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SEPTEMBER 24, 2026

The Film That Broke the Formula: Nischal Basnet and the Reinvention of Nepali Cinema

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By Nepal Digest - September 24, 2026 - Nepal

When *Loot* opened in 2012, Nepali cinema did not suddenly become a different industry overnight. But it did begin speaking in a different register.

The characters swore the way people swore outside the theatre. Kathmandu looked less like a decorative backdrop and more like a city of alleys, debt, frustration and schemes. The men at the centre of the story were not noble heroes. They were ordinary people trying to rob a bank.

For many younger viewers, the shock was not the crime. It was recognition.

The director behind that film was Nischal Basnet, a film-school graduate with no feature directing career behind him. The success of *Loot* made his name almost instantly, but the larger story is about what happened when a filmmaker trusted a local audience to accept something messier than the formulas it had been given.

A film school generation

Basnet emerged from a generation of Nepali filmmakers who entered cinema with formal training, access to digital tools and growing exposure to international films.

This mattered because the old barriers were changing. Making a feature was still difficult, but cheaper digital production meant filmmakers no longer needed the same industrial machinery that had shaped earlier decades.

The question became less “Can a Nepali film be made?” and more “What kind of Nepali film should be made?”

Basnet’s answer was *Loot*.

Kathmandu without makeup

The film’s crime plot was familiar in broad outline, but its texture felt local. The speech patterns, cramped rooms and urban

anxieties belonged to Kathmandu. Characters appeared driven by money not because the film wanted to preach about greed, but because money structured their lives.

The humour was rough. The people were compromised. The camera seemed interested in neighbourhoods that commercial cinema had often treated as too ordinary to matter.

That ordinariness became the film’s strength.

Loot was commercially successful and quickly became a reference point in discussions about modern Nepali cinema. It did not invent realism in Nepal, nor did it single-handedly transform the industry. But it proved that a film with a distinct local voice could become a mainstream event.

What success does to a filmmaker

A debut hit creates freedom and pressure in equal measure.

Basnet’s second major directing project, *Talakjung vs Tulke*, moved away from urban crime and into a village shaped by inequality and conflict. Written by Khagendra Lamichhane, the film adapted a classic dramatic structure to Nepal’s social and political landscape.

The result was both critically recognised and commercially successful. Nepal selected it as the country’s submission for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

For Basnet, this mattered not because an Oscar campaign guaranteed international success—it did not—but because it confirmed that the director of *Loot* was not limited to one type of story.

From behind the camera to in front of it

Basnet's career then took a shape that is unusual in larger film industries but familiar in smaller ones: he became several things at once.

He directed, acted, sang, produced and appeared in other filmmakers' projects. Audiences saw him in films such as *Kabaddi*, *Dui Rupaiyan* and *Prasad*. He also became associated with songs that crossed over from movie soundtracks into popular culture.

This multi-role career reflects the structure of Nepali cinema. The industry is small enough that creative people often move between departments. A filmmaker may be a writer on one project, actor on another and producer on the next.

Basnet's public identity consequently became broader than "the director of *Loot*".

The difficult sequel

Loot 2 demonstrated another truth of film careers: success is easier to start than to repeat.

The sequel did strong business but received a more mixed critical response. Some critics argued that the energy of the original had hardened into style. The very elements that once felt spontaneous now carried the burden of expectation.

That criticism is useful because it places Basnet's influence in perspective. A filmmaker who becomes associated with change can quickly become another establishment figure, judged against the breakthrough that first made him important.

A return with Dimag Kharab

Basnet later returned to feature directing with *Dimag Kharab* in 2023.

The social drama followed an ordinary man confronting political deceit and structural injustice. The film brought together actors including Khagendra Lamichhane, Dayahang Rai, Arpan Thapa and Swastima Khadka.

Reviews were not uniformly positive, but the project showed Basnet returning to one of his recurring interests: what happens when ordinary people collide with systems more powerful than themselves.

That theme links much of his work even when the genres change.

The importance of dialogue

One of Basnet’s lasting contributions is linguistic.

For decades, mainstream Nepali cinema often relied on formal dialogue that sounded written rather than spoken. *Loot* helped popularise a looser register in which rhythm, slang and street speech mattered.

This may seem minor compared with cinematography or plot. It is not.

Audiences recognise themselves through language. When characters speak like real people, the entire fictional world becomes more believable.

A cinema confident enough to be Nepali

The strongest version of modern Nepali cinema does not need to imitate Bollywood, Hollywood or international festival films. It can borrow techniques from everywhere while remaining grounded in its own social experience.

Basnet’s work has been part of that shift.

His films are interested in the lives of people who are neither mythic heroes nor elite cosmopolitans. They are hustlers, villagers, workers, spouses, friends and frustrated citizens.

The stories are recognisably Nepali because they do not constantly announce their Nepaliness. It is simply the world the characters inhabit.

After the revolution

More than a decade after *Loot*, the industry is different. New directors arrive with digital fluency. Viewers compare Nepali releases instantly with global streaming content. Independent films travel through festivals while commercial productions compete for increasingly expensive audience attention.

No single film can “save” such an industry.

But some films can change what others believe is possible.

That is the place *Loot* holds, and it is why Nischal Basnet remains important even beyond the success or failure of individual later projects.

He helped prove that a Nepali filmmaker could take the familiar city outside the cinema, bring its language and compromises onto the screen, and trust the audience to recognise itself.

Once that happened, it became harder to go back to pretending that formula was the only option.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - https://nepaldigest.com/nischal-basnet-loot-nepali-cinema/