

CULTURE / NEPALI MOVIES

## Shambhala: The Nepali Film That Took the Himalayas to Berlin

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At more than 4,000 metres above sea level, the Himalayas do not behave like a backdrop.

The air thins. Distances stretch. Weather becomes part of every decision. A journey that might look simple on a map can become a test of patience, endurance and faith.

That physical reality is central to *Shambhala*, Min Bahadur Bham's second feature film. The mountains in the film are not decoration placed behind a story. They shape the story's rhythm, its silences and the inner life of the woman at its centre.

When *Shambhala* entered the Competition at the 74th Berlin International Film Festival in 2024, it carried something unusually specific onto one of world cinema's biggest stages: a film rooted in Nepal's high Himalayan communities, told with the scale of an epic but the patience of a meditation.

## **A Himalayan story without turning the Himalayas into scenery**

*Shambhala* follows Pema, played by Thinley Lhamo, through a remote mountain world shaped by marriage, social expectation, suspicion and spiritual searching. The official premise provides enough to understand the film's movement: when Pema's husband leaves for Lhasa, she eventually sets out across the Himalayan landscape on a journey that becomes both physical and inward.

Beyond that, the film is better encountered than explained.

Bham does not use the mountains simply to make the screen look grand. He treats geography as a force. The settlements, paths, rituals, cold, animals and long distances affect how people behave. Silence becomes part of the dialogue. Landscape becomes part of character.

That approach is consistent with the cinema Bham had already developed in *Kalo Pothi*. In Nepal Digest's profile "Min Bahadur Bham: The Filmmaker Who Made Silence Speak", his work is traced back to Mugu and to a filmmaking language shaped by

childhood, conflict, caste, memory and Himalayan life.

*Shambhala* expands that language without abandoning it.

## **The scale of making the film was part of the story**

The production itself had to survive the environment it was trying to capture.

Reuters reported that the film was shot at altitudes ranging roughly from 4,200 to 6,000 metres. At that elevation, logistics become more than a production concern. Equipment, travel, weather and physical stamina all become creative constraints.

That matters because *Shambhala* does not feel like a film that could simply have been reconstructed elsewhere.

The sense of remoteness is not simulated. The vastness around the characters is real enough to change how the viewer reads every movement through it. A horse crossing a ridge, a figure moving across snow or a body framed against the mountains can appear small in visual scale but enormous in emotional weight.

The result is a film whose ambition comes partly from refusing convenience.

## **Berlin was a breakthrough for Nepali cinema**

The most important international milestone came in February 2024.

*Shambhala* was selected for the Berlinale Competition—the festival’s main competitive section. Reuters described it as Nepal’s first film to enter the Berlinale’s top-prize race.

That distinction deserves precision. *Shambhala* did not win the Berlinale’s top prize. The significance lies in the selection itself.

For a Nepali production to stand in the same Competition program as established filmmakers from major cinema industries meant that a story made from the cultural and geographical margins of global filmmaking had entered one of its central rooms.

Bham had already built an international reputation through *Kalo Pothi*, which emerged through Venice’s Critics’ Week. But Berlin represented another scale of visibility. The film was no longer simply being introduced as a promising work from Nepal. It was being judged inside the festival’s principal competition.

That difference matters for how Nepali cinema is perceived abroad.

## **From Berlin to Locarno**

*Shambhala* did not disappear after its Berlinale premiere.

Later in 2024, the film entered the Locarno Film Festival and screened in Piazza Grande. Locarno's official schedule listed the film for 12 August.

The move from Berlin's Competition to Locarno's Piazza Grande gave the film a different kind of international life. Berlin positioned it inside the formal prestige of a major jury competition. Locarno placed it before a large public audience in one of European cinema's most distinctive venues.

For Nepali filmmakers, this kind of circulation is significant because festivals do more than award prizes. They build reputations, connect producers and distributors, create future financing relationships, and influence which national cinemas programmers continue to watch.

## **A film about place, but not only about place**

It would be easy to describe *Shambhala* primarily as a Himalayan film.

That would also undersell it.

The mountains create the film's world, but its concerns are recognisably human: trust, intimacy, judgment, social pressure, loss, endurance and the possibility of peace inside uncertainty.

Cineuropa's coverage described the film in terms of romantic and mystical purity, while emphasising its movement through adversity and spiritual transformation. Those qualities help explain why the film could remain culturally specific without becoming inaccessible to viewers far from Nepal.

Bham's cinema rarely asks the audience to decode Nepal as if it were an exhibit. Instead, it places viewers inside a lived environment and allows meaning to emerge slowly.

That patience is part of what makes *Shambhala* unusual in an era when many films are edited to explain themselves immediately.

## **Thinley Lhamo at the centre**

Much of that patience depends on Thinley Lhamo's performance as Pema.

The character has to carry both social scrutiny and the physical weight of the journey without turning every emotion into dialogue. The film's restrained style places considerable responsibility on gesture, expression, posture and silence.

Pema's movement through the landscape gradually becomes more than a search for another person. Without revealing the film's

later turns, the journey increasingly raises a different question: what happens when a person stops allowing the judgments around her to define the limits of her life?

That shift is where *Shambhala* moves from social drama toward spiritual cinema.

## **Why the film matters for Nepal**

Nepali cinema has spent decades fighting several assumptions at once: that Nepal is mainly a location for foreign adventure stories, that domestic films have limited international reach, and that the country's smaller production ecosystem prevents it from competing artistically with better-funded industries.

*Shambhala* does not erase those structural problems.

But it provides a useful counterexample.

A Nepali story, led by Nepali creative voices and deeply tied to a remote Himalayan culture, entered the Berlinale's main Competition and then travelled to Locarno. It did so without sanding away the specificity that made it Nepali in the first place.

That may be the film's larger contribution.

The lesson is not that Nepali cinema must make more mountain films. It is almost the opposite. *Shambhala* suggests that international relevance does not require filmmakers to imitate a

generic global style. Cultural specificity can become an advantage when it is matched by rigorous filmmaking.

## **The mountains remain**

At the beginning, the Himalayas seem enormous and the people crossing them appear almost temporary.

By the end, that scale feels different.

The mountains have not become smaller. Pema has changed in relation to them.

That is also a useful way to understand what *Shambhala* carried to Berlin. Nepal did not arrive there by pretending to be somewhere else. Bham took one of the country's most remote cultural landscapes and trusted it to hold a story large enough for the world.

The mountains stayed where they were.

## **The audience came to them.**

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