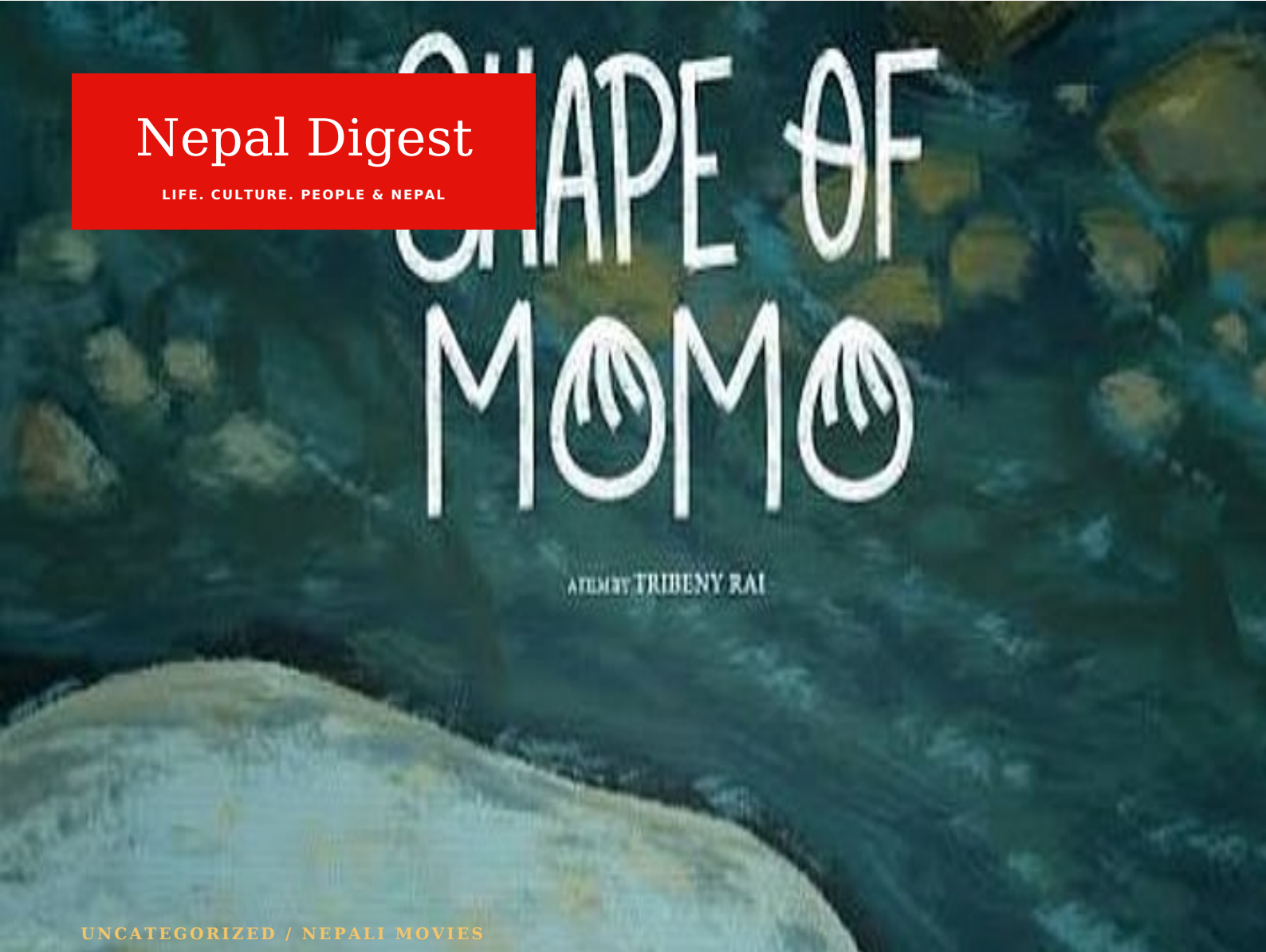
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UNCATEGORIZED / NEPALI MOVIES

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Tribeny Rai’s award-winning debut from Sikkim challenges conventional definitions of Nepali cinema, placing women’s lives, cultural identity and everyday resistance at the centre of a Himalayan story.

