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**Impact of COVID-19 on Pilgrimage Tourism: A Case
Study of Lumbini, Nepal**

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Abstract

The coronavirus outbreak is troubling the pilgrimage tourism industry in terms of economic, social, food, employment, and spiritual faith as pilgrimage activities are being stopped during the pandemic. The COVID-19 restriction and the nationwide lock-down has made it a very difficult time for pilgrims to stop the travel movement and this has made a big worry for government around the world. The pilgrimage tourism in Mecca, Vatican City, Israel, and India has been affected much by pandemic as gathering in the pilgrimage sites have been restricted since the year 2020. Lumbini one of the most important pilgrimage site, which is also a UNESCO-listed World Heritage site in Nepal, and has a significant contribution to the national economy. This research uses Lumbini, Nepal, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, to explore the impact of novel coronavirus on pilgrimage tourism and discusses the challenges experienced by Buddhist pilgrim, monks and nuns in different monasteries in 2020 and during the first quarter of the year 2021. The research is qualitative. The study is based on both primary and secondary data gathered through interviews with the related stakeholders and the review of several relevant secondary sources. The outcomes of the research illustrate that pilgrimage tourism has been extremely affected by coronavirus and lock-down

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causing multiple effects on social creation, economic and holy activities, and daily lives of the monks and nuns in Lumbini.

Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism is the oldest perception or unique art of traveling for perceiving spiritual insight and dedication (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). It is a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy place, and internally for spiritual purposes for understanding or leisure purposes (Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021). The first motives for the spiritual journey is the religious feeling that essentially require their followers to visit sacred places and help to facilitate religious events and festivals (Kunwar, 2017). It is estimated that around 300-330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites generating approximately over US\$ 3.5 trillion worldwide every year (Daily Day, 2020 & UNWTO, 2011). The world's largest form of mass pilgrimage tourism takes place at the yearly Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and the Kumba Mela, which is held every 12 years at Haridwar, Uttaranchal, and Prayag, Allahabad, India (Pathak, 2012). Thus, Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Vatican City, which is the home for the Pope, and the Centre of the Roman Catholic Church, Israel, etc. are the most popular pilgrimage destinations for pilgrim tourists in the world (Nhamo et al., 2020). Despite the significance, the tourism industry is also very complex to pandemic, terrorism, conflict, and economic crisis that have been affecting human lives since early ages. There are cases where communities and governments have damaged the different holy sites. The world's tallest Buddhist statue in Afghanistan destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 had led to a negative influence on pilgrimage tourism (Nyaupane, 2009). The existing COVID-19 pandemic is a health emergency that has brought uncertainty and severe effect on almost all the sectors all over the world. The major pilgrimage destinations have been forced to close are facing with socio-economic catastrophe in business due to the lack of pilgrimage visitors to the destination (Raj & Griffin, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic was first reported in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in December 2019 (Buckley, 2020). The coronavirus outbreak has created many challenges in the health and safety, global economy, and tourism industry. The strength of the infection has also confirmed that it is very difficult to control the spread of the virus easily (Raj & Griffin, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has restricted all possibilities of human life including the cancellation of pilgrimages, religious and festival events, and the places for the worship of devotion affecting the mental and emotional phenomena (Gautam, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has had destructive effects and fear on pilgrimage tourism and services. The popular destinations of all the faith i.e., Jerusalem, Vatican City, Mecca, India's Mahabodhi temple, and the Lumbini that attract millions of Jewish, Christina, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist pilgrims yearly from all over the world has been affected by the

COVID-19 crisis (Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020). According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the unparalleled catastrophe has resulted in a \$ 2.7 trillion drop in revenue and job losses of 100 million in 2020 from the entire tourism industry. The number of international arrivals will be lower by 850 million to 1.1 billion in 2020 (Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020). The arrival of tourists for 2020 was worst than the downturn during the Maoist insurgency between 1996 to 2006 and the earthquake in 2015 together (Prasain, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an 80.78% drop in tourist arrivals than the previous year (Prasain, 2021). The tourists visiting Nepal for pilgrimage or spiritual purposes have also been impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Magar, 2020). In context to Lumbini, there has been a loss of many pilgrims and visitors in the year 2020 in the major visiting time of the year (Magar, 2020). Most of the international events, conferences, and festivals were postponed with uncertainty due to the coronavirus lock-down in the country. Through the research, the author is going to explore the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism in the context of Lumbini and discuss the consequence practiced by the religious monks, nuns and pilgrims during the coronavirus lock-down in the country.

