

PEOPLE / PEOPLE

Everest as a Job: Phurba Tashi Sherpa and the Cost of Reaching the Top

Phurba Tashi Sherpa reached Everest's summit 21 times, but his larger story reveals the skilled labour, family risk and workplace realities behind commercial mountaineering.

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026



Everest as a Job: Phurba Tashi Sherpa and the Cost of Reaching the Top

Phurba Tashi Sherpa reached Everest's summit 21 times, but his larger story reveals the skilled labour, family risk and workplace realities behind commercial mountaineering.

By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Phurba Tashi Sherpa climbed Everest 21 times, stood on more than thirty 8,000-metre summits and became one of the most accomplished high-altitude workers of his generation. Yet the most important part of his story is not the number of summits. It is the way those summits expose the labour structure behind commercial mountaineering. For foreign climbers, Everest may represent a once-in-a-lifetime dream. For Phurba Tashi, it was also a workplace—dangerous, highly skilled and tied directly to the economic security of his family.

His career shows why Himalayan mountaineering cannot be understood only through records or national pride. Every major expedition depends on local workers who carry loads, establish camps, manage oxygen, fix ropes, guide clients and cross dangerous terrain repeatedly before the summit day celebrated in photographs. Phurba Tashi became unusually visible because his abilities were impossible to ignore, but he spent much of his career inside a system where extraordinary performance was still framed as support.

The 2014 Everest avalanche changed the public meaning of that system. Sixteen Nepali climbing workers were killed in the Khumbu Icefall, and the disaster forced the world to confront the risks borne by the people whose labour made commercial climbing possible. Phurba Tashi became one of the central figures in the documentary *Sherpa*, which captured not only the tragedy but the debate over dignity, pay, risk and whether the mountain should reopen after such loss.

Born in Khumjung

Phurba Tashi was born in Khumjung in the Everest region, inside a community where expedition work had already become an important source of income. His father also worked on expeditions, making high-altitude labour part of family experience rather than an abstract adventure profession.

Growing up beneath Everest creates a different relationship with the mountain from the one carried by international visitors. The peak is globally symbolic, but locally it is also part of geography, work and family memory.

This distinction shaped Phurba Tashi's career from the beginning. Everest was extraordinary and ordinary at the same time.

Learning from the Bottom of the Expedition

High-altitude guides rarely begin by leading summit pushes. They learn through lower-level expedition work: carrying, camp logistics, kitchen roles, route familiarity and the accumulation of trust.

Phurba Tashi moved through this professional ladder, gradually becoming one of the climbers expedition leaders relied on at the highest elevations. Skill was demonstrated repeatedly rather than certified through one formal moment.

The process resembles an apprenticeship. Every season adds technical knowledge that cannot be reproduced fully in classrooms.

Everest Becomes a Profession

Phurba Tashi eventually climbed Everest 21 times, matching the record then held by Apa Sherpa. In 2007 alone, he reached the summit three times in one season.

The figure is difficult to grasp because even one Everest ascent requires weeks of acclimatisation, load movement and exposure to serious objective hazards. Repeating the summit multiple times within the same season multiplies fatigue and risk.

For a professional climber, however, repeated ascent may be part of the work. Camps need stocking, clients need guiding and expedition teams need leadership at altitude.

More Than Everest

Phurba Tashi's record extended far beyond Everest. He completed more than thirty ascents of 8,000-metre mountains, including peaks such as Cho Oyu and others across the Himalaya.

This broader record matters because Everest can dominate public perception to the point that high-altitude expertise appears synonymous with one mountain. In reality, different peaks require different route knowledge, weather judgement and logistical systems.

A climber trusted across several 8,000-metre environments possesses a depth of professional knowledge not captured by one summit count.

The Repetition Problem

Experience reduces some forms of risk because climbers become more efficient and more skilled at recognising danger. But repeated exposure also increases cumulative probability. A person crossing the Khumbu Icefall fifty times faces more opportunities for something uncontrollable to happen than someone crossing it twice.

This is one of the paradoxes of professional mountaineering. The most experienced workers are often the ones exposed most frequently to objective hazard.

Records based on repeat summits can therefore represent both mastery and accumulated risk.

