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**A Study of Pilgrimage Tourism in Halesi, Khotang,  
Nepal**

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**Who is a “real” pilgrim, and who is “just a tourist”? (Hinmon, 2002)**

**“a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (Turner & Turner 1978, p. 20; in  
Kunwar, 2017, p. 323)**

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**Abstract**

*Halesi is one of the most important pilgrimage tourism destinations of eastern Nepal. The purpose of this study is to highlight the culture, religion, belief, ritual, pilgrims' behavior, 'metempsychosis' (story, legend and myth) and heritage of the Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist and Kirati (Rai) communities through the traditions (great and little tradition or textual, oral and transcendental cultural tradition) that play an important role for shaping the universe of power, place and people. Apart from these aspects of culture in Halesi, this research investigates how pilgrimage site has been commoditized into tourism destination which is what pilgrimage tourism talks about. This is a preliminary study of pilgrimage tourism in Halesi, Khotang, Nepal and provides room for further exploration. This study uses qualitative grounded theory to analyse pilgrimage tourism in Halesi, Khotang, which is a polyethnic pilgrimage place for three diverse groups with the respective religious beliefs executing holy rituals in accordance with their own customs. In order to*

**Keywords**

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*carry out the research, a fieldwork was done for 38 days in Halesi. Data were gathered from different respondents including key informants, locals, hoteliers, priests, lamas, pilgrims, and visitors. The major data sources were open-ended inquiries and informal conversations. Halesi is found gradually transforming on several infrastructural development both in religion and tourism and is becoming a destination for pilgrims as well as non-pilgrims (secular tourists). As a result, the holy site attracted more numbers of pilgrims, thereby improving the economic situation of the local communities who were involved in the tourism industry which began to attract the attention of different stakeholders when they were able to know the significance of Halesi as a polyethnic pilgrimage tourism destination. It is noteworthy to quote “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist”.*

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to highlight the culture, religion, belief, ritual, pilgrims' behaviour, metempsychosis and metensomatosis (specific cultural tour guided by the religious texts, story, history, myth, legends) (Seaton, 2002; Seaton, 2013, pp. 19-27), heritage of the Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist and Kirati (Rai) communities through the traditions (great and little) that play an important role for shaping the universe of power, place and people. Apart from these aspects of culture in Halesi, this research investigates how pilgrimage site has been commodified into tourism destination which is what pilgrimage tourism talks about. A pilgrimage is described as a journey made for religious purposes, both physically and mentally to a holy place for spiritual aspirations and understanding. One of the earliest and most important forms of population movement connected to human civilization is a pilgrimage, which always had and still has substantial religious, cultural, and spiritual motive. Eliade defines pilgrimage as “a religiously motivated journey to a symbolic center of the world – axis mundi, or its representation, i.e., a very sacred place, a place of the sacred, separated from profane zone” (Eliade, 1969; in Liro, Solijan & Wodecka, 2018, p. 6).

Throughout history, religious observance has been a prerequisite for both a person's physical and psychological well-being (Smith, 1992). There are a number of ways to connect with the divine, and individuals seek these connections for a variety of reasons (Sindhe, 2020). They do this through making pilgrimages to well-known holy places in order to forge these bonds. Some of the most common ones are seeking or obtaining spiritual enlightenment or rebirth, asking for forgiveness and salvation after committing a mistake, and praying for divine intervention to settle personal concerns.

Halesi is popular not only for Hindus but also for Tibetan Buddhists who often visit it as their Buddhist sacred center. Hence, it is very important to know how Tibetans define what Tibetan pilgrimage is. Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimages involve the

