

SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF THE TREKKING TOURISM IN TAPLEJUNG

Youba Raj Luintel

Central Department of Sociology, TU

E-mail: y.luintel@gmail.com

Abstract

This report is about gender and social inclusion including the gender, poverty, caste scenarios of Taplejung regarding the tourism industry. Interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations were done in order to solicit primary information. A field visit was made to the Ghunsa trail (up to Lelep) and the Pathivara trail from 8 to 22 July 2012. The main purpose of undertaking the present gender and social inclusion analysis is to explore the diversity profile of Taplejung, one of the Upper Himalayan Trail (UHT) districts, so as to identify the nature of relationships between tourism and disadvantaged groups (DAGs) and get an understanding of poverty and exclusion. This study identifies that the tourism sector in Taplejung carries several risks. Road building is one of them, which has multiple effects.

Key words

Disadvantaged group; gender and social inclusion; Taplejung; trekking tourism

Introduction

The main purpose of undertaking the present gender and social inclusion analysis is to explore the diversity profile of Taplejung, one of the Upper Himalayan Trail (UHT) districts, so as to identify the nature of relationships between tourism and disadvantaged groups (DAGs) and

get an understanding of poverty and exclusion. This is primarily qualitative analysis. Given the short duration of the field visit, this report presents a preliminary note on the GESI analysis of tourism in Taplejung. The visits to Taplejung were carried out for about a month (from 8 to 22 July 2012).

In Taplejung, there were three UHTs identified and promoted by DTC/DDC Taplejung. We chose two trails in Taplejung for reasons that they attracted quite different kinds of tourists. The two trails chosen were the Phungling-Ghunsa trail and the Phungling-Pathivara trail as the representative of the two different segments of trekking routes in the district. During the field visit, some focus group discussions and key-informant interviews were carried out.

Landscape of tourism in Taplejung

In 2012, the flow of tourists in Taplejung was very low. Besides the domestic tourists visiting the holy shrine of Pathivara (about 30,000 to 40,000 each year), a very low level of tourist inflow existed in the tails of the Ghunsa and Yamphudin. The total number of foreign tourists visiting Taplejung was 601 in 2011 and which was 454 one year earlier. While there are very few homestay facilities in Yamphudin trail, it does not exist in Ghunsa route. Also, a majority of tourists coming to Taplejung as organised groups (meaning they come under commercial trekking company from Kathmandu and bring all equipment along, such as camping facilities. According to the local people, particularly the MSMEs we visited, the following kinds of foreign tourists visit Taplejung.

- Mountaineers who attempt to climb Mt. Kanchenjunga come in a much-organised way and bring everything

they need from Kathmandu and are under the guidance of commercial trekking companies.

- Camping trekkers who are in a group of 15 or 20 people. They bring with them tents and peripherals, imported foods and cooking gas, etc. They are supported by a guide, Naika, cooks, porters who number double than tourist themselves. They bring everything they need from Kathmandu and don't even trust local porters.
- Homestay trekkers are the ones who come in a small group of five or six persons, prefer staying with local people and consume whatever is offered locally. They are very flexible and adaptive.
- Teahouse trekkers are the ones who, like home stay trekkers, do not bring anything with them, but prefer to stay in hotels with lodging facilities and are sensitive to safety, independence, cleanliness and hygiene.

Of these types, currently, the first two types (mountaineers and camping trekkers) are higher in number in Taplejung. The perspective of the local people is that instead of campsite tourism, tea house and homestay tourism bring more benefits to the local society and economy. From the value chain perspective, this may not be the case. Also, one needs to take into account what tourists (the demand side) prefer. Hence, the district stakeholders may wish to look

for options for what is feasible so that tourism brings economic benefits also to the local people.

