



# Lives of Tourism workforce in Nepal and the Pandemic

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Life is at halt in Nepal due to COVID-19, with a four-month lockdown period attempting to stop the spread. The tourism sector is the hardest hit by the pandemic and restrictions placed on international travel. Tourism has been one of the major incomes generating sectors of Nepal, with the cancellation of campaign Visit Nepal 2020 devastating the region with the loss of an expected two billion dollars. The people working in the tourism sector are in shock: it is not “new normal” for them; it is the phase of abnormality and uncertainty. They are more worried about hunger than the contagious COVID-19. The indigenous and the low-level employees are the most vulnerable at this time. Despite their own threat to survival, their concern about their employers’ business is very thoughtful and significant. Despite uncertain about their survival they are still positive and happy for the environment as it is allowed time to rejuvenate and recover with less human interference. This research brings attention to those low-level employees working in tourism sector and their family’s survival. The research questions of the paper are: (1) What are the experiences that the low-level employees of tourism sector are experiencing in their life, livelihood and occupation? and (2) How do they respond to the disastrous COVID-19 in terms of their occupation and the sector where they were and are working? This paper tries to explore the employees experience during this time of crisis. The research design is qualitative, with primary data collected through tele-interview and secondary data collected through books, newspaper articles, journal articles, government and non-government reports, and websites. Thematic analysis was utilised through this short study.

**Key words:** *Visit Nepal 2020 and Covid impact, Welfare and Tourism*

## Introduction

An unprecedented scenario is currently being witnessed by the world in this era, where life is at halt in comparison to the normal days before the worldwide outbreak of novel Corona Virus (COVID-19). This different picture does not seem pleasant. Life and livelihood of the world has been adversely affected by the COVID-19. As of July 20<sup>th</sup> 2020, 3:37 p.m. CEST, Globally there have been 14,348,858 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 603,691 deaths as reported by World Health Organization (WHO). The catastrophic disease has created chaos in health system across the world, influencing the social and economic condition countries and of the world. According to WHO Director General, Dr. Tedros, health is the foundation of social, economic and political stability. The global health crisis brought by COVID-19 now does not remain a health crisis alone, it has transformed into an economic and global socio-economic pandemic never witnessed before. The World is in crisis due to COVID-19.

In December 2020, the infectious disease was seen for the first time in Wuhan, China. The contagious COVID-19's infection rate is so high that sooner it spread around the world. Countries started using different strategies to stop it from entering their land, to minimize the number of infected people, and to lessen its risk. In doing so, along with strengthening health care delivery system, aviation was closed, travel was restricted, workplace and educational institutes were shut down, country after country started to implement social distancing policy and nationwide lockdown. On 23<sup>rd</sup> January Wuhan was locked down, on 9<sup>th</sup> March Italy was locked down, on 14<sup>th</sup> March Spain was locked down, and as of 20<sup>th</sup> April 100% of world-wide destinations had introduced travel restrictions (World Travel Organization[UNWTO], 2020 May). The Pandemic and the restrictions placed by the countries to suppress it have heavily affected 220 million in protracted emergencies (WHO, 2020). The impact is already being felt and can be significant in poor and less developed countries like Nepal.

The first case of COVID-19 in Nepal was seen on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2020 and the first case of local transmission was confirmed on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020 in Nepal (Ministry of Health and Population, 2020). To minimize its spread and lessen its effect, the country adopted the strategy of country-wide lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 till 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020 and asked its people to stay where they are. International travel bans into Nepal were introduced, and even Nepalese were unable to enter (Johnson, 2020). Life seemed still here in Nepal. Educational institutes were closed, financial institutes were partially closed, shops and markets were shut down, business houses and the factories were padlocked, transportation besides essential goods and services were shut down, hotels and restaurants were closed and people were confined to their home for more than 3 months. Because of outrage of people and their concern about hardships in daily living, the government eased the lockdown from 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020. The government of Nepal allowed unlocking - reopened shops and movement of private vehicles on the road was permitted according to the odd-even final digit on license plates matching the final digit of the Nepali calendar date. However, cinema halls, malls and long distance public vehicles are not permitted

to run; schools and colleges are closed; and many other sectors are still in halt. Though every industry is being affected, the tourism sector is the hardest hit by the pandemic and the restrictions placed by the world to lessen the impact. This is the worst period in the history of international tourism since 1950 (UNWTO, 2020).