practice of circumambulation. Circumambulation or *korra* of sites brings the pilgrim into relation with the energy and focal point of the site. “*Korra* is usually performed clockwise around an image—a chorten [stupa], a temple, a gumpa [monastery], or a sacred mountain or lake— while some *korra* embrace a unity of power-places that can take days or weeks to circumambulate” (Dowman 1988, 5-6; in Parker, 2004, p.21). A pilgrim is defined as a *ngas skor ba*-- “one who goes around a sacred place” --by the rite he must perform at the end of his travels (Buffetrille, 2013, p.25). According to Huber (1994c; in McKay, 2013, FN.13), *Gnas* is generally translated as meaning “place” in the sense of “sacred” or “power” place, hence *gnas-skor*: pilgrimage or literally “going around a place”. But, Morinis (1984; in McKay, 2013, FN.3) states that it is a “journey from home to shrine” (p. 22). Thus, defining him by the rite he performs at the end of his journey (Buffetrille, 2020) Tibetan pilgrimage is much more than the mere act of traveling to a sacred place. It is associated with a great many ritual activities and religious teachings, and it has sociological, cultural, economic, and literary dimensions. In this regard, Buffetrille (2020) has recently developed a typology of Tibetan pilgrimage, meaning and concept of pilgrims and pilgrimage on the basis of Tibetan language. There are three kinds of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimages: natural sites (mountains, lakes and caves), man- made cities (city, monasteries and temples), and hidden lands (or *beyul*). A fourth type of pilgrimage must also be mentioned as the author further adds, pilgrimage to pay respects to a holy person in such instances being considered a *né*. Tibetans also go on pilgrimage outside the land of snow—a common Tibetan designation for the Tibetan plateau that refers to the many snowy mountains—particularly to Nepal and India. These different kinds of sites attract both Buddhists and Bonpos (the adepts of the religion that coexists with Buddhism (Buffetrille, 2020)).

In Hindu life world, pilgrimage, (*tirthayatra*) is an act “to cross” an active seeking of transformation. Literally, the profane to the sacred realm, from humanity to divinity, from this world to another world. Naturally, the purpose is to make contact with the divine and with these super objective human beings make arduous journey to remote places-usually a mountain, or hill top where the divinities supposedly live. Such geographical locales are considered to be the abode of divinities. In short, pilgrimage is to cross to be transformed. In this sacred journey, each stage is imbued with sacred significance the inherent message and meaning (Singh, 2013, p.128-129; Vecchione, 2008).

Important pilgrim sites are often closely connected with the lives of saints, ascetics, and important historical figures. In many cases, these shrines began as simple retreat caves or hermitages inhabited by renowned yoginis. The most important are places frequented by the Buddha in his travels and the caves used for meditation by Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), the Indian tantric master who was the first to suppress

the Bon spirits and made them accept Buddhism in the 8th century. Most of the latter are located in hard-to-reach places, at the top of isolated valleys or near the summit of a mountain (Chan, 1994, p. 37).

Depending on their location, tourists can engage in a wide range of tourism activities, and pilgrimage travel is one of the activities they engage in. Since pilgrimage has been regarded as its earliest form, the relationship with tourism has long been recognized (Eliade, 1969; Fleischer, 2000; Smith, 1992; in Kim, Kim & King, 2019). Pilgrimage often takes place on foot, is an older form of tourism with deep religious roots, and involves tours, trips, visits to various locations and sightseen under specific circumstances, travel by air or sea, etc., as well as the purchase of regional memorabilia (Gupta, 1991, p.91; Kunwar 2017, p. 327). Collins-Kreiner (2018) argues that the term “pilgrimage” must be used liberally to refer to both historically religious and contemporary secular excursions. Tourist can experience different forms of tourism depending on their destination and pilgrimage tourism is also one of the forms of tourism practiced by religious and spiritual traveller.

Pilgrimage destinations are like any other tourist destinations, in terms of products (accommodation and tours) with numerous attributes that can satisfy the needs of both religious pilgrims and other holidaymakers (Bond, et al., 2014, Rinschede, 1992; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 269). Religious pilgrimages and pilgrimage destinations are often turned into visitor attractions to bring socio-economic benefits to local communities while creating the necessary financial resources to preserve and restore cultural heritage with companies dedicated to hospitality services (Martin Martin, Guaita Martinez & Salinas Fernandez, 2018; Ashley, & Haysom, 2006; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 269). This fact makes religious pilgrimages a modality of tourism with a notable impact on local economies (Pereiro, 2019; Fernandes et al., 2012; Alecu, 2011; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 269). This economic injection has a potential of expanding the supply of tourism infrastructure that is purposefully created by provincial tourism entities (Hampton, Jeyacheya & Long, 2018; Rogerson, 2015; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 269).

