

Mountain tourism in Nepal: An overview on the sustainable inclusion of local communities

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Abstract:

The recent great political transformation of Nepal as a democratic republic has raised high expectations of mountain communities in socio-economic sphere through mountain tourism as well. Nepal, due to unique nature and unspoiled culture amidst a number of ethnic people and races natives in mountains & Himalayan regions, has undoubtedly bigger scope for the development of mountain tourism. Mountain tourism development is not attainable without the greater involvements of local communities, their enthusiastic participations, and sincere contributions. Though a number of efforts through policies and actions are made to enhance local communities' participation in mountain tourism in Nepal, a general look shed light on the on the incomplete and puzzling picture raising a number of issues and questions on real participations of local people without prejudice on participatory decision makings & benefits sharing.

The widespread involvement of local people in mountain tourism is not only mandatory for the comprehensive development of mountain tourism, but also for fulfillment of the livelihoods related inevitable needs of mountain people as key local stakeholders. The post-conflict Nepal after the end of a decade long (1996-2006) violent conflict is passing through the fragile period of transition. The local communities' participation in equitable manner is increasingly important to prevent from their discontent and frustration, if not fulfilled, can further induce the possibility of the recurrence of any kind of unwarranted conflict in Nepal.

A sincere review on existing mountain tourism related policies and regulation and molding these measures to facilitate local people's participation will be justifiable for the sustainable development of mountain tourism in Nepal.

Key words: mountain tourism, communities, participations, socio-economic transformation, conflict.

1. Introduction

The Himalayan democratic republic of Nepal is not only one of least developed countries in Asia Pacific region, but also land-locked – a double disadvantage in her efforts to fulfill development aspirations.

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Approximately 83% of land mass from a total of the 1, 41,181 sq. km (CBS, 2006) area of Nepal is covered with mountain landscapes including Himalayas, however, attributed with pristine nature and culture. Out of more than 3,500 km. vast extensions of the highest Himalayas termed as Hindu Kush – Himalaya ranging from Afghanistan in the north-west to Myanmar in the south-east, Nepal Himalaya has covered approx. 800 sq. km. beginning from Byasrishi Himal in Darchula in the west to Kanchejunga in the east (Upadhayaya & Upreti, 2008).

The natural landlocked geographic setup coinciding with climatic variations & the harsh remote terrain are nature caused shortcomings for Nepal's development.

Moreover; age old feudal cum elite socio-cultural setup, poor management of limited state resources (technical, financial, human as managerial), larger portion of economy based on conventional type of industries, inadequate cum substandard infrastructures, and technological backwardness are manmade drawbacks which have posed major challenges and difficulties for Nepal's desired socio-economic transformation.

The nation with 26.4 million populations (CBS, 2006,) ranks as the 142nd (UNDP, 2007) least-developed country among 177 nations in the World.

In the midst of around 1792 mountain peaks existed in Nepal, 1310 peaks are above 6000 meter and only 326 peaks have been opened for climbing (TAAN, 2008).

The four ranges of mountains covering Sivalik, Mahabharat, Mid Hill and high Himalayas with valleys in between are inhabited by a range of different communities. The communities are a mixture of various castes, ethnic people, and indigenous groups from Tibeto Mongoloid and Indo Aryans races with their age-old rich cultures and traditions.

Nepal Mountain regions are generally characterized by irregular & steep relief of land/surface, deep gorges, low temperature, fragile ecology, poorly developed soil, limited choice of crops, remote isolated villages, low oxygen pressure, and low humidity of air. (Upadhayaya, 2006).

Seasonal agriculture, animal husbandry, transhumance system, trans-himalayan trading, seasonal trading (mainly by migrating to India), foreign employment, and recently innovated mountain tourism are mixture of occupations of the people of mountain regions of Nepal for their livelihoods and subsistence.

Tourism in Nepal, like in other countries, is some of the phenomenon and relationships arising from activities like travel and stay of nonresidents in so far as they don't lead to permanent residence and are not connected with any kind of earning activities. Those activities made by tourists include recreations, holidays, adventures, businesses, and other special interest activities. There are four key components of tourism namely attraction, accessibility, accommodation, and amenities, all of which are equally important and required for the development of tourism (Bhatia, 1996).