## **1.0 Tourism Industry in Nepal**

Tourism is one of the potential sectors for economic development of Nepal (Nepal Tourism Facts, 2019). Nepal opened its door for international tourist in the early 1960s (Thapa, 2003). Within the small geographical location of Nepal there are multi-fold majestic mountains, diverse natural resources and flora and fauna. In the Country of Himalayas, eight out of ten highest peaks of the world are located. The country of Mt. Everest is a major tourist destination for adventure tourism (Adhikari, 2017). It is a major destination for social tourism too because of the location of the birth place of Lord Buddha, centre of faith for Hinduism; Pashupatinath and socio-cultural diversity with 126 castes and ethnic groups speaking 123 languages (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Tourism has been one of the major income-generating sectors in Nepal. In the year of 2019, the total number of international tourists was 1,197,191, with 12.7 days average length of stay. The total number of international tourists who visited the country in the 2018 was 1,173,072, with 12.4 days the average length of stay (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2019). The tourism industry contributed 7.9% to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018 and supported more than 1.05 million jobs in Nepal in 2018 (Prasain, 2019). The revenue generated from tourism industry in the year 2019 was US\$ 724,337,000 and in 2018 it was US\$ 703,179,000 (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2019). It reflects the economic activity generated by different operating sectors of tourism industry such as the transportation sector comprising airlines, bus companies and others, accommodation sectors; like hotels, restaurants and home stays, adventure and out-door creation sectors; travel and tour agencies. These facts show the increasing rate of tourists and the vivid scope of tourism in the country.

## **1.1 Statistics Related to Tourism Industry of Nepal**

According to Nepal Tourism Statistics Report, 2018, there are 1254 star and tourist standard hotels operated with a bed capacity of 40,856 per day. The number of registered homestay is 324 with 597 numbers of room and 1006 beds. However, in 2017, the number of homestay was 283 and the number of room was 554 and the number of beds was 948. The homestays registered with the district cottage industry development offices as well as local units are not included in the data. The data shows the growing nature of tourism industry. The number of registered travel and trekking agencies are 3508 and 2649 respectively. Similarly, the number of registered tour, trekking and river guide is 4126, 16248 and 253 in number respectively.

## **1.2 COVID-19 and the hardest hit Tourism sector**

Nepal was aspiring to move forward from its status of Least Developed Country (LDC) by 2022. The mega-earthquake of 2015 and the unofficial blockade of India in the same year had severely affected the socio-economic condition of the country (Budhathoki, 2020). The country's plan in getting back to socio-economic normalcy has now been hit hard by the COVID-19. The hardest hit by the pandemic is the Tourism industry, with the aviation industry bearing the heaviest crisis among all. Even the restriction of travel opens around the world with opening of nation-wide lockdown, less people will travel for holidaying and vacation purpose to different countries. So, we can say that the tourism industry is being and will be harshly hit by this catastrophe. In this regard, those millions of jobs generated by the tourism sector will be shattered. According to UNWTO (2020), 100 to 120 million direct tourism jobs around the world are at risk. In regards to Nepal, Deepak Raj Joshi-former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Tourism Board has estimated that coronavirus affected 1.3 million people, causing a loss of Rs. 160 billion (The Himalayan Times, 2020). The year 2020 was declared the tourism year with the campaign called 'Visit Nepal-2020' put forward by the Government of Nepal, aiming to attract more than two million tourists (Johnson, 2020). Along with this announcement all tourism stakeholders, especially the travel transportation, hotels, restaurants and travel agencies, had invested heavily to celebrate the tourism year and provide great hospitality to international and national tourists. But, due to the disastrous epidemic, the Nepal government was compelled to postpone the program with the call of lockdown by the government. With Visit Nepal 2020 cancelled, this has meant a loss of an expected two billion US dollars causing major upset to the operating tourism sector (Johnson, 2020).