Pilgrimage tourism in Nepal

The term pilgrimage refers to the structured institution which comprises the socio-cultural behavior of an individual (Morinis, 1984). Pilgrimage tourism is an important type of tourism that includes the participation in a journey to some sacred places such as mosques, churches, temples, and monasteries for practicing a spiritual and delightful experience (Raj & Griffin, 2020). In context to pilgrimage tourism, the travel activity, traveling designs, transportation system choices, and socializing process are affected by the beliefs and devotion towards the destination (Haq & Medhekar, 2019). Indeed, the development of modern tourism and practice is often difficult to identify without the understanding of pilgrimage tourism (Kreiner, 2019). The pilgrimage tourism to the sacred and holy places such as Pashupatinath, Muktinath for Hindus, Lumbini for Buddhists, Jerusalem for Christians, and Mecca for Muslims created modern tourism in the society (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), pilgrimage tourism signifies all travel outside the normal atmosphere for mystical purposes (Daily Day, 2020).

Pilgrimage tourism has played a vital role in preserving sacred sites, building cultural understanding, and offering outstanding opportunities for generating revenues (Daily Day, 2020). Nepal was officially a Vedic country, where Hinduism and Buddhism controlled the life of the people and have co-existed for centuries (Adhakari, 2020). Nepal is also a renowned destination for pilgrimage tourism due to its prominent, famous, and prideful historical and holy places. Pilgrimage tourism is dedicated to the ritual bath, listen to the speech (Dhamma Deshana), practicing

meditation, worshipping, visiting the temple and monasteries (Adhikari, 2020). In context to the pilgrimage tourism, it lies in the third main purpose of visiting Nepal after the holiday and mountaineering tourism receiving a large number of tourists in the country (Magar, 2020). It is estimated that 20% to 30% of the tourists travel especially from India, Thailand, Japan, Korea, Myanmar, Sri-Lanka, and European countries fall under the pilgrimage category (Subedi, 2015). The table below shows the number of tourists visiting Nepal for pilgrimage between the years 2015-2019.

Table 1: Pilgrim's arrival in the last five years in Nepal

Year	Arrival number	Percentage of pilgrims Out of total arrival
2015	14,996	2.78 %
2016	82,830	11 %
2017	141,633	15 %
2018	169,180	14.4 %
2019	171,937	14.36 %

Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2020

Pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini

Lumbini is considered a synonym of the world peace center and the most important destination for pilgrimage in the world since the time of Buddha (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). It is the central point for the Buddhist circuits and a place of devotion for the entire peace-loving people in the world (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). It is popular all over the world as a birthplace of Lord Buddha, inscribed on the World Heritage Site since 1997 because of the outstanding universal value deserved for the benefits of humanity (UNESCO, 2013). It is one of the main pilgrimage sites based on the life of Gautam Buddha for Buddhists (Nyaupane, 2009). The Buddhist pilgrimage site of Lumbini includes more than 200 historical, archaeological, and pilgrimage sites associated with the life of Buddha and Buddhism culture which has been attracting visitors from early periods (Rai, 2020). Among them, the Maya Devi temple is considered the heart of all the monuments at Lumbini (Nyaupane, 2009). The Lumbini Museum, Lumbini International Research Institute complex, and the Auditorium also known as peace hall is the home for the cultural zone in Lumbini (Nyaupane, 2009). The pilgrims and travelers of different culture reach to Lumbini for expressing their spiritual and magical feeling in several ways (Rai, 2020). Lumbini is one of the best places in the world for practicing meditation, mystical vacation, worship, listening to speech, chanting, and getting wisdom and knowledge (Sharma, 2019). According to Liro, Soljan & Bilska-Wodecka, there are three kinds of motivations for visiting pilgrimage centres in Krakow, Poland i.e., tourist motivations

(Sightseeing, prayer, pilgrimage), religious motivations (service, confession), and recreational motivations (walking, spending time with the family) (Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021). In the context of Lumbini, the motivation of pilgrims is devoted to all three kinds of motivation for visiting the pilgrimage centre in Lumbini. Thus, Lumbini has been a major tourist attraction for Buddhist and non- Buddhist visitors due to its antiquities, monuments, socio-cultural practice, norms and values, belief and activities.

