close above. When the Sherpas arrived — masks on their faces, oxygen tanks on their backs — the only movement on the steep face came from the dead man's frayed jacket pockets. They were inside out and flapping in the whipping wind.

More than a year of exposure to the world's wickedest elements had blackened and shriveled the man's bare face and hands. His hydrant-yellow summit suit had dulled to the hue of a fallen leaf. The bottom of his boots pointed uphill. His frozen arms were bent at the elbows and splayed downhill over his head. It was as if the man sat down for a rest, fell backward and froze that way.

The Sherpas picked at the body and used gestures and muffled words to decide how best to move it off the mountain. The ghoulish face and bone-white teeth scared them, so they covered the head with the jacket's hood.

There was no time to linger. That altitude is called the "death zone" for good reason. The Sherpas knew from experience how difficult it was to scale the world's highest mountain. The only thing more daunting might be to haul a dead body back down.

The man's name was Goutam Ghosh, and the last time anyone saw him alive was on the evening of May 21, 2016, when it was obvious that he would become another fatality statistic, soon frozen and as inanimate as the boulders around him.

Ghosh was a 50-year-old police officer from Kolkata, part of a doomed eight-person expedition — four climbers from the Indian state of West Bengal and four Sherpa guides from Nepal — that ran out of time and oxygen near the top of Everest. The four Bengali climbers were eventually abandoned by their guides and left to die. Three did; only one, a 42-year-old woman named Sunita Hazra, survived, as did the guides.

At the time of the tragedy, the climbing season for Everest was almost over. On their way to the summit over the next two nights, the last two dozen of the year's climbers had come upon Ghosh's rigid corpse on a steep section of rock and ice.

To get around him, climbers and their guides, sucking oxygen through masks and double-clipped to a rope for safety, stripped off their puffy mittens. They untethered the clips one at a time, stepped over and reached around Ghosh's body, and clipped themselves to the rope above him.

Some numbly treated the body as an obstacle. Others paused to make sense of what they saw — a twisted man still affixed to the rope, reclined on the slope as if he might continue climbing after waking from his awkward slumber.

Apparently abandoned at his time of greatest need, he was a mute embodiment of their worst fears. One climber stepped on the dead man and apologized profusely. Another saw the body and nearly turned around, spooked by the thought of his own worried family back home. Another paused on his descent to hold a one-sided conversation with the corpse stretched across the route.

Who are you? Who left you here? And is anyone coming to take you home?

Mount Everest occupies a rare spot in the collective imagination — a misty mix of wonder, reverence and trepidation. Hundreds of people successfully and safely reach the summit most years and return home with inspirational tales of conquest and perseverance. Other stories detail the occasional tragedies that leave a few people dead in a typical year. Those disaster stories are now their own genre in books and film.

Where most of those stories end is where this one begins, long after hope is gone — the quiet, desperate and dangerous pursuit, usually at the insistence of a distraught family far away, to bring the dead home. The only search is for some semblance of closure.

That was why the Sherpas with their oxygen masks and ice axes had come this far, this high, more than a year later.

The four Indian climbers, from a vibrant climbing culture in West Bengal, were like so many others attempting Everest. They saw the mountain as the ultimate conquest, a bucket-list item that would bring personal satisfaction and prestige. They dreamed of it for years and made it the focus of their training. As motivation, they surrounded themselves with photographs of the mountain, from their Facebook pages to the walls of their homes.

In other ways, however, they were different. Climbing Everest is an expensive endeavor, something to be both bought and earned. Many climbers are middle-aged Westerners — doctors, lawyers and other professionals — with the kind of wealth that the group from India could not fathom. Some spend \$100,000 to ensure the best guides, service and safety.

These four climbers measured monthly salaries in the hundreds of dollars. They borrowed money and sold off possessions simply for a chance. They cut costs and corners, because otherwise Everest was completely out of reach.

Ghosh shared an apartment with eight members of his extended family. Paresh Nath, 58, was a one-handed tailor who barely scraped by with his wife and young son. Subhas Paul, 44, drove a small-goods truck and used his father's pension to pay for his Everest attempt. Hazra was a nurse, married and raising a son.

They knew one another from the climbing circles of West Bengal, connected more by their common mission than strong friendships.

