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SEPTEMBER 24, 2026



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By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

Nabin Subba has spent more than two decades arguing, through films and through public debate, that Nepal cannot have a genuinely national cinema if only a narrow section of the country is allowed to define what “Nepali” looks and sounds like on screen. His work has moved from Limbu villages to Dalit households, from Kathmandu’s political disillusionment to a remote Rai family confronting the arrival of a road. Across these very different stories, the central question remains remarkably consistent: who gets to represent Nepal, and who has historically been left outside the frame?

Subba emerged at a time when mainstream Nepali cinema was heavily shaped by Kathmandu-based production, melodramatic conventions and visual habits borrowed from the much larger Indian film industry. Songs, fights, romance and familiar archetypes dominated commercial expectations. Regional cultures often appeared as colour, scenery or stereotype rather than as complete social worlds with their own internal conflicts. Subba's films challenged that hierarchy by treating communities at the margins of the national screen as centres of experience.

That choice did not produce a simple identity-politics cinema. His strongest films are interested in contradiction inside communities as much as exclusion from outside them. Tradition can provide belonging and also restrict women; development can connect a village and also destroy a livelihood; migration can offer possibility while hollowing out local life. Subba's cinema is most effective when it refuses to make either modernity or tradition morally simple.

From Taplejung to the Stage

Born in Taplejung in eastern Nepal, Subba grew up within a cultural landscape far from the institutions that controlled national filmmaking. The region's languages, rituals and social relationships later became part of his creative vocabulary, especially through his engagement with Limbu culture. Yet cinema was not his first professional medium. He began in theatre,

writing and directing plays before entering film.

Theatre offered a useful education because it forces the storyteller to work with actors, language and social space before technology can hide weaknesses. A stage production cannot depend on expensive locations or editing to create meaning. Dialogue, gesture and the relationship between performers have to carry the work.

Subba also worked in journalism, another experience that shaped his attention to social structure. Journalism teaches a person to ask whose account is being treated as authoritative and whose experience remains unreported. That question would later become central to his filmmaking.

The Problem with a “National” Cinema

Nepal is multilingual, multiethnic and geographically fragmented, yet for decades the national film industry often behaved as if one cultural centre could stand in for the whole country. This was partly economic. Production companies, studios, distributors and media were concentrated in Kathmandu, so the people making films naturally reproduced the worlds they knew best.

But concentration eventually becomes ideology if it is never questioned. When the same accent, family structure and social assumptions appear repeatedly, audiences begin treating them as neutral while everything else becomes “ethnic” or “regional.”

Subba challenged this imbalance directly.

He later used the idea of “Fourth Cinema” to discuss filmmaking that emerges from indigenous perspectives rather than merely representing indigenous people from outside. The argument was not that every filmmaker must make ethnic cinema. It was that communities should possess the power to shape how their own worlds are imagined.

Numafung

Numafung, released in the early 2000s, became the film that established Subba as a major figure in Nepali cinema. Based on Kajiman Kandangwa’s Limbu-language story *Karobar ki Gharbar*, the film centres on a young Limbu woman whose life is shaped by marriage customs, family obligation and the economic pressures surrounding bride-price traditions.

The film’s importance lies partly in how calmly it observes. It does not turn Limbu culture into either a romantic celebration or an anthropological exhibit. The customs emerge through everyday life, including the ways they create belonging and the ways they can constrain individual choice.

Language becomes part of the storytelling. Older characters use Limbu more heavily, younger characters move toward Nepali, and generational change becomes audible before it is explained. This

kind of detail allows culture to function dramatically rather than decoratively.

Why Numafung Felt Different

At the time, many Nepali films were visually and narratively influenced by Indian commercial cinema. *Numafung* rejected much of that grammar. The film did not need exaggerated villains, spectacular fights or songs inserted to satisfy a formula. It trusted social observation.

That restraint gave the film unusual emotional force. Conflict appears through families, customs and choices rather than through an external villain who can be defeated. The audience is forced to remain inside the social structure rather than escape it through melodrama.