Review of literature

Buddhism is one of the major world religions founded in the sixth century B.C.E. (Rai, 2020). Pilgrimage sites are visited to judge the religious history (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). The authentic history of Lumbini started with the pillar inscription of the famous Indian Emperor Ashoka (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). Lumbini is the only landmark of the Buddhist world which is one of the holiest places of the greatest religion that contain important evidence about the nature of Buddhist pilgrimage centres from as early as the 3rd century BC (Rai, nd). Lumbini is an international pilgrimage destination that is authentic both in terms of visitor's experiences and object-related authenticity (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). Lumbini is the birthplace of the greatest, the brightest, and the light of peace, where the newly born Prince Siddhartha took his seven steps and expressed a significant message to the suffering humanity nearly two thousand years ago (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012). Lumbini falls in the cultural category that refers to monuments, historical sites, philosophy, archaeological, ethnological values. The concept of travel in Buddhism is seemed to have started by the Buddha himself, where Buddha mentioned four important places i.e., Lumbini, Buddhagaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar that should be visited with the emotion in heart and mind (Rai, 2020). As the birthplace of Lord Buddha, Lumbini has become a growing place of pilgrimage for the international Buddhist community and an important tourist attraction in Nepal (Bernard, 2019). The millions of devotees are eager to fulfill their lifetime dream of visiting major Buddhist pilgrimage sites mentioned by the Buddha (Rai, 2020). The visits of Chinese travelers brought more records out about Lumbini and this has to lead the World to know about Lumbini. Lumbini holds almost a similar position with Mecca in the context of pilgrims and tourists (Kunwar & Ghimire). Thus, Lumbini has been a destination for Pilgrimage since the time of Buddha (Nyaupane, 2009).

Tourism is one of the most vulnerable industries in times of crisis and even more so in times of pandemic, as it involves human movement between an origin and a destination (Gössling et al., 2020). In context to the impact of COVID-19, there has been severe effect in all the sectors but tourism is paying the highest price (Nair & Sinha, 2020). Tourism plays an essential role in the spread of disease between places; indeed, safety and health condition are the prime necessity in order to develop

tourism (Peric et al., 2021). Until, the 20th century, the outbreak of a pandemic is becoming more and more frequent because of globalization. The World has experienced different types of pandemics like SARS in 2002-2003, Bird Flu in 2009, MERS in 2012, Ebola in 2013-2014 and COVID-19 in 2019 (Gössling et al., 2020). The increasing spread of the coronavirus converts the perception of the tourists and their behavior of convincing them that travel is unsafe and there is risk consideration on international travels (Park & Reisinger, 2010).

Regarding this research, the author has reviewed the different literature about the global impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism through different academic journals. The different reports showed that the world had experienced a number of the leading pandemic in the past years, yet none had similar implications on the global economy as the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020). The coronavirus pandemic is one of the biggest global economic crises since the 9/11 terrorist attacks that have affected most intensely on the tourism industry (Raj & Griffin, 2020). In context to the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini, there is also different literature but that research is directly or indirectly related to the promotion of pilgrimage tourism and tourism development of Lumbini. The example includes research on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini by Nyaupane (2009), Kunwar and Ghimire (2012), Ghimire (2014; 2015; 2017), Ghimire & Rai (2015), Khatri (2016), LDT (2014-2020), Sharma (2019), Rai (2020), UNESCO (2013). These works are related to Lumbini from a pilgrimage, cultural or religious point of view to promote pilgrimage tourism with development and commercial interests, but none of the academic work has been conducted in Lumbini highlighting the impact of the pandemic on pilgrimage tourism in the destination. A review of previous studies show the inadequacy of understanding of the relation between pandemic and its impact on pilgrimage tourism, at least in the context of Lumbini. Thus, the author has made an effort to study the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism in the Lumbini area. This is going to be the first study on the impact of COVID-19 based on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini.

Research objectives

The main purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism in the context of Lumbini, Nepal. The following research objectives are prepared to guideline this research work;

- To investigate the perceptions of monks and nuns about the coronavirus pandemic and how Buddhism understands and defines the pandemic and the solution towards minimizing the pandemic according to Buddhism context.
- To examine the social, economic, and spiritual impact faced by people in Lumbini due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

It was in year 1968, the word coronavirus got discovered in the world (Dahal, 2020). Thus, it has been more than 50 years since the “coronavirus” got originated in the world (Ulak, 2020). The coronavirus crisis is not the first situation of health emergency in the world as numerous health crises were encountered in the past decades (Kunwar, 2021). The COVID-19 started from Wuhan city, Hubei province of China in December 2019 and spread globally at a horrible rate claiming more than 700 thousand lives all over the world (Buckley, 2020 & Ruiz Estrada et al., 2019). According to World Health Organization (WHO), “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly disclosed virus causing moderate respiratory illness and medical sickness among people” (WHO, 2020). The WHO confirmed that people with cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illnesses (WHO, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus to be a public health emergency of international concern on 30th January 2020 (WHO, 2020). On 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated it as a pandemic.