About 5,000 people have reached the 29,029-foot (8,848-meter) summit of Everest at least once since Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary first did it in 1953. Nearly 300 people have died on the mountain in that period, according to the Himalayan Database, which tracks such things.

Nepal officials estimate that about 200 bodies remain scattered across Everest. A few are so familiar, so well preserved by the subfreezing temperatures, that they serve as macabre mileposts for the living, including one corpse commonly called Green Boots. Other bodies remaining on Everest include those of George Mallory, dating to his fatal attempt in 1924, and the guide Scott Fischer, part of the 1996 disaster depicted in "Into Thin Air."

Most of the bodies are far out of sight. Some have been moved, dumped over cliffs or into crevasses at the behest of families bothered that their loved ones were someone else's landmark or at the direction of Nepali officials who worry that the sight of dead bodies hinders the country's tourist trade.

More and more, however, families and friends of those who die on Everest and the world's other highest peaks want and expect the bodies to be brought home. For them and those tasked with recovering the bodies — an exercise that can be more dangerous and far more costly than the expedition that killed the climber in the first place — the drama begins with death.

When someone dies, those left behind, from climbing partners on the scene to family and friends half a world away, are immediately faced with enormously daunting decisions and tasks. The rituals, customs and logistics of what happens next are always different.

There are practical considerations, including whether to search for the bodies of those presumed missing or dead, if that is even feasible, and whether to recover the body or let it rest eternally where it is. There are emotional considerations, maybe cultural and religious ones, often in the name of closure, which can mean different things to different people. There are the wishes of the deceased, if those were ever communicated. There are logistical concerns, including danger and cost, local customs and international laws. Sometimes, in some places, recovery of a body is not just wanted, it is needed, to prove a death so that benefits can be provided to a family in desperate need of financial support.

All these things came into play after the bodies of three men from India were scattered high on Everest in 2016. The dim hopes for rescue kindled into demands for recovery, led by the West Bengal government.

Within a few days, in the short window between the last of the season's summit attempts and the start of the summer monsoon that racks the Himalayas and shuts down the climbing season until the following year, a recovery team of six hired Sherpas tried to find the deceased and carry them down. They had neither the manpower nor the time.

The first they found was Paul, the delivery driver and a part-time guitar instructor who lived with his sprawling family, including his wife and 10-year-old daughter, in the small town of Bankura. He was steps from the well-worn route below Camp 4, roughly 26,000 feet above sea level. He was faceup, but only the toes of his boots stuck out of the fresh snow. It took four hours to chip and pry him from his icy grave and another 12 to drag him to Camp 2, where a helicopter carried the body to Base Camp.

A few days later, thousands crowded Bankura's rough and narrow streets for a miles-long procession of Paul's body, which was carried on the open bed of Paul's small truck. The procession led to the banks of the Dwarakeswar River, where the body was cremated and the soul set free, according to Hindu tradition. There was heartache, but also closure.

Back on Everest, above where Paul's body was extricated, two of the Sherpas moved up to Camp 4. At roughly 26,000 feet, higher than all but about 15 of earth's peaks, it sits at the edge of the

oxygen-depleted death zone and is the last rest stop for climbers before their final push to the summit. The Sherpas searched the abandoned tents, some shredded to ribbons by wind, until they found the body of another of the missing Indian climbers. They knew it was Nath, the tailor, because he had only one hand, the other lost in a childhood firecracker accident.

Raging winds kept them from climbing any higher in search of Ghosh, and the men were called back. The summer monsoon was on the way, ending the climbing season. Everyone rushed to pack up camp and get off the mountain. Ghosh and Nath, left dead in the death zone, would remain on Everest for at least a year, and maybe forever.

The thought of Ghosh somewhere up there — alone and frozen, or maybe wandering around the Himalayas lost and crying into the wind for help — haunted his wife, his brothers, his mother and all those who lived in the cramped home off Old Calcutta Road, hundreds of miles away. Kolkata lies on the improbably flat and vast plain of the Hooghly River, a slow and wide offshoot of the Ganges in eastern India. There is nothing, not even a hill, to poke the horizon, and the thought of a mountain like Everest feels as far away as another planet.

And so his wife, Chandana, kept the vermilion sindoor in the part of her hair, and the red and white bangles on her right wrist, to indicate that she was a married woman. She would not remove them until she was certain she was a widow. She left the calendar on the wall of the bedroom turned to May 2016. In her mind, that was when time stopped.

