

Culture à la Tourism

Tourism has its critics as well as its protagonists. To the latter, tourism does nothing but good. It is seen as a lucrative source of income for a resource-starved country, such as Nepal, which must be exploited to the full. One geographer, J. R. Allan, is quoted as saying: "*Trading of some cultural peculiarities for basic needs is a worthwhile exercise*" (Himal 2(3) 1989). There are also some people who like to adopt a middle stance in this controversy. "*Tourism cannot be wished away even by those who may dislike it*", says Kanak Dixit (Himal 2(3) 1989). For him the wisdom lies in managing it properly. A balanced approach to tourism is where our concentration should be.

Some insights can be drawn from sociological studies carried out in the industrialised countries of the West on the possible motives of tourists that lead them to take pleasure trips or a holiday abroad in the first place. In one such study, Cohen presents the views of Boorstin (Boorstin 1964), according to whom a tourist is a "*passive onlooker who seeks to enjoy the extravagantly strange from the security of the familiar*" (emphasis added) (Cohen 1988: 30). Such a security refers to the comforts of staying in expensive hotels, built to the specifications of the developed, industrialised world and catering for all the familiar comforts available back in their countries. What they come looking for,

once their comfort and security needs are taken care of (which in tourism development language is called 'building the infrastructure'), is to savour the spectacle of nature and of exotic cultures presented to them. To Boorstin, however, what is offered as a cultural menu in a host country is actually a "pseudo-event". In the name of culture, shows are "staged" to fit in the "tourist space" in tour packages and then offered to tourists. A tourist's behaviour during such trips is seen to break away from the standard, normative rules of behaviour back in his own social and work milieu (Cohen 1988). This explains why one comes across frequent instances of over-indulgence on the part of a tourist with regard to the food, drink, and other forms of entertainment that he seeks for himself during his holiday trip. This seems to make tourism an inauthentic experience, not only for the tourist, but also for the host country receiving him.

There is a school of opinion in the West that strongly disfavours tourism. Fisher quotes Smith as saying that tourism ultimately dehumanises societies. It alters the visited country as if it were "on sale", "*distorting its imagery and symbolism, turning its emotions loose...A culture is turned from a subject to an object, from independent to dependent, from an audience in its own right to a spectacle*" (Smith 1980, quoted in Fisher 1986: 37). Such a sentiment is also echoed in the remarks made by an anonymous visitor to the Sagarmatha National Park, which are quoted in Fisher. The remark reads:

"I fear the trend of "Industrial Tourism". Must we lead Nepal down the same [path of] ruination that so many of the western nations have gone? They have paved with asphalt the area around "Old Faithful" geyser Yellowstone National Park, Yosemite has smog and traffic jams... Is that progress? Will the government's plan to build a road into this area improve it? If we want to help the people of Nepal, let's help them in real ways--better means of food production, schools, hospitals. Please, let's spare them from the garbage that is burying us" (Fisher 1990: 109).

Remarks by another tourist in the same visitor's book are as powerfully worded. He has written: "*A hot shower, steaks, and 500-foot viewing tower with central heating would definitely be in order*" (Ibid: 110). Such a pessimistic view of tourism is not only necessarily held by westerners, but also by some local residents. Fisher quotes the Tengboche Rimpoche as saying that tourists visiting the Khumbu area are like the floods in North India which come every year during the monsoon. If a dam is built on the river, it is a good way of

controlling, not only floods, but also a means of using the waters most profitably. If, however, the dam is dynamited, the waters released from it will wreak havoc and destruction. To the Rimpoche, construction of the airport at Lukla is like a dam dynamited, releasing the tourist flood (Fisher 1986: 58).

The views of economists, planners, and members of the government on tourism development run counter to such opinions. To them, connecting the remote parts of Nepal through aeroplane services is not only desirable, but also an accepted and standard strategy for popularising tourism. In a publication brought out by the Rastra Bank (the State Bank of Nepal) tourism has been described as "*a major growth sector and a stable source of foreign exchange with immense potential and virtually unlimited scope*" (Himal 2(3), 1989). Geographer and regional planner, Harka Gurung, too has put himself behind the idea of expansion of tourism to the maximum. He shows little patience with those who argue for restraints on tourism (Himal 2(3), 1989). He dismisses the idea of culture ever coming to harm as a result of tourism. He maintains that culture must develop its own immunity through maximum exposure to tourism (Himal Ibid). If it cannot do that it is not much "*use beating one's chest about cultural dislocation*" (Ibid).