The first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Nepal on 23rd January 2020 in a 31 years old student who returned to Kathmandu from Wuhan, China on 9th January 2020 (Shrestha et al., 2020). The second case was found two months later on 23rd March who had traveled to Nepal from France via Qatar (Sharma et al., 2020). Nepal has already reported 672,871 cases till 21st July 2021, 636,402 of them have been recovered, 26,832 cases still active, and 9,637 dead were registered till now (World meter, 2021). Nepal went into the strict lock-down from 24th March 2020 to 21st July 2020, prohibiting domestic and international travels, broader closure and closure of the non-essential services in the first stage which was later alleviated on 11th June 2020 but as the cases rose steadily, Nepal announced the second lock-down on 20th August 2020 to 16th September 2020 (Sharma et al., 2020). Moreover, COVID-19 is a new normal word now adays. Nepal started to begin the first phase of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign from January 2021 and the Government of Nepal’s National Development and vaccination Plan (NDVP) targets to vaccinate roughly 22 million population in Nepal (UNICEF, 2020). Nepal has been imposing the second wave of coronavirus lock-down from 29th April 2021 as the cases have been increasing day by day in the country (The Hindu, 2021).

Impact of coronavirus on global pilgrimage tourism

Pilgrimages are considered one of the oldest forms of tourism (Mróz, 2021). Pilgrimage is a complex and changeable phenomenon composed of a set of mutual interactions of religious, secular, and natural factors occurring in the geographic space of pilgrimages (Cohen, 1992). According to United Nations World Tourism

Organization (UNWTO), approximately 330 million people visit the major pilgrimage sites worldwide every year creating around US\$ 18 billion in global revenue (Mróz, 2021). But the global pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has already affected more than 45 million pilgrim's journeys from 190 countries worldwide in the year 2020 (Mróz, 2021). Due to the second wave of the COVID-19, it is confirmed that the effects of the pandemic will have a long-term impact on the pilgrim's journey, culture, economy, social and psychological behaviors of people all over the world (Oxholm et al., 2020). Thus, this has led to the cancellations or interruption of religious festivals and events with severe negative effects on the pilgrimage tourism of different destinations. To put a scale to the cost and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a summary table with estimated damages and consequences for pilgrimage tourism is shown below,

Table 2: Estimated damage and effects on pilgrimage destinations by COVID-19

COVID-19/Where	Estimated losses during pandemic	Consequences
Varanasi, Kashi Vishwanath, Jagarnath Temple, India	Estimated loss of \$137 billion.	Slowdown in visitors' number and loss around 38 million jobs.
Mecca, Saudi Arabia	Estimated a loss of \$ 12 billion.	2.5 million visitors were affected
Indonesia	Estimated a loss of \$ 5.8 billion.	Visitors decreased by 89% in 2020.
Jerusalem, Israel	Damage of US\$1.16 billion.	4.3 million visitors were disturbed
Catholic Church, France	Deficit of US\$9.06 million.	5 million visitors were affected
Entire tourism industry with Pilgrimage Tourism, Nepal	Estimated loss of US\$ 282 million.	Nearly 2 million international visitors were affected.

Source: Statista, 2021, Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020, Kumar, 2020 & xinhusnet, 2020

Impact of coronavirus on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini

The coronavirus pandemic has created an unexpected amount of uncertainty in the pilgrimage tourism of Nepal. The Visit Nepal 2020 campaign has prepared grand events in the various pilgrimage sites including Lumbini but the global outbreak has resulted in the cancellation of all events (Magar, 2020). Pilgrimage tourism is the second sector after mountaineering tourism, which has been impacted worst due to

the coronavirus lock-down (Magar, 2020). Due to the closing down of most of the pilgrimage sites, the hotels, lodges, transportation companies, tours, and travels and nearly one million people depending on the tourism industry are highly affected by the pandemic.

The coronavirus outbreak has resulted to close down the pilgrimage sites of Lumbini for the 8 months in 2020 impacting the arrival of many domestic and foreign tourists in the destination. In the previous year, Lumbini had seen growth in the arrival of visitors except the year 2015 when a devastating earthquake crushed in Nepal (Kunwar, 2021). The credit for development in the pilgrimage tourism goes to the effort of restoring the Lumbini Garden under the master plan, better accommodation, political stability, and increased promotional activities (Nyaupane, 2009).

Lumbini is the first and foremost most visited destination by foreigners and domestic tourists in the year 2019. According to the report from the Government of Nepal, about 1,779,086 travelers visited Lumbini in 2019 out of them, 78.76% were Nepalese, 11.51% were Indian and 9.73% were from other countries (Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2020). But, in the year 2020, Lumbini has lost more than nine hundred thousand tourists in the major visiting time of the year due to the travel restriction and lock-down in the country (Paudel, 2020 & Magar, 2020). According to the information from the Lumbini Development Trust, Information section only 279,927 travelers visited Lumbini in 2020 out of them, 70.47% were Nepalese, 16.24% were Indian and 13.29% were from other countries, which was 84.27% a smaller number of visitors in the year 2020 (LDT, 2020). Yet, the number of domestic tourists has increased after the post-COVID lock-down in 2020 (Onlinekhabar, 2020). The occurrence of the second wave of coronavirus outbreak in the country has resulted to impose a lock-down from 29th April 2021 disturbing the pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini in the major tourist season of the year. The table shows the country-wise tourist arrivals to Lumbini in the years 2019 and 2020.