Studies attest that religious pilgrimages are the fastest growing industry in various parts of the world (Tarlow, 2010; Patel & Fellow, 2010; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 270). According to Tarlow (2010; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 270) in USA alone, some 24% of travellers are interested in religious-based tourism and further alludes that worldwide, religious pilgrimages are one of the fastest growing segments of the industry, with an estimated value of US\$1.8 billion (in 2010; in Christou & Fotiadis, 2022, p. 270) and 300 million travellers. These assertions clearly indicate that religious tourism like other sectors of tourism is a big business. In India, religious tourism is regarded as the largest socio-economic sector since 70% of domestic tourists travel for religious purposes and in 2010 alone it generated 20% of the revenue (Patel &

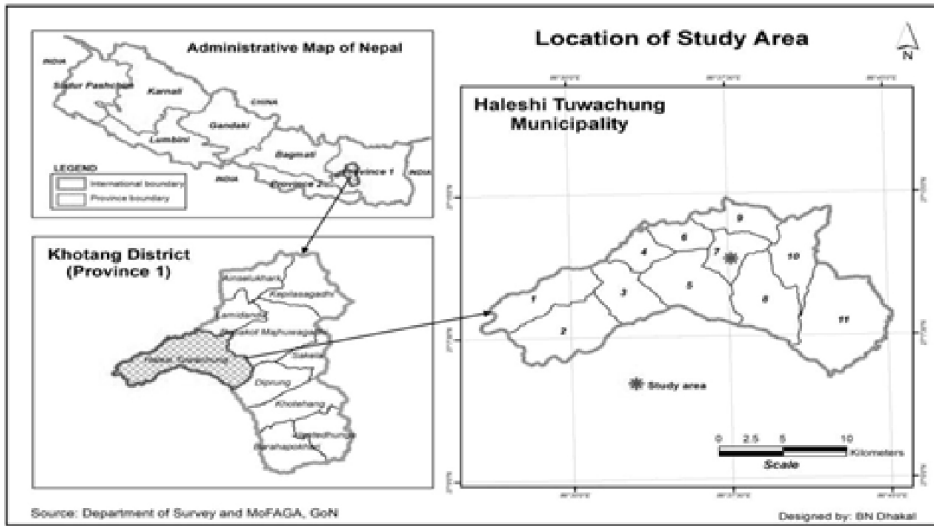
Fellow, 2010; in Christou & Fotiadis, 2022, p. 270). The tourism industry of which the religious pilgrimages are part which employs the largest work force (Tarlow, 2010; in Linda & Nzama, 2022, p. 270).

Nepal is a well-known pilgrimage travel destination. Since, the country is the destination for Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims. Lumbini, the birth place of Lord Buddha, as well as other temples like Pashupatinath where Lord Shiva is worshipped, Janakpurdham with the significance of Janaki Temple, likewise other pilgrimage sites such as Chhinamasta in Saptari, Godawari in Kailali, Labchi in Dolakha, Pathivara in Taplejung, Barahachettra in Sunsari with their own significance and beliefs. Accordingly, it is believed that pilgrimage activities in Nepal were practiced from very early times and how important the country's pilgrimage sites are and which is still continuing the age-old tradition that enhance the researchers to study on pilgrimage tourism in Halesi. Ulak (2022) added Policymakers have not yet investigated and promoted many of Nepal's pilgrimage sites. There are numerous pilgrimage sites in Nepal's rural areas where accommodations are scarce and access is difficult, but there has been a slow improvement in infrastructure, as evidenced by the Manakamana cable car from Kurintar, Chitwan to the temple in Gorkha, the Kalinchowk cable car from Kuri to the shrine, and the road system to Pathivara Temple in Taplejung and Halesi Mahadev, Khotang, which have made the holy pilgrimage secure and practical for all age groups.

