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The first time Purnima Shrestha went deep into the Everest region for work, she carried a camera rather than climbing equipment. She had been assigned to photograph the Everest Marathon in 2017. The runners, guides and high valleys were her subjects; the mountains were meant to remain in the background.

Instead, the assignment changed the direction of her life. Standing among people who treated the Himalaya not as a distant postcard but as a place of work and ambition, she began to wonder why the peaks had always seemed unavailable to her. Within months, the photojournalist from Gorkha was preparing to climb Manaslu, an 8,163-metre mountain that experienced climbers approach with

respect.

Seven years later, in May 2024, Shrestha reached the summit of Everest three times in 13 days. No woman had previously climbed the world’s highest mountain three times in a single season. The record was spectacular, but the route towards it began with a quieter change: a woman who had spent years looking through a viewfinder decided to enter the frame.

Growing up beside a trekking route

Shrestha grew up in Arughat, Gorkha, in a family of subsistence farmers. The town is a gateway to the Manaslu region, and travellers passed through on their way towards mountains that supported an international trekking industry. For local families with limited means, however, proximity did not necessarily create access.

Her childhood home did not have running water. The ambitions commonly offered to girls were narrow: complete school if possible, marry, raise children and manage a household. Climbing an 8,000-metre peak was not simply unusual; it belonged to another social and financial world.

Shrestha left for Kathmandu and trained in journalism, finding her place in photography. The profession taught her to observe before speaking. A photojournalist learns to recognise a moment, frame it and decide what the public needs to see. It also brings the

photographer close to other people’s risks while allowing her to remain just outside them.

The Everest Marathon assignment disturbed that distance. She watched people train, struggle and continue through altitude. The mountains no longer looked like scenery. They looked like a question.

Learning at 8,000 metres

Shrestha announced that she wanted to climb Everest. Friends warned that the plan was too large for someone with little technical experience and no history on high peaks. She first needed to discover how her body and mind would respond to altitude. Manaslu became the test.

Even reaching the expedition required help. Friends lent her money, turning private confidence into practical backing. She had never climbed a 5,000-metre peak before attempting an 8,000er. The jump would be considered unreasonable by most conventional training plans.

Manaslu was punishing. High-altitude climbing reduces life to basic tasks: eat when appetite disappears, melt water, protect fingers and toes, sleep while the wind hits the tent, then rise and continue. Success depends on fitness, but also on judgement and the ability to function while cold, tired and afraid.

She reached the summit in 2017. In Arughat, the news carried particular meaning. A daughter of the district, once separated from the mountain economy passing near her home, had climbed the peak that defined the region.

Everest followed in 2018. The summit confirmed that Manaslu had not been a one-time act of will. Shrestha was becoming a mountaineer, learning expedition systems, rope movement, acclimatisation and the discipline of turning back when conditions demanded it.

Seven high mountains

Over the next several seasons, she climbed the seven 8,000-metre peaks located wholly or partly in Nepal: Everest, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse, Makalu, Dhaulagiri, Annapurna I and Manaslu. She completed the sequence in four years and eight months, becoming the fastest Nepali woman to do so at the time.

The list compresses what happened. Annapurna I is notorious for avalanche exposure. Dhaulagiri is isolated and technically serious. Kanchenjunga demands a long approach and sustained effort before the summit is even close. Every name carries separate weeks of uncertainty, money, logistics and danger.

In 2021, Shrestha was among the Nepali women who climbed Annapurna I, helping change the image of who could lead and participate in Himalayan expeditions. Women had long worked

throughout Nepal’s mountain communities, but professional climbing remained heavily male. A summit could challenge that division, although it could not remove the structural barriers behind it.

Sponsorship remained a repeated struggle. Mountaineering is expensive even for athletes living near the Himalaya. Permits, equipment, food, oxygen, transport and team support require funding. Nepali climbers may receive praise after a summit but face uncertainty before the next expedition. Shrestha’s early reliance on loans showed how thin the line could be between ambition and access.

The camera did not disappear

Climbing changed Shrestha’s relationship with photography, but it did not end it. Her two professions began to inform each other. A photographer pays attention to light, scale and human expression; a climber understands what happened outside the frame.

From high camps she also saw the Himalaya changing. Snow and ice were not abstract indicators in a report. Conditions shaped routes, water, safety and the lives of communities below. Her later photography and public work drew attention to melting mountains and the unequal consequences of climate change.

That perspective matters because Nepal’s peaks are often marketed as permanent icons. Tourism posters favour clear skies

and timeless white ridges. Climbers encounter something less stable: glaciers that move, snow patterns that shift and hazards that cannot be separated from a warming climate.

Shrestha’s photographs therefore carry two kinds of evidence. They record individual effort, but they can also document a landscape changing within a human lifetime. The person behind the camera is no longer only visiting. She knows the routes through fatigue, fear and repetition.

Three Everests in thirteen days

By the 2024 spring season, Shrestha had already climbed Everest more than once. Repeating the ascent three times in one season demanded a different approach. The body normally needs recovery after entering the death zone, where oxygen is insufficient for long-term survival. Descending to base camp is not a return to ordinary comfort; it is the beginning of deciding whether damaged reserves can be rebuilt quickly enough to go again.

She reached the summit on 12 May, returned on 19 May, and stood there for a third time on 25 May. The three climbs were completed within 13 days. Nepal’s tourism authorities confirmed the achievement, and she became the first woman to summit Everest three times in a single climbing season.

The number drew attention because it was easy to understand. Yet speed records in the Himalaya depend on more than a single athlete. Route-fixing teams establish lines. Guides, cooks, base-camp staff, weather forecasters and expedition managers make repeated summit rotations possible. Shrestha’s record was personal, but it was also built inside a large system of mountain labour.

There are reasonable questions about repetition at extreme altitude. Records can encourage athletes to push beyond safe limits, and Everest’s commercial season already concentrates many climbers into short weather windows. Shrestha’s achievement should be recognised without presenting risk as something that disappears through courage.

Her experience was the crucial difference. By 2024, she understood how she acclimatised, how to move efficiently and how to read her own decline. The record came after years of learning, not from treating the mountain as a place where determination alone was enough.

Changing the picture

Nepal’s mountaineering history includes extraordinary women, from Pasang Lhamu Sherpa to a newer generation of guides, instructors and expedition leaders. Their visibility matters in villages where girls still receive a shorter list of possible futures.

Shrestha’s story adds a particular route into that history. She was not raised inside a famous climbing family. She arrived through journalism, curiosity and a decision made as an adult. The late beginning makes her achievements more surprising, but it also makes them accessible. A life can change after the expected starting point has passed.

Her success does not mean every barrier has fallen. Women climbers still have to prove physical competence repeatedly, find funding and manage expectations about marriage and family. Recognition often arrives as celebration rather than durable support. The strongest legacy of a record would be better training, equipment and professional opportunities for the women who follow.

Shrestha has spoken of wanting to complete all 14 of the world’s 8,000-metre mountains. It is a goal that demands time, finance and a willingness to accept that weather may overrule preparation. Whether or not the full list is completed, her place in Nepal’s climbing story is already secure.

The photograph from a summit captures only an instant. It cannot show the loans, cold nights, repeated carries, failed plans or long descent. Purnima Shrestha knows that better than most. She has spent her working life deciding what belongs inside a frame.

Her larger achievement has been to widen it.

Featured image: Himalayan mountain landscape. Illustrative photograph from Unsplash, used under the Unsplash free-use licence.

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