

ROAD TO NOWHERE

Across Nepal, surveyors are leaving red markings like this one in the remote Tsum Valley on rocks (left) for soon-to-come roads. The alignment do not respect cultural heritage, environmental factors or important trekking routes that provide incomes to thousands.

Indiscriminate highway building is causing enormous collateral damage to Nepal's culture, nature and economy. Driven by greed and graft, roads are being built where one already exists and even if it would end up destroying an area's culture and tourism prospects. If the Tsum road goes ahead, locals insist on an alternative alignment that protects their holy sites and vital trekking routes.

Sonam Lama in Tsum Valley.



SONAM LAMA

Road from nowhere to nowhere

When greed drives roads, it can destroy the economy, culture and environment of fragile and remote valleys like Tsum

Sonam Lama in Gorkha



MADHU CHHETRI

Nepal's obsession with 'development' and 'growth' is causing enormous collateral damage to its culture and heritage.

In a hurry to improve access in this mountainous land, we are following a development model that is obsolete and a copy paste of so-called 'developed' countries. The most glaring example of this is the spread of new [roads](#) to once-remote valleys.

One of the easiest ways to argue for a development budget these days is to propose a road, even if it from nowhere to nowhere. Driven by greed and corruption, roads are being built where one already exists and even if it would end up destroying an area's culture and tourism prospects.

A road comes with the propaganda of development and creates the illusion among locals of manna from heaven. Aided and abetted by unscrupulous contractors in the district capital, roads have destroyed much of what used to be Nepal's unique tourism selling point in the Annapurnas and other Himalayan valleys.

Undoubtedly, villagers in remote areas would want roads because they get access to markets, health services, education, and makes it easier to get to and from the city. But the way the roads are being built in Nepal is bringing little development, mostly destruction.

The government wants to build eight strategic highways under the [North-South Transit Road Development](#) (NSTRD) to serve as trade arteries between China and India and also to use river corridors to connect Nepal with Tibet. Even though the road through the Manaslu Conservation Area and the Tsum Valley (see map) is not even included in the NSTRD, it has already been sanctioned and construction has begun from the south.

[Budi Gandaki to Larkya Pass](#) has now become the third most popular trekking route in Nepal as roads have destroyed other areas. Some 10,000 people, including 4,000 Tsumpa who live in this isolated and sacred side-valley of the Budi Gandaki behind Ganesh Himal will be affected by the road. The Gorkha district administration has sanctioned a road up the Tsum Valley to the China border.



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No one asked the Tsumpa about the road, decisions were taken by local politicians and contractors far away in Gorkha. There was no effort to organise prior consultation, when the alignment started being surveyed earlier this year. No one tried to find out the economic, cultural and environmental impact of the road on this fragile valley and to minimise the damage. About 35km of the road has now been surveyed and the alignment slices through chortens, monasteries, and mani walls of historical and cultural significance, some of which are more than 1,000 years old. [Tsum](#) Valley is known as the Beyul Kyimolung, the holy hidden valley of happiness, first described by the Guru Rimpoche Padmasambhava in the eighth century. Milarepa meditated in the caves of Piren Phug and there are centuries old nunneries here. The valley is part of the sacred Kyimolung circumambulation of Siringi Himal. Mustang and Manang suffered vandalism, theft and destruction of their Tibetan Buddhist and Bon Po heritage after roads were built, a similar fate awaits Tsum.

The road is supposed to link India and China via Nepal, but the 5,093m high Ngula Dhajen pass is covered with snow and ice for more than four months in a year and there is no road yet on the Chinese side. Not only is this road environmentally and culturally destructive, it doesn't even make economic sense. Like elsewhere in Nepal, this is a road driven by greed and ambition of lowland politicians and contractors who want to profit from the government infrastructure budget by building a harmful road.

Experience from the Annapurna area has shown that roads can help locals connect to markets, spread health and education, but it must be done in consultation with local people, respect local heritage sites, reduce the harm to the environment, and maximise the benefits of trade and tourism. The current alignment would not just destroy heritage sites in Tsum, but wreck the trekking route up the Budi Gandaki.

The locals of Tsum are not against the road per se, they are against the politicised top-down decision making without prior consent of the locals, and a complete lack of responsibility for the environment, cultural, and economic impacts.

If the Tsum road is to go ahead, the locals insist on an alternative alignment that protects their holy sites and a vital trekking route.

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