### **Halesi**

Halesi, as one of the pilgrimage sites in Nepal, is situated in Ward 7 of the Halesi Tuwachung Municipality in Khotang district in Province 1 of Eastern Nepal. It is 215 kilometres east of Kathmandu Valley and is situated at 86° 37' 19" East longitude and 27° 11' 31" North latitude. It is situated at an altitude of around 1370 meters above sea level. The site is accessible via a partially completed road that connects Halesi and Kathmandu, as well as other eastern hills and Terai towns like Katari that lead to the Indian border region. Lamidanda is the closest airport from Kathmandu, and it takes 35 minutes to fly from there to Halesi, which is located below the Mount Everest and Gauri Shankar Mountain ranges. It is said that the deities of three main religions like Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist, and Kirat (Rai) reside in this revered location.

**Figure 1: Location of the study area**



Halesi is an amalgamation of Hindu, Buddhist and Kirati (Rai). It is well known and renowned spiritual power centre for various groups as discussed in the following table:

**Table 1: Faith based belief of three heterogeneous groups**

Hindus	The presence of the ‘Mahadev’, in the form of ‘Linga’, the ‘phallus’, symbolic stone status of ‘Parvati’, the ‘Vasha’ and the bull as a carrier of Mahadev make Halesi a scared site for Hindus.
Tibetan Buddhist	In Tibetan Buddhist community, it is known as ‘Halesi-Maratika’, they see the site as ‘Padmasambhava’ earthly home, go there over their lifetimes to honour the saint, gain merit, seek longer lifespan and eventually nirvana or salvation.
Kirats	As local residents of the region and the surrounding areas, passionate devotees of Shiva ‘Paruhang’ and Parvati ‘Sumnima’. Claiming as their place of origin, Himalayas resident have strong intimacy with the Halesi temple.

*Source: Adapted and modified from Khatri & Shrestha (2014)*

It is one of the sanctuaries dedicated to the Hindu god Mahadev, the second Buddha Padmasambhava, on the one hand Manjushree, Vajrapani and Awaloketesvara have all blessed this cave. This holy place is situated between the sacred places. After the cave shrine was discovered in the ancient past, the remarkable form of the cave drew

the attention of the audience from all over, Hindus, Buddhists and Kiratis beliefs glorified the site even more, presenting as a spiritual power centre as a result Halesi Mahadev became known as a god who fulfilled prayers of worshippers. It has now become a hallowed site where people of many religious origins, both from inside the country and from outside, gather to mark significant cultural events throughout the year. There are two means of travel, roads and airways that are used to visit Halesi Mahadev by the pilgrims. It takes around 5-6 hours by hiking to reach the scared place from the nearest airport 'Lamidanda' as well as private helicopter, jeep, bus and local vehicle helps to get access towards destinations. Roadways/Motorway is accessible means of transport to reach Halesi. Halesi is connected by Pushpa Lal Lokmarga (Madhya Pahadi Lokmarga) together with the access of four airports like Lamidanda, Khanidanda, Diktel and Rumjatar. People from Terai-Madhes may choose the shortest way to visit to Halesi, only 100 km away from Mirchaiya of Siraha district. If we follow the way from Bardibas through Sindhuligadi, it is less than 150 km. Halesi can be reached from the places like Bhojpur and Sankhuwasabha by bus.