## **1.3 Government Policy and packages for tourism Industry**

The hardest hit Tourism Sector in Nepal is slightly relieved by the annual budget of the fiscal year of 2020-2021 in Tourism and Aviation and the ray of hope has been thrown by the government for its survival. The government has allocated NPR 50 billion to support the tourism industry, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) affected by COVID-19 (National News Agency, 2020). Whereas the budget of fiscal year 2019-2020 allocated NPR 22.68 billion as the budget for Nepal tourism sector. The government has allocated NPR 19.42 billion for the construction and upgrading of international airports in the country ("Nepal Federal Budget," 2020). Budget has been continued for the soon-to-be completed mega aviation projects such as Gautam Buddha International Airport and Pokhara International Airport, and upgrade of Tribhuvan International Airport. Similarly, internal tourism has been considered an important element in the tourism section of the budget. The government has made provision of 5% interest bearing NPR 100 billion for loans for tourism and other industries hit by COVID-19 (National News Agency, 2020). The loans can be taken through Nepal Rastra Bank for Tourism Industry for operating cost and salary payments to their staff. The government has allocated NPR 2.68 billion for the development and promotion of

tourism infrastructure to attract tourists (“Nepal Federal Budget,” 2020). The tourism sector is also relieved by waivers on aircraft parking, Air Operator’s Certificate (AOC) renewal charges, and infrastructure tax on aviation fuel. One cultural village in each state was included in the budget to promote local cultures.

#### **1.4 Low-Level Employee: The vulnerable within the Tourism Industry**

After the announcement of lockdown in Nepal, citizens were asked to stay at home except in emergency. All the markets and shops besides grocery stores were shut down. All in all, life and living was in complete standstill until 120 days were completed. Because of the restrictions on mobility and of social distancing, people started fearing more of hunger than the infectious disease itself. Every day, people are losing jobs and income and are worried when the normality will return.

Many of the business companies and educational institutes adopted the approach of work from home. However, this approach is impossible in the tourism sector because according to UNWTO tourism comprises the activities of person travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for leisure, business and other purposes. Even if the free flow of people starts and transportation reopens as normal, the tourist will not be in position to enjoy their vacation and neither will they be comfortable with the travel to different countries because of risk of the contagious virus. According to Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), hotels and restaurants are estimated to witness a loss of 16.30 percent during this fiscal year compared to the growth of 11.06 percent last year (as cited in Shrestha, 2020). This shows that the tourism industry is going to be harshly affected by this catastrophe.

A lot of discussion about minimizing risk and revival of tourism sector after COVID-19 can be heard and seen in different virtual media through different news and media portals, but very little concern can be seen and heard in those high level discussions with different intellectuals, hoteliers, airlines companies and the concerned government authority about the low-level employees who are directly and indirectly linked to the industry. With lock-down policy adopted, it is a serious matter to consider those employees and their family’s survival. How difficult of a time they might be facing with every single minute thinking of how to get food for tomorrow? It’s terribly difficult even to think of those vulnerable groups within tourism industry of whose life we are not bothered at all to think about and respond to in this time of crisis. It is vital to explore that area to understand the reality and know the hardship they are going through. So, this paper aims to explore the real situation of that low-level employee with their own experience and what they think and feel, and how they are acting in this time of crisis. The purpose of the paper is to explore the impact of the pandemic on employees who are working in low-level jobs in tourism sector. We need to understand their experiences, and their feeling and thinking about their life and work during the pandemic.

The research questions are:

1. What are the experiences that the low-level employees of tourism sector are experiencing in their life and livelihood?
2. How do they respond to the disastrous COVID-19 in terms of their occupation and the sector where they were and are working?

## **2.0 Methods**

The research design is qualitative in nature as the paper tries to explore what the low-level employee involved in the tourism sector thinks and feel and how they are acting during this time of crisis. Since the nation-wide lockdown was on-going during the time of information gathering processes, the researchers applied non-probability sampling design with purposive sampling techniques. The researchers purposefully interviewed those participants who were known to researcher about their involvement in the tourism sector. The interview was unstructured in nature. The source of data is both primary and secondary. The data collecting technique in primary source was based on tele-interview as it was not possible to visit the participants due to the lockdown. Books, newspaper articles, journal articles, government and non-government reports and different websites were the secondary sources of data in the research. The data-collected through phone interviews was analysed thematically. Although thin findings are thematically arranged, care has been taken to preserve the respondents' narratives.

