

# Exploring the Tourism Potentiality of Chuliban Hill in Dhankuta Municipality

Pradeep Rai<sup>1</sup>

Email: pradprai@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Chuliban Hill is a forest-covered hill situated in Dhankuta Municipality, ward numbers 7 and 8. The forest is owned and protected by three different forest user groups formed under the Division Forest Office of Dhankuta. For the past several years various attempts at developing the Chuliban hill as a major tourist destination within Dhankuta Municipality have been made. But only a few attempts have been successful so far, and only a few domestic tourists do actually come to visit the place. Against this background, this research work explores the actual and optimum tourism potentiality of the Chuliban hill and its developmental challenges by investigating the facts through close observation and interviewing all the major stakeholders. At the end of the research, it was found that the Chuliban hill actually possesses a very high potentiality for developing as a major tourist destination within Dhankuta Municipality. The plans and projects towards this aim have also been made at different levels and times. However, insufficient budget allocation and lack of proper coordination between the Municipality and the local forest user groups, apart from the coronavirus, have been the major hindrances that have caused the failure in realizing the full potentiality of the Chuliban hill.*

**Key words:** *Tourism potentiality, tourism development, stakeholder, municipality, forest user group, coordination*

## Introduction

Chuliban hill is a forest-covered hill situated in Dhankuta Municipality. It lies at the altitude of 1100 to 1303 meters above sea level, and overlooks Dhankuta bazar and the Tamor river. Spread over the area of 62.61 hectares, it formerly covered the area of three wards - 7, 8, and 9. Though the restructuring of local levels of Nepal in 2017 combined the ward numbers 8 and 9 to make a single ward number 8, there still lies three forest user groups separately of ward no. 8 called Chuliban Forest User Group, of ward no. 7 called Chuliban Deurali Forest User Group, and of ward no. 9 called Mangdinpakha Forest User Group. Influenced by subtropical warm temperate climate, the major vegetation found in

<sup>1</sup> Mr Rai is an Assistant Lecturer of English at Tribhuvan University, Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Dhankuta.

this region are salla, saal, chilaune, dhaalnekatus, guraas, pani-amala, kurilo, harchur and ghodakhari. (Source: District Forest Office, Dhankuta)

The local community around the Chuliban forest hill is composed mainly of Athapahariya Rais, who are the unique indigenous ethnic group of Dhankuta. These Athapahariya Rais have their own culture, language and belief systems. They have not only been using the forest for sustenance for years, but worshipping it too. They are the actual or major consumers of the forest. Besides Athapahariya Rais, in ward no. 7, there are Magars, Limbus, other Rai groups, Tamangs, Chhetris and Brahmins too in a small number living around the hill. However, the forest user groups are mainly made up of Athapahariya Rais, and they are the ones leading these groups too.

Chuliban hill is also a popular tourist destination within Dhankuta municipality. Inside the forest hill a park has been made, especially for children, featuring rotepung and such other playthings. There are picnic spots too, and most importantly, a 5-storey view tower has been built on the top of the hill that provides a breathtaking open view of Tamor river, adjacent hills and places around. To reach the top of the hill it takes about 20 minutes' uphill walk from the entrance gate at the base. At the top, beside the view tower, there is also a pujathan (altar) of Athapahariya Rais, and a little below while descending from the other side of the hill, a Hindu temple too can be visited. The most spectacular views that a visitor can see and feel from certain different heights of the hill are the picturesque view of Dhankuta bazar and a long snaking stretch of the Tamor river. A small resort-kind of restaurant is also available nearby the entrance gate, beside the children park, where visitors can stop to eat and drink. The entrance fee into the Chuliban park is Rs 20 per person. For picnic spot, additional fee is charged.

Is this all the Chuliban hill can offer? What else can be done if a well-organized plan for tourism development is to be made? There are only a few local and domestic visitors visiting the park each day now. The present pandemic of coronavirus is, understandably, the main excuse for that. But what was the trend of visit before the pandemic began? What kind of visitors were there? If tourism in the region is to be promoted further, what kind of visitors can be targeted most? Who are the stakeholders involved, and how each can play their part in the overall development of tourism in the region? These are the various questions that should be answered in order to find the optimum tourism potentiality of the Chuliban hill. This research work has tried to answer these questions.