Recently, Wangchung (2016) has described the historicity of Halesi. According to him, the great site is blessed by the three assemblies of deities of longevity, where Padmasambhava accomplished the vajra body together with princess Mandarava. Where the site is surrounded by the mountain with five peaks, where the Manjushri adobe surrounds the location, lies east of Jambudvipa. To the south lies the mountain Potala, the adobe of Avalokiteshvara. In the west is Oddiyana, the home of the *dakinis*. To the north stands Shambala, the palace of the noble ones. In the middle is Vajrasana, the ultimate dwelling place of the Buddhas [the thousand enlightened Ones of the Good Kalpa]. The excellent Maratika Cave (*Haleshen* or *Halase* in Tibet language) also known as Halesi Cave in the local language, is situated southwest of the mountain Potala and north of Vajrasana. The practices of circumambulation prostration offering, recitation of mantra and meditation keep the pilgrims engaged in a level of concentration that alters their state of mind and experience of place clasping hands over their forehead they bring folded hands to the crown (body), the throat (speech) and the heart (mind) before lowering themselves to their knees and stretching out full length on the ground (Parker, 2004).

The main cave where Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati are worshipped is the Halesi cave, along with the Basha cave (One can see sky from this cave). Buddhists think that the guru "Padmasambhava" stayed and meditated there, and to this day the Buddhists are meditating in the cave. This activity in the cave exemplifies interfaith harmony and tolerance. When a pilgrim's desire is granted, a golden bell, calf, and *trishul* (trident) are presented as a "bhakal" (commitment). Pigeons also fly through the cave. More numbers of religious places for Hindus, Kiratis, and Buddhists are located close to the Halesi cave. This site is also very important for the Rai, a strongly

Hindu indigenous community of which one group, the Chamling Rai, live in this region. In fact, all the traditions agree in saying that it was a Rai hunter, in pursuit of a deer, who discovered the caves (Buffetrille, 2012). It only takes a short stroll of a few minutes or an hour to visit these beautiful and revered structures. There are many sites that has religious and historical significance nearby area like Manjushree cave, Mandarava cave, Kakanidevimandir, Tarakhsecave, Tuwachung Jayejum, Naagcave, Satyaswor Mahadev in Mangaltar and other various religious destination nearby the holy site. As such, it is said that Halesi area is heavenly located by virtue of its natural, cultural and historical occurrences beautified more by Halesigadhi, Chyasmigadhi, and Khamtelgadhi.

Halesi Mahadev temple has a tradition of priests from a specific lineage belonging to the Giri community who performs daily rituals i.e., The morning and evening rituals are performed by Bal pujari (child priest) and regular pilgrim rites are performed by the main priest. The Bal pujari performs temple ceremonies, while other rituals are carried out by the priest chosen by the mandir bikash samiti (temple management committee), from the Giri family. It is believed that during the 7-8 century, a priest called Kathur-Mathur passed over the responsibility of performing regular ceremonies and the sacred performances to the Giri's when, King Gribhan Bikram Shah handed the red seal copper plate in 1804 A.D., and the first Giri priest known as Manohar Giri was brought from Ramechhap to perform the rites.

The child priest performs the morning devotion in Halesi, Khotang at 5:30 AM. Additionally, visitors are allowed to worship the deities, and present their oblation items. The child priest also leads evening worship carrying out rites and prayers in a manner similar to that of morning worship. In the case of Maratika Thubtenchholing monastery (commonly known as Gumba in Nepali), this monastery was first constructed in 1980 and reconstructed in 2016 (Giri, 2020, p.44). The monastery was founded by Nawang Chhophel Gyachhyo who was born in 1922, and brought up in Mahakulung of Solukhumbu district for the first time he went Halesi in 1978 and permanently resided there after the demise of Nawang Chhopel in 1996 the monastery has been looked after by Nawang Jidgal Chhyoki Wangchhyuk (Karma Sherpa) as an abbot of this monastery. It is evident that the previous Lama got reincarnation in 2000, and is addressed by Tulku Tenzin Chhogyal (Giri, 2020, p. 44).