Nepal's tourism can be geographically divided into two broad geographic regions namely Mountain and Terai. While looking at the bulk of tourism related activities being operated in the given geographic and topographic distributions of Nepal's territory, mountain tourism is found dominant covering vast occupancy in Nepal.

2. Mountain Tourism potentials in Nepal and a perspective on the inclusion of local communities

The tangible forms of mountain tourism products in Nepal include multidimensional attractions like snowcapped great Himalayan ranges, deep gorges, beautiful landscapes, beautiful forests (flora), unlimited wild animals & birds (fauna), preferable cool climatic conditions, traditional culture, innumerable festivals, Hindu temples, and Buddhist monasteries etc. Mountain tourism products in Nepal are also characterized by its intangible forms like the faith on Nepal Mountains as the abode of gods by large number of religious tourists. The Sherpas of Everest region, Newars of Bandipur & Kathmandu, Gurungs of western Annapurna regions, and Rais of eastern regions possess themselves as important local players and indispensable parts of mountain tourism in Nepal.

These Mountains, devotedly considered as abode of gods, are not only the potential resource of fresh water in forms of rivers, streams and lakes as a basis of clean & renewable energy (hydropower) but also abundant & prospective products for the development of mountain tourism.

These attractions present Nepal a fascinating mountain tourist destination for varied forms of mountain tourism activities. These activities range in terrestrial (trekking, mountaineering, pony trekking, Ski diving, rock climbing, bird watching), aerial (Bungi Jumping, Hot Air Ballooning, Paragliding, Ultra Light Aircraft, Mountain Flight, Cable Car, etc.), and aquatic (Rafting, /Kayaking, Boating, Fishing, Swimming, water Running, etc.) spheres, all of which are full of adventures.

Amidst the five typology of tourism like ethnic tourism, cultural tourism, historical tourism, environmental tourism and recreational tourism identified by Smith (1989), Kunwar (2006) views environmental tourism as synonym to mountain tourism which is primarily geographic and often ancillary to ethnic tourism, that attracts tourist elite to remote areas such as Antarctica or Nepal Himalayan region to observe man-land relationships and experience a truly alien scene.

Mountain tourism is the pioneer of all the tourism in Nepal that started from 1949, the year Nepal opened for tourists. It often relates to mountain tourism while talking about Nepalese tourism, for the identity Nepal has earned as the mountainous country in the world. Nepal is always treated as a Himalayan country by foreigners. The image of Nepal as a beautiful Himalayan country can not be ignored but in the meantime it is important as well to look into the diverse culture of this country (NTB, 2009).

These were *Hippies* during 70s who interestingly came to Nepal as explorers looking for discovery of new places for their heavenly world and involvement with local people. They have enormous roles for exploring new mountainous tourist sites that contributed for the identification of new trekking routes & sites. Their travels and stays during 70s and 80s also contributed to spread *Hippi* culture in Nepal.

Tourists coming to Nepal in the year 2007 for mountain tourism related activities (including trekking & expedition, holiday pleasure & pilgrimage purposes of visit) constituted about 70.57% from a total of 5,26,705 arrivals (NTS, 2007). This segment shows important position of mountain tourism in the overall tourism operation of Nepal.

There were a total of 40, 64,997 number of tourist arrivals in Nepal in last one decade from 1998 to 2007 (NTS, 1998 – 2007). It can be guessed, while looking the data of 2007, that around two third of total arrivals could have come for mountain tourism related activities like trekking, mountaineering, holiday pleasure, business, pilgrimage, rafting and conferences in mountain regions of Nepal.

The high prospect of mountain tourism to enhance Nepal's tourism image as a mountain tourist destination can be well visible while looking at the grand organizations of the first ascend of the golden jubilee celebrations of mountains above 8000 mt. The organization of these mega events with massive international media coverage about the glories of world's highest mountains like Mt. Everest, Mt. Cho-O-You and Mt. Kanchenjunga, even during the period of armed conflict when Nepal's image was shattered as an insecure tourist destination, reveal the enormous glory and precious values of these mountains interwoven with the richness of Nepal tourism sector.