Taplejung exhibits several potentials in tourism, namely trekking, mountaineering, cultural, eco-tourism and pilgrimage. None of which is realised fully yet. While Pathivara can attract more (at least double than the current flow of) domestic tourists, it can also attract foreign tourists for eco-tourism (targeted to the observation of red-panda and the dense forests of rhododendron). The Ghunsa and Yamphudin trails have not realised the flow of tourists yet that the Pathivara trail has, even though they have potentials of all types of tourism, mentioned above, except pilgrimage. What is important to note here is that the MSMEs in Taplejung are engaged in tourism only part-time, keeping their conventional livelihood options, such as farming, animal husbandry, other trade engagements, service, portering, etc. continued. That is perhaps one of the reasons why the service quality is very low and very few households are devoted to tourism. There are several ironies embedded.

The first irony is that potentially major promising destinations, such as Fungfung spring, Timbung Pokhari, Diki Chyoling Gomba, the vast range of rhododendron forests in the Tinjure-Milke-Jaljale (TMJ) area, fall outside the existing orbit of the trail routes. Currently, there are hardly any infrastructures to inspire tourists to visit these places.

The second irony is that currently there are many roads under-construction in Taplejung, parallel to or bypassing the existing trail routes. These roads will, within a year or two, definitely shorten the current length of the trek. These roads may also jeopardise the fate of existing markets, such as Mitlung, Chhiruwa, Tallofedi, Gupte, Deurali, and so on. At some points where the current trail overlaps with the proposed road (such as in Sinwa), the value of land skyrockets, potentially displacing the poor and Dalit households farther off the road (or jeopardising their hopes to come along the road).

The road leaving the market hamlet off means that the settlement has to be relocated once the road completes. As a result, currently, there is a sense of uncertainty among MSMEs whether their investment will yield any return in the context of current road building, as it might drastically alter the flow of trekkers, and the landscape of tourism at large. Hence, the entrepreneurs are in a state of “wait and see” mood without making any substantial business investment. One possibility, however, is that there are symptoms of corporate investment in tourism to come in the district. If this takes place, it would bring new opportunities. If this happens, efforts need to be made for socially responsible tourism so that the corporate business is socially just and inclusion-sensitive, an area, perhaps, the district stakeholders could contribute.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF MAJOR TREKKING ROUTES

Taplejung has three major trekking routes: Phungling-Ghunsa, Phungling-Yamphudin and Phungling-Pathivara. In this section, we briefly describe each of these routes with their major characteristics.

The Phungling-Ghunsa Trail:

The Phungling-Ghunsa Trail starts from Phungling Bazaar, the District headquarters, passes through the then Hangdeva, Phurumbu, Linkhim and Tapethok VDCs and ultimately arrive at Lelep VDC leading the trekkers further to Kanchenjunga Base Camp. Hence, it joins six VDCs along the Tamor River. There are many locations where tourists can stay, namely: Mitlung (1), Sinba (1), Chiruwa (2), Tapethok (1), Lelep (1), Sekathum (2), Amjilesa (1), Gyabla (1), Phole (2), Ghunsa (5), and Khampachin (5). Caste-ethnicity wise, Sherpa have the highest representation (16 out of 22 MSMEs) in this route, followed by Limbu and Newar (each having 2 MSMEs). Brahmin and Tamang have one hotel-lodge each. This route attracts almost more than half of the foreign tourists, hence, is one of the main trails.

The Phungling-Yamphudin Trail:

Like the other two trails, this one also begins from Phungling Bazaar, passes through Hangdeva, Phawakhola, Sikaichha, Tellok, Pedang, Mamangkhe VDCs and finally arrives at Yamfudin leading the trekkers further to the

Kanchenjunga Base Camp (connecting eight VDCs in total). There are many locations in this trail, starting from Lalikharka (6), Meldada (1), Kunhari (1), Kandebyanhyang (8), Khesewa (1), Phumphe (2), Mamankhe (5), Yamphudin (1), and Bhotegaon (3). In this route, Brahmin/Chhetri have little less than half of the MSMEs (13 out of 28), followed by Limbu (9 MSMEs), and Gurung and Sherpa (each having 3 MSMEs). This is the alternate trail to the Mitlung-Ghunsa route, although tourists' flow is quite less here. One important feature of this trail is that there is a homestay facility in Mamankhe, where lies the Limbu Museum too.