During fieldwork, the researcher counted 74 stalls which have become the source of income for temple management committee. Slaughtering and animal sacrifice is strictly prohibited in and around Halesi. Besides this, every year, people celebrate hundreds of festivals which retain social norms, religious beliefs, art-tradition, and the economic status of the society and reflect unique tradition. The major festival calendar where high number of pilgrims visit to holy site are as follows:



**Table 2: Festival calendar**

Festival	Month	Duration	Religion
Ubhauri	April/May	1 day	Kirat
Buddha Jayanti	April/May	1 day	Buddhist
Bolbam	July/August	1 month	Hindu
Haribodani Ekadashi	October/November	1 day	Hindu
Teej	August/September	1 day	Hindu
Lohsar	February	1 day	Buddhist
Udhauri	November/December	1 day	Kirat
Balachaturdashi	November/December	10 days	Hindu
Bishwo shanti puja	January/February	1 month	Buddhist
Shivaratri	February	1 week	Hindu
Ram-Navami mela	March/April	10-15 days	Hindu

Macdonald (1985) describes, at this site, there is a mela (fair) at Shivaratri, at Ram Navami as well as at Teej and at Balachaturdashi (a festival where people throw away the grains in the name of the dead). The mela at the time of Shivaratri is quite big. During the time of *Bolbam*, a difficult journey dedicated to Shiva, the devotees sprinkle the holy water taken from the River of Ganga in India in the sacred complex of Halesi (Khatry & Shrestha, 2013, p.23). In Halesi, different festivals are observed throughout the year in course of celebrating festivals the Hindus observe three important festivals where temple is open for 24 hours and the Paravati – Thaan (temple of Goddess Parvati) and Shivalinga (*phallus*) are decked with the ornaments by the child priest i.e., Bal pujari with the sound of the Naumati Baja along with *damha* and *jhynta* played by the musical masters on the other side. Similarly, Buddhist also celebrate Buddha Jayanti, Lohsar and Biswo shanti pooja whereas, Kirati celebrate Udhauri and Ubhauri. Basically, Saturdays and off days there could be seen a greater number of pilgrims visiting the destination.

This study sheds light on why has Halesi become important pilgrimage site for multiple religious groups? How is Halesi going to be commoditized as pilgrimage tourism destination? The objective of this study is to show the interrelationship between pilgrimage and tourism on one side and host guest relationships on the other.

### Review of literature

The information for the current study was gathered in stages. At the beginning, four keywords were selected to search for religious tourism-related articles: “pilgrimage”, “religion”, “pilgrimage tourism” and “religious tourism”. Second, the identified keywords were utilized to search existing journal articles on Google Scholar (<http://>

scholar.google.com), the most well-known search engine for academic journal articles.

Until the 1970s, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists were the primary researchers on pilgrimages and pilgrimage sites, and they mostly employed Eliade's (1999) and Turner's theories (1978). Following that, geographic research gained popularity. From the perspectives of geography, economy, tourism, and culture, geographers analyse the places of pilgrimages. Studies on pilgrimages and the world's major pilgrimage sites were undertaken by Park (1994) and Jackowski (1999), and in studies of urban geography and tourism, particular focus has been placed on the roles of sanctuary centres in urban space (Sorre, 1952; Shwarz, 1959; Beaujeu-Garnier & Chabot, 1971; in Liro, Solijan & Wodecka, 2018, p. 7).

The contrast between tourism and pilgrimage started to develop in the 1970s, when MacCannell (1973) said that the tourist as pilgrim was seeking for something novel and real, as quoted in (Kreiner, 2010, p. 442). Later on, Grabun (1977) described travel as a ritual, suggesting that parallel processes happen in both organized pilgrimage and travel that may be considered a "holy trip". According to him, the purpose of these journeys is to alter oneself via encounters with the strange or divine while also gaining knowledge and status.

Pfaffenberger (1983), who studied tourists and pilgrims in Sri Lanka, discovered that there are differences in the languages of symbols provided by cultures: religion for the pilgrim, and potentially leisure or a love of nature for the tourist. Comparing the tourism-related activities here, Pfaffenberger applied the findings of Boorstin, MacCannell, Cohen, and other scholars who studied pilgrimage and tourism in order to compare the tourism activities at three well-known religious sites in Sri Lanka and argued that the mass tourism activities in the religious sites have changed the traditional pilgrimage activities where pilgrims travelled to the holy sites in search of authenticity with religious faiths. Given the widely accepted idea that the tourist phenomenon is complex, Pfaffenberger (1983) early efforts employed a socio-anthropological method, distinguishing between religious pilgrims and fun-seeking tourists, at a pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka. Visitors and pilgrims therefore have distinct motivations.