## **Results of this study:**

The results of this short study are illustrated under two headings (3.0) dealing with their lives in the tourism sector and (4.0) how the current scenario presents challenges current and post COVID-19

### **3.0. Economic loss and state of shock**

All the participants strongly stressed on the economic loss that they are suffering due to this pandemic. Everyone in this sector has been adversely affected, especially the ones who are totally dependent on this industry who are totally devastated. Dependent workers in the tourism industry say they are more vulnerable and victimized. One of the participants says, "We are compromising now but till when we can fight with the socio-economic impact of this pandemic and the restrictions that the government has imposed on".

Another participant says "through this occupation I was making earning, now I have lost my job and I do not see options right now. What to do and what not to do". Other participant says "Till now I and my family are surviving but I wonder how to survive in future". Those sayings

explain the difficulties employees are suffering from. Their survival is the biggest challenge for now.

One of the owners of a hotel and resort says “I am doubly affected by the corona, first, the hotels are completely closed but we need to give salary to the staff for their survival at least. Even if the lockdown opens, to run the business we need to invest again and that also we are not sure whether the customer will come or not”. Every participant says it’s difficult for them to pay rent, salary and bank loans. The government needs to implement temporary reductions on critical bills like rent, interest and others, otherwise the catastrophic situation will occur within the sector. They are going to be bankrupt if government will not come with proper relief packages for the small and medium enterprises in tourism.

### **3.1. Thought for food**

Especially those full-time employees only dependent on this sector are worried about the food to eat during this time of lockdown. One of the participants says, “For us everything has cut off; from food to other daily livelihood things and our primary concern is the availability of food”. One of the participants says, “I have lost my job and income. The rice grain that I had brought back from village is depleting and we do not know till when the lockdown remains. I am worried about food to eat in future during those days of lockdown so I am trying to use less food in daily basis just to survive”. The participants also said that they had gone to take government relief packages provided by the local administrative units, but was unable to get it and returned bare hand. Another participant says, “The shopkeeper does not give rice and other groceries in credit to those of us who are renting in Kathmandu. They think that we may not pay the credit and run away, so, it’s difficult for us even to have food during this time of lockdown”.

It is difficult for those employees and their family to survive now and more crucial it can be in future. Economic loss of low-level employees has paved the way of discrimination and the gap of inequality can be more widen in future.

### **3.2. Living with uncertainties**

All of the participants share their concern about the uncertainties of their future. They are not able to think what to do and what not to do, and how to move ahead. One of the participants shared she has not thought of anything, and right now she is only thinking of how to manage food for the days of lockdown. Most of the owner of small and medium enterprises said they are uncertain about the running of their business and uncertain about the future whether to wait for the better days for tourism to come or think of some other alternatives. One of the owners of the hotel says “we are uncertain about this pandemic but certain about the business breakdown so I am thinking of other alternatives to jump over. However, I have spent my 25

years of life in this industry and know only tourism, tourist and hotel. I do not have skills and idea of other profession or job to start too and I am in dilemma”.

### **3.3. Low-level employee and indigenous: high level of vulnerability**

National Parks and conservation areas are the tourist destination and these areas are present in the location where the indigenous people used to reside from time immemorial. They used to make their livelihood more with the earning from tourism. From the day of lockdown the national parks and conservation areas are closed for tourist and the life of the indigenous involved in tourism has been severely affected. There is a big challenge for the indigenous people. The participant says, “*Tharu, Bote, Musahar and Majhi* are the indigenous present in Chitwan National Parks. They are vulnerable because they are poor and do not have enough land for agriculture. Their living was based on tourism. Here, 60% of nature guides are from Tharu community. In hotels and restaurant 50% of workers working as a room boy, as a waiter, as a kitchen helper are from Indigenous community. The *Bote, Musahar and Majhi* row boats in national park and make their livelihood. Due to COVID guests are not coming so, they are not rowing their boats and its quite tough time for them”. The indigenous and the low level employee whose life are basically based on tourism are up most vulnerable. One of the participants said Climbing Sherpa, Sherpa, Porter, *Yak, khachar*, vehicle drivers are most vulnerable within mountain tourism. Participants emphasized that full time low level workers are more vulnerable. They are dying with lack of food and difficulties of other livelihood.