The result helped demonstrate that authenticity itself could be cinematic. Local speech, landscape and ordinary behaviour did not need to be polished into somebody else's model of entertainment before they became worthy of the screen.

Women Inside Tradition

Numafung also made gender central to Subba's cinema. The protagonist's struggle is not framed simply as an individual rebellion against a backward community. The film shows how family affection, economic need and cultural expectation can all

coexist with restriction.

This complexity matters because social practices survive precisely when they are embedded in relationships people value. A custom is harder to challenge when it is defended by parents who also love their children.

Subba's film avoids the easy comfort of blaming one cruel person. The problem is structural, which means the solution cannot be a single heroic act.

Representation Without Tourism

Films about minority or indigenous communities often fail by turning people into visual information. Costumes, rituals and landscapes receive attention while characters remain emotionally thin. The audience learns how people dress but not what they want.

Subba's strongest work resists this tendency. Culture matters deeply, but characters still possess private ambition, jealousy, humour and contradiction. They are not representatives sent to explain an ethnicity to outsiders.

This may be the most important difference between representation and authorship. Representation shows a community. Authorship allows the community's worldview to shape the structure of the story itself.

Dalan

Subba later worked on *Dalan*, a 52-episode television series focused on Dalit life and caste discrimination. Television offered a different scale from art-house cinema. A feature film may reach festival audiences and urban theatres; a serial can enter homes repeatedly over months.

That repetition changes how social issues are encountered. Caste discrimination stops being a subject presented in one educational message and becomes part of the lives of recurring characters. Viewers develop familiarity before the argument is complete.

Dalan became one of Subba's most socially significant projects because it used a mass medium to address exclusion that had often remained outside mainstream entertainment. The series was also recognised internationally for its treatment of social issues.

Why Television Matters

Filmmakers sometimes treat television as less prestigious than cinema, but in a country such as Nepal the medium can have greater social reach. Families watch together, characters become household names and discussions continue between episodes.

For a subject such as caste, this matters enormously. Prejudice is not only legal or institutional; it is reproduced through daily behaviour. A serial can depict those repeated interactions more

effectively than a two-hour film.

Subba's movement between cinema and television shows that he was interested in audience impact as well as artistic prestige.

Goodbye Kathmandu

Goodbye Kathmandu shifted the setting toward urban Nepal and the frustrations of a generation shaped by political transition, migration and uncertainty. The film demonstrated that Subba's interests were never limited to indigenous identity as a narrow category.

Kathmandu itself can contain marginality. Young people may live near the centre of national power while feeling excluded from meaningful opportunity. Migration becomes both escape and threat, while political promises lose credibility through repetition.

The film widened Subba's recurring question: who belongs in the national story? The answer now included urban characters whose problem was not invisibility of ethnicity alone, but the instability of living in a country where the future often seems located somewhere else.

The Long Gap Before the Next Feature

Subba did not produce feature films at the speed expected from commercial directors. Years passed between major projects,

reflecting both artistic choice and the structural difficulty of financing independent cinema in Nepal. Films that resist mainstream formulas rarely attract easy investment.

This slow production cycle can be frustrating, but it also separates his work from an industry built around rapid release. Each film becomes a larger intervention rather than another item in an annual schedule.

The long gap before *A Road to a Village* also allowed Subba to return to rural Nepal with a very different historical context from the one surrounding *Numafung*. The question was no longer only how tradition constrains people, but how development itself changes the value of tradition.

A Road to a Village

A Road to a Village—*Gaun Aayeko Bato*—had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023 and travelled through festivals including Busan, Mumbai, São Paulo and Kerala before its wider release. The international route gave the film visibility far beyond Nepal without requiring it to abandon its local setting.

The story follows Maila, a basket weaver from a rural Rai community, his wife Maili and their young son Bindre. When a road finally reaches the village, the family initially experiences it as progress. Buses arrive, goods become available and the outside

world suddenly feels closer.