In this debate, if the private sector in tourism, consisting of hoteliers, travel, and trekking agencies, is seen to solidly favour tourism and tourism expansion, it would be no surprise. In fact, many of them would want the government to go along and accept the idea of unlimited growth in tourism and would like to think that the country offers inexhaustible scope for its expansion. Government bureaucrats do not seem to dispute this basic premise of growth. Still the private sector continues to accuse them of not doing enough, or doing it poorly, with their eyes merely set on maximising profit.

Some hoteliers like to talk ebulliently about how tourism should be aggressively pursued through such notions as "endemic tourism", probably meaning to draw tourism out of its present seasonal cycle, or "ecotourism", suggesting an environmentally-friendly travel and tour-around, to view nature, the landscape, and wildlife and to look at people and cultures in their traditional settings. They talk of yet another new concept--"value-based" tourism, or tourism organised around special themes (personal communication: Karna Shakya). Some of these ideas have been contained in a report submitted to the Prime Minister during the second meeting of the Tourism Council held in the second week of June 1994, entitled "Visit Nepal 1996", prepared by a committee headed by Karna Shakya, President of the Nepal Heritage Society.

Opinions differ amongst hoteliers themselves on what kind of tourists are best to have, and who are the ones it is good to avoid as far as possible. Some show a strong dislike for "adventure" tourism (personal communication: Karna Shayka), others prefer "special interest" tourists and disfavour "mass" tourism (Shrestha 1983: 43-46). In all their zeal to steer tourism in Nepal on to a more vigorous course, the notion of "carrying capacity" is rarely mentioned. The sudden drop in the number of tourists visiting Nepal in 1993 has set off an alarm bell in their minds. This has focussed the attention of everyone concerned with tourism once again on the actions of the government which always seems to proceed with unconcern. The environmental pollution of Nepal, in general, and the Kathmandu Valley, in particular, which has reached dangerous proportions according to studies carried out in the past few months (as well as from general observations), is held partly responsible for the decreased number of tourists in Nepal in 1993. The piles of garbage dumped everywhere in the streets of Kathmandu, which are left unremoved for days, sometimes even weeks, are not only offensive to the sight, but also to the nose of the passer-by because of the foul stench wafting from them. The wearing of pollution masks by people in the streets has given the most damaging publicity ever to Nepal's idyllic image of a Himalayan paradise. The earlier cited "Visit Nepal 1996" has urged the government to address these problems squarely and pursue a determined policy to enhance the number of tourists visiting Nepal to a new level. Neither the government nor the private sector has made it clear whether tourism promotion and development are to be pursued with "no holds barred". The government's actions in tourism promotion sometimes give the impression of being rash and precipitate, rather than based on wisdom. The issuing of licenses to open casinos to three 5-star hotels has already been cited. In the tourism trade in some parts of the world, they seem eager, and make no bones about it, to cater to a class of tourists called "sex tourists". Will this also lead the government to consider legalising prostitution in Nepal one day in order to attract more tourists? and would the private sector be eager too to give its assent to such a move? One hopes not. All this only underlines the need for deeper thinking on strategies for tourism development. It is not sufficient to merely feel concerned about the problems of physical pollution and environmental degradation, we have to be alert also to the questions of moral and cultural degradation. After all, the cultural health of a society is not too far removed from the purity of its environment and both these should be made matters of predominant concern in tourism development.

There is no clearly-stated government tourism policy founded on an enduring concept or philosophy, as we have already pointed out above. The government's responses are either spasmodic, or weak gestures at "crisis

management", or made with the intention of increasing government profits under any pretext. Even from ecological considerations, it would not be wise to have a single, uniform policy on tourism for all the regions of Nepal. Such a policy can only be formed by paying due recognition to the many micro-ecological 'niche' in which the country abounds. Such a line of thinking must surely lead the government to acknowledge the idea of a different carrying capacity for different Himalayan valleys, as their ecologies, environmental conditions, and natural and cultural settings are bound to be different. Each Himalayan valley has a set of problems and conditions that make it unique and special from others. This is in terms of terrain; climate; biodiversity; land amount and quality; demography, and the religious, cultural, and social make-up of its people. After all, these in total are what constitutes a society's natural and cultural heritage. What must be borne in mind is that the story of Khumbu and the Sherpas cannot be repeated with the same degree of success everywhere in the Himalayas. The Sherpas are more of an exception than the rule. The Sherpas' exceptional circumstances have already been dealt with. Their early induction into the tourism trade has made them able tour and trekking managers and organisers, as they run sprawling businesses of their own. This prevents Khumbu, among other things, from being overrun by non-Sherpa outsiders in the management, not only of the tourism business, but also in the control of natural resources in the area. Although they may have neglected agriculture, the Sherpas have developed a greater awareness about keeping their land in Khumbu to themselves and under their own control. This is considered most essential in order to preserve the cultural integrity and cultural identity of a society.