“I still believe he is alive,” she said in her home in February. “I am not a widow. I am the married wife to Goutam Ghosh. Not a widow. Unless I see him, and we cremate him, I will not change.”

In the steel town of Durgapur, 100 miles northwest of Kolkata, Nath’s wife, Sabita, tried to move on. She and Nath were poor, even by Indian standards, and she had no money to bring the body home. She and her husband never spoke about what to do if he died, but now she convinced herself that he would want to be left on the mountain. He dreamed about Everest so much that a photo of the mountain was one of the few things that decorated the chipped concrete walls of their bedroom.

The two of them sat side by side through countless nights sewing backpacks and jackets to sell to support his quest. People in town marveled at his ability to cut and sew with just one hand, just as climbers wondered how he could navigate the ropes and harnesses used in mountaineering.

Sabita let herself imagine that she might awake and find him sitting behind his sewing machine. The couple's 9-year-old son silently pretended that nothing had happened, that his father was simply on a long trip.

That's what happens when the body is left on the mountain. Death feels like hearsay. Only the body coming through the door at home could make it something more than a haunting phantom in the imagination. Its return could bring honor and closure. It might not answer all the questions, but it could end the nightmares.

But even if it could happen, even if the bodies of Ghosh and Nath were found where they were last seen, and even if impossibly huge sums could be raised to pay to recover them, and even if there were people willing to risk their own lives on Everest to honor the dead and appease the living, nothing could happen right now. It would have to wait a year.

On the afternoon of May 20, 2016, Ghosh, Nath, Paul and Hazra anxiously rested inside a tent at Camp 4. They wore oxygen masks and bright, bulky snowsuits filled with down. They sipped tea and munched crackers. There was little chatter.

They did not know one another well, but formed a ragtag group of modestly accomplished climbers, joined by their individual desires to summit Everest and their common need for a low-budget expedition. All had spent 10 years or more saving, borrowing and raising money for an Everest expedition. They found a company popular with West Bengali climbers that charged them each about \$30,000, cheaper than other outfitters but still a daunting sum, far more than any of them dreamed of making in a year.

Adding to their desperation was that it was their third attempt in three years. Their 2014 quest was scuttled by an avalanche that killed 16 Sherpas, ending the season just as it was about to start. The 2015 season was canceled after an earthquake rocked Nepal in late April, killing nearly 9,000 people. It caused an avalanche that roared into Everest Base Camp, killing 18.

Now, finally, after weeks at Base Camp and on the lower slopes of Everest, they were within reach of the summit. If all went well, they would be back at Camp 4 within 24 hours, on their way home to India, where Everest summiters are revered as conquering heroes. "Everesters," they are called.

In the early evening, after dark and later than they had planned, they emerged from the tent, each with a guide. (Guides in the Himalayas are often called Sherpas, though not all are part of the ethnic

group of Sherpa, from which many take their surname.) The sky was clear and the moon was full. A line of headlamps slinked up the face of the mountain above them.

The summit of Everest cannot be seen from Camp 4, but much of the route can. It leads up a series of ropes, used by every Everest climber, that are tied to anchors drilled into the rock and ice and set by Sherpas at the start of the season.

The route leads across a barren ice field, sliced with deep crevasses, and shoots up a steep and rocky slope until it reaches a small flat spot, a burr on the side of the mountain. The landing is known as the Balcony, and from there it is two hours or more along the exposed, knife-edged Southeast Ridge to the South Summit — at 28,700 feet, it would be the world's second-highest peak, if it were considered separate from Everest. From the South Summit, the top of Everest finally emerges in full view, tantalizingly close up a serrated ridge.

The round-trip journey from Camp 4 takes some people less than 12 hours, and experienced guides and climbers know that it should take no more than about 18 — 12 hours up, six hours back. Most follow a rule that at a predetermined time — rarely later than noon — all climbers still moving up should retreat. Prolonged exposure is dangerous, and sometimes deadly, because of the unpredictability of afternoon weather, the limited number of oxygen bottles that can be carried and the toll caused by extreme elevation and temperatures.

A woman and two guides were the first of 74 people to reach the summit that day, at 3:36 a.m., according to the Himalayan Database. The last recorded time for climbers reaching the summit was 11 a.m.