Table 3: Tourist arrivals to Lumbini in 2019 and 2020 (Country-wise)

S.N.	Name of the Country	Visitor numbers in 2019	Visitor number in 2020
1.	India	204,824	37206
2.	Myanmar	30,791	9943
3.	Thailand	28,364	9555
4.	Sri-Lanka	47,507	4061
5.	China	21,269	2477

S.N.	Name of the Country	Visitor numbers in 2019	Visitor number in 2020
6.	South Korea	6145	1707
7.	Vietnam	8345	1511
Total		347,245	66,460

Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2019 & LDC, Information section, 2014-2020

Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative approach, where the author has examined to increase the knowledge on the current situation of COVID-19's impact on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini. The research is made based on both primary and secondary data sources. The ethnographic research was used in the research where the author has the opportunity to observe and interact with the participants and study the circumstances of COVID-19 and its impact on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini. The field visit was undertaken from November 25, 2020, to March 31, 2020, where the researcher has observed the issue of pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini and has conducted an unstructured interview with the monks and nuns from different monasteries and temples in Lumbini. The total number of respondents in this study was eight and they were selected based on random sampling in which only intended stakeholders were chosen. Each interview lasted on average about 15-20 minutes. The data collected during the interviews were recorded first and later translated into English, afterward evaluated and presented in the findings of the study. As the author is native, there was no restriction to interview with the related stakeholders. The questions were related to monk's and nun's perception on daily rituals during the COVID-19 lock-down and their thought on the socio-religious and economic impact on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini, with the questions about the effect of coronavirus on personal lives and pilgrimage tourism. The pseudonyms are used to address the interviewee.

Likewise, the secondary data were obtained from published journals, articles, newspapers, and emerging media coverage sources for doing this research. The limitation of the research is that due to the coronavirus crisis, it was not possible to get access into the international monasteries in Lumbini therefore was difficult to get interviews with the monks and nuns of international monasteries during the period of field visit. It is also difficult to collect all the relevant information for the research because of the specific time frame.

Findings and discussion

This portion highlights the main outcomes of the research and addresses the results from the research titled the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism

in Lumbini. The research is based on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini in accordance to Buddhism content, the response of monks and nuns towards coronavirus pandemic, the connection of COVID-19 to Buddhism, the different rituals, social activities done in the different monasteries in Lumbini to minimize coronavirus pandemic, the restrictions towards the social lives, livelihood and restriction towards entry in the monasteries, the effect on the arrivals of the pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini during the COVID-19 lock-down. Eight interviewees were participated in the interviews for the research. Among them are, a monk inside the scared garden, a monk at the Myanmar monastery, a monk at Canadian temple, a monk at an Indian temple, a monk at Cambodian temple, a professor from Lumbini Buddhist University, a nun from Nepalese temple, and a nun from Kathmandu monastery in Lumbini were interviewed. The impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini are discussed below:

Economic impact

There are several factors such as livelihood of the people, economic growth, business activities, the behavior of people that are influenced because of the pandemic (Lee & Chen, 2011). The tourism industry is a fragile and insecure industry, which will take a longer time to return to normal as travelers need the confidence to travel (Ulak, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has created long-term uncertainty, economic and social threats to the tourism industry in Lumbini (Kunwar, 2021). Within the literature, the author found that many researchers consider the coronavirus pandemic as the most challenging catastrophe that has impacted enormously on the livelihood of the locals creating frustration, fear, nervousness and a huge economic loss.

According to a monk around the scared garden in Lumbini, monk Vivekananda (Pseudonym) stated,

“I was born in this place and till the moment of my life, I am not aware of any type of lock-down. Although Lumbini is one of the popular pilgrimage spot, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted every sector in Lumbini. This is the time where Lumbini is filled with many pilgrim tourists but there is no tourist at the moment. The COVID-19 has not impacted so much in my livelihood, daily ritual activities. Before the pandemic, the number of pilgrims visiting Lumbini was huge but the tourism activities are zero since the coronavirus pandemic started and there have been huge economic impact on local shops, souvenir shops, hotels and restaurants, and transportation sectors”.

Similarly, a Sri-Lankan monk named Thero (Pseudonym) expressed his thought as similar to above as,

“The pandemic was also earlier in the time of Buddha. Buddhism says that the coronavirus pandemic is the result of human’s destruction towards religious and spiritual activities. There was not any disturbance in our daily rituals and activities as

the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity that we can relax and focus on spiritual activities but there has been a lot of economic impact on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini since the lock-down started in March 2020”.

