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Swastima Khadka entered Nepali cinema with the visibility of a young commercial-film actor. The industry knew how to present that kind of newcomer: fresh face, songs, glamour, publicity and the promise of stardom.

Then came *Bulbul*.

In the 2019 film, Khadka played Ranakala, a woman driving a tempo through Kathmandu while carrying the pressures of work, family and loneliness. The role stripped away much of the surface associated with celebrity and placed her inside the daily life of a

working woman.

The performance became a turning point, winning major recognition in Nepal and at the SAARC Film Festival. More importantly, it altered expectations.

Khadka was no longer simply a popular actress. She had demonstrated that she could carry a film built around interior life rather than star image.

Starting inside the mainstream

Khadka's film career began with *Hostel Returns* in 2015. It was the kind of youth-oriented commercial project that gives new actors visibility quickly.

She then appeared across mainstream productions including *Chhakka Panja 2*, *Nai Nabhannu La 5* and other widely seen films and songs.

That early career gave her something valuable: recognisability.

But popularity can also become a trap. Once an actor is associated with glamour, producers may keep offering variations of the same part.

Bulbul broke that pattern.

Ranakala and the city below the billboard

Written and directed by Binod Paudel, *Bulbul* followed a tempo driver whose life has little of the comfort often attached to screen romance.

Kathmandu is present as traffic, labour and exhaustion. Ranakala works because she has to. Her emotional choices are shaped by the economic pressure around her.

Khadka's performance was effective because it did not treat the character as a social-issue symbol. Ranakala is proud, frustrated, funny, vulnerable and occasionally contradictory.

That complexity made the role memorable.

The film was selected as Nepal's submission for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. It was not nominated, but the selection widened the international visibility of the film and its lead performer.

What recognition changes

Awards do not automatically create better careers. They can, however, change the questions people ask about an actor.

After *Bulbul*, Khadka could not be discussed only in terms of glamour or commercial popularity. Filmmakers and audiences had seen another register.

This allowed her to move between projects rather than stay confined to one image.

That range is visible in later work, including *Chiso Manchhe*, *Pashupati Prasad 2: Bhasme Don* and *Dimag Kharab*.

Women who have to calculate

Some of Khadka's strongest later roles share a practical quality.

In *Dimag Kharab*, directed by Nischal Basnet, she played a woman whose response to her husband's political struggle is shaped by risk, money and the future of their child. The character's anger is not presented as an obstacle for the male protagonist to overcome. It comes from an understanding of what instability costs a family.

This kind of role is important in an industry where women have often been asked to represent love, sacrifice or beauty before being allowed to represent calculation.

Real people calculate constantly. They ask whether the rent can be paid, whether a choice is safe, whether love can survive insecurity.

Characters become stronger when they are allowed those ordinary concerns.

Celebrity and craft

Khadka's career also demonstrates the tension between being a public figure and being an actor.

Celebrity rewards consistency. Audiences want a familiar personality they can follow online, recognise in advertising and photograph at events.

Acting often demands the opposite. A performer has to become less recognisable, at least temporarily, so that a character can take over.

The most interesting parts of Khadka's filmography appear where these two demands collide.

Moving into production

Her involvement in *Behuli from Meghauli* marked another shift. Khadka was not only part of the cast; she also moved into production.

That matters because production changes an actor's relationship with storytelling.

An actor works within decisions already made about budget, script, casting, schedule and distribution. A producer participates in creating the conditions under which those decisions are made.

For women in South Asian film industries, moving behind the camera can be especially significant. It creates more leverage over which stories are financed and how female characters are written.

A broader generation of Nepali actresses

Khadka's rise is part of a larger change in Nepali cinema.

Female actors increasingly move between commercial hits, independent films, streaming projects and production. Their careers are less dependent on being paired with a particular male star.

The audience has changed too. Viewers now discuss performance in detail online. They compare scripts, character arcs and representation. That scrutiny can be harsh, but it also creates space for more demanding roles.

Khadka has benefited from that environment while also helping to shape it.

Beyond one breakthrough

It would be easy to describe *Bulbul* as the film that “proved” Swastima Khadka could act. That framing is too simple.

An actor does not become serious only after removing makeup or playing a working-class character. The more important change was that the film gave her a complex role and enough screen time

to build a human being rather than an image.

Her career since then has been a negotiation between popularity and that deeper possibility.

Some projects are more commercial. Some are more ambitious. Not every role carries the same weight.

But the trajectory is clear.

Khadka began as one of Nepali cinema's recognisable young stars. She is increasingly becoming something more durable: a performer and producer with enough influence to help decide what kind of women appear on the screen in the first place.

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