The West Bengal expedition stood at the Balcony well after dawn, resting and taking in the majestic views of snow-covered peaks and cloud-shrouded valleys. There were four clients and only three guides because Nath's guide appeared to stay behind at Camp 4, for reasons never understood. Other climbers were already coming down, having reached the summit hours before.

The Base Camp manager for the Indian expedition received a radio call from Bishnu Gurung, the only one of the group's guides with experience reaching the summit of Everest. He said he recommended to the clients that they turn back, but they refused.

“I told them, ‘If we are still on the Balcony at 10 in the morning, how can we reach the top?’ ” Gurung said.

Ghosh cried at the prospect of giving up, Gurung later said. Paul began ascending on his own.

“I stopped there just to check if he will return back if I didn’t continue,” Lakpa Sherpa, Paul’s guide, said. “I thought he would listen to me. Sherpas can’t use force or hit him in that situation. They are our guest. All we could do is convince. As he wasn’t convinced, I followed him.”

Only Nath was persuaded to turn back to Camp 4. The three other Indian climbers persisted. The three guides joined them, carrying a dwindling amount of oxygen and a growing sense of dread.

“I thought that I won’t return back,” Lakpa Sherpa recalled.

Throughout the late morning and early afternoon, dozens who had reached the summit descended past the Indian climbers. Paul Pottinger, a Seattle doctor, reached the summit at 7:48 that morning. He wore a camera on his head to record much of his daylight descent on the rope, a one-way lane used by both those going up and coming down. Negotiating past oncoming climbers can be a slow, clumsy and dangerous exercise.

Pottinger passed Paul and his guide, Lakpa Sherpa, well below the South Summit. Lakpa Sherpa asked for the time. Pottinger lifted the sleeve of his jacket to expose his watch, visible to the camera. It was 10:23. He repeatedly told the guide that it was 10:20. He later speculated that the guide wanted Paul, his client, to hear how late it was.

“Who climbs Everest without a watch?” Pottinger said months later. “Now I wonder if he had a watch. And I wonder if he was really saying, ‘Please tell my guy to stop because I can’t.’ ”

Minutes later, Pottinger passed Pasang Sherpa, Hazra’s guide, climbing alone. At 10:45, on a particularly steep pitch at an anchor tangled in a knot of ropes, Pottinger passed a group of three: Ghosh, Gurung and Hazra.

“The timing could scarcely have been worse for all of us, jammed together at the steepest section of the day,” Pottinger wrote in an online diary of his expedition. “But they made it by and continued up. *How many more people will be headed up at this time of day? Damn it’s late.* But, as before, I said nothing to them about this. And, as before, it haunts me to this day.”

Paul and Lakpa Sherpa reached the summit at 1:45 p.m., according to the camera later recovered from Paul’s body. There were 31 photographs taken at the summit over 16 minutes.

The others in their group — Ghosh, Hazra, Nath and their guides — were somewhere below.

The last photograph of Ghosh taken with his camera appeared to be at the South Summit at 1:57 p.m. He wore an oxygen mask. He held flags and banners that he had carried in his backpack. A video recorder dangled around his neck. Ghosh turned it on.

Wind whipped through the camera's microphone, but not enough to obscure the sound of Ghosh's quick-paced breathing. It was as if Ghosh were checking himself in a mirror. With a bare hand, he lifted his sunglasses to his forehead. His eyes were bloodshot. He pulled his oxygen mask to his chin, briefly showing his teeth and his gray-speckled mustache.

"Goutam," a voice said, and Ghosh glanced in its direction, put his mask on and reached to turn off the camera. It was the last record of him alive.

Yet Gurung, Ghosh's guide, apparently kept going, alone. About 40 minutes later, he photographed himself 21 times with Ghosh's camera at what appeared to be the summit. There was no sign of Ghosh.

(Hazra, the lone survivor, said that she reached the summit at about 3 p.m. There is no evidence that she got there. She has petitioned for a summit certificate from Nepal's Department of Tourism, the arbiter of such matters, without success.)

In the area above 8,000 meters (over 26,000 feet), from Camp 4 to the summit, a dearth of oxygen and brutal weather kill those who dare stay exposed too long. As altitude increases, atmospheric pressure decreases, and with the thin air comes less oxygen for the lungs and the bloodstream.