The number of tourist arrivals in Lumbini has dropped significantly in recent years since the coronavirus outbreak. The thousands of tourists who visit Lumbini in May month every year for Buddha Jayanti has decreased and there were no tourist arrivals because of the coronavirus outbreak (Aninews, 2020). India is the first-highest source of tourists in Lumbini but in the recent years, Lumbini has been missing a large number of Indian tourists due to the global pandemic and national-wide lock-down imposed by the Government of Nepal (Aninews, 2020). The Chinese tourists who desired to visit Lumbini in March and April 2020 have cut their plan since the aftermath of an outbreak (Kunwar, 2021). This has resulted the cancellation of about 70% of the hotels booking in Lumbini by the Chinese groups during the peak season of the year in 2020 (Kunwar, 2021). The information collected from the Lumbini Development Trust, Information section also showed that the arrivals of international tourists to Lumbini was relatively low after February 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic and travel restrictions. As the traveler’s movement for pilgrimage purposes was obstructed since the last year, pilgrimage sites are closed and businesses were completely shut-down, this has bought everything into silence in Lumbini.

The coronavirus infection is not only transmissible to human beings but has infected harshly the economic structure of the country (Ulak, 2020). In regards to the financial report of 2019-2020, Lumbini was one of the most visited places in Nepal with estimated income of 145,000 US\$ in the fiscal year of 2019-2020 but in the fiscal year of 2020-2021, Lumbini has suffered with huge financial losses as number of visitors were relatively low in the major visiting season of the year in 2020 (Kunwar, 2021). The tourist source projects like Gautam Buddha international airport at Bhairahawa and the international conference hall in Lumbini are expected to delay in operation due to the worldwide lockdown (Subba, 2020). Thus, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the revenue of the Government and the livelihood of monks and nuns residing in Lumbini as they are fully interdependent on the donations and support from the international and local organizations for their daily maintenance and other ritual activities. The daily lives of the monks and nuns was much affected in Lumbini since the traveler’s mobility was stopped.

Social impact

The tourism industry needs to be safe and trouble-free to grow economically, socially, morally, and spiritually (Kunwar, 2016). The coronavirus has resulted in the closing down of the pilgrimage activities in Lumbini that has affected the socio-cultural formation and livelihood of locals in the area (Kunwar, 2021). The

international, regional and the local restrictions on movement of people has affected on the mass gatherings like cultural, heritage, religious events and ceremonies (Raj & Griffin, 2020). The lives of people can only be hassle-free when it is mentally and socially safe. But, during the pandemic, it is essential to focus on the health and security of people by ignoring unnecessary travel (Kunwar, 2021).

The above literature is supported through the opinion of a nun named Kusho from Rajkiya Buddha Bihar, Lumbini (Pseudonym) as,

“Lumbini is a famous place for international and domestic tourism but because of the coronavirus lock-down, we have been facing a lot of troubles, frustration, fear in our daily lives as we have been locked inside the monasteries for a longer period. Our monastery is run through donations, funds, and foreign supports but because of the lack of tourists, we could not receive these supports now a days. The coronavirus and lock-down has not only impacted in our daily lives and rituals activities but also in the social lives of local people, businessmen, and residents. The authority had decided to re-open the monasteries now but we need to concern about the health and follow the safety measures such as people should be aware of the social distance, sanitizing hands, wearing masks to overcomes from the current situation”.

Similarly, a nun named Kamesi (Pseudonym) in the Kathmandu monastery stated a similar opinion as mentioned above as,

“According to Buddhism, coronavirus pandemic is a natural phenomenon which has also occurred in the past ages. There has been a lot of impact in Lumbini since the last eight months in 2020. It has created numerous effects on the lives of local people, cultural, religious activities, conferences, local business and lives of daily working people. The actual reason for the pandemic is because people are not engaged in religious, worship and spiritual activities. The first and foremost important thing is to protect oneself and save others. People have to follow the health protocols to reduce the transmission from coronavirus. There are ongoing worship activities since the last nine months in the Bodhi television, Lumbini. I have been praying to save the world against COVID-19. People who believed in Buddhism and they do call me to pray for them and in return, they were recovered from coronavirus”.