Nepal's seven cultural heritage sites and one natural heritage site listed in UNESCO world heritage sites in 1979 are confined in mountain regions. This listing not only gives the extreme importance of those sites to all potential holiday tourists of world tourism market who are interested to observe the cultural & natural heritages located in mountain geography of Nepal, but also labels these mountain tourism sites with immense value as global assets for the purpose of its conservation and preservation. This seems rationale attached with the betterment of humanity.

Mountain tourism in Nepal is one of the most important sectors of economy. As a positive economic affects, it is believed to have contributed to foreign currencies earnings, employment generations, rise of income, production development, and various supplies linkages.

Apart of mountain communities through their participations and empowerment; other players like private sector tourism entrepreneurs, government, visitors, and international support organizations & agencies are interrelated and important elements for the success of mountain tourism in the integrated approach

Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Department of National Parks & Wildlife Conservation, and Department of Immigration are directly concerned home agencies

from government side for regulating mountain tourism related activities in Nepal. Similarly, Nepal Tourism Board as joint forum of public & private sector in close association with principal service providers (from private sector) is active to develop mountain tourism products and resources by involving local communities in mountain tourism and marketing it.

There are nearly 26 International Organizations/Agencies found which have contributed for the development of tourism with approximately USD 425 million from the starting of the planned development of tourism since 1956 in Nepal (Upadhyaya, 2006). Looking at mountain tourism as one of the pioneer activities and its wider scope in overall tourism sector in Nepal, it can be speculated that the proportionate allocation of such financial resource for mountain tourism must not be smaller.

Mountain tourism in Nepal is operational in many forms like trekking & expedition tourism, community based tourism, rural/village tourism, eco tourism, and adventure sports tourism. Community based tourism run and guided in and by the jurisdiction of Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in Annapurna region of western Nepal has followed the principle of maximum people's participation on sustainable approach. This project viewing indigenous people as one of the most important factors for successful management of conservation efforts, has tried to reach out to the poorest of the poor people as much as possible (Bajracharya et al., 2007).

Pandey (2008), relating the attachment of the poor segment of the community in all forms of community based tourism including community based mountain tourism, mentions community based tourism both in mountain or Terai as a form of tourism that takes environmental, social, and cultural sustainability into account. It is managed by community and targeted to enable visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community so that the visitors' participations ensure to provide benefit to the community.

Among various forms of tourism; based on community, nature and cultural resources; rural tourism provides an opportunity to harness indigenous knowledge for the socio-economic benefit of rural poor communities subject to making it sustainable and pro-poor.

Village tourism as an innovating approach for the welfare of rural people while boosting tourism. It is the key to any regional or community development and has potential advantage to contribute for the development to non-industrial regions or villages (Pradhanang, 1997:28).

The inclusion of local communities in mountain tourism largely matters from the perspective of their wider intakes in decision making for resource allocation, tourism management, and benefits sharing.

3. A diagnostic (critical) look on the structure of inclusion of local people in mountain tourism

As Nepal passed through decades of unitary cum autocratic rules in a feudal socio-economic setup, the notion about tourism as like of other sectors till recently prevailed that tourism business is for maximizing profits for investors specially urban based resourceful elite classes and not for resource constrained general rural communities.

A decade long (1996-2006) violent conflict that started from Rolpa, western hills of Nepal from February 1996 was caused by the dissatisfaction and frustrations of mass scale disadvantaged people for their exclusion on the mainstream socio-economic and political development process in equitable manner.

In this context, a sincere look and reasoning at various policy level approaches would be relevant for justifying the sustainable enhancement of local people participation in mountain tourism and thereby helping for prevention and mitigation of possible conflict in tourism sector of Nepal.

A high-level task force constituted by the government in 2005 had recommended to bring a commonly accepted system in association between Nepal Tourism Board and private sector to register all trekkers trekking in mountain or non-mountain areas for their proper record keeping, taking care of their safety in case of mountain sickness, and doing further planning & diversification of trekking tourism (HLTF, 2006).