The Phungling-Pathivara Trail:

It starts from Phungling Bazaar, passes through Hangdeva, Phurumbu, and Phawakhola VDCs and finally reaches the holy shrine of Pathivara located in Tapethok VDC (connecting five VDCs). There are many locations in this trail, starting from Suketar (13 MSMEs), Gupte (9), Deurali (5), Sewaro Chowk (4), Terse (1), Tallofedi (5), Kaffefedi (2), Bolodada (1), and Mathlofedi (9). This is a cultural trail route attracting more than 50,000 domestic and Indian pilgrims each year.

Our effort of assessing the diversity profile of the population of 13 VDCs, which all three trail corridors connect, reveals a social composition of population little different than the district as a whole. Limbus outnumber all population groups

in the trail corridors (ranging their size from 35 to 39 percent), followed by Brahmin, Chhetri and Sanyasi with population size ranging from 24.5 to 31.6 percent. Other Hill Janajatis (including Rai, Bhujel, Magar, Tamang, and Gurung) also have a significant presence in the trail corridors (15.6 to 17.8 percent). The size of Dalit population is almost consistent between 7 and 8 percent.

What one can ascertain from this discussion is that Hill Janajati groups (outnumbered by Limbus) represent one of the largest population groups in Taplejung with a lot of heterogeneity within (see Section 2.2 for a brief discussion). This follows by Brahmin, Chhetri and Sanyasi. Dalit are at the minority position who also represent the poorest and discriminated segment of society. One of the limitations of this discussion is that it could not bring poverty dimensions into the discussion due to the virtual lack of poverty survey or data on DAG mapping.

MSMEs and the trekking corridors in Taplejung

In the three trekking trails in Taplejung, Sherpa are far ahead in offering hospitality to the tourists. Even though their population size ranges between 4.8 and 7.7 percent in those trail corridors, 30 (Pathivara) to 78 (Ghunsa) percent of the teahouses, hotels, lodges and campsites are owned and operated by Sherpa alone. (Note that population composition of the

trail corridors is drawn from census data of 2001 encompassing the VDCs each corridor passes through.) As in other Eastern Hill districts of Nepal, Sherpa hotels are cleaner and hygienic (based on observation as well as interviews with the local people).

The local people also opine that Sherpa, by culture, are fond of offering a warm welcome and homely services to the guests better than any other caste/ethnic groups. (Perhaps, this is a part of their entrepreneurship skills.) They are more attentive and diligent in catering for the needs of the guests. But in some segments of Ghunsa trail, it has also complained that some of them do often attempt to monopolise the business. In such a case, the other hotels and lodges would get guests only when the influential Sherpa hotels are packed. Ghunsa is a case in point.

A notable presence of Brahmin (40 percent) can be noticed in the Pathivara trail while they do not exist in the Ghunsa trail. They are catering to domestic tourists more and are concentrated in the Pathivara trail most. Of the total 18.5 percent MSMEs by Brahmin/Chhetri, about two-third are in Pathivara trail and the rest in Yamphudin trail. Given that their population in those VDCs ranges between 24 and 30 percent, their representation can be considered normal. Unlike this, Limbu lag behind as MSMEs. Given that their population in those VDCs ranges between 35 and 39 percent in trail

corridor VDCs, their share in business ranges between 11 (in the Ghusna trail) to 28 percent (in the Yamphudin trail). Dalit do not appear in the frontline hospitality services altogether.

