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OCTOBER 28, 2026

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By Nepal Digest - October 28, 2026 - Nepal

In a Himalayan village in Sikkim, a woman returns home after leaving her job in Delhi. Her family expects her to marry and settle into a familiar life. She imagines something different.

The woman is Bishnu, the protagonist of *Shape of Momo*, played by Gaumaya Gurung. The character's struggle unfolds not through grand speeches but through family conversations, silences and the pressure of expectations. It is a fitting example of the kind of work Gurung has increasingly pursued: stories that make room for women and communities too often treated as secondary characters.

Gurung’s career, which spans Nepali commercial films, international television and independent cinema, illustrates a changing creative landscape. Her success is also a reminder that festival recognition alone cannot resolve the structural problems facing filmmaking in Nepal.

From optometry to the screen

Gurung did not follow a conventional route into Nepali cinema. She spent substantial periods in Britain, studied optometry and worked as a healthcare professional while developing her interest in acting. In a British Council interview, she described herself as a Nepali actor and optometrist based in London.

That background made her entry into filmmaking distinctive. Her career developed across countries and professions rather than entirely within Kathmandu’s entertainment industry. She also appeared in the BBC and FX miniseries *Black Narcissus* (2020), a production far removed from the domestic film circuit.

In her own account, watching Iranian, Korean and indigenous filmmaking broadened her sense of what cinema could do. Growing up in Nepal, she said, she rarely saw indigenous performers who looked like her on screen. The absence shaped her belief that the experiences of ethnic communities deserved more substantial representation.

Commercial success and creative range

Gurung reached a wider audience through *Kabaddi 4: The Final Match* in 2022. The performance brought a nomination for Best Debut Actress from the Nepal Film Technicians Association, according to her British Council profile. She also worked on *1915: Legend of Gurkhas* and later appeared in a range of Nepali productions.

The significance of moving between commercial and independent projects is easy to overlook. Popular cinema provides audiences, money and visibility. Smaller films often offer more demanding parts and greater freedom to examine neglected experiences. An actor who can work in both worlds helps connect them.

Gurung has also been associated with projects from filmmakers seeking a broader international audience for Nepali stories, including Deepak Rauniyar’s work. Such collaborations form part of a gradual expansion in the ambitions of Nepali-language filmmaking.

The quiet defiance of Shape of Momo

Directed by Sikkimese filmmaker Tribeny Rai, *Shape of Momo*, also known as *Chhora Jastai*, is a Nepali-language feature made as an India–South Korea production. It centres on Bishnu, who leaves city employment and returns to her ancestral Himalayan village.

The household is full of competing expectations. Bishnu’s grandmother longs for the return of a son living abroad. Her mother wants her to marry. Her pregnant sister faces troubles of her own. In the middle of these obligations, Bishnu attempts to imagine a future on her own terms.

The film uses daily life, rather than spectacle, to examine how family loyalty and individual autonomy can pull in opposite directions. Even the shape of a momo becomes an image of the demand to conform. Its specificity is part of its appeal: the domestic details are local, but the tensions are widely recognisable.

The film travelled to international festivals, introducing these characters to audiences outside the region. At IFFSA Toronto 2026, Gurung received the acting prize in the International Feature category and Rai was honoured for directing. The awards were reported in October by *Kantipur* and *Sikkim Express*.

This success deserves attention, but it should not be mistaken for proof that the industry has solved its difficulties. An international prize can strengthen the reputation of a film or an actor; distribution, financing and sustained audience access remain separate challenges.

Who gets to be seen?

Nepal’s linguistic and cultural diversity has never been in doubt. Whether its cinema has represented that diversity with equal depth is another question. Indigenous performers and communities have often had to navigate a narrow range of characters and assumptions.

Representation does not improve simply by adding a recognisable face to a cast. It depends on who writes the script, what relationships the film takes seriously, and whether people from underrepresented communities are allowed interior lives rather than functioning as scenery.

That distinction is important in *Shape of Momo*. Bishnu is neither an idealised symbol of tradition nor an uncomplicated rebel. She is a person trying to balance affection, obligation and ambition. Gurung’s restrained performance allows the contradictions to remain visible.

For audiences accustomed to formulaic heroines, this is a meaningful alternative. Yet one film cannot stand in for an entire movement. The expansion of opportunities for women and indigenous storytellers will have to be measured over years, by the work that gets commissioned and watched.

Between Nepal and the diaspora

Gurung’s trajectory also reflects a wider story of Nepali lives shaped by migration. She has worked abroad without entirely separating her identity from Nepal. That position is familiar to many people who move between countries, professions and languages.

In 2021, *Nepali Times* reported on her involvement in *Khula Akash* , a travel initiative that explored Nepal’s places and communities. Journeys of this kind offer something different from the simple celebration of a homeland. They create opportunities to question what belonging means after years spent elsewhere.

Cinema has a similar capacity. For Nepali-speaking viewers across the world, a film can make a place feel closer without pretending that life there is unchanged. For international viewers, it can reveal a culture through ordinary relationships rather than familiar tourism images.

The limits of international acclaim

Nepali films have gained a more visible international presence. That does not automatically mean a wider domestic market for independent work. Festival screenings and prizes rarely substitute for reliable distribution, financing or the infrastructure needed to keep filmmakers employed.

An industry’s strength is not measured solely by the number of trophies won abroad. It is also measured by the range of productions that can be completed, the audiences they reach and whether creative workers can build sustainable careers.

This is where Gurung’s choices matter. Her movement between accessible popular films and character-driven independent productions shows that the two need not be mutually exclusive. A more resilient Nepali cinema would be able to support both.

A broader idea of Nepali cinema

The changing face of Nepali cinema is not simply a new generation of stars replacing an older one. It is the possibility that more lives, languages, places and experiences can become central to its stories.

Gurung’s career does not provide a finished model for that transformation. But it reveals what is possible when a performer moves between commercial success and more searching work without treating either as illegitimate.

In *Shape of Momo*, Bishnu does not demand that her family cease to matter. She asks whether belonging must require surrendering the right to choose. That is a compelling question for the film’s protagonist, and a useful one for an industry reconsidering whose stories belong on screen.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - https://nepaldigest.com/gaumaya-gurung-changing-face-nepali-cinema/