The provision of Trekking Information Management System (TIMS) that came into force from Jan 01, 2008 on this backdrop, is supposed to support the systematic and regulated operation of trekking tourism, a significant portion of mountain tourism in Nepal. Its proper implementation would help to upgrade the service standard and contribute for better management of sustainable mountain tourism development. Some looks on the policy provisions on the inclusion of communities in mountain tourism in Nepal as provided below may be suitable to shed light on the real progress.

a. Local people's participation in controlled area

A major working policy of national tourism policy of Nepal includes the division of trekking areas in three categories namely General Trekking Area, Directed Trekking Area & Controlled trekking area (CTA). Places like Upper Mustang, Upper Dolpa, Nar and Fu Villages of Manang, Manaslu, Humla and few areas of Gorkha district in western and northern regions fall under this third category (Controlled Trekking area).

It is mandatory for the foreign trekkers to pay specified royalty to the government to get permissions to enter in groups (not individual), and book their trekking trips with registered trekking agencies to get guiding services, eat & sleep in those controlled areas. This policy on the one side has helped to control the negative aspects of unsustainable tourism management by not only discouraging the numbers of trekkers through high

amount involved for them to join this trip but also fixing the ceiling of total number of entry in a particular season in some areas.

On the other side, this regulation is not justifiable in order to involve local people of those areas for all kinds of trekking related arrangements. A particular centre based elite trekking operator groups have full control over the positive effects of these controlled areas. This has caused a big dissimilarities and unjust to local people on their participations, and on productions & distributions of resources. These local people have remained hosts participants for the sake of name only.

The structure of unjust is well noticeable from Tikaram Bhattarai report prepared by Nepal government, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. This report has reported that that the revenue collected from trekkers' entry to Upper Mustang goes to Government with 52%, to trekking agencies with 38%, to National Trust for Nature Conservation with 7%, and to local (host) people with only 3%.

The deduction of permit fee by government to enter CTA with effect from July 2009 is not the proper measure which still acts as an obstacle to the local people for their participation in tourism related activities in their own places. It would rather require adopting the policy of completely removing the permit fee to enter in such controlled areas in order to justify local people's access, their involvements and benefits from tourism.

b. Recycling of the revenue generated locally from mountain tourism

One of the policy guidelines of national tourism policy has provisioned to plough back certain amount of the revenue back to the area from where the revenue is generated through tourism related activities. There are four kinds of frameworks introduced to effectuate this system as follows.

- b.1) Authorization to non-government agencies like Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) and Nepal Mountaineering Association (NMA) to collect revenue and recycle it locally for community development work in an integrated approach.
- b.2) Authorization to national parks and its committee formed by the participation of local committees of the buffer zones to recycle 30-40 percent of the total revenue collected from tourism related activities.
- b.3) Authorization to designated agencies like National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) to recycle 60% revenue generated locally at Upper Mustang and certain percentage of revenue collected by the government at centre for Manaslu areas. Under this framework, Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) in Everest region is authorized to recycle 40% revenue generated from the collection of service charges from expeditions groups bound towards the expedition of Mt. Everest for cleaning the icefall route. SPCC was also designated to get certain budget on regular basis from the

additional contributions made by donors to fund through government.

- b.4) Authorization to District Development Committees (DDCs) through the amendments on Local Self Governance Regulation 2061 to get 30% of revenue collected from the government at centre and invest this revenue back to the areas of particular districts from where the generation of revenue was possible by the operation of tourism related activities.

The most of above provisions, except framework b.1, are not operational due to the lack of government serious implementations. Furthermore, it is also not transparent as how much of such amount of revenue raised locally is recycling and how much of such income are occurring benefits to local people except in case of framework a (as above). A research survey carried out in mid 90s had revealed that two-third of respondent households favored ACAP as a contributor in uplifting their living standards and that almost fifty percent of tourist expenditures were retained locally (NTB, 2005).

c. Development of institutional mechanism for the improvement of rural livelihoods through participatory tourism

In a bid to support government policy of reducing poverty through the development of rural tourism at micro, meso and macro levels through participatory approach by involving local communities, local social bodies, community organizations, Village Development Committees, Buffer Zone Users' Committee, Community Based Organizations, and Non Government Organizations; Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP) as a sample (pilot) project in joint association between UNDP, SNV Nepal, DFID Nepal, and Nepal Government was implemented in six districts¹ demonstrating community based pro-poor sustainable tourism model with backward and forward linkages.