The sacred complex as a concept was first introduced by Vidyarthi (1961). Later on, this study was followed by Jha (1971) and the same kind of study was carried out by Vidyarthi, Saraswati & Jha (1981). According to Saraswati (1978), "the concept of sacred is essentially based on man's desire to communicate with the spiritual world, usually, in order to attain *moksha*" (salvation). In the context of Nepal, Pandey (2000), Giri (2008) and Khatry & Shrestha (2014) conducted research in Ruru-ksetra of Gulmi, Lumbini and Halesi respectively but, pilgrimage tourism as an area remained unarticulated.

The great and little tradition of Indian civilization (Redfield, 1955, 1956) gave birth to other three traditions (e.g., textual, oral and transcendental cultural traditions also include asceticism) invented by Indian anthropologists in 1970s (Saraswati, 1978, pp. 88-90; Bhim Kunwar, 2017, p. 332). These traditions portray all about Hindu, Buddhists and tribal cultural groups and their cultural, religious, ritualistic behavioural patterns are based on those three traditions directed by the priests, texts and memorization also called literate and proliferate culture. All these features are found and attached with pilgrimage traditions of Nepal. This is a different perspective of studying pilgrimage practices in Nepal.

Messerschmidt (1989; De Jong & Grit, 2019) was the first to investigate pilgrimages in Nepal where focus was on the Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath and looked at “various features of the sacred area” there and also in the surrounding area. Bleie (2003) researched on pilgrim tourism in the middle Himalayas, and commended that there is a need to develop plans strategically on marketing initiatives for the Manakamana shrine. Kunwar and Ghimire’s (2012) study, “Lumbini as an International Pilgrimage Destination: Authenticity and Significance,” establishes that authenticity is crucial for the growth of the tourism industry where the study was based on tourists’ experiences at pilgrimage sites. Focus and Locus of Pilgrimage Tourism at Santaneshwor Mahadev Temple by Khadka (2018) describes the opportunities and challenges of pilgrimage tourism at Santaneshwor Mahadev temple in Godavari Municipality, Lalitpur. The study placed particular emphasis on the development of infrastructure, including a tourist centre, modern restrooms, clean drinking water, restaurants, and lodging options (Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021; in Ulak, 2022); the study carried out by Kunwar & Thapaliya (2021) is an early investigation on pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra, Nepal, focusing on providing comprehensive data based on the major characteristics of the local pilgrimage system. They are Macdonald (1990), Chan (1994), Huber (1997), and again Huber (2006) who has carried out research on pilgrimage of Labchi located in Dolakha district of Nepal. Kunwar (1999) also highlighted on Labchi regarding the importance of this pilgrimage but in a nutshell.

Gautam (2014), who wrote a book on *Tirtha Paryatan*, provides an overview of various pilgrimages in three different countries, which includes 137 pilgrimage sites in Nepal that also focuses on pilgrimage site Halesi, Khotang providing a peripheral overview of the holy site. There aren’t many studies in Nepal that focus on pilgrimage tourism because the majority of those studies focus on nature, adventure, sustainable development, implications of COVID-19, sustainable development, and opportunities for homestays (Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021).

