



WHAT PASANG wrought

ANUP OJHA

TWENTY years ago, at a time when Nepali women enjoyed far fewer personal liberties than they have begun to now, before the equal rights movement had gained the kind of momentum it's seen in recent times, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa had emerged a welcome anomaly. Uneducated, and coming from a relatively conservative background, Sherpa had shocked the country, taking on the challenge of scaling Mount Everest, and becoming, on April 22, 1993, the first Nepali woman to complete the climb, and the second in the world after Junko Tabei of Japan, who had done the same in 1975.

Although she passed away while she and her team of five were making the descent from the summit, Sherpa's unprecedented achievement became a veritable beacon for the cause of women in Nepal, proving as it did that resilience, strength and courage were not the property of men alone.

The government of Nepal consequently declared Sherpa a National Luminary in 2002, as well as naming the Jasama Himal (7,315m) in the Mahalangur Range and the 117-kilometre Trishuli-Dhunchu road after her—her image has even been printed on stamps. A statue of Pasang Lhamu has been erected at Bouddha, and she was the first woman to be honoured with the Nepal Tara. But more significant than

these formal acknowledgements have been the various philanthropic missions that were spurred on by her feats and the deeper impact she has had on how women in Nepal perceive themselves.

In an attempt to keep Sherpa's memory alive, and to bring to fruition her professed dream of empowering women and promoting mountaineering, the Pasang Lhamu Mountaineering Foundation (PLMF) was set up the year she made the climb, with its headquarters at Dhumburai. "We wanted to continue the good work she would've no doubt taken on had she come back," says Bachchu Narayan Shrestha, the general secretary of PLMF.

Since 2002, PLMF has opened an indoor climbing wall on its premises, for interested climbers to use for training. Besides this, the foundation has also been running the Pasang Lhamu Sherpa Memorial Higher Secondary School and College in Samakhusi, where more than 1,800 students from poor and marginalised communities from all over Nepal are enrolled, at minimal fees. "Additionally, we've been operating the Pasang Lhamu-Nicole Niquille Hospital in Lukla since 2005, where we offer free maternity treatment, including food and accommodation, as well as other basic treatments at very low rates for the benefit of those who aren't able to afford expensive hospital facilities," Shrestha says. "It's what Pasang envisioned."

Ang Dorjee, Sherpa's eldest brother, who lives in the US, and is currently in Nepal to mark the 20th anniversary of his sister's climb, attests to his sister's far-sighted aspirations. "Pasang was that way, even as a child," he says. "She always wanted to make things better for other people, people who didn't have advantages growing up, because she knew what it was like for them." He adds that it's been incredible to see what her achievements have wrought in their wake; 21 women have since scaled Everest.

We remember Sherpa's courage and the inspiration her feats have offered to women all over the country

"She might not be with us anymore, but she's done this amazing thing...she's shown Nepali women, and women around the world, that they shouldn't underestimate themselves, that nothing is impossible."

To be sure, there are few acquainted with her feats who can claim to not feel buoyed by her courage. "I was in the fifth grade when I first read Pasang *didi's* story, and it was just mind-blowing to learn about how she overcame all these obstacles—having to look after her three siblings, her responsibilities as a mother, all of it," says 29-year-old Shailee Basnet, coordinator of the Everest Women Seven Summits Eco-Action team, a group of female climbers who have so far scaled four out of the seven peaks on their to-do list, including Everest in 2008, Mount Elbrus in Russia and Kosciuszko in Australia in 2010, and most recently Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, just a little over a month ago. "I don't think any of us would be here if she hadn't done what she did," Basnet says emphatically.

Another well-known female climber who claims to have been directly inspired by Sherpa's story is 29-year-old Chhurim Sherpa, who set a Guinness World Record on February 25 this year as the first Nepali woman to climb Everest twice in one season. "Pasang *didi* opened the door for us," she says. "Anytime I'm on a climb, and things get difficult, I think of how she must've felt and what she would've done."

"I know I can't give up because she didn't give up."

Behind *The Glass Ceiling*

Nancy Anne Svendsen is an independent filmmaker based in northern California who has been working on a film titled The Glass Ceiling based on Pasang Lhamu Sherpa's story. The 70-minute documentary explores the various challenges Sherpa encountered before and during her climb, and includes interviews with Pasang's family, friends, and climbing associates. The film's trailer was screened at Le Sherpa in Panipokhari in the Capital on April 22 in the presence of an assortment of guests including Sherpa's eldest brother. The Post chatted with Svendsen about the concept behind the production, as well as the making of the film. Excerpts:

Why did you zone in on this particular story? What was your link to Sherpa?

Pasang's brother, Ang Dorje, is married to my sister Kareen. It was three years back, when we were having dinner, that he told me all about his sister and what she'd achieved, the details of it all. It was such an incredible account that I knew right then I had to do something.

What was it that sparked off the idea to do a film on her?

It was deeply moving, what I heard, and I felt an immediate connection to her. I started digging into whatever I could find about her life. As a filmmaker and storyteller myself, I felt almost responsible to bring her story to a larger public, a global audience, because really, this is the sort of inspirational tale that extends beyond the boundaries of geography or culture. So I came to Nepal to continue my research and began collecting footage. That was how the process kicked off.

What sort of response did you get from the people you talked to here?

I found that her spirit was still very much alive here. I went to her home in Surke, in Solukhumbu, which is a beautiful little village, and her memories were naturally very strong there. What helped was the fact that I was able to get up close with people who knew her personally, her friends and family, and they were all very happy to tell me whatever they could about her. The Nepali crew that I worked with was also very accommodating and helped me out a great deal in both the research and filming processes.

What was the one quality Pasang possessed that you think made her so iconic?

Her determination, no doubt. I mean, here she was, born to an ethnic minority, a housewife who had never gone to school, and look at what she was able to do. And all because she set her mind to it. It's amazing.

How far along is the film?

About 75 percent of the production work has been completed, but we still have some additional footage to shoot before finishing it off. Hopefully, it'll be done within a year.



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