This project reveals the implementation of TRPAP as a success story particularly in relation to the role and contribution of tourism for the participations and capacity buildings of communities by social mobilization and community participations consisting of marginal & discriminated sections of rural men & women², lower castes & ethnic minorities living in extreme poverty. This project enabled the country to diversify new tourism products both in established tourism destinations as well as in new & remote areas and new communities.

Pandey (2008) relating to the distinctiveness of this project states that when the country was in the verge of conflict during the project period of TRPAP (2001 – 2006), it was one of the most successful programs in terms to involve rural communities.

¹ Out of six districts namely Rupandehi, Lubumbini, Chitwan, Langtang, Solukhumbu, and Kanchenjunga, Rupandehi is from Terai region not covering mountain region.

² As per TRPAP statistics there were 50.65% of women participation in an attempt to encourage equal representation of men and women in capacity building, training and study visits.

As TRPAP was able to work unhindered during the insurgency period simply because of its people-centered programme based on the technique of Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA) and the involvement of locally recruited staff, it as a semi-governmental programme acted as a face saving programme of the government because of the limitation of the government representatives of various similar programs only in the district headquarters and mere possibility of its (government) representation in the rural hinterlands,.

However, another face of this project is the failure to capitalize these new products in the main stream tourism marketing at the stage when local marketing institutions at local project sites are still very weak. Private sector business agencies like tour and trekking agencies as the major marketing forces in tourism sector blame TRPAP for its inability to incorporate centre (mainly Kathmandu) based marketing forces to market these new tourism product on the world tourism market.

d. Role of mountain tourism in kind of decent participation and livelihoods of porters

Porters are load carrying people from poor economic background who assist the trekking or expedition groups in carrying their loads. They are the backbone of the economy of the remote area as they are the major modes of transportations at many mountain regions of Nepal. They fulfill the basic needs of their families from the money earned by carrying heavy luggage of tourists.

International Porter Protection Group (IPPG) has categorized porters as traditional/commercial, high altitude and the trekking porters. Tourism in mountain regions of Nepal is the second major source of income for porters after agriculture and ahead of Livestock and Business.

An academic research made by Lama (2006) in Sagarmatha National Park opinions that real benefit they are getting from tourism in Nepal is still a question. His research finding points out some major problems faced by porters while their professional engagement in mountain tourism in Nepal. These problems include like difficulty of accommodation in trekking areas, no treatment in case of accident while traveling, insufficient wage rate, insufficient clothes & equipments, no accidental insurance, and misbehave or discrimination of people. This study highlighting the problems faced by porters in mountain tourism related activities, further recommends for the organization of general education and awareness programs to porters identifying porters' group; organization of specific trainings programs for porters with special need for mobile trainings in remote areas particularly on personal hygiene, primary health, altitude mountain sickness, basic communication skills, and awareness of potential dangers & safety aspects; constructions of porter shelters in various camping sites; and review the provision of wage for porters as per the altitude.

e. Initiatives for the diversification of mountain tourism for expanding the participations of local people

The high level task force constituted to put suggestions for revitalizing tourism industry in 2004 recommended to carry detailed study in mountain places like Shree Antu in eastern Nepal, Damodar Kunda in western Nepal, Simikot & Hilsa areas in western Nepal which posses high potentials for the development of mountain tourism (HLWT, 2006).

The government through the annual budget forecast for the fiscal year 2008-09 has announced to formulate a new tourism policy in its attempt to make tourism inclusive which is to some extent apparent while looking on Tourism Policy 2009 brought on March 25, 2009 (The Himalayan Times, 2009).

This policy, giving emphasis to rural tourism, has adopted the strategy of expanding tourism at the rural level with the concept of 'home stay' to make tourism to the reach of grass root wider communities. It incorporates programs related with people's participation in integrated approach; invention & development of new spots especially rural touristic areas through home stay; and focuses for the promotion of agro tourism, religious tourism, and adventure tourism.