The Khumbu Icefall

The Khumbu Icefall is one of the most dangerous sections of the standard south-side Everest route. Towering seracs, moving ice blocks and deep crevasses create hazards that can change without warning.

Commercial expedition workers cross the Icefall far more often than most clients because they help establish camps and move supplies. The people with the most skill may therefore spend the most time in one of the mountain's most unstable zones.

Phurba Tashi's generation understood this reality intimately.

2014: The Avalanche

On 18 April 2014, an avalanche struck the Khumbu Icefall and killed sixteen Nepali climbing workers. At the time, it was the deadliest single accident in Everest's climbing history.

The disaster occurred early in the season while Sherpa teams were preparing the route and transporting equipment before most clients had reached the upper mountain.

The timing exposed a truth often hidden by summit narratives: the most dangerous work may happen before the expedition's headline climbers are even fully involved.

Grief Becomes Labour Politics

After the avalanche, grieving workers began discussing whether the Everest season should continue. The issue quickly expanded beyond mourning into questions about compensation, insurance and the unequal distribution of risk in the industry.

Some international expedition teams initially wanted to continue. Many Sherpa climbers felt that returning to normal climbing immediately would disrespect the dead and ignore longstanding labour concerns.

The mountain became the site of a workplace dispute as much as an adventure story.

Sherpa: The Documentary

Australian filmmaker Jennifer Peedom had already been filming the 2014 Everest season when the avalanche occurred. Her documentary *Sherpa* therefore captured the disaster and its aftermath from unusually close range.

Phurba Tashi became one of the central figures because he embodied the contradictions of the industry. He was one of the world's strongest Everest climbers, deeply respected professionally and still subject to the economic pressures that kept high-altitude workers returning.

The film gave international audiences access to conversations usually absent from climbing documentaries.

A Professional, Not a Background Figure

Traditional Everest films often centre the paying climber's emotional journey. Local workers appear as competent but

relatively silent helpers.

Sherpa reversed the perspective. Phurba Tashi appears as a professional, husband, father and community member with his own calculations about work and danger.

This changed how many viewers understood commercial mountaineering. Sherpa workers were no longer merely part of the mountain environment.

Family Pressure

One of the most powerful tensions in Phurba Tashi's story is between professional ability and family fear. His relatives knew he was capable of climbing Everest again. Capability was not the issue.

The question was whether another summit was worth the possibility that he might not return. High-altitude work pays well relative to many rural alternatives, but the income becomes meaningless if the worker dies.

Every expedition therefore contains an economic calculation shared across the household.

Risk Is Never Individual

Adventure culture often treats risk as a personal choice. A climber decides how much danger to accept and bears the consequences.

Professional expedition labour complicates this idea. The decision is influenced by income, dependants and the absence of equally paid alternatives.

Phurba Tashi's family depended on the mountain while also fearing it. This contradiction is central to understanding why Sherpa labour cannot be reduced to either exploitation or pure adventure.

The Economics of Commercial Everest

Everest expeditions involve substantial fees, permits, equipment and logistics. High-altitude workers receive a fraction of the total expedition cost despite carrying some of the greatest physical risk.

Pay has improved over time, as have insurance and compensation standards, partly because of public pressure after major disasters. Yet the structural imbalance remains visible.

The client purchases a dangerous experience. The worker returns to danger season after season as employment.

Skill, Not Superhuman Myth

Phurba Tashi was sometimes described through language emphasising almost impossible strength. Such descriptions recognise ability while risking dehumanisation.

If Sherpa climbers are treated as naturally superhuman, the difficulty of their work can appear reduced. Exceptional performance starts to look expected rather than earned.

A better interpretation recognises physiology, training, experience and judgement together.

The Burden of Competence

The strongest workers in dangerous industries are often asked to take on the hardest tasks. Competence attracts responsibility.

For Phurba Tashi, being exceptionally reliable meant more exposure to difficult terrain and greater expectations from teams. His skill protected others while increasing the amount of risk he personally carried.

This is one of the hidden costs of being the person everyone trusts.

Guiding Clients

Guiding at extreme altitude requires managing people whose physical and psychological condition can deteriorate rapidly. Clients may be exhausted, hypoxic or emotionally overwhelmed at exactly the moment a guide must make clear decisions.