It is proved from various studies that the people who were isolated for a longer period are very much likely to develop a wide range of symptoms of mental stress and disorder (Shivakoti, 2021). In these days, people are facing a considerable level of fear and worry due to the uncertain lock-down by the Government of Nepal and the long-time framework for complete eradication of virus to come back to the normal living (Shivakoti, 2021). The travel restriction was imposed as a strategy by the Government of Nepal to control the spreading of COVID-19 infection but it has adversely affected on the lives of the people inside the monastic zone in Lumbini. In the pilgrimage

site of Lumbini, there has been anxiety in the lives of the monks and nuns as they have remained isolated inside the monasteries for a longer period that has created mental effect such as fear, worry, pain, frustration, nervousness among them. The monasteries in Lumbini have been closed for a longer period which has interrupted all the social activities in the monastic zones in Lumbini. In-fact there has not been any social and religious ceremonies celebrated in the monastic zone in Lumbini since the lock-down started in March 2020. It has hampered the domestic tourism as the pilgrimage sites are closed bringing down the loss in revenue. The number of international and domestic tourists who visited Lumbini in January 2020 were huge but there was decline in the number of visitors afterward. These consequences brought major social, economic impact on national economics, individual livelihood and public spirit.

The study shows that the sudden economic fall, unemployment, economic suffering had led to significant rise in the number of people committing suicide (Paudel & Subedi, 2020). Thus, the lives of people have been affected physically, mentally, socially, financially, culturally in Lumbini. It is also declared by Kusho from Rajkiya Buddha Bihar, Lumbini (Pseudonym) that the daily lives have been stuck inside the monastery after the enforcement of lock-down in the country. Indeed, it is the primary duty of the authorities to provide morale and health counseling to the affected to reduce the impacts on their health.

Impact on spiritual activities

In the decade, the world had experienced several major epidemics and pandemics but none of them had such devastating implications in the global economy as the current COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has been considered as the most challenging calamity that has brought the harshest disturbance in the economy since the 2nd World War (Kunwar, 2021). The collective gatherings of spiritual pilgrim act as a major epicenter for spreading coronavirus around the world (Raj & Griffin, 2020). This has resulted in the closure of temples, mosques, churches and monasteries in the country. A professor from Buddhism University Mr. Sakya (Pseudonym) stated his opinion way as,

“According to Buddhism, Pandemic is like a World War which creates insecurity to human lives and animals. In the modern era, there is no respect for each-others, people are money-minded, unfriendliness to animals. Thus, the world has suffered from a pandemic at the moment. We have been doing different types of religious activities and have been praying every day to save the world from the pandemic. The pandemic had made everything into silence, monasteries sites are without the pilgrimage, most of the monks and nuns had stranded in different parts of the country, flight services, transportation, hotel, and restaurant are closed for several months, cultural activities,

religious festivals, ceremonies are interrupted and the tourism sector in Lumbini is impacted worst by the pandemic”.

In the same way, a monk from the Myanmar temple named Venerable Sayado Venkovita (Pseudonym) shared his opinion similar to above as,

“According to Buddhism, coronavirus is a penalty to human beings and animals because there is more violence, jealousy, miser now a days and the pandemic did occur in the Buddha’s ages. The pandemic is like a World War that has impacted all over the world and especially on religious activities like chanting, religious festivals and ceremonies in Lumbini. The pandemic has impacted a lot in the different sectors and tourism activities in Lumbini. The country had to bear huge losses during eight months in 2020. To reduce the pandemic crisis, we are engaged in different rituals activities, and worships”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the tourism sector and caused major disruption on the pilgrimage tourism as borders are closed, airlines are being grounded and movement of people is stopped (Raj & Griffin, 2020). The Buddhist monks have considered the coronavirus pandemic as similar to World War that had impacted the economic, social, cultural, and physical aspects. It has impacted socio-cultural activities, events, festivals, rituals, national and international conferences. The tourism sectors such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation have been hit hard since the coronavirus outbreak (Shivakoti, 2021). The current pandemic has brought pilgrimage tourism to a coma. The mass gathering events through Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, Christianity pilgrimage in Jerusalem, Israel and Buddhist Pilgrimage in Lumbini, Nepal has been suffered much. This has hampered on the spiritual tourism in Lumbini as religious sites are shut down since the pandemic started. Most of the outcomes of this research and academic literature from different journals also clear up that pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini has been affected a lot since the outbreak of coronavirus. The coronavirus pandemic has caused multiple effects on the pilgrimage and mass gatherings activities in Lumbini such as interruption in the cultural activities, international conferences, development projects, economic activities, social artifact and the livelihood of residents in monastic zone.

The different literature and opinion on Buddhism text also clarify that the pandemic like coronavirus is considered as a World War that has interrupted on the mass gathering events causing huge economic losses. Thus, to resume the pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini after the post-COVID-19, the formulation of effective plan and policy is needed.