## **Methods and Materials**

The principal method used in this research was Personal Interview with 7 concerned people. They were selected through judgmental sampling. The authentic and responsible persons from all the major stakeholders were met face to face and interviewed, and thus the first hand data was collected. Next method used in the data collection was the close and careful observation made by the researcher himself. Some secondary sources like

tourism promoting brochure prepared by the Municipality, documented information on the Chuliban community forest provided by the District Forest Office, Forests Act of 2019, and relevant information found online were reviewed. Similarly, to apply some of the key ideas of tourism, the books on the principles of tourism by an Indian author A. K. Bhatia and by American authors Charles R. Goeldner & J.R. Brent Ritchie have also been consulted.

## Results and Discussion

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), "Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents)." This standard definition includes all kinds of purposes and visitors associated with tourism. R.W. McIntosh (as cited in Bhatia, 2002) states four kinds of travel motivators: (i) Physical motivators, (ii) Cultural motivators, (iii) Interpersonal motivators, and (iv) Status and prestige motivators. By physical motivators, he means "physical relaxation and rest" among other things, whereas, cultural motivators are those "which are connected with the individual's desire to travel in order to learn about other countries and their people and their cultural heritage expressed in art, music, literature, folklore, etc." In the same way, interpersonal motivators are "related to a desire to visit relatives, friends ... or to meet new people and forge new friendships," while status and prestige motivators are "related to travel for business or professional interest, for the purpose of education and pursuit of hobbies." Among these four kinds of motivators, physical motivators and cultural motivators are seemingly the kind of motivators that can bring the tourists up to the Chuliban hill.

Drawing distinction between domestic and foreign tourism, Bhatia (2002) writes:

In domestic tourism, people travel outside their normal domicile to certain other areas within the country as compared to travelling outside the boundaries of a country in international tourism. The tourist activity of residents of a country within their own country, which does not cross the boundaries of the country, is thus described as internal or domestic tourism. The travel becomes an easy affair. The barriers of currency exchange, language, passport, visa, health document, etc., are not to be faced by a domestic tourist. (p. 89-90)

Thus, in any place of visit, there is likely to be more domestic tourists than foreign tourists. Moreover, the distinction is made between same-day visitors and at-least-one-night visitors. Goeldner and Ritchie (2009) observes:

Of those travelers directly within the scope of travel and tourism, basic distinctions are made among those whose trips are completed within one day. The same-day visitors are also called day-trippers and excursionists because they stay less than twenty-four hours.

While they are important travelers, their economic significance pales in comparison to travelers who stay one or more nights. (p. 10)

It is, understandably, true that the more the visitors stay at a place, the more will be the economic gain for that place since the visitors will keep spending their money to pay for the service provided. So, for tourism development, staying-more-than-one night tourists will be more beneficial than same-day visitors.

In light of all the ideas discussed above, it has been enquired into what kind of visitors do visit the Chuliban hill. Ram Kumar Rai, who has been running a resort inside the Chuliban park for the past four years, reports having only about 25 domestic visitors per day in average on days other than Saturday while on Saturdays, the number of visitors rises upto 60 in maximum. But before the corona time, it was 100 to 200 domestic tourists per day. These domestic visitors, Rai informs, consisted mainly of visitors from outside the town of Dhankuta (but still from within Dhankuta district) and from neighboring districts too like Tehrathum, Sankhwasabha, Bhojpur, Sunsari and Morang. A few visitors would also come from as far as Jhapa in the east and Kanchanpur in the west. Most of these domestic visitors were the ones who had come to Dhankuta on some purpose and so stayed in the town for one or two nights.