A guide sometimes has to tell a client to abandon a summit attempt after years of preparation and enormous expense. This can create conflict.

Good guiding therefore requires authority as well as empathy.

The Summit Is Not the End

Many mountaineering accidents happen during descent, after climbers have already reached the summit. Fatigue is extreme, oxygen supplies may be lower and the emotional goal has already been achieved.

Professional guides understand that summit success means little if the team cannot return safely. This shifts their priorities away from the photographic moment.

Phurba Tashi's long career depended on remembering that the job ended only after everyone was back down.

Why 21 Summits Matter

The number 21 became famous because it placed Phurba Tashi among the leading Everest record holders of his era. But the record also provides a measure of accumulated professional exposure.

Each ascent involved weeks of work. Each season required the body to acclimatise again, and each route carried hazards beyond individual control.

The number therefore represents labour as much as athletic achievement.

Everest Records Keep Changing

Later climbers surpassed the 21-summit mark, demonstrating how quickly Everest records can move. This does not diminish Phurba Tashi's significance.

Records are historical snapshots. What matters is what the achievement represented at the time and what kind of career made it possible.

Phurba Tashi's name remains central to the era in which professional Sherpa climbers increasingly became recognised individually rather than as anonymous support.

After the 2014 Season

The 2014 avalanche altered Phurba Tashi's relationship with Everest. Family pressure and the emotional consequences of the disaster contributed to his decision to step back from repeated summit attempts.

For a climber capable of extending his record, stopping can be more difficult psychologically than continuing. A professional identity built over decades has to be redefined.

The decision demonstrates another form of judgement: knowing when the cost has become too high.

Retirement Is Not Failure

Adventure culture often celebrates persistence until the goal is achieved. In professional mountaineering, responsible retirement deserves equal respect.

Experience can create confidence, but age and cumulative exposure change the risk equation. Families also become more influential as responsibilities grow.

Phurba Tashi's withdrawal from record chasing makes his earlier achievements more, not less, meaningful.

The Labour Legacy of Sherpa

The documentary *Sherpa* contributed to an international shift in how expedition labour was discussed. Viewers saw workers debating compensation, respect and whether the season should continue.

The conversation did not solve every inequality in the industry, but it made them harder to ignore. Foreign climbers and expedition companies increasingly had to address worker conditions publicly.

Phurba Tashi became a symbol of expertise demanding recognition on its own terms.

What Changed After 2014

Insurance, compensation and labour arrangements have continued evolving after major Everest disasters. The industry is more aware of the need for stronger protections than it was in earlier decades.

Yet risk cannot be regulated away entirely. High-altitude work will remain dangerous as long as commercial expeditions rely on repeated movement through objectively hazardous terrain.

The deeper question is whether the people taking that risk are given genuine choice, fair pay and social protection.

The Sherpa Name and the Profession

Globally, “Sherpa” is often used as a synonym for mountain guide, obscuring the fact that Sherpa is an ethnic identity. This linguistic habit reduces individuals to a service role.

Phurba Tashi’s career helps correct that simplification because his name, decisions and family story became visible alongside the work.

The more individual climbers are recognised, the harder it becomes to treat an entire community as anonymous

infrastructure.

Everest as Home Geography

For Phurba Tashi, Everest was not a distant object reached through international travel. It rose from the geography surrounding the community in which he was born.

This proximity creates a relationship very different from the idea of “conquering” a mountain. The mountain can be workplace, cultural presence, source of income and site of grief simultaneously.

Commercial mountaineering becomes easier to understand when all of these meanings are held together.

The Cost of Reaching the Top

Every Everest summit photograph hides a long chain of labour. Tents were moved, routes prepared, oxygen carried and camps supplied before the climber stood on the summit.

Phurba Tashi performed that work at an extraordinary level for years. His record exposes how much expertise can remain invisible when the story is organised around the customer rather than the worker.

The Difference Between a Record and a Career

Phurba Tashi's 21 Everest summits became the easiest number through which to describe him, but a career is larger than its record. The number does not show how many times he turned back, how many clients he assisted or how many days were spent moving equipment through dangerous terrain without reaching the summit.