The annual budget of fiscal year 2008-09 has also incorporated various measures like declaring 2011 as "Nepal Tourism Year", carrying out feasibility study to open new trekking routes on Lamjung-Annapurna, Lamjung-Manaslu, Gorkha-Manaslu and up to Mansarovar locating Khaptad in western Nepal as the base point (Kantipur, 2008). The provision of integrated programme consisting of agriculture, tourism training and marketing in order to provide tourism benefits to the resident of trekking routes on the mountainous regions are seen new initiatives for the inclusion of local people's participation on huge scale . However, time-bound decisions and effective delivery would really matter on this endeavor for inclusion on mountain tourism.

4. Potential challenges for the sustainable inclusion of local people in mountain tourism

Though community inclusion for the development of mountain tourism is inevitable to prosper sustainably, there are a number of challenges for the inclusion of communities in mountain tourism development. These issues and challenges as visualized may include lack of their desired knowledge & awareness, limitations with tourism related entrepreneurs skills, lack of community tourism experts, financial limitations, lack of accessibility to link potential mountain tourism spots, centralization pattern of tourism development, complex social structure (homogeneous or heterogeneous) of mountain societies, power relations within such societies, role & status of women in sharing benefits from local tourism, and the shortage of government expertise. Those challenges if not managed well, can potentially cause conflicts between different groups or classes in the society (SNV 2000).

Regarding the possible impediments on the sustainable inclusion of local community in mountain tourism in long run, Thapa (2008), apart from challenges as above, theoretically envisages threat to local community at a stage when local tourism development passes onto the “institutionalized development stage” which ultimately motivates and attracts capitalists to open large-scale tourism entrepreneurship. This eventually compels the local control over tourism development slowly to come to an end.

5. Conclusion

Nepal Mountains, due to its unique natural and cultural features as well as hospitality friendly attitude of mountainous people, offer tremendous potentials for the development of mountain tourism. Nepal being a mountainous country has tremendous potential for not only the development of mountain tourism but also making it a pathway for entire, social, economic transformation (progress).

The great structural transformation on the political sphere of Nepal with the end of a decade long war and the successful completion of constituent assembly (CA) poll has created high expectations, coinciding with both opportunities and challenges in socio-economic spheres including tourism.

The participation of local people is crucial for the success of mountain tourism in Nepal. Their sustainable participation is not only concerned for the success of mountain tourism in long run but also matters for potential discontents, intentional obstructions, and possible blocking on the development process by people of Nepal Mountains if they realized the ignorance of their involvement and equitable share. The possible occurrence of another cycle of conflict in Nepal Mountains can not be neglected on the backdrop of the bitter experience of the recently ended armed conflict, if the expectations of mass segment of people living in Nepal Mountains will not be met on the notion of fair inclusion and share.

As durable peace is the open certainty for sustainability of tourism, inclusiveness holds the key to lasting peace in Nepal for which tourism (specially mountain tourism in Nepalese context) being a sector with competitive and comparative potentials for socio-economic mobilizations must move forward with the notion of representations of local people irrespective of any kind of biasness on their castes, ethnicities, groups & socio-economic levels, geographies, religions, regions and sectors (including public and private). This can help ensure the fare share and equitable distribution of mountain tourism benefits among all stakeholders.

The global warming and mountain changes are unwarranted reality of modern world of globalization. The proper participations of local people (as hosts) and tourists (as guests) with notion of sustainable tourism are desirable for their constructive involvement to mitigate these impacts.

Institutionalizing the systematic involvement of local people in tourism product formulation, operations and programming is the need of time. It is required not only in the presently operated areas but also on many new cum remote, however yet tourism potential exotic areas in Nepal Mountain in a conducive environment for the mutual benefits of both employers and employees.

The beforehand proper decision by local communities on the kinds of tourism and tourists are desirable prior to investing in mountain tourism venture amidst communities. Working together through central based organizations and ensuring that tourism planning proceeds through the district based main committee can be valuable exercise for rural communities (Nirola, 2004).

There is bare need of enhancing the linkage of mountain tourism with the community economy, using local resources and stimulating local products and employment. For this, sincere overviews on existing mountain tourism related policies, legal issues (acts, rules, regulations, laws, and bylaws); its need based timely amendments; reformulation of participatory planning system, institutional & governance reforms with notion of participations, and strengthening of the implementations aspects are vital issues for the sustainability of mountain tourism in Nepal.

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