Bhusan Shrestha, vice-chairman of Regional Hotel Association, Dhankuta and former chairman of Dhankuta Hotel Association, and also the owner of Parijat hotel, informs that the visitors who stay for one or two nights at the hotels of Dhankuta town are mainly the visitors who come to Dhankuta for their work at the office of Employees Provident Fund, Tax Office, and now Transportation Office too. In addition to these visitors, there are young people who come from faraway places to take public commission exams. When these domestic visitors, apart from their work, choose to visit the town or nearby places, Chuliban park becomes their number one choice for visit, where they can reach in 20 to 30 minutes on foot and spend a couple of hours refreshing themselves.

Whether before the outbreak of coronavirus or after it, only a few local visitors (residents of the Dhankuta town) are found to visit the park, and that too is mostly when they have some guests whom they should take somewhere to visit. In the name of foreign tourists, the resort owner Rai has witnessed only occasional Indians so far who enter Nepal through the transit points of Jogbani and Kakadvitta. Hotel owner Shrestha also confirms it. According to Shrestha, many years ago, there used to be Europeans and Americans on mountain trek travelling through the route of Dhankuta, but no more now, as today mountaineers and trekkers fly directly to Tumlingtar in Sankhuwasabha district. So, as foreign tourists, it is the Indian tourists (from Bihar and West Bengal) who should to be targeted by the tourism development plans concerning the Chuliban hill. And these Indian tourists, if any, are the actual tourists who come to visit Dhankuta for solely visiting purpose. They come upto Dhankuta visiting tourist places like Bhedetar, Namaste Jharana, and Mulghat on the way, and they go further up from Dhankuta upto Tehrathum, informs

Shrestha. Many a times these Indian tourists bypass Dhankuta and reach directly upto Hile, for they don't find much of meaningful thing to see at Dhankuta. This fact should be especially noted, and something worth must be planned that can entice these Indian tourists to stop surely at Dhankuta.

In addition to the few visiting Indian tourists, the tourism development plan of Dhankuta should target more the domestic visitors who stay at least one night at Dhankuta. But then, as we have already seen, the domestic visitors staying at the hotels of Dhankuta are not the actual tourists whose primary goal is to visit Dhankuta. They are the people who have come primarily for some other purposes concerning education, work or business. Doesn't Dhankuta has potential to bring visitors from faraway places for the sole purpose of visit? Can't Dhankuta be places like Illam and Pokhara where people visit solely for recreation purpose? The office of Dhankuta Municipality has the affirmative answer to it. It does actually have a plan which, if successfully carried out, can bring the visitors from faraway places and make them stay for at least one night.

Bikas Adhikari, Financial Development Officer of Dhankuta Municipality, and who is also the authority overseeing the tourism development within the municipality, informs of one-day-tourism package. According to the plan envisioned by the municipality, paragliding can be done from the Chuliban hill in the morning (before noon, as it is too windy in the afternoon), landing down at Tamor river shore at Yakchana Ghat, and from Yakchana Ghat to Mulghat, 4 kilometers' rafting in the Tamor river can be done, and then from Mulghat, the tourists can be taken back to Dhankuta, or further up to Hile. As per this plan, a test flight of paragliding was done three years ago, and it was successful too, informs Adhikari. But there are a few trees that should be cut down in order to clear the way for the runway. These trees haven't been cut yet, and no further work has been done towards starting the paragliding service. When asked about the reason, Adhikari hints at the need of permission from District Forest Office in agreement with the local forest user group. He is positive about having that permission in due time. Besides the pandemic of coronavirus, he shows insufficient budget, lack of able manpower, and lack of integrated and eco-friendly plan as reasons for the delay in implementation of the one-day-package plan. However, he boasts of having long-term plan for tourism development within Dhankuta Municipality. This long-term plan is of 5 years, and it is expiring in 2022. As per this plan, the Municipality has built a view tower at the top of the Chuliban hill at the cost of 75 lakhs. The plan needs renewing now.

