

CULTURE / CHANGEMAKERS

A Culture in Strokes: How Sunita Dangol Helped Bring Ranjana Script Back Into Public Life

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Before Sunita Dangol became a familiar name in public life, she was already working on a quieter question: how do you keep a language, a script and a cultural memory alive when younger generations are growing up in a very different Kathmandu?

Her answer was not to place heritage behind glass. It was to teach it, draw it, speak it, film it and make it easier to encounter in everyday life.

That is the less-discussed story of Dangol's rise. Long before politics became the frame through which many people knew her,

she had built an identity around Nepalbhasa, Newar culture and the revival of Ranjana script. She moved through beauty pageants, radio, television, public speaking, calligraphy workshops and youth-led cultural projects, gradually turning communication skills into a form of cultural advocacy.

The story matters because Kathmandu is full of things people recognise but do not always know how to read. A carved inscription on a temple. A letterform painted during a festival. A script on an old manuscript. A word spoken by grandparents but not always by grandchildren. For Dangol, these were not decorative remnants. They were clues to a living culture.

Miss Newa was only the beginning

Dangol first drew wider attention after winning the Miss Newa title in 2011. Pageants can easily be dismissed as image-driven events, but in her case the experience appears to have opened a door into a much broader engagement with language and identity.

Her public work expanded quickly. She became an RJ, television presenter, emcee and communications professional. Those roles trained a skill that would become central to her later cultural work: translating ideas for different audiences.

She was not simply speaking to people who were already deeply invested in Newar heritage. The challenge was to reach younger audiences who were comfortable with English, Nepali, social

media and contemporary visual culture, but who might have had only a distant relationship with Nepalbhasa or traditional scripts.

That problem—how to make inherited culture feel immediate rather than compulsory—became a recurring theme in her work.

Learning the script she had seen all her life

Dangol has described growing up in Kathmandu with Nepalbhasa as her mother tongue, while becoming more deeply interested in Ranjana script later. She learned through Nepal Lipi Guthi after being encouraged to join classes and began practising calligraphy intensively.

Ranjana is one of Nepal's historic writing systems, strongly associated with Newar cultural and religious traditions and visible across manuscripts, temples and Buddhist contexts far beyond the Kathmandu Valley. But recognition is not the same as literacy. Many people can identify its visual beauty without being able to read or write it.

That gap became part of the attraction.

In an account of her script journey, Dangol explained that seeing the script around temples and old buildings made her want to understand it properly. Once she began learning, calligraphy gave the script another dimension: it was not only historical information

but a visual practice.

That distinction is important. Heritage often survives when people are given a reason to use it rather than simply admire it.

Callijatra and the idea that culture should travel

Dangol became one of the public faces of Callijatra, a youth-led initiative working to preserve and mainstream Newa scripts and Nepalbhasa.

The project took the script outside specialist circles. Workshops introduced people to the basics of writing Ranjana. Calligraphy made it visually attractive. Educational materials helped turn interest into learning. Online outreach widened the audience beyond those who could attend a physical class.

At international typography gatherings, including ATypI events, Dangol and collaborators demonstrated Ranjana and discussed the larger effort to bring Newa scripts into contemporary use.

The philosophy behind the work was simple but consequential: preservation does not happen only by protecting old examples. It also happens by creating new users.

That makes Callijatra part of a wider transformation in cultural preservation. Older models often focused on archives, experts and

institutions. Newer models add social media, design, workshops and public participation. The objective is not merely to store the past safely but to make it usable again.

It is the same tension explored in other Nepal Digest stories about why Nepal's traditions survive because they keep changing. A tradition that never adapts can become ceremonial. A tradition that changes too quickly can lose meaning. The work lies in keeping continuity without freezing culture in place.

One minute of Nepalbhasa at a time

The pandemic created an unexpected test for that approach.

When physical gatherings became difficult, Callijatra's workshops could no longer operate normally. Instead of waiting for classrooms to reopen, Dangol and her collaborators shifted part of the work online.

Short Nepalbhasa lessons began circulating in one-minute formats designed for social media. The idea was deliberately small.

Viewers did not have to commit to a formal course. They could learn a phrase, a pronunciation or a basic expression in the same environment where they were already consuming short videos.

It was a useful example of how language preservation can change when the medium changes.

Traditional language teaching assumes time, classrooms and structured progression. Social platforms assume interruption, speed and repetition. Rather than treating that as purely destructive, the one-minute lessons used the logic of the platform itself.

