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Making Nepal Visible: Deepak Rauniyar's Cinema of Conflict and Belonging

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SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

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By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Deepak Rauniyar's films rarely present Nepal as scenery.

The country in his work is not a postcard of mountains and temples waiting for an international audience to admire it. It is crowded with arguments: class, ethnicity, gender, war, policing, migration, identity and the difficult business of living beside people whose politics may be very different from your own.

That refusal to simplify Nepal has taken Rauniyar from Saptari to major international film festivals, including Berlin and Venice.

His career offers a useful lesson about global cinema: local stories do not become international by becoming less local. Often they travel because they are specific enough to reveal something universal.

Starting outside the centre

Rauniyar was born in Saptari in Nepal's Madhesh region. The geography matters because questions of centre and periphery would later recur throughout his work.

Kathmandu dominates Nepal's film industry just as it dominates much of national political and cultural life. Stories from outside the Valley can therefore arrive already carrying questions of language, class, representation and who gets to define the national image.

Rauniyar's cinema repeatedly returns to those tensions.

Highway and a country forced to stop

His first feature, *Highway*, premiered internationally at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2012.

The film uses a bus journey disrupted by highway blockades to build a portrait of Nepal in transition. Passengers are trapped together while political protests interrupt movement.

The device is simple and deeply Nepali. For years, shutdowns and road blockades could transform ordinary travel into uncertainty. Rauniyar turned that frustration into structure.

Instead of explaining the country through speeches, the film lets national dysfunction enter through delay.

That approach would become a hallmark of his work: politics is most interesting when it enters people's bodies, journeys, marriages and homes.

White Sun and the unfinished war

Rauniyar's second feature, *White Sun*, released in 2016, deepened that method.

The story begins with a death in a mountain village and brings together family members divided by the legacy of Nepal's civil war. A former Maoist fighter returns home and must confront people who remember the conflict differently.

The film is political, but it is not built like a political lecture.

The war appears in family resentment, generational distance and the inability of people to agree on the meaning of the past. A national conflict becomes domestic.

This helped *White Sun* connect with international festival audiences. Viewers did not need to know every detail of Nepali

political history to understand the emotional architecture of a divided family.

The long road to Pooja, Sir

Years later, Rauniyar returned with *Pooja, Sir*, a crime drama centred on a police investigation in southern Nepal.

The film premiered in the Orizzonti section of the 81st Venice International Film Festival in 2024.

Its protagonist, Inspector Pooja, travels from Kathmandu to investigate the kidnapping of two boys. She enters a border-town environment shaped by protest, mistrust, caste and ethnic tensions.

The film uses the mechanics of a police procedural, but the investigation opens into a larger question: who gets to move through Nepal with authority, and whose identity becomes visible the moment they do?

Women at the centre

Rauniyar's work is closely connected to actor and producer Asha Magrati, his long-time creative collaborator and partner.

Their filmmaking has increasingly placed women at the centre of narratives that might once have been written around male protagonists.

In *Pooja, Sir*, the central detective is a woman navigating both institutional power and social prejudice.

This matters because representation is not only about placing a woman in a traditionally male role. It is about allowing the character to remain complicated.

A female protagonist does not need to be morally perfect in order for the casting to be progressive. She needs the same dramatic freedom male characters have long been given.

International success without cultural flattening

Filmmakers from smaller industries often face pressure to make their countries legible to outsiders.

That can produce a familiar set of images: poverty, spirituality, mountains, tragedy.

Rauniyar's films resist that packaging.

He expects viewers to enter Nepal's complexity rather than receive a simplified introduction. Languages shift. Social categories matter. History is present even when not fully explained.

This creates a different relationship with international audiences.

The films are not saying, “Here is Nepal.” They are saying, “Here is one conflict inside Nepal. Pay attention.”

Why festivals matter

Major film festivals do more than give prestige. For filmmakers working outside large commercial industries, they create distribution opportunities, financing relationships and international visibility.

Rauniyar’s trajectory through Berlin, Venice and other festival circuits has helped make Nepali cinema visible in spaces where it historically had little representation.

This does not automatically transform the domestic industry. Nepal still struggles with financing, development, distribution and the tension between commercial filmmaking and independent cinema.

But every international breakthrough widens the map for the next director.

A cinema of discomfort

Rauniyar is most interesting when he refuses to make the audience comfortable.

His films do not offer easy heroes. Political movements contain contradictions. Families fail one another. Institutions carry

prejudice. Good intentions do not erase structural inequality.

This is a demanding way to represent a country, especially when audiences often want national cinema to make them proud.

But serious art cannot function only as reputation management.

Sometimes the most respectful thing a filmmaker can do is trust a society to survive honest examination.

Looking at Nepal without looking away

Deepak Rauniyar's films have travelled because they begin from conflicts close to home.

A blocked road. A dead father. A village divided by war. A police officer entering a place where authority is contested.

These are not grand abstractions. They are points where national history meets individual life.

That is the territory Rauniyar keeps returning to.

His cinema does not ask the world to admire Nepal from a distance. It asks viewers to sit inside its disagreements long enough to understand why they matter.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/deepak-rauniyar-nepal-cinema-conflict-belonging/>