Nepali cinema has traditionally been associated with films made in Nepal, produced for Nepali audiences and distributed through the country’s domestic theatres. But language does not necessarily respect national borders.

Across the Himalayas, Nepali-speaking communities have developed their own cultural identities, shaped by different

political histories and social experiences. Their stories may be told in the same language, yet they rarely occupy the same cinematic space.

Tribeny Rai's *Shape of Momo* is an argument for thinking about that space differently.

Set in Sikkim, an Indian state bordering Nepal, the film follows Bishnu, a woman who returns to her ancestral village after leaving her job in Delhi. What awaits her is not simply the comfort of home but an elaborate network of family obligations, gender expectations and unresolved contradictions.

The film's achievement is not that it claims to speak for every Nepali-speaking community. It is that it allows one such community to tell its own story without translating its identity into the conventions of mainstream Indian or Nepali commercial cinema.

In doing so, it raises a question worth asking: should Nepali-language cinema be defined by where a film is produced, or by the people and experiences it represents?

A Himalayan Story That Travelled the World

Shape of Momo made its world premiere at the Busan International Film Festival in September 2025, where it received

the Songwon Vision Award and Taipei Film Commission Award. It also screened in the New Directors section of Spain’s San Sebastián International Film Festival and received further recognition on the international festival circuit.

The India–South Korea co-production reached theatres in Nepal and India on 29 May 2026, with distribution through Rana Daggubati’s Spirit Media. Filmmakers Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti and Payal Kapadia joined the project as executive producers.

These developments matter because independent films from smaller filmmaking communities frequently struggle with visibility and distribution. Festival recognition can attract critical attention, but it does not automatically translate into commercial success.

For Rai, the international journey is especially significant. Her debut feature emerges from Sikkim, where the infrastructure available to independent filmmakers is considerably smaller than that of India’s established film centres.

Yet its international recognition also demonstrates that a film need not abandon its regional identity to reach audiences elsewhere. Its cultural specificity is central to its appeal.

The Women Who Hold a Family Together

At the centre of *Shape of Momo* is Bishnu, played by Gaumaya Gurung.

Having left Delhi, she returns to a household occupied by women from several generations. Her grandmother dreams of joining her son in Dubai. Her mother manages family responsibilities and village affairs. Her pregnant sister navigates tensions within her marriage.

Bishnu arrives with different ambitions. She hopes to establish a homestay and build an independent life, but finds that the expectations of her family have changed far less than her own outlook.

Marriage remains an important measure of a woman’s success. Household responsibilities are accepted as feminine obligations. Decisions about independence are frequently negotiated through family approval.

What makes Rai’s approach interesting is the absence of a simple division between progressive and conservative characters.

Bishnu is determined, but not always considerate. Her mother appears conventional, yet possesses a practical intelligence that her daughter sometimes overlooks. The older women have learned to survive through compromises that Bishnu does not necessarily understand.

Their disagreements are not simply battles between freedom and oppression. They also reflect differences in experience, opportunity, economic dependence and the meaning of security.

This complexity moves the film beyond the familiar narrative of an educated woman returning to challenge backward traditions. It asks whether personal independence can become another form of authority when someone attempts to impose her own understanding of progress on others.

Why the Momo Matters

The title is deliberately ordinary.

Momo is part of everyday food culture across Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling and other Himalayan communities. Its familiarity gives the film an immediately recognisable cultural reference. But the dumpling also becomes a metaphor for social conformity.

Bishnu can prepare momo, although the shape is not necessarily what others expect. Her imperfect folds attract criticism despite the food itself being perfectly edible.

The distinction between appearance and substance becomes an analogy for the expectations placed on women. A woman can be educated, capable and financially ambitious, yet still be judged against standards concerning marriage, behaviour, domestic skills and respectability.

Like a carefully folded momo, she is expected to take a recognisable form.

Rai does not treat this metaphor as an elaborate philosophical statement. It emerges through conversations and everyday activities, where seemingly harmless observations reveal deeper social assumptions.