Though Dhankuta Municipality does have a plan for tourism development, it doesn't seem to have been much successful in implementing the plan. But then, the Municipality is not the only player here; there are other major stakeholders too. As already said above, Chuliban hill is covered by forest, and this forest is the community forest owned and conserved by the local forest user groups formed under District Division Forest Office. Hence, nothing can be done inside the forest area without the consent of the forest user groups. Dilkumari Rai (Athapahariya), secretary of Chuliban Deurali Forest User Group

and an active member of the United Forest User Group formed with the purpose of tourism development in the region, was approached to know the view and the role of the forest user groups. She says that forest user groups have always wanted the development in the Chuliban area. It was in their initiative and with the support of the Municipality and the Forest Office, a park with picnic spots was built inside the community forest. When enquired about the plan for further development in tourism, Rai informs about the discussion going on for establishing an Athapahariya museum inside the park, and a homestay among Athapahariya houses situated nearby the park. If these two things are made a reality, then, they will certainly add to the tourism development in the region. There will be people coming not just for recreational purposes, but for cultural studies too. But do Athapahariya Rais have an organized plan for this? Have they already taken any steps towards it?

In personal talking, Surya Rai (Athapahariya), general secretary of Kirant Athapahariya Samaj Nepal, Dhankuta, informs that the construction of an Athapahariya museum has already begun near Bihibare Haat with the investment of 50,00,000/- from the municipality. But it will take several years before the construction work can be completed since the Municipality can provide only small percentage of the total needed fund each year, says Rai. Now Bihibare Haat is a place about 40 minutes' walk away from the Chuliban hill. Why isn't the museum being built inside or somewhere nearby the Chuliban park? Mainly because of risk of fire in the forest during dry season, replies general secretary Rai. Nonetheless, he argues that the museum will not be too far away from the Chuliban park, and it will still contribute to the tourism development in the Chuliban area. Regarding Athapahariya homestay, he informs that, with the budget of 5,00,000/- from the municipality, preliminary studies and preparation have been completed towards starting homestays at two places of Dhankuta – one at Chamjebung-Tomowa area, and another, at a place nearby Bihibare Haat. Chamjebung-Tomowa homestay will be, comparatively, more beneficial to the Chuliban park, as it lies just at the edge of the forest. Those who come for homestay will also definitely visit the Chuliban park, and those who want to come to Chuliban park, will have additional reasons to visit the area. Thus, the prospect of Athapahariya museum and Athapahariya homestay definitely increases the tourism potentiality of the region contributing to the cultural dimension of it. Dhankuta Municipality should, therefore, incorporate this cultural dimension too in their tourism development plan, which can be yet another big fish to attract the tourists not just from neighboring districts but from all over Nepal.

The chairman of ward no. 7, Junga Bahadur Rai, who is also an Athapahariya, sees many possibilities of tourism development in the Chuliban hill. He is determined to act from his side too, but makes excuses pointing out the problems of insufficient budget allocation for the ward committees. According to him, only about 60 to 70 lakhs budget is allocated for wards in a fiscal year, which should be distributed among all kinds of development works within the ward area. So, only the municipality, the province, or the federal government can do the work of big investments, he says. In regard to Chuliban forest hill, he point out the Forest Laws of Nepal as being the second hindrance to the

tourism development in the region. “To cut even one tree, the permission of Forest Office should be taken, which is very difficult due to the forest laws,” he complains.

The Municipality’s delay in being able to cut down the trees and prepare the runway for paragliding seems to confirm what the ward chairman Rai says. If so, what is in the forest laws that has been the hindrance to the development? According to the section 18 of Forests Act, 2019, if a forest user group wants to use any part of its forest for eco-tourism, then, it should make an application, along with a work plan, to the Division Forest Office, and the Division Forest Officer will approve the plan if he or she deems it appropriate. The subsection 7 says, “The users’ group may carry out forest enterprises specified by the work plan approved by the Division Forest Office and such eco-tourism programs as prescribed,” and then the subsection 8 adds, “The users’ group may use the forest area as prescribed for the development of eco-tourism pursuant to sub-section (7).” Padam Khadka, Assistant Forest Officer of Division Forest Office, Dhankuta, explains that if a forest user group wants to cut down some trees for the purpose of eco-tourism, then, they can do so by making a work plan regarding it and getting it approved by the Division Forest Office. Now it becomes clear that if the Municipality wants to have some trees cut down to make way for the runway for paragliding, the application for the permission should go through forest user group. It also becomes clear that local government doesn’t have authority over community forest; community forest is an autonomous entity that operates under the authority of Division Forest Office.