Then the economics change. Plastic products and cheap manufactured goods begin undermining the value of Maila's handmade bamboo work. Connectivity has arrived, but so has competition from an economy much larger than the village.

Development as a Family Story

Roads are usually discussed through statistics: kilometres built, travel time reduced, markets connected. Subba asks a more intimate question—what happens to one household when the road arrives?

The answer is not anti-development. The road creates real opportunities, including access to new goods and experiences that the child finds exciting. But progress is not distributed evenly.

Maila's livelihood becomes less valuable precisely because the village is now connected to a market capable of replacing his craft cheaply. The infrastructure succeeds in engineering terms while producing social disruption.

The Child and the New World

Bindre's perspective gives the film much of its emotional complexity. Children often welcome technological change without the economic anxiety adults attach to it. A television, soda bottle

or bus journey appears as possibility rather than threat.

This creates tension between generations. The father sees the economic structure that may destroy his work; the child sees a world becoming larger.

Neither perspective is wrong. Development frequently produces exactly this mixture—hope for the next generation and insecurity for the one whose skills were built for the previous economy.

Dayahang Rai and the Meaning of Casting

Casting Dayahang Rai as Maila was significant because Rai has become one of Nepal's most recognisable actors while remaining closely associated with stories outside the conventional Kathmandu elite. His presence gave the film domestic visibility without requiring Subba to move toward mainstream formula.

The collaboration also reinforced a wider trend in Nepali cinema: actors can move between commercial success and independent films rather than treating the two as separate careers. This matters because art-house cinema needs audiences, and recognisable actors can help bridge festival recognition with local theatres.

Subba's career has consistently argued that indigenous or rural stories are not niche material. Casting one of the country's leading actors makes that argument practical rather than theoretical.

The International Festival Route

For small film industries, international festivals function as infrastructure. They provide critics, sales agents, distributors, grants and future collaborators that domestic markets may not offer. TIFF and Busan are not only prestige events; they connect films to global circulation.

Subba's festival success shows how local specificity can become an international advantage. Audiences do not need to understand every Rai cultural reference to recognise the emotional problem of a parent watching economic change overtake his skills.

The lesson is similar to the one established by *Numafung*: local detail travels when the human stakes are clear.

Originality as an Industry Problem

Subba has repeatedly criticised Nepali cinema for borrowing too heavily from Indian dramatic conventions. In public discussions, he has argued that originality should come from the specific setting, characters, sound and language of Nepali society.

This criticism is not a rejection of foreign influence. All cinema is influenced by other cinema. The problem appears when imitation becomes so dominant that filmmakers stop observing the society immediately around them.

Nepal's advantage is precisely the material that cannot be copied elsewhere: its languages, histories, social contradictions and landscapes. Original cinema begins by treating those things as sources of drama rather than obstacles to commercial appeal.

The Idea of Fourth Cinema

Subba's advocacy around "Fourth Cinema" has been part of a broader conversation about indigenous filmmaking. The term is connected to the idea that indigenous communities should not simply appear in films made through dominant cultural frameworks. They should participate in authorship, aesthetics and control.

This is a deeper demand than diversity in casting. A film can feature indigenous actors while still viewing them through an outsider's gaze.

Fourth Cinema asks who controls the camera metaphorically as well as literally. Whose assumptions determine what needs explanation, what counts as conflict and what kind of ending feels truthful?

Film Policy and Institutional Change

Subba has also been active in debates about film policy, education and the structure of Nepal's cinema industry. Individual directors can create important films, but representation will remain fragile

if financing and institutions continue rewarding only familiar formulas.

A diverse cinema ecosystem requires regional filmmaking capacity, training, archives, grants and distribution routes. It also requires critics and audiences willing to treat films outside the mainstream as central to national culture.

This institutional dimension explains why Subba's influence extends beyond the films carrying his name. He has participated in arguments about what the industry itself should become.

