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SEPTEMBER 25, 2026



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By Nepal Digest - September 25, 2026 - Nepal

At 21, Sonam Bhuti Gurung has emerged from one of Nepal's most remote regions with a simple ambition: to make people pay attention to communities that are too often admired for their landscapes but overlooked for the lives lived within them.

Nepal knows Dolpa through images: snow-covered mountains, ancient settlements, monasteries standing against enormous Himalayan landscapes, and trails disappearing into valleys where roads have yet to arrive.

For Sonam Bhuti Gurung, however, Dolpa is not scenery. It is home. Behind the beauty she sees another Dolpa—one shaped by difficult access to education, limited infrastructure, economic hardship, migration, and communities living far from the institutions that make decisions about their future.

At just 21, Sonam has begun trying to bring those realities into Nepal's wider conversation. Her tools are unusually simple: education, a second-hand iPhone, and her own voice.

A Childhood Between Dolpa and Kathmandu

Sonam comes from Upper Dolpa, but her education took her away from the region early in life. She has said that she had been living and studying in Kathmandu since she was around four years old. Yet geographical distance did not erase her relationship with the place she came from.

Moving between Kathmandu and Dolpa exposed her to two dramatically different versions of Nepal. Kathmandu offered schools, connectivity, and opportunities that could easily be taken for granted. Returning to Dolpa made those differences difficult to ignore.

Sonam began noticing how access to education could influence people's choices, confidence, and possibilities. For her, education

gradually became more than obtaining a certificate. She came to see it as something capable of expanding the choices available to a person—particularly young women.

Returning as a Teacher

In 2024, Sonam worked as a teacher at Chharka Bhot School in Upper Dolpa. It was an experience that confronted her with one of the contradictions facing many young Nepalis who want to work in their own communities: purpose alone does not pay the bills.

Sonam later recalled receiving her first teaching salary and crying because the amount was barely sufficient to meet accommodation and food expenses. She was also carrying responsibility for her younger brother. For a moment, the experience made migration understandable in a deeply personal way.

Teaching in Dolpa also gave Sonam something that statistics cannot easily provide—proximity. She could see the realities facing children, teachers, and families directly. The experience strengthened her belief that remote communities should not merely be discussed from Kathmandu. Their own people should participate in telling their stories.

A Second-Hand iPhone and a Bigger Idea

Sonam's interest in storytelling began before national attention arrived. She had become interested in video editing while still at

school and learned largely through freely available digital tools. But there was an obvious problem: she did not have the equipment.

After completing Class 11, she wanted to start creating videos but lacked a capable phone. She took a teaching job at a monastery, reportedly earning Rs 12,000 per month, and committed herself to saving part of the salary. After roughly a year, she had accumulated around Rs 55,000. She used the money to buy a second-hand iPhone. It became her camera.

There was no professional production team behind her. No expensive studio. And in the village, internet connectivity itself could be extremely limited. Still, she documented.

Nepal's remote regions are frequently photographed and interpreted by outsiders—travellers, journalists, researchers, and development organisations. Sonam represents something different: a young person from the region attempting to document it from within.

When Herne Katha Changed the Audience

Sonam's story reached a much larger audience after she was featured by *Herne Katha*. The appearance brought national attention to a young teacher whose concerns extended beyond her own circumstances.

People discovered someone willing to speak openly about rural life, education, women, and the difficulties experienced by communities in Upper Dolpa. Visibility also changed her life. Suddenly, strangers recognised her and some contacted her because her story had affected them.

The attention could easily have transformed the story into one about internet fame. Sonam has consistently tried to redirect it towards something larger: Dolpa.

Beyond the Postcard

To outsiders, Dolpa can look almost mythical. To the people living there, geography can impose severe practical costs. Education, transportation, healthcare, communication, and economic opportunities become fundamentally different questions when settlements are separated by mountains rather than city streets.