Why are Limbu under-represented in tourism enterprises? The local people including Limbu themselves put forward many explanations for this. First, unlike Sherpa and Brahmin/Chhetri, Limbus conventionally enjoy in other opportunities, like police and army (including British Army). Second, they live in low altitude (*fedi*) area, while most of the trekking trails go up-hills. Third, in local people's perspective, Limbu are conventionally better off by income and assets ownership. They are among the ones benefiting much from the cardamom and *chiraito* (*swertia chirayita*) farming, one of the booming sources of cash income in Eastern Hill districts. The DDC Taplejung estimates that currently, a total of 4,000 ha of land is under cardamom cultivation, which can be extended to 6,000 ha. An estimated 12,000 households are currently engaged in cardamom, producing about 4,000 metric tonnes, worth Rs. 50 million to 2.5 billion (DDC Taplejung 2011).

Caste analysis of tourism

Besides, one of the most disturbing facts is that Dalit virtually do not exist in the landscape of hospitalist-related business in the trail corridors in Taplejung. While this is not a surprising fact given

Nepal's hierarchical social segregation and division of labour along the caste-line, because almost all Dalit are also poor, it demands serious attention for poverty and inclusion perspective along caste discrimination. There are serious social-cultural limitations in bringing them to the hospitality business upfront because of the inter-caste and intra-Dalit segregations in inter-dining. So, the likelihood of Dalit operating hotels and lodges immediately is very slim. Hence, there is a need to assess the potentials and economic viability of providing them support for skills and knowledge to increase the chance of Dalits joining the value chain of tourism, perhaps through backward linkages

Although the foreign tourists would not bother with any caste-belonging of the service provider, the local people still do so. And, because trekking is very much a seasonal business (in Taplejung, as elsewhere), hotels or lodges cannot sustain if there is no demand of service from local people on the move, and the domestic tourists. One alternative option is that Dalit and poor households, which are not likely to join the frontline of hospitality service immediately, can still take benefits of tourism by joining the value chain, as discussed earlier, through backward linkage (production of fresh vegetables, goats, chicken, egg, milk, handicrafts, gift items, souvenirs, etc.). For this, the DDC, the LCB, and the district stakeholders may wish to

carry out a separate and dedicated market feasibility study of such products, the viable strategies to be adopted so that Dalit and poor households may join, and the way they can be supported and enabled to do so.

Gender analysis of tourism

The DDC Taplejung estimates that women's workload in the district is 2 to 4 hours longer than men every day. Since men are out-migrating at an increasing rate, in search of better opportunities in education, employment and overseas labour, women's workload is ever increasing. The gender relation, however, varies to a considerable extent among different caste-ethnic groups.

Janajati women can participate more in public life compared to Brahmin, Chhetri women. They carry out most of the work responsibilities of the hospitality business as hotel and lodge owners. They enjoy a certain level of economic autonomy in day-to-day business. But eventually, it is men who take control over the income once it becomes sizeable. One of the major observations is that Janajati women experience a higher level of violence at home from their male counterparts, which Janajati women attribute to the problem of widespread alcoholism. Given that drinking *tongba* is very common among the Limbu and Sherpa, women in those ethnic groups are said to have experienced physical and mental violence to a higher level. While talking about the nature of gender

relations among Hill Janajati ethnic groups, one needs to take into account the diverse practices within.

While Limbu women enjoy a greater extent of autonomy in terms of movement and public contact, Sherpa women (particularly Bhote-Sherpa women) do not enjoy this at the same level. The fact that Limbu women experience greater autonomy in movements and public contact than women of other Janajati groups can also be attributed to Limbu men's relative absence at home (due to their conventional preference over armies, and currently going abroad such as to Malaysia and Qatar as labour migrants). Sherpa community, however, cannot tolerate giving women the same extent of freedom and autonomy. Although Sherpa women take most of the burden of hospitality service, their public participation is notably low and invisible.

Generally, Brahmin-Chhetri women are better educated compared to their Janajati counterparts and one can see some of them getting employment in public offices (such as the schools, local health posts, government offices, banks, etc.). These women, however, experience relatively greater domestic control over movement outside the home, and are very closely observed for their public contact. Given the changing social norms, these restrictions are now more relaxed though. It is widely observed that domestic violence among Brahmin-Chhetri is relatively lesser than their

Janajati counterparts, but in terms of economic autonomy Brahmin-Chhetri women lag (for a comparative overview on these issues see Acharya and Bennett 1981).