Mentoring a New Generation

Younger Nepali filmmakers frequently cite Subba as an influence, particularly for his commitment to culturally grounded storytelling. The impact is visible in a new wave of films centred on regional communities, local languages and social realism.

Influence is difficult to measure because later filmmakers do not simply copy *Numafung*. The more important effect is permission. Subba helped demonstrate that audiences and festivals would take a deeply local Nepali story seriously.

Once that possibility is established, younger directors can move in directions he never did.

Who Gets to Be Universal?

One of the hidden hierarchies in global culture is that stories from dominant societies are treated as universal while stories from minority communities are labelled specific. A family drama in New York can simply be “a family drama”; a similar film in a Limbu or Rai village may be described primarily through ethnicity.

Subba’s work challenges that hierarchy by refusing to translate local life into a simplified universal language. The family remains Rai or Limbu, the social structure remains culturally specific and the emotions remain accessible.

Universality emerges through specificity rather than by removing it.

The Road as a Metaphor for Nepal

A Road to a Village can also be read as a wider metaphor for Nepal’s development trajectory. The country has spent decades trying to connect remote regions through roads, electricity, telecommunications and markets. These investments are necessary, but connectivity changes the terms on which local economies survive.

A road does not simply bring opportunity into a village. It also allows capital, advertising, migration and cheaper goods to flow in. Some people gain quickly; others discover that their old skills

have lost value.

Subba's film is powerful because it refuses to treat this as evidence that roads are bad. The tragedy comes from development without adequate adaptation.

What His Cinema Has Changed

Nabin Subba did not invent indigenous storytelling in Nepal, nor can one filmmaker represent the country's diversity. His significance lies in proving repeatedly that national cinema becomes richer when the centre of the frame moves.

Numafung placed a Limbu woman's life at the centre of a major film. *Dalan* brought Dalit experience into long-form television. *Goodbye Kathmandu* examined urban disillusionment. *A Road to a Village* explored development through a Rai family confronting economic change.

These works differ in setting, medium and period, but they are connected by the same refusal to allow dominant narratives to define the entire nation.

A Wider National Screen

Nepal's cinema is now more diverse than when Subba began. Indigenous filmmakers, regional-language projects and independent productions have greater visibility, while actors from

outside traditional elite backgrounds have become major national stars. The change is incomplete, but the frame has widened.

Subba's career belongs to the long process that made that widening possible. He argued for originality before it became fashionable and placed marginalised communities at the centre before diversity became a marketable language.

The Challenge of Audience Building

One of the remaining challenges for Subba's kind of cinema is audience development inside Nepal. Festival recognition can create international prestige, but domestic viewers still need access through cinemas, streaming, subtitled releases and critical discussion. Without those systems, independent films risk becoming respected abroad and under-seen at home.

Subba's work suggests that the solution is not making the films more conventional. It is building a film culture in which different kinds of storytelling can find different kinds of audiences. National cinema becomes healthier when commercial entertainment and artistically demanding work do not have to compete for exactly the same space.

The next stage of his influence may therefore be institutional as much as creative: helping create conditions in which younger filmmakers can make culturally specific films without spending

years rebuilding financing and distribution from zero.

Why His Films Matter to Film Education

Subba's work is also useful as a teaching model because it shows that culturally grounded cinema is not created simply by choosing an ethnic subject. It requires research, language, casting and a visual approach that emerges from the community rather than being imposed on it.

For students, this distinction is crucial. Representation is not achieved by adding traditional dress to a conventional script; it depends on allowing culture to shape character motivation, rhythm and point of view.

The frame can always widen further.

The central question of Nabin Subba's cinema has never really changed: whose life is allowed to stand for Nepal? His answer is that no single life can. A national cinema worthy of the country has to be wide enough for a Limbu daughter, a Dalit household, a frustrated Kathmandu generation and a Rai basket-maker watching a new road transform his world. The more voices inside the frame, the closer the screen comes to the country itself.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/nabin-subba-indigenous-nepali-cinema/>