All cultures and societies are not equally prepared mentally and temperamentally, nor endowed with the same natural ingenuity to cope with new problems, or to take the advantage of new economic opportunities arriving on their doorsteps. Usually, what happens is that a bigger benefit goes to outsiders from the opening of new areas to tourism in the interiors of the Himalayas. Among such areas opened recently are Upper Mustang, Upper Dolpa, and Larke Bhot in Gorkha. There are other areas, e.g., Kimathanka, Hatiyagola, Kerung, Dhuli, Yari, and Tinkar, which are next on the cards for opening. The case of Upper Mustang is already before us, as reports are being made that, under the existing rules in vogue in the area, which only allows group tourism handled by agencies, in specified numbers, of specified duration, and along specified routes, tourism leaves an infinitesimal amount of profit from the total tourist expenditure to the share of the local people, most of the money going to benefit outsiders. Sharma's calculation of expenditure patterns incurred by climbing expeditions draws similar conclusions. According to this

calculation, 85 per cent of such expenditure goes towards paying the various government fees, lodging expenses, buying of provisions, and paying for agency services. Only 15 per cent is spent locally (Sharma 1992b: 20). The local, impoverished populace either cannot or is not allowed to take up the new challenges and turn them to its advantage. In the name of infrastructural development in tourism, local land increasingly falls into the ownership of non-locals. People are not only culturally dislocated as a result of this (which economists prefer to advise us to worry least about), but it could also lead to their economic dislocation. A local of Mustang has been quoted as requesting that "*a law be passed curtailing the right of the people from outside the area to buy property and run business. If the government makes such rules, the people of the area can enforce them*" (Thapa 1992: 126).

Although economists in the developed countries and their in-country apologists might make it sound light and business-like, trading off one's culture and privacy to buy one's basic needs is deeply hurting to one's self-respect. When even this little profit is skimmed off by someone else — an outsider — it is like adding insult to injury. In Nepal it has become common to cite the instance of Austria and Switzerland which receive tourists in their midst numbering many times more than their entire population. But one should not perhaps forget the fact that the Austrians and Swiss do not have to take to tourism in order to buy their basic needs, and they offer services to tourists in their countries as people who are on an equal footing with them. This fact links tourism in Nepal to yet another equally crucial issue. More than any other country in South Asia, Nepal has over relied on tourism to bring it economic goodies. Dixit shows how it makes the whole thing sound more like "*tourism-led development than development-led tourism*" (Himal 2(3) 1989). If this is done by overexploiting the Himalayas, our prime source of tourist attraction, it might "*kill the goose that lays the golden eggs*".

Jodha and Shrestha have developed a concept that looks at the mountains as fragile areas where the approach to sustainable farming should be different from that followed in other regions, meaning the plains mainly. Before implementing any farming development scheme, therefore, one must take the geomorphic structures, vulnerability of the resource base, people's low resource capacity, and high overhead costs for infrastructural development into account (Jodha and Shrestha 1993: 8). The implication of these constraints means that a full account must be taken of this fragility. These are not regions in which the government has already made large-scale investments to develop

other economic sectors, such as farming, before introducing tourism. A facile and complacent attitude of leaving everything to tourism in the private sector for triggering overall development can be callous. Hence, each mountain area must be studied thoroughly from all possible angles to assess the likely impacts it will have as a result of opening up to tourists. An equally good thing to do would be to involve the local community in any policy decision on tourism affecting such an area, as has been suggested (Thapa 1992: 126). Some of the rules enforced by the government regarding tourism in Upper Mustang appear to be bonafide and well-meaning in their intentions. For example, only group tourism is allowed at present, use of local fuelwood is forbidden and travelling groups must take their own kerosene supplies, waste must be disposed off properly, or taken back, tourists must not gift away cash or goods to local children, and they must be accompanied by Nepalese liaison officers appointed for the duration of their trip. However, unless and until a decentralised approach in tourism is adopted and local people are involved in all such policies, says Thapa, all hopes of implementing the rules on the ground will prove futile (Thapa 1992: 126).

Kathmandu, and a few other urban centres, have the capacity to absorb and handle a greater number of tourists at any given time. But this should not lead to it being cited as an example and to applying the same prescription to the smaller, remoter alpine valleys of Nepal. Kathmandu is a bigger, open, and flatter place and, as Nepal's prime metropolitan city, much capital investment has gone into developing its physical infrastructure and civic amenities to accommodate a much larger population. Lack of proper planning, lack of control, and inadequate development can be cited even in the case of Kathmandu which has been taken to the verge of an environmental disaster. Repeated mistakes of this nature in more fragile ecologies can only spell doom.