### **3.4. Adversity of the pandemic more in future**

Tourism is the sector where activities related to travelling takes place. Since, COVID-19 is a global pandemic, people dependent on tourism are assuming that there will be very limited tourists even if the travel restrictions and aviation reopens. Experts have projected job losses in this sector for a year to two. One of the participants says, “Slowly people start taking loans for food and other livelihood. Since heavy job loss occurs and the recovery of the sector takes time, they will sell their property and land to repay those loans. So, the devastating effect is yet to come in the workers life”. Since a huge number of employees of this sector work without written contracts, appointment letters or informally, they are excluded from the benefits of government relief packages and social security fund too.

## **4. Tourism during and after COVID-19**

### **4.1. Environment is rejuvenating**

All of the participants were much happier for the environment despite the hardship they are going through. Nepal’s tourism is mostly based on the natural beauty and cultural heritage. People relying on tourism are happy that the mountains are getting a break. One of the

participants says, “Everest is on rest now”. Every year a lot of mountaineers used to go for summit and a lot of traffic used to occur during the season. In this regards the crisis can be changed into opportunity. The participant said that collaborating with the government, the expedition companies can send Sherpa climbers to the Everest and other mountains for picking up the garbage that are dumped there. One of the participants says, “Almost every day a lot of jeep gets into the national park for safari and wild life gets disturbed. This will be the perfect time for wildlife to breed and spread in the jungle”. This is the positive side for those dependent in the tourism. According to National News Agency (2020), a new bird named Kashmir Fly Catcher - which is considered the world’s endangered species - was detected in a hotel garden at Sauraha, Chitwan. This is the indication of nature rejuvenating because of least disturbance from the human beings.

#### **4.2 Recovery and reviving tourism industry takes time**

Since the global pandemic has hit the world and the world is pretty unsure about the anti-vaccine for COVID-19, it will be difficult to predict about its recovery and revival. The most significant aspect is that despite of difficulties for food and survival, the workers are pretty much positive that the tourism will once again will be better as it used to be. The workers working in small and medium enterprises related to tourism said they are now less bothered about 2020 and are making plans for upcoming year 2021.

#### **4.3 Employee much concerned about their owner business**

The interesting point is those lower level employee dependent in this sector are much more worried about their employer/the business’ owner. One of the participants says, “I am much worried about my owner. It’s very hard time for them. They have spent a lot of money and now the money is in halt and they might be more vulnerable. If same continues they may have to shut their business down.” It’s really very amazing to see their concern towards their employee.

#### **4.4 Baggage of mixed Feeling**

Seeing ahead, accumulation of mixed feeling was found. People in this sector have mixed feeling right now. They are in a confused state of mind. They do feel that it will end and the better days will definitely come, but worry when those better days could be felt - when the tourists come and the sector regains the pace of work as it used to be.

#### **4.5 Promotion of domestic tourism**

The participants think that at least to make the tourism sector movable, the government and concerned authority should give attention towards the domestic tourism. However, they said that personally domestic tourism does not much support them, for their personal work to

recover, out-bound tourist is a must. However, they think that at least domestic tourism can keep the tourism sector alive. CEO of Nepal Tourism Board, Dr. Regmi emphasized promotion of domestic tourism can be done with the provision of leave travel concession (LTC) to civil and private sector employees. It can help in managing the crisis and help in resiliency of tourism.