The body tries to overcome it by sending more blood to the brain, which can cause swelling, leading to symptoms like headaches, nausea and exhaustion. At extreme heights, a condition known as high-altitude cerebral edema can also cause a lack of muscle coordination, impaired speech, confusion and hallucinations. As the body continues to fight for equilibrium, it sends blood to the lungs. High-altitude pulmonary edema results in coughing and major breathing problems.

The sun's strong rays at high altitudes can burn the skin and eyes, causing snow blindness. The subfreezing temperatures, exacerbated by perpetually strong winds, cause frostbite, killing the skin and the underlying tissue, especially in the extremities.

Confused and numb, climbers sometimes react to the onset of hypothermia by shedding their clothes, believing they are burning up, not freezing to death. It is why those who die in extreme conditions, like the ones on the slopes of Everest, are often discovered in a state of undress.

Back in West Bengal, vague and inaccurate news reports spread quickly on May 21: The climbers had reached the summit. The houses of the climbers filled with friends offering congratulations and customary sweets.

By nightfall, however, the festive moods faded. Updated reports from Everest arrived. The West Bengali climbers were lost on their way down.

That evening, down at Camp 4, the first group to leave for a summit attempt included an experienced American climber and photographer, Thom Pollard, and his Nepali guide.

They first passed a Sherpa, then another, both cold, scared and without oxygen. Then they came across climbers below the Balcony. One was a woman. One was a man in a yellow snowsuit, lying sideways across the hill, still attached to the rope. His hands were uncovered. He appeared close to death.

Options for would-be rescuers are few at such extreme altitudes. Climbers carry finite amounts of oxygen, just enough for their own expected need, because of the weight of the canisters. They worry about their own survival, knowing that extra time exposed to the elements can prove fatal. They are often in a depleted state, physically and mentally. Even if they have all their faculties, they have paid tens of thousands of dollars, perhaps devoted many years of their lives, to this one day, and might be reluctant to abort it all for a faceless stranger whose needs cannot be assessed easily and who, most likely, speaks a different language.

Pollard and his guide stopped, discussed the situation and continued past.

“I’ve wrestled with this for a year,” Pollard said from his home in New Hampshire.

Pollard and his guide were the first to summit on the morning of May 22, at 2:40 a.m. On their descent, still in the dark, they were relieved to see Hazra was gone. There were marks in the snow where she had either scooted downhill or been dragged away.

But Ghosh was still there, splayed on the slope and now alone.

“He was dead,” said Pollard’s guide, Lhakpa Gyaljen Sherpa. “I shouted: ‘Hello, hello!’ There was no response. Looking at his face, he was dead. That’s why the others must have left him.”

Like everyone else who went up and back for the remaining days of the season, they stepped over him, clipped out of and back onto the rope around him, and continued down.

Sunita Hazra's memories of that night are spotty, but she remembered leaving Ghosh, her closest friend on the expedition.

"I told Goutam, 'You must come,' " she said in the living room of her home near Kolkata. "I thought if I started moving downward, he would follow me. I had neither the strength to help him or to even look behind me to make sure he was coming."

She believes she would have died, too, if not for Leslie Binns, a British climber who was ascending above Camp 4 when he found her with her mittens off and her jacket unzipped. He gave her a shot of oxygen, which lifted her energy, but soon realized she would not make it to Camp 4 on her own. He aborted his own summit attempt to drag, encourage and cajole her downhill.

They soon discovered Subhas Paul, in a dazed and hypothermic state of his own. Binns slowly coaxed the two Indian climbers down, sharing hits of oxygen and trying to lift them when they collapsed. They lost track of the roped route. Paul fell into a shallow crevasse and flailed his arms.

Binns eventually made a decision to try to save one or the other. Figuring Paul had energy to expend, he chose Hazra and escorted her to a tent.

"When I got to Camp 4, Subhas was not behind me," Hazra said. "I thought he was there. I thought Goutam and Nath were somewhere safe."

Some in Camp 4 later awoke in the night to someone shouting, rhythmically but incoherently, over and over. They presumed it came from within the camp, part of another expedition. No one ventured into the dark to explore.

When climbers emerged from their tents in the first rays of sunlight, they realized the shouting was from Paul, about 100 yards uphill from camp. He had been out in the elements for at least 32 hours.