The approach is effective because many cultural expectations do not announce themselves as instruments of control. They are transmitted through habits, casual remarks and the quiet pressure to behave like everyone else.

Nepali Cinema Is Bigger Than Nepal

The film’s broader significance lies in its language and geographical identity.

Shape of Momo is an Indian production with South Korean co-production participation, directed by a filmmaker from Sikkim and rooted principally in Nepali-speaking community life. It therefore occupies a space that conventional national classifications can struggle to describe.

Calling it Indian cinema is accurate in production terms. Calling it a Nepali-language film is equally accurate in cultural and linguistic terms. Neither description, on its own, tells the whole story.

Nepali-speaking communities in India possess histories, political experiences and identities that cannot simply be absorbed into

those of Nepal. Their language creates connections across borders without eliminating these distinctions.

That is precisely why films such as *Shape of Momo* deserve attention from Nepali audiences. They offer the possibility of discovering familiar cultural experiences through a different social perspective.

The significance extends beyond linguistic pride. A genuinely diverse Nepali-language cinema should accommodate stories from communities whose experiences are not identical to those commonly represented in Kathmandu-centred filmmaking.

That would broaden the cultural conversation rather than merely expand its geographical reach.

The Politics of Ordinary Life

One of the most revealing aspects of Rai’s filmmaking is her reluctance to present her protagonist as morally uncomplicated.

Bishnu resists patriarchal expectations, but her attempts to manage family property and relationships expose other forms of power. Her treatment of workers and her assumptions about the people around her complicate the idea that an educated, independent woman is necessarily free from prejudice.

Class and migration therefore become important alongside gender.

This is a valuable distinction. A film concerned with women's autonomy can easily reduce its argument to the belief that tradition is oppressive and modernity liberating.

Shape of Momo is more interested in how people carry inherited assumptions with them, even when they believe they have rejected them.

Its rural setting also resists the temptation to present the Himalayas merely as picturesque scenery. The landscape is beautiful, but life within it involves financial uncertainty, family conflict, social surveillance and competing ambitions.

The village is neither a cultural paradise nor a place from which liberation can only come through escape. It is home, with all the emotional contradictions that word implies.

International Recognition Is Only the Beginning

The film's festival achievements have brought visibility to Rai and the wider possibilities of independent Nepali-language filmmaking. But visibility should not be mistaken for structural transformation.

International awards cannot, by themselves, establish a sustainable filmmaking ecosystem. Independent directors still require access to finance, experienced crews, distribution

networks and audiences willing to engage with stories outside commercial formulas.

A film may impress international festival juries while struggling to secure regular screenings or meaningful commercial returns.

That tension makes *Shape of Momo* an important case study rather than definitive evidence of an industry-wide revolution.

Its success demonstrates what is creatively possible. Whether that possibility leads to a larger movement will depend on the films, institutions and audiences that follow.

The more consequential question is whether emerging filmmakers from Sikkim and other Nepali-speaking regions can build careers without treating their home communities merely as starting points to leave behind.

A Different Future for Nepali-Language Storytelling

For Nepali cinema, *Shape of Momo* suggests an alternative path to cultural relevance. That path does not depend on bigger budgets, elaborate spectacle or reproducing commercial formulas.

It begins with the conviction that local experiences can carry universal meaning.

The film’s questions about marriage, family loyalty, migration, independence and belonging are not exclusive to Sikkim. They resonate across Nepali-speaking communities, including those living far from the Himalayas.

For diaspora audiences, the film’s treatment of homecoming is particularly relevant. Leaving a place can change how one understands it. Returning can expose the uncomfortable distance between personal transformation and the expectations that remain at home.

Yet *Shape of Momo* does not offer a simple answer to whether independence requires departure or whether belonging demands compromise. Its value lies in recognising that both questions may remain unresolved.

Tribeny Rai’s debut does not single-handedly redefine Nepali-language cinema. No individual film can reasonably carry that burden.

What it does achieve is more concrete: it expands the range of places, voices and experiences that audiences can recognise within that cinema.

And perhaps that is where meaningful change begins.

Not by deciding that Nepali cinema must have one particular shape, but by accepting that it never needed one in the first place.

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