The overall status of Dalit women is quite pathetic, as is the case elsewhere in Nepal. From education to public contact outside the home, from control over one's own body to choice of occupation, from economic autonomy to participation in public life, Dalit women experience greater challenges and barriers. They experience poverty more than any woman of non-Dalit background. They remain invisible in a public place and are often forgotten in local public consultations. They experience three layers of disadvantages: patriarchal oppression of their community, caste oppression as "untouchables" by the non-Dalits, economic marginalisation as the poor. There are about 5,000 Dalit women in the district (CBS 2003). This is the group deserving immediate and substantial support, inclusion and empowerment than any other single group of women. Since Dalit women do not have specific skills, they can be supported, perhaps, through the general support in bringing them into the value chain of tourism through backward linkage, as mentioned earlier, in addition to supporting them through awareness building, leadership development and empowerment measures.

Barriers and drivers to change

Brahmin/Chhetri and Limbu are the two relatively most influential groups in Taplejung. Although Bhote-Sherpa are also in par with these two groups in terms of income and economy, their spatial location does not favour them much, as they live mostly at high altitude and very far from Phungling Bazaar, the district headquarters, where most of the amenities of modern life are available. Because Limbu, Tamang and Brahmin-Chhetri live in the lower foothills or closer to flat river beds, they are relatively affluent due to soil fertility, relatively good access to transportation, and political influence and market network.

Dalit are scattered all over the district, except in Olangchung Gola, Papung, and Yamphudin VDCs. Their size of the population is smaller. They belong to the lowest rank in the social hierarchy as per the conventional social norms. Untouchability prevails not only between Dalit and so-called "upper caste" Hindus but also between Dalit and Hill Janajati groups. Strikingly, there are notable intra-Dalit restrictions of sharing, inter-dining and inter-caste marriage within Dalit, etc.

Gender is one prominent dimension of exclusion across all caste-ethnic groups. While people tend to believe that Limbu and Tamang women are least excluded compared to Sherpa and Rai, and the latter is less excluded than Brahmin-Chhetri women, and

Dalit women are worst excluded of all. Certain variation accepted, we find a monotonous marginalisation of Dalit women with multiple forms of exclusion and marginalisation, that of patriarchy, of poverty, and untouchability.

Poverty is another key dimension of exclusion and barrier to change. Poverty prevails among all ethnic/caste groups including male and female both. Incidence of poverty, however, is higher among Dalit and women due to their multiple experiences of marginalisation at home and/or in public places.

The characterisation of social exclusion and economic deprivation such as this applies to the tourism sector almost wholesale, with a little variation that Sherpa are one of the first groups to take benefits from tourism. To address the problem such as this, generally speaking, conscientisation (raising critical thinking and awareness together with literacy and collectivity), economic empowerment (from skill training, market linkage to microfinance) and group mobilisation (forming groups at the community level, saving and credit, seed money, development of self-help solidarity and leadership) can form a package of mutually reinforcing interventions.

Conclusion

Taplejung District has a very diverse population composition consisting of at least 15 caste/ethnic categories broadly divided into Hill Janajati groups (67

percent) and Khas-Aryan including Dalit (30 percent). Limbu, Sherpa and Brahmin, Chhetri are the four larger population groups. The settlement pattern of the district is mixed in the south, and relatively homogenous in the east and north, where Limbu and Sherpa predominate. The mixed composition of the population is also reflected in each trail, although with slight variation. While the upper segment of Ghunsa trail (upward Lelep) is exclusively inhabited by Sherpa, in the lower segment, Limbu, Brahmin, Chhetri and other Hill Janajati have a notable presence. One can find a similar population composition in Yamphudin route. In Pathivara trail, the size of Sherpa, however, is smaller.