Hazra and Paul were reunited with their three guides in the tent. They did not know where Ghosh and Nath were.

By midafternoon, persuaded by doctors from other expeditions to get to lower altitude immediately, the group was on its way downhill again, without Ghosh and Nath, carrying the last bits of oxygen it had stashed at Camp 4. Paul soon collapsed.

"Subhas started getting very weak," Lakpa Sherpa said. "He wasn't getting better even after supplying oxygen. His hands froze. We tried very hard to rescue him from there."

Two guides stayed with Paul. The third led Hazra downward, but soon left her behind, feeling he was in worse condition than she was, suffering from frostbite on his hands and feet. Darkness came, bringing snow and wind.

Alone, Hazra fell and broke her wrist. She had frostbite on her hands. Eventually, the other two guides caught up to her.

“I understood from the Sherpas that Subhas sat down to rest,” Hazra said at her home earlier this year. She began to cry. “And they left him,” she said.

Hazra and the guides made their way to the icy landing spot above Camp 2, where a helicopter winched Hazra to Base Camp. Ferried to Kathmandu, she was hospitalized for her injuries. A few days later, she received a hero’s welcome at the airport in Kolkata.

She knew little of what happened behind her, up the mountain. At about the time that Paul, Hazra and the three guides left Camp 4 to descend toward Camp 3, another Indian expedition returning from the summit spotted Nath off the trail in afternoon light. He was upright and alive, mindlessly digging into the ice with his one hand.

Nath was carried to Camp 4. His eyes were swollen shut with snow blindness.

By the next morning, the last day that anyone would summit Everest for the season, Nath was too weak to hold a bowl of soup. He died in a tent at Camp 4.

Goutam Ghosh was still somewhere higher on the mountain. At least 27 people stepped over him on their way to the summit and again on their way down before the season ended and the mountain emptied for most of a year.

Every spring, as hopeful climbers from around the world trek to Everest Base Camp in Nepal, an elevation of about 17,500 feet, to begin acclimating for a summit push in May, a team of local Sherpas is hired to create the season’s route up the mountain. They establish the course up more than two vertical miles that hundreds of others will follow.

First, the “icefall doctors” set ropes, ladders and makeshift bridges through the notoriously dangerous, ever-shifting Khumbu Icefall immediately above Base Camp. Others keep moving upward, setting anchors and stringing ropes until they reach the summit. The process can take weeks, and is often delayed by bad weather.

Only when the ropes are fixed to the top does the Everest climbing season open. It usually lasts only a few weeks, squeezed between the route opening in early May and the projected start of the monsoon at the end of the month.

Everest is rarely climbed at any other time of the year. That meant the rope-fixing Sherpas were likely to be the first to see Ghosh and Nath, if their bodies were still there from the year before. The forces of wind, snow, ice and gravity could have moved them or hidden them.

Nath was last seen in a tent at Camp 4, at more than 26,000 feet, which gets battered into something unrecognizable from one year to the next. Ghosh was last seen higher on the mountain, clipped to a rope on a steep section called the Triangular Face, just below the perch called the Balcony. If that rope from last year's route was damaged — perhaps by a falling piece of ice — Ghosh's body could have fallen and disappeared for good.

There were three major reasons the Ghosh family desperately wanted Goutam's body returned. The first was emotional. The idea that he lay near the summit of Everest, alone, exposed to the elements, left to serve as a tragic tourist marker for future climbers, was nearly too much to bear. And they wanted answers about what happened. Maybe his body could provide those answers. Maybe that video camera around his neck, if it was still there and still worked, held clues. Maybe there were memory cards from his camera in his pockets or backpack. Maybe a message for the family. Something.

The second was religious. Hindus believe the body is merely a temporary vessel for the soul. Once the soul is severed from the body through cremation, it is reincarnated in another body. Like most in West Bengal and across India, the Ghoshes were devoutly Hindu. To them, closure required a cremation, and all the ceremonies that came with it.

The third reason, as important as the others, was financial. Legally, in India, Ghosh was considered a missing person. Only when a body was produced, or seven years had passed, would the Indian government issue a death certificate, which the Ghosh family needed to gain access to his modest bank accounts and to receive financial death benefits like life insurance and the pension he had earned as a police officer.