Professional mountaineering rewards successful summits publicly while much of the real work happens on days when there is no headline. A safe retreat, a rescued climber or a well-managed camp can be more professionally important than another summit count.

This distinction helps explain why Phurba Tashi's reputation among climbers extended beyond the record itself. Reliability matters most to the people whose lives depend on it.

The 2014 Disaster as a Turning Point

The avalanche did more than interrupt one climbing season. It exposed a structural imbalance that had been normalised for decades. Sherpa workers were taking repeated objective risk while the global narrative remained centred on the ambitions of paying climbers.

The debate that followed forced expedition operators, governments and clients to confront questions about compensation and worker protection more directly. The changes were incomplete, but the disaster altered the language through which Everest labour was discussed.

Phurba Tashi became important in that conversation precisely because he could not be dismissed as an inexperienced worker. Few people alive understood Everest labour more deeply.

What Sherpa Showed the World

The documentary's power came from allowing mountain workers to speak as people with families, ambitions and grievances rather than as background infrastructure. Phurba Tashi's household became one of the places where the economics of Everest could be seen clearly.

His family did not need convincing that he was capable of climbing. They had watched him do it repeatedly. Their concern was that capability itself kept drawing him back into danger.

This is one of the central moral tensions of commercial mountaineering: the better a worker becomes at a dangerous job, the more opportunities that worker may receive to take the same danger again.

The Economics of Stopping

Retirement from high-altitude guiding is not purely a sporting decision. A professional climber may lose one of the best-paying forms of work available locally when he stops. Families therefore have to weigh safety against income.

For famous climbers, guiding reputation can sometimes open alternative roles in logistics, training and expedition management. For many others, such transitions are less certain.

Phurba Tashi's public visibility gave him opportunities beyond summit labour, but his story still illustrates why the industry needs clearer career pathways for veteran guides who should not have to keep climbing at extreme altitude indefinitely.

Insurance and Social Protection

One lesson from Everest's major disasters is that high-altitude workers need protection that does not depend on public sympathy after an accident. Insurance, compensation and family support have to be built into the economics before the season begins.

These protections should reflect the actual income lost when a skilled worker dies or becomes disabled, not merely provide symbolic payments. Expedition labour is professional labour and should be treated accordingly.

Phurba Tashi's era helped make this argument visible internationally, even though implementation remains uneven.

Why the Worker's Perspective Matters

Mountaineering stories become distorted when only the client's perspective is treated as central. The same storm, crevasse or summit push looks different to someone who paid to be there and someone whose job requires returning next season.

Phurba Tashi's career provides a rare long-term view from inside that professional reality. Everest is simultaneously an extraordinary natural place and an industry organised through labour.

Understanding both does not diminish the adventure. It makes the adventure more honest.

The Career Path After High Altitude

One unresolved issue in commercial mountaineering is what happens to elite guides after they decide the death zone is no longer worth the risk. Their experience remains valuable, but the industry does not always provide structured transitions into management, training or safety leadership.

Veterans such as Phurba Tashi possess knowledge that expedition companies cannot replace easily. Route judgement, client

psychology and crisis experience can be taught to younger teams if organisations create formal roles for that transfer.

A mature mountain industry should therefore treat retirement from high altitude not as the end of a climber's usefulness but as a transition into a different level of professional authority.

The Legacy of Choosing to Stop

Phurba Tashi's story is also important because it resists the idea that great climbers must keep proving themselves indefinitely. Choosing family and survival over another record is not a retreat from courage.

In an industry that often rewards continued exposure to danger, stopping can be one of the clearest expressions of judgement. The mountain will always remain there; the climber's life does not come with the same guarantee.

That recognition changed the way many viewers understood the summit itself.

His career helped make that cost visible. Once audiences could see the worker, the family and the risk behind the summit number, Everest became harder to narrate as a story of individual conquest alone.

Twenty-one Everest summits made Phurba Tashi famous.

The more important legacy is what his life reveals about the

industry beneath those summits: skill, family responsibility, repeated danger and the labour that allows other people to call Everest a dream. For him, the mountain was never only a dream. It was a job—and eventually a job whose cost became impossible to ignore.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/phurba-tashi-sherpa-everest-as-a-job/>