About the business and entrepreneurship structure of the district, all the business and commercial establishments in Taplejung are trade-related. Of the total cottage and small industries, 86 percent are trade-based and only 9 percent outlets relate to production and processing, including *radi-pakhi*. Except for hotels and lodges (33.3 percent), none of these entrepreneurship relates directly to tourism, the exception being one gift shop in Suketar. While the presence of Sherpa and Limbu is far low in the cottage and small industries, in the hospitality business they (particularly Sherpa) outnumber all the rest.

The existing MSMEs predominantly belong to the trail-side households who come from economically better (at least

in terms of food security) and socially influential background (in terms of local power relations). To be specific, a little more than half of the MSMEs are Sherpa alone (whose population share in trail corridors is not more than seven percent). Limbus whose population is about 40 percent in the trail corridor, in MSMEs their share is about 17 percent only. Dalit virtually do not exist in the landscape of hospitality services. If they are not linked to the benefits of tourism still for some time, it is Dalit, women and poor households who may face adverse effects of tourism (such as, price hike and expanding gulf between the rich and the poor), and perhaps will be displaced.

The tourism sector carries a promising scope of employment and self-employment opportunities in Taplejung as the district is gifted with so many attractive destinations and cultural diversities. It carries, however, several risks. First, many roads are now being constructed (along all three corridors), and there is a widespread fear of what effects these roads could bring in trekking tourism. The Ghunsa and the Pathivara trails suffer the worst effect of road building as the length of trekking can drastically shorten there. There are indications that the current MSMEs might

be displaced (and new ones will find it hard to start any business) amidst the changing dynamics of heavy commercial investments once the roads start bringing new opportunities. This may squeeze the employment opportunities of wage earners, porters, mule drivers, etc.

Second, campsite tourism is still the norm in Ghunsa and Yamphudin trail. Very few tourists use the services provided by local people. If we are expecting pro-poor, sustainable and equitable tourism, it is already high time that synergy is created to transform the current campsite-based tourism into either homestay or tea house tourism. Third, the flourishing hospitality business demands much of the time of both men and women, but given the stereotypical gender division of labour in Nepali society, it demands women's time far more than one can expect. If women's practical and strategic gender needs (including access to and control over resources) are not improved, women's physical and mental health can deteriorate in the long run due to drudgery. Moreover, initial indications warn us enough that violence against girls and women can escalate when tourism brings cultural pollution and cash floods in the villages.

References

- Acharya, Meena and Bennett, Lynn (1981). An Aggregate Analysis and Summary of 8 Village Studies. *The Status of Women in Nepal*, vol. II, Kathmandu: Centre for Economic Development and Administration.
- Baramu, Bhadra Kumari (2009). "Educational status of Baram: Issues of inclusion and exclusion (a case study of Pandrung -4 and Takukot-8)," a research report submitted to the Social Inclusion Research Fund, Kathmandu.
- CBS (2003). *Population Census of Nepal 2001 (Ethnic/Caste Population)*, Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics.
- Childs, Geoff (2004). *Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- DDC Taplejung (2011). *Periodic District Development Plan of Taplejung*. Taplejung.
- DDC Taplejung (2012). "Strategic Tourism Action Plan (STAP)," draft report, Taplejung.
- DFID and World Bank (2006). *Unequal Citizens: Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*, Executive summary, Kathmandu: DFID and World Bank.
- District Cottage and Small Industries Office (2011). "List of cottage and small industries in Taplejung," office record, Taplejung.
- MoTCA (2008). *Tourism Policy, 2065*, Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation.
- Pantha, Ritu and Sharma, Bharat Raj (2003) "Population size, growth and distribution," *Population Monograph of Nepal*, vol. 1, pp. 37-86, Kathmandu: CBS.
- Sambriddha Pahad (2012). Financial access of rural poor to credit in Taplejung, office record.
- SNV Nepal (2010). "Great Himalayan Trail Development Programme, Phase 1 (2010-12)," final draft, Kathmandu
- TCCI (2012). "List of TCCI affiliated members" (office record), Taplejung: Taplejung Chambers of Commerce and Industries.