Impact on behavior and travel pattern of pilgrims

The global tourism industry has practiced much crisis in the past like the earthquake, Ebola, Tsunami, terrorist attack generating great threat in the destinations (Maditinos & Vassiliadis, 2008). The current COVID-19 pandemic has

caused devastating effects on the tourism industry due to the interruption in tourism activities and shutting down of tourism destinations (Jamal & Budke, 2020). Within the literature, the author found that many researchers and practitioners consider pandemic as a hindrance to the tourism industry that impact on the behavior of travelers for longer period. The tourism industry in Lumbini is also tremendously affected by the coronavirus lock-down since the year 2020. According to the monk in a Singapore monastery named Lama Tashi (Pseudonym) stated that,

“As we are spiritual in nature and peace lovers, the coronavirus lock-down was not a problem for us. It was a peaceful moment inside the monastery for meditation. But, for the pilgrimage tourists who want to come to Lumbini to get knowledge on spiritual, it is a difficult situation. The current situation has made a difficult situation that people need to fear from one other and the values, faith and believes on Buddhism is difficult to understand because of the current situation. The current coronavirus pandemic has impacted all over the world and it has also impacted inside the monastic zone of Lumbini as everything was shut down since the last eight months in 2020. The pandemic is also mentioned in Buddhism text and had occurred in the early ages and the solution for these forms of a pandemic is through worship, praying, and chanting and we did the same activities during the coronavirus lock-down. There was no any disturbance in the daily ritual activities and ceremonies in the monastery during the lock-down”.

Similarly, a monk in a Canadian monastery named Venerable Thilding (Pseudonym) stated his opinion in the way as,

“The coronavirus pandemic is a cause of the human’s terrible behavior and activities in the past days, which has impacted a lot on the travel behavior of pilgrims. According to the Buddhism text, pandemic had occurred in the period of Buddha and the current pandemic is because people have been sacrificing animals and are not engaged in spiritual activities nowadays, which has resulted in the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic had occurred in the period of Buddha impacting a lot to the people and property. We have been doing daily worships and ritual activities to minimize the coronavirus pandemic. Tourism activity in different sectors is also impacted a lot during the peak season of the year”.

The coronavirus crisis has brought changes in the behavior of pilgrimages and their motivation to travel for the next few years. A report by Baker (2015) suggests that travel activities influence disease outbreak and helps the increase of such diseases (Hollingsworth et al., 2007). Travel for pilgrimage purposes show more meaningful mobility such as railways, airways, land transportation and the use of such system and services contribute the spread of diseases (Dahal, 2020). This has impacted the mobility of pilgrimage tourism including the tourism system. The recovery of pilgrimage tourism will be slow and difficult as the pilgrimage sites are still closed due to risk of getting infected with COVID-19 and travelers have chosen to stay

home rather than travel. Thus, the health and safety has challenged to change in their behavior to travel. There have also been important debates over pandemic and its impact on the travel mobility and vice versa (Dahal, 2020). The popular pilgrimage sites for pilgrims in the world has been interrupted by coronavirus and the destination is without pilgrims at the moment. The main attractions in Lumbini have been closed for a longer period of time and there is no any motility of religious travelers at the moment in Lumbini. This shows that there has been the change in the travel patterns of the traveler's despite of their willingness to visit Lumbini in the major visiting time of the year. Thus, online worshipping need be practice instead of offering physical ritual activities in monasteries in Lumbini.

The major research and findings of this study confirms that the pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini has been affected adversely by the pandemic causing number effects on the social system, economic, cultural, religious activities, health and living of the resident in Lumbini. The eight of the respondents of the research also responded that there have been enormous loss on the pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini since the lockdown started in March 2020. However, the first concern is to follow the rules and regulations of hygiene protocol to prevent from the infection of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The study estimated the impact of COVID-19 on pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini, Nepal using the intended stakeholder's opinions. The result showed respondents were agreed that pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini has been adversely affected due to the COVID pandemic resulted into unprecedented economic crisis, social impact, cancellation of spiritual events, rising unemployment, change in travel pattern, uncertainty, and mental stress. The monasteries sites in Lumbini were turned into silence, monks, nuns and pilgrims were stranded in the different parts of Nepal, daily lives were disturbed because of the lack of donations and supports in monasteries, cultural activities, international Buddha Jayanti was affected. The research found that the pandemic like coronavirus had occurred in the period of Buddha but was eliminated with time through chanting, praying, and worship. Thus, respondents were agreed that to reduce the impact of coronavirus, people need to engage in spiritual activities i.e., chanting, worshipping, and praying. Pilgrimage destinations like Lumbini will also have to implement safety and hygiene protocols to re-open the pilgrimage sectors as health and safety is the top priority now. The significance of this study is the findings of the research that will help the authorities to formulate health and safety protocols to revive the pilgrimage tourism in Lumbini and upgrade the economic activity after the post-COVID-19. Thus, instead of an international destination, domestic travel will be preferred and the recovery is predicted to start from the domestic tourism for at least two or three years after the post-COVID-19 in Lumbini.

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