Speaking at the WOW Women Achievers Awards 2026, where she delivered the keynote address, Sonam highlighted this contradiction. Nepal celebrates Dolpa's mountains and snow, she argued, while many of the people living among those landscapes continue to face serious disadvantages.

Her concern is not limited to Dolpa. She has spoken about wanting to represent remote communities across Nepal whose difficulties rarely reach the centre of national discussion.

The Women She Sees Around Her

Another important part of Sonam's perspective concerns women. Returning to her community has shown her how differently lives can unfold depending on education, economic independence, and geography.

Her response is not simply to tell women to dream bigger. She connects independence with practical capacity. Education matters. Financial literacy matters. Skills matter. And the ability to earn from those skills matters.

Freedom is difficult to exercise without the capacity to support the choices that freedom creates.

Education Beyond Certificates

Sonam is pursuing higher education, but her argument about education is broader than academic credentials. For her, a degree alone does not necessarily represent meaningful education. Reading, understanding the world, developing useful skills, and becoming capable of making informed decisions matter just as much.

The divide between Nepal's centre and its remote regions is not merely geographical. It can become a divide in information, confidence, networks, and opportunity. Education can narrow that distance—but only when it gives people practical agency rather

than another certificate to hang on a wall.

Remote Does Not Mean Empty

One of the persistent problems in how places such as Upper Dolpa are discussed is that remoteness is treated as absence: no roads, limited services, sparse population, weak connectivity. That framing can make the region sound like a blank space waiting for outsiders to discover or develop it.

For people who live there, remoteness is not emptiness. It contains language, memory, family relationships, religious life, seasonal routines and forms of knowledge shaped by the landscape. Development becomes more meaningful when it expands choices without suggesting that people first need to become culturally closer to Kathmandu in order to matter.

Geography Changes the Cost of Everything

A school in a remote mountain district does not operate under the same conditions as a school in the capital. Teachers may need to travel farther, supplies cost more to move, weather affects attendance and communication can be inconsistent. The same is true for healthcare, construction and ordinary commerce.

This is why national averages can hide severe inequality. A statistic showing access to schooling or mobile connectivity may

tell little about how reliable that access is in one settlement during winter, or how much time and money a family must spend to use it.

Teaching Made the Inequality Personal

Sonam's experience at Chharka Bhot School gave her a position inside the system rather than outside it. She was not only a former student reflecting on remote education; she was responsible for showing up, teaching and trying to sustain herself on the income attached to the job.

The low salary became meaningful because it collided with a broader ambition to serve her own community. That is one of the hardest problems in rural development: many young people want to contribute, but the economic structure may effectively punish them for staying.

Why Young Professionals Leave

Migration is often explained through aspiration, but it is also about arithmetic. A teacher, health worker or technician may care deeply about a community and still leave because the salary cannot support housing, family responsibilities or long-term security.

Sonam's story makes that tension visible without turning migration into a moral failure. People do not necessarily leave because they stopped caring about home. They often leave because the available work does not make staying financially sustainable.

Representation From Within Is Different

When outsiders document a remote community, they decide what appears unusual enough to record. A person from the community begins with a different baseline. The things that look exotic to a visitor may be ordinary, while the details residents consider important may never enter the tourist frame at all.

This does not make insider storytelling automatically objective. Every storyteller still chooses what to show. But it changes who has the authority to define the problem and which questions are asked first.

The Phone Became More Than a Camera

The second-hand iPhone Sonam bought with savings represented access to production, editing and distribution at once. A generation ago, documenting remote life for a national audience might have required a television crew or newspaper assignment. Now one person can record, edit and publish from a device small enough to carry between villages.

Connectivity remains the bottleneck. Capturing a story is one task; uploading large files from a place with weak internet can be another entirely. Digital storytelling from remote Nepal depends not only on creativity but on the physical infrastructure that allows the story to leave the village.

Internet Access Is Now Part of Cultural Power

Connectivity is usually discussed as an economic or educational service. It is also a cultural one. Communities with reliable internet can represent themselves, sell products, maintain contact with migrants and participate in national debates more directly.