When enquired about the role of forest user groups in getting the trees cut down, secretary Dilkumari Rai revealed that the trees haven’t been cut yet due to lack of understanding between them and the Municipality. According to her, the Municipality tries to take everything under its control and implement its plan without due consultation with the forest user groups or without acknowledging their right over the forest, but the forest user groups cannot easily give up their ownership and control over the forest that have been theirs ever since the formation of the user groups in 1995. So, the forest user groups are not going to make application, as specified, for the permission to cut down the trees until they have been taken into confidence by the Municipality. They surely want the tourism development, but they want it with their respectable participation and uncompromising ownership. On the other hand, the Municipality can no way push the agenda unilaterally since the Forests Act of Nepal doesn’t give it any direct authority over the community forest. In this tussle between the Municipality and the forest user groups, the Division Forest Office seems to side with the forest user groups and remains silent.

Hence, it, finally, becomes clear that the problem actually lies in the lack of cooperation and coordination between Dhankuta Municipality and the forest user groups of Chuliban community forest. If these two major stakeholders cannot work together, then, any tourism plan in the region is sure to fail, or become crippled seriously. This is the single biggest obstacle at present that has delayed the process of tourism development in the Chuliban hill area that has, in fact, a vast tourism potentiality, if only such obstacles are removed.

## Conclusion

Chuliban forest hill area has definitely an immense potentiality of ecological and cultural tourism. Some works have already been done in ecological dimension. A park with children playthings and picnic spots, as well as recent construction of a view tower on the top of the hill have been attracting, mainly, domestic visitors from different parts of Nepal, and a few Indians too from Bihar and West Bengal. But, there is so much more this tourist destination can offer. Dhankuta Municipality has planned a one day tourism package, which includes paragliding flights from the Chuliban hill down to Tamor river shore at Yakchana Ghat, and from there rafting in the river upto Mulghat. Moreover, the Chuliban hill can also provide a perfect place for cultural studies of Athapahariya Rais, who are Dhankuta's indigenous ethnic group of people having their own distinct cultural practices. The ongoing construction of Athapahariya museum house and a prospect of Athapahariya homestay point towards this direction. Thus, Chuliban hill has the potential to bring domestic visitors from all over Nepal and engage them for, at least, one whole day.

Despite having such a great tourism potentiality in the Chuliban hill, the development towards actualizing it has been impeded, mainly, by the absence of proper understanding, cooperation and coordination between the two major stakeholders, Dhankuta Municipality and the forest user groups. To make an understanding, the initiation should be taken by the Municipality, since it is the local government. Once it is able to take the forest user groups into confidence, the development process is sure to get easier and faster. So far the pandemic of coronavirus is concerned, the humans will definitely overcome it sooner or later. As for the insufficient budget, the Municipality can continue to work in parts with the maximum budget available each year, and also try to get the Province to invest into many of its projects.

## References

- Adhikari, B. (2022, January 20). Personal Communication.
- Bhatia, A. K. (2002). *Tourism Development: Principles and Practices*. Sterling Publishers
- Goeldner, C. R. & Ritchie, J. R. B. (2009). *Tourism: Principles, Practices, Philosophies*. Wiley
- Khadka, P. (2022, February 11). Personal Communication.
- Rai, D. K. (2022, January 25). Personal Communication.
- Rai, J. B. (2022, January 13). Personal Communication.
- Rai, R. K. (2022, February 07). Personal Communication.
- Rai, S. (2022, February 11). Personal Communication.
- Shrestha, B. (2022, February 10). Personal Communication.