Ghosh was a police sub-inspector, the second in command at the local precinct of the Kolkata police. It was a good job that paid about \$500 a month. Ghosh was a talented player of tabla, the Indian bongo-like drums, and sometimes performed with his wife. He took army courses to become

an adept equestrian and was known in the neighborhood as a good soccer player. He had been mountaineering and rock climbing for most of his life.

It might seem a strange hobby in Kolkata, hundreds of miles from the Himalayan foothills, but West Bengal is a surprising hive of mountaineering. There are hundreds of mountaineering clubs, in just about every small town and every neighborhood of the cities. Kolkata has dozens of them. The state government heavily promotes the activity through the West Bengal Mountaineering and Adventure Sports Foundation, where a 60-foot climbing wall rises outside its offices.

The foundation gives grants to those who apply with realistic ambitions of scaling the biggest peaks. In the case of Ghosh, Paul, Nath and Hazra, it granted each 500,000 rupees, or about \$7,500, toward their quest to climb Everest.

Ghosh was the most experienced of the mountaineers — not a well-known climber in West Bengal, but a respected one. He was an instructor at summer camps held at a climbing center on Susunia Hill, a 1,450-foot hiccup on the plain a couple of hours' drive northwest of Kolkata. He had successfully climbed a number of 7,000-meter peaks in the Himalayas. In the bedroom he shared with Chandana was a poster of Everest. It hung there for 20 years.

“We try to go through our routines,” Chandana Ghosh said in February. “The peace is not there. We try to eat and we try to sleep. But all the time we are thinking about the beloved man of this family, lying up there all alone.”

Goutam Ghosh was the youngest of three brothers, all in their 50s. They lived with their parents, wives and children in a dim, two-story apartment in the concrete jumble of Barrackpore, a district of northern Kolkata. Their father had recently died. The door from the street led to an outside hallway, open to a sky obscured by rambling apartments, one on top of another, squeezed tight. The bathroom was to the left, a hole behind a half wall and a pitcher of water next to a hose.

Debasish Ghosh, 53, unlike his younger brother, was not a mountaineer. A small man with a bushy mustache and a bit of a paunch, he ran a fast-food stall, serving chow mein and mutton rolls, not far from the family's home near the Barrackpore train station. He made a vow: If the body could be found, he would bring Goutam home.

Debasish Ghosh hoped that the West Bengal government would coordinate and finance a retrieval attempt a year later. For months, he requested meetings with officials, slowly climbing the

government's chain of command, until he and Chandana met with Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal.

She expressed concern for the cost, Debasish Ghosh said, and asked who would venture up Everest to bring back the bodies. She wondered about the state's responsibility if members of a recovery team were hurt or killed.

Without a commitment from the state government, the Ghosh family sent a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India. His office forwarded it to the state government, with a note that said "for action as appropriate." Secretly, the state government approved money for the operation, but it did not share its plans with the Ghosh and Nath families.

"They were saying that only if the body is located will they take up the decision," Debasish Ghosh said. "But who will inform us that the body is there? It has to be the Sherpas, because otherwise nobody is obligated to find the body."

So the family hired an experienced guide who was known among West Bengali climbers and who had been to the Everest summit five times. He told Debasish Ghosh that he would recover his brother's body for 26.3 Indian lakh rupees, or roughly \$40,000, more than the cost of Goutam Ghosh's original expedition.

The family agreed to pay 2.5 lakh (about \$4,000) upfront, to organize and buy oxygen for those who would make the initial search, following closely behind the rope-fixing teams. The rest would be paid at intervals along the way — when photographs were produced, for example, and when the body reached Kathmandu.

The Ghosh family did not have the money, but agreed to sell a small lot in Kolkata that Goutam owned, where he hoped to someday build a house. They sold jewelry, including a gold necklace that Chandana wore for her wedding. Family members and mountaineering club members scrounged the small bits of savings that they had. By early May, as the rope-fixing team was doing its work, it was still not enough.

"We have arranged about 20 lakh so far," Debasish Ghosh said in Kolkata.

A day later, too anxious to wait helplessly any longer, he packed a small yellow daypack with a few changes of clothes, plastic containers of homemade chicken and roti, and a folder of paperwork, protected in plastic sleeves. The sleeves held copies of Goutam Ghosh's identification

card, his police service card, his permit for climbing Everest — all things that would help identify a body and cut through the logistics of bringing it home.