When connectivity is weak, the problem is not only inconvenience. Other people become more likely to speak on behalf of the community because they possess the tools of distribution.

Visibility Can Help and Distort

National attention after *Herne Katha* created opportunities for Sonam, but visibility also creates pressure to become a symbol. A young woman can suddenly be expected to represent all of Dolpa, all remote youth or all women facing similar barriers.

No individual can carry that responsibility accurately. Sonam's value lies partly in speaking from one life and one community, not

in becoming a substitute for the many other voices that deserve space too.

Social Media Rewards Simplicity

Remote-region advocacy can become vulnerable to the same compression that affects all digital media. “Beautiful Dolpa, forgotten people” is an emotionally powerful frame and still too simple to explain every local challenge. Education, infrastructure, culture, migration and development choices often pull in different directions.

Longer storytelling allows those contradictions to remain visible. A region can need better roads while also worrying about what roads change. Tourism can bring income while increasing pressure on waste systems and cultural practices. Modernisation can expand choices while weakening older forms of self-sufficiency.

Women’s Independence Has Material Conditions

Sonam’s emphasis on education and financial literacy becomes stronger when connected to material reality. Confidence alone cannot create independence where a person has no income, limited mobility or little control over household decisions.

Skills, earnings, documentation, banking access and the ability to travel safely all expand the range of choices a woman can realistically make. Empowerment becomes meaningful when it changes what is possible on an ordinary day.

Girls Need Examples Close Enough to Imagine

National role models can inspire, but examples from the same district or community can feel more attainable. A girl in Upper Dolpa seeing another young woman teach, study, speak publicly and use digital media receives evidence that such pathways are not reserved only for people from Kathmandu.

This is one of the quiet effects of Sonam's visibility. The story is not only consumed by urban audiences learning about Dolpa. It can travel back toward the communities that produced it.

Education Should Widen Choice

Sonam's criticism of certificate-focused education reflects a broader challenge in Nepal. Families invest heavily in degrees because credentials are expected to unlock employment, yet many graduates discover that a certificate alone does not create a clear career pathway.

For remote students, the gap can be even wider if professional networks, internships and information remain concentrated in cities. Useful education therefore includes communication, digital skills, financial understanding and the confidence to navigate institutions, not only exam performance.

Entrepreneurship Could Connect Home and Market

Sonam has spoken about eventually promoting products from her community. The idea is potentially significant because remote economies often lose value when raw products leave cheaply and branding, packaging or sales happen elsewhere.

Turning local products into sustainable businesses would require more than storytelling: quality control, logistics, pricing, reliable supply and relationships with producers would all matter. The opportunity is real precisely because the operational challenge is substantial.

Tourism Should Benefit Residents More Directly

Dolpa's international appeal comes partly from remoteness, landscape and cultural distinctiveness. Tourism can create income through guiding, lodging, transport and local products, while also creating uneven benefits if outside operators capture most of the

spending.

Young people from the region can help shape a tourism model that explains local culture accurately and keeps more value in the community. Storytelling, entrepreneurship and tourism therefore overlap naturally.

Development Needs Local Negotiation

Roads, schools, telecommunications and health services are generally described as obvious improvements, yet communities still need a voice in how projects are designed. A road can reduce isolation and also change trade patterns, land prices and cultural exposure rapidly.

People who understand both Kathmandu institutions and village life can become useful translators between these systems.

Sonam's own experience across both worlds gives her a perspective suited to that role, even if her career ultimately moves in a different direction.

The Burden of Being “Inspiring”

Young public figures from difficult backgrounds are often described as inspiring before they have had time to become ordinary adults. The label can become restrictive because every decision is expected to remain motivational.

Sonam should be allowed to change ambitions, fail at projects, leave a job or choose a private life without that becoming a betrayal of the story people first admired. A meaningful public profile does not require a person to become a permanent symbol.

What Visibility Cannot Solve

A viral video cannot fix teacher shortages, transport costs or weak healthcare. Recognition can open doors, connect donors or attract institutional attention, but structural problems require budgets, governance and long-term implementation.

