

Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, the film

A new docudrama about Nepal’s first woman to climb Mt Everest is a tale of discrimination, dedication, triumph and tragedy

22 April 2023 Tayama Rai



Dawa Futi Sherpa, daughter of Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, at the film's premier. Photos: PASANG LHAMU FOUNDATION.

The Sherpa high altitude guides who take climbers to the tops of Himalayan peaks and glory have for decades been nameless and consigned to the shadows. They are also exposed to the most dangerous parts of mountains for the longest period -- as the tragic death of three guides on the Khumbu Icefall this month proved.

Things were not much different back in the autumn of 1990 when Pasang Lhamu Sherpa attempted to climb Mt Everest. The French leader of the expedition she was with ordered her to go back down. He seemed to be worried Pasang would steal the thunder from his climbers.

As it turned out, Christine Janine became the first French woman to climb the world’s highest peak as Pasang Lhamu looked on from a lower camp. She realised it was her identity as a Nepali Sherpa woman that prevented her from getting to the top too. This ordeal only made her more determined to become the first Nepali woman to conquer Chomolungma.



From left: Dawa Yangzum, Ang Dorjee Sherpa and Director Nancy Svendsen.

"Her incredible story moved me," says Nancy Svendsen, the director of the 72-minute documentary that premiered on 19 April, ahead of the 30th anniversary of Pasang Lhamu's historic climb on 22 April 1993, and the 70th anniversary of the first climb on 29 May 1953.

Svendsen was first introduced to Pasang Lhamu not as a Nepali national hero, but as the late sister of her brother-in-law, Ang Dorjee Sherpa. But the climber's story resonated strongly with Svendsen who had worked in corporate America, a field traditionally dominated by men.

"From that moment, I have been working to gather her archival footage and pictures. I started with very little. We had maybe a few home videos and scrapbooks of pictures her daughter gave me, and that was it," recalls Svendsen.

Pasang Lhamu came from a deprived farming family so much of her climbs and expeditions were never filmed. But *Pasang* makes it work with press footage combined with contemporary photos to portray her life. Svendsen has also deployed clever edits and animation to show Pasang Lhamu's last journey.

The entire production took 10 years with Svendsen changing her career to become a first-time filmmaker to locate and interview the late mountaineer's colleagues, including Pemba Norbu, the last person to see Pasang Lhamu alive.

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"It seems much like everything even risk-taking is gendered," says Dawa Futi Sherpa, Pasang Lhamu's eldest daughter and president of the Pasang Lhamu Foundation and Nepal’s former ambassador to Spain. "For the longest time my mother was criticised for leaving her family and takings risks with her life even as she was doing it for her country and Nepali women."

Pasang Lhamu, born the only daughter of a Sherpa mountaineer, was not allowed to go to school or mountaineering with her brothers like the majority of Nepali women of her time. She eloped, escaping an arranged marriage, with Lhakpa Sonam Sherpa and opened her own trekking company in Kathmandu.

Mother to three, she was a homemaker determined to level the status of Nepali women to what Western women had at that time. It was not necessarily her mountaineering skill she wanted to prove.

Her struggle is seen in the backdrop of Nepal's quest for democracy as she clashes with the prime minister, political parties, and Western mountaineers to fund her expeditions.

As she embarks on her fourth and final mission to Everest, we can see how the subordinate status inflicted on her for being a woman, a Sherpa, and a Nepali led to decisions that proved to be fatal for her and her team in that 1993 expedition.

Pasang: In the Shadow of Everest brings the real Pasang Lhamu Sherpa to life, beyond what little is depicted in school textbooks while also addressing controversies surrounding her final climb through first-hand accounts. It equally showcases her trailblazing character that led to national mourning after her demise.

"Climbing Mt Everest as a Nepali woman then is harder than climbing 14 peaks now," notes Dawa Yangzum Sherpa, the first Nepali international mountain guide who was at the premiere of the film in Kathmandu this week.

Dawa Yangzum Sherpa herself started her career by climbing the Pasang Lhamu Foundation walls, and says that a whole generation of Nepali women mountaineers has grown up inspired by the legacy of Pasang Lhamu. After Pasang Lhamu, 65 Nepali women have scaled Mt Everest.

Winner of 14 international film awards, *Pasang: In the Shadow of Everest* honors the legendary climber while also delving into the realities of Sherpas, often sidelined in mountaineering films. Public screenings of the Nepali version will begin on 28 April and there are plans for shows in 15 locations in Kosi and Madhes provinces with donations raised during its Nepali premiere.

House Speaker Dev Raj Ghimire and famed ophthalmologist Sanduk Ruit were among the attendees at the premiere where Ang Dorjee Sherpa said: "This documentary will encourage Nepali women to dream big and conquer their summits."

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