#### **4.6 Government policy**

For now, the industry is in the hands of the government. Appropriate, progressive and proactive strategies by government play a vital role here. The government too need to come up with relief packages and special programs for employees and their family's survival. Government's policy and relief packages can play a determinant role in the life of those people. One of the participants said that if government fails to bring relief packages for the workers than the worker can protest. The Trekking guide association of Nepal submitted a demand letter on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020 to Nepal Tourism Board with the demand of relief packages from government. The association had demanded the concessional loan of 1 to 1.5 million NPR per person until the tourism sector revives. The example of it was witnessed in Nepal during the lockdown period where the trekking and tour guides protested against the government for not paying attention to their sector. The tour guides emphasized that the government can map of the workforce available and begin involving them in the infrastructure development related with tourism sector. Respondents suggested that the government ought to categorise them on the basis of their involvement in the sector. Some of them are fully dependent on the sector while others are partially dependent and have another avenue to earn their livelihood. Fully dependent respondents offered opinion that such an exercise ought to be undertaken in the interests of the employees, as it could signal survival and recovery.

#### **5.0 Discussion**

The following pragmatic discussions and possible alternatives emerged as part of this research in relation to managing the workers and the impacts of the pandemic on their livelihoods. These are briefly identified as:

- Exploration of new trek and trail routes
- Management of conservation area
- Thrust into Agriculture
- Himalayas cleaning campaign and
- Worker involvement in infrastructure

*New trek and trail routes* can be explored with the help of workers. Involving in infrastructure development. The government can transform the threat of tourism into new opportunities. For this, the government and concerned authority can provide a certain amount of allowances to the employees involved in the exploration of new trek and trail routes. In this way workers

will be benefitted by the income and government and tourism sector will also be in win-win situation. *Management of conservation* areas can generate employment. The local indigenous workers need to be given the first priority in such employment opportunities. The first priority for the employment should be given to those who were totally dependent in tourism, who does not have *enough land for agriculture* and are very poor and indigenous. People do not stop to eat and feed even if it is lockdown, so agriculture should not be neglected by the country. Those workers who are interested to do agriculture, animal husbandry or horticulture should be inspired and assisted by the government with the provision of agriculture-aid and market guarantee. Climbing Sherpa can be mobilized for cleaning the garbage present in the mountain by the government in association with Nepal Mountaineering Association and expedition agencies. The government can provide certain allowances and insurance for those climbing Sherpa. Workers as per their skill, competency and interest, can also be involved in nation building process. They can help the government in infrastructure development and the government in return can support with income.

## Conclusion

Contagious COVID-19 has adversely affected the tourism sector in Nepal. The world is facing pandemic and there is restriction on travel and the social distancing policy has been adopted. In such a scenario there will be less tourists travelling to different countries for holidaying and other purposes. Decreased number of tourists means a loss of jobs for millions of tourism workers and difficulties in livelihood. There is a feeling of uncertainty within those people. This is the phase of shock to them and it's not the new normal for them. It is the phase of abnormality and uncertainty. They are more concerned about survival; survival of their and their families' life, survival of their business and the survival of their sector. The low-level employees and the indigenous employees are the most vulnerable within the harshly hit industry. However, the small and medium enterprises are heavily devastated too. The low-level employee is struggling for basic needs like food and shelter. The indigenous people in the sector are yet to see the harsh impact as they do not have alternative source of income. They neither own land and other property nor are they literate and skilled to get engaged in other occupations. The worker's concern about their employers' business, despite their own situation being devastated is very thoughtful and reflects the importance of their dependence on the sector. Besides all these hardships they are happy for the nature. The nation-wide lockdown and the restrictions on travel have had positive consequences for ecology. There is no human disturbance to nature and it is rejuvenating. It's a good and favourable sign for the wildlife, birds and the nature. It will take a year or two for the recovery and revival of tourism sector. During this period of critical time, government must provide relief programs and packages to prevent millions of workers from starvation, and other social difficulties brought by economic loss. Despite all hardship, the silver lining is that people are learning to survive with the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19. Peoples positive attitude towards recovery and revival of the tourism sector reveals the social capital required for resilience in the face of



disastrous COVID-19 and its adverse effect. Solidarity in all forms among all the stakeholders can help resilience of the tourism sector.

**Acknowledgments:** The author is grateful to her mentor Dr Venkat Pulla for guiding her through every step of this research and for the editing assistance provided by Rachel Lafain, Research Associate of Dr Venkat Pulla at the Brisbane Institute of Strengths Based practice.

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