This distinction protects the story from becoming unrealistic. Sonam can advocate, document and build. She cannot be responsible for solving the conditions that made her advocacy necessary.

A Generation With New Tools

What makes Sonam's story especially relevant is that she belongs to a generation from remote Nepal with access to tools previous generations did not have: smartphones, social media, online learning and direct distribution. Geography still matters, but it no longer controls visibility completely.

The opportunity now is to turn visibility into participation—more young people from remote districts telling stories, starting

businesses, entering policy conversations and creating institutions rather than appearing only as subjects inside somebody else's narrative.

What Comes Next

Sonam's ambitions extend beyond teaching and digital storytelling. She has spoken about eventually working with organisations such as UNICEF, travelling internationally, and becoming an entrepreneur. One idea is particularly connected to home: promoting products originating from her community and creating economic opportunities around them.

Those ambitions remain aspirations rather than completed achievements. That distinction is important. Sonam's story is still at an early stage.

There is a temptation, particularly after someone becomes visible online, to turn a young person's unfinished journey into a finished success story. That would miss what makes Sonam interesting. Her importance today does not come from having solved Dolpa's problems. Nor can one teacher, creator, or advocate realistically do so.

What she has done is begin using the opportunities she received outside Dolpa to direct attention back towards the place from which she came.

A Different Image of Dolpa

For generations, remote Himalayan communities have frequently appeared in mainstream narratives as subjects—places to photograph, study, visit, develop, or romanticise. A generation equipped with smartphones and digital platforms increasingly has the ability to reverse that relationship. They can become the storytellers.

Sonam's second-hand iPhone therefore represents something larger than a device. It gives a young woman from Upper Dolpa the ability to decide where the camera points: sometimes towards mountains, sometimes towards classrooms, and sometimes towards the difficult realities hidden behind Nepal's most beautiful landscapes.

Sonam Bhuti Gurung is still discovering where that journey will take her. But she already appears clear about where it began.

The Long-Term Measure

The strongest measure of Sonam's public work will not be follower counts or invitations to speak. It will be whether visibility creates more space for people from Dolpa to speak for themselves, study without leaving opportunity permanently behind and build livelihoods that do not require choosing between home and survival.

That outcome depends on institutions far larger than one young storyteller. Schools need teachers who can afford to stay, communities need reliable connectivity and local producers need markets that reward value rather than distance. Sonam's contribution is to make those needs harder to ignore while refusing to reduce the region to hardship alone.

A Voice Is Strongest When It Creates More Voices

Sonam's story becomes more meaningful if it leads to a wider field of storytellers from Dolpa rather than leaving one young woman to represent an entire region. Schools, community groups and local organisations can help by teaching basic media, writing and digital skills so young people document their own surroundings with greater confidence.

That would shift representation from occasional national attention toward a more continuous local archive. Festivals, school life, agricultural routines, migration and environmental change could be recorded by people who understand the context intimately. A region becomes harder to stereotype when many residents are producing their own accounts.

The long-term opportunity is therefore bigger than one creator's visibility. It is the possibility of a generation from remote Nepal becoming producers of public knowledge rather than only subjects

inside stories made elsewhere.

That is also why her unfinished career matters. The value lies not in presenting a 21-year-old as somebody who already has the answers, but in watching what becomes possible when education, local knowledge and digital tools meet in the hands of someone who refuses to treat her home as background scenery.

Upper Dolpa is not simply a beautiful corner of Nepal waiting to be discovered. It is home to people whose ambitions, hardships, and voices deserve to be part of Nepal's story—and Sonam intends to make sure they are heard. The lasting value of that work will come when attention becomes opportunity for more people than the storyteller herself, and when more young people from Dolpa are able to tell their own stories directly, confidently and continuously over time.

Originally published by Nepal Digest - <https://nepaldigest.com/sonam-bhuti-gurung-upper-dolpa-journey/>