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Twenty-One Times to the Top: Apa Sherpa's Life Beyond Everest

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Apa Sherpa became famous for climbing Mount Everest 21 times. The number is so large that it can obscure the life underneath it.

Before the records, before international attention and before his name became shorthand for endurance, he was Lhakpa Tenzing Sherpa, a boy from Thame in the Khumbu who left school after his father died. The mountains surrounding his village were not adventure destinations. They were home, weather, work and risk.

His later career would take him to the summit of Everest again and again, but the deeper story is about what mountain work

meant for a family with few alternatives—and what happened when the man known for reaching the top began talking more about the lives below it.

Growing up beneath Everest

Apa was born in Thame, a high-altitude village in the Everest region. In childhood, the mountain economy around him depended heavily on agriculture, trade and expedition work. When his father died, Apa left school to help support his family.

That decision changed the direction of his life. He began working on trekking and climbing expeditions, first in support roles that rarely appear in heroic accounts of mountaineering. Kitchen work, carrying loads and assisting teams were part of the long apprenticeship through which many Sherpa climbers learned the mountain business.

For international clients, an expedition could be a once-in-a-lifetime undertaking. For men like Apa, it was employment.

The first summit

Apa did not reach Everest on his first attempt. According to Guinness World Records, he succeeded on his fourth try, reaching the summit in May 1990.

One summit would have been enough to define most climbing careers. For Apa, it became the beginning of a working relationship with the mountain that lasted for two decades.

He returned almost every year. The repetition required not only strength but familiarity with the rhythms of the Khumbu Icefall, changing weather, expedition logistics and the psychology of climbers under pressure. By 2011, he had reached the summit 21 times, then a world record.

The record brought global recognition, but it also revealed something that mountaineering narratives have often underplayed: the extraordinary experience accumulated by Sherpa workers whose names historically received less attention than the foreign climbers they supported.

Everest as workplace

The romantic image of Everest is a solitary climber fighting toward the highest point on Earth. The reality is much more collective.

Routes are prepared. Loads are carried. Camps are established. Oxygen is moved. Weather information is shared. Injured climbers are assisted. Behind many successful expeditions sits a network of labour that is both highly skilled and unusually dangerous.

Apa's record made that expertise harder to ignore. It also complicated the idea that summiting Everest is simply an individual conquest. For him, climbing was never detached from family responsibility or livelihood.

That difference matters. A person who can walk away from the mountain after one successful expedition experiences risk differently from someone whose household income has depended on returning.

The mountain begins to change

Apa's relationship with Everest eventually expanded beyond climbing records. He became increasingly vocal about environmental change in the Himalaya.

The issue was personal. In 1985, a glacial lake outburst flood struck the region around Thame and damaged his family's land and home. Years later, he would speak about that experience while drawing attention to the risks created by changing glaciers and unstable mountain lakes.

For residents of high Himalayan valleys, climate change is not an abstract argument about distant decades. It affects water, farming, trails, floods, snow patterns and the safety of settlements.

Apa used his fame to help communicate that reality.

Climbing to clean

His later Everest expeditions included environmental goals. The 2011 climb that produced his 21st summit was part of an Eco Everest Expedition, combining mountaineering with efforts to remove waste and draw attention to the changing mountain environment.

This shift mirrored a wider transformation in public discussion about Everest. As commercial climbing expanded, so did concerns about rubbish, crowding, human waste, abandoned equipment and the environmental footprint of expeditions.

Apa had spent enough years on the mountain to see how much had changed. The person who had once been celebrated mainly for climbing it repeatedly was now helping ask what repeated climbing was doing to the place itself.

Walking instead of summiting

After his record-setting years, Apa redirected attention toward the communities spread across Nepal's mountains. In 2012, he joined a long journey along the Great Himalaya Trail to promote climate awareness and responsible tourism.

The symbolism was striking. For decades the world had measured his achievements vertically: how many times he had reached one summit. Now the journey was horizontal, moving across

communities whose lives rarely received the same international attention as Everest.

The trail reinforced a point that mountain tourism often forgets. The Himalaya is not scenery surrounding an adventure industry. It is inhabited land.

What education meant to him

Apa's childhood ended early in one important sense: leaving school meant accepting adult responsibility before he had chosen it.

That experience shaped his later emphasis on education. For families in mountain regions, schooling can offer a wider range of futures than expedition labour alone. It does not mean abandoning climbing or tourism. It means making them choices rather than necessities.

This is one of the quieter themes in Apa's life. Records made him famous, but education represented the opportunity he himself had lost.

From record-holder to witness

A record always has an expiry date. Someone eventually climbs more, runs faster or goes farther. Apa's 21-summit mark was later surpassed.

That does not reduce what he did. It clarifies what matters after the number changes.

Apa Sherpa became one of the first Himalayan climbers to be internationally recognised not simply as support for somebody else's expedition but as a mountaineer whose own experience deserved attention. He then used that recognition to talk about mountain communities, climate risk and education.

In that sense, the most important part of his story may have begun after the record.

Everest gave Apa Sherpa a public identity. The life beyond Everest gave that identity a purpose larger than the summit count.

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