A language spoken by previous generations was being packaged in one of the youngest media formats available.

Why scripts matter beyond nostalgia

It is easy to see script revival as a niche concern. But writing systems carry more than words.

They encode histories of education, religion, commerce, state power and community memory. When a script disappears from everyday use, access to parts of that history becomes mediated by specialists. People may remain culturally connected to a tradition while losing the ability to engage directly with its written record.

That is why script work sits close to debates about identity and belonging.

In Nepal, language has never been only about communication. It is also tied to recognition: which communities appear in schools, public signage, media and institutions; whose names are spelled correctly; which histories are visible; and which forms of knowledge are treated as central rather than peripheral.

This is also why the subject intersects with questions raised in profiles such as Rukshana Kapali's fight over identity and language recognition. The circumstances are different, but the larger issue is similar: cultural belonging becomes more secure when institutions and public life make room for it.

From participant to teacher

One of the most important parts of Dangol's cultural story is the movement from learning to teaching.

That transition changes the role of a cultural participant. Someone who learns a script preserves it for themselves. Someone who teaches it creates the possibility of transmission.

Dangol's work with workshops, educational curriculum and outreach helped position her not simply as a cultural enthusiast but as a communicator between generations.

Her media background mattered here. Radio and television require clarity. Hosting requires confidence. Calligraphy requires patience. Language activism requires consistency. Combined, those skills gave her a public style that was polished without being detached from the subject matter.

That combination also explains why she became effective in cultural events aimed at younger audiences. She did not present heritage as something people should respect because they were

told to. She presented it as something people could learn, use and make their own.

The visual power of Ranjana

Ranjana has one advantage many endangered or declining writing traditions do not: it is immediately visual.

Its calligraphic form can attract someone before they understand a single character. That makes design an entry point into language.

Callijatra used that quality well. Workshops could begin with the pleasure of drawing. A participant might arrive because the letters looked beautiful and leave with questions about language, manuscripts or history.

This is an important preservation strategy because curiosity often works better than obligation.

Young people who resist being told that they must preserve a tradition may still be drawn to typography, graphic design, tattoos, posters, digital fonts or visual identity. Once the script enters those spaces, cultural learning can follow.

The broader digitisation of Newa scripts has reinforced that possibility. Fonts and Unicode work make it easier for scripts to survive not just on monuments and paper but on contemporary

devices and digital platforms.

A modern public identity built from an old script

Dangol's later public visibility has sometimes obscured this earlier body of work. Yet it explains a great deal about the image she eventually carried into wider public life.

She was already comfortable moving between formal institutions and youth culture. She could speak about heritage without rejecting modernity. She could present local identity in settings that were national and international.

That ability eventually led to recognition beyond Nepal, including her selection for the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leaders class of 2025.

Her political career is now the most visible part of her biography, but it did not invent the themes associated with her. Culture, youth participation, communication and the relationship between heritage and modern urban life were already there.

Politics came later.

What her cultural story says about Kathmandu

There is a tendency to imagine modern Kathmandu as a choice between two versions of the city.

One is historic: courtyards, temples, festivals, local languages, neighbourhood identities and inherited systems of social life.

The other is contemporary: apartments, motorcycles, global brands, digital payments, migration, English-language education and social media.

But most residents live in both cities at once.

A teenager can use an international app while participating in a local festival. A designer can work in English and draw Ranjana letters. A family can value ancestral language while speaking Nepali at school and work. Cultural identity does not disappear simply because daily life becomes modern; it changes the way it is expressed.

Dangol's script work is interesting precisely because it did not try to reverse time. The objective was not to recreate an earlier Kathmandu. It was to find places for older language and script inside the city that exists now.

The more enduring story

Public office can be temporary. Elections change. Titles change. Political alliances change.

Cultural transmission operates on a different timeline.

If a young person learns to recognise Ranjana because of a workshop, a social post or a one-minute lesson, that knowledge can last beyond any political cycle. If a script becomes easier to type, teach and share, the number of people capable of carrying it forward expands.

That may be the more enduring part of Sunita Dangol's story.

Before City Hall, before election campaigns and before national political attention, there was a young Kathmandu communicator learning the curves of an old script and asking how to make other people curious about it too.

In a city that often worries about what modernisation is erasing, that question remains relevant.

How do you preserve a culture without trapping it in the past?

One answer is to keep writing it.

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