For the first time Macdonald came to know about the existence of Halesi in 1961 while he was in Solu, through the abbot, named Sange Tenji Lama, of Serlo monastery of Solu Junbesi in 1983. He not only explained about the importance of

Halesi but also showed him a copy of manuscript guide-book to Halesi which was written in Tibetan language and later on, he carried out his fieldwork at Halesi in 1983. Before this, it was Barbara Aziz who mentioned about Halesi in 1978. Likewise, K. Dowman has also mentioned about the “Maratika Cave at Heileshe cave in Nepal (Near Lamidanda) east of Okhaldhunga” (Macdonald, 1985, p. 11). Similarly, Prindle (1983) who also studied in eastern Nepal particularly in the Brahmin communities, has very briefly notified the attendance of the shamans at Halesi. Even before this, the government gazetteer of Nepal in Nepali, *Mechidekhi Mahakali*, part-1, which was translated into English by Macdonald in 1985 talks about Halesi as an important Hindu pilgrimage of eastern Nepal. According to him, it is a place of Mahadev located in the thum of Halesi as pilgrimage not only for people of the district but also for those from the surrounding areas (1985, p.5). Buffetrille (1994, 2012, 2013) and Macdonald (1985) both authors mostly concentrated on Tibetan Buddhism practices in Halesi as an important pilgrimage of Nepal even the name Halesi as Halase is from the view point of Tibetan Buddhist text. Subindra Giri from Halesi has written a book entitled *Halesi Ko Serophero* (Halesi: Its Premises) it is not theoretically grounded it just provides insights of Halesi (Giri, 2020).

In the context of pilgrimage in Tibet, Hinmon's (2002) study is based on intersecting cultures, multicultural interactions in sacred space and pilgrimage site as potentially microcosmic manifestations of the larger global political arena... that involved Tibetan Buddhist, westerners and other Asian tourist and a pilgrim... interactions between Tibetan pilgrims and non-Tibetan pilgrims.

As far as Tibetan pilgrimage is concerned, she is Buffetrille who carried out detail studies in Halesi and highlighted pilgrimage as Tibetan Buddhist civilization and a culture, but these studies are silent on the prospects of pilgrimage tourism because when they were doing fieldwork in Halesi at that time pilgrimage was not commodified rather it was completely a sacred complex.

There are few concepts which seem to be quite applicable in the context of studying the origin of Halesi. It is Margaret Rodman who coined the term like “multilocality” in developing her argument that it is time to recognize that place. The places like voices, are local and multiple “observing that” for each inhabitant, a place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people and places,” and that the links in these chains of experienced places are forged of culture and history” (1992, p. 643; Owens, 2002, p. 272). For Rodman, the concept of multilocality refers to the experience of places and has four dimensions: it “assumes decentered analysis,” “and can refer to the polysemic meanings of place for different users” (1992, p. 646-647; Owens, 2002). This theory seems to be applicable in the context of pilgrimage studies of Halesi because the Hindus, Tibetan Buddhist and Kiratis have their own voices on the origin of Halesi for example, the Lama in his guide book shows that

exoterically, it is the place where Siva and Umadevi take pleasure. Esoterically, it is the great palace of Chakrasamvara. Secretly, it is the palace of the deities of immortality, and even more secretly, it is the paradise of Great Felicity, Sphere of the Absolute, Akanistha (Buffetrille, 1994, p. 58). The nativistic (kiratis) approach is based on ancestral origination but, all those different approaches uphold the heritage with due respect to its peace and harmony.

There comes another universal concept that is Geomancy, or the art of divination by means of geographical features, plays a vital role in determining Tibet's pilgrimage places. The sanctity of a site is largely derived from its special natural and physical attributes, rather than from the shrine erected there. The image consecrated in a monastery is of course important and pilgrims have a natural wish to pay homage to it. However, for the most significant sites, it is the geomantic and metaphysical character of the place that makes it worthy of worship (Chan, 1994, p. 36). Halesi could be seen through its lens. Geomancy plays a very important role influencing the power of the places. In this regard van Spengen writes, "from a geographer point of view, mountains, lakes, rivers, caves, and passes-all geographical features revered by Tibetans-together with the flows of pilgrims they generate, constitute the geographicity of the Tibetan pilgrim world" (2013, p. 40). For the Tibetan pilgrim, the locational and physical qualities of a place possess an inherent meaning anchored in its specific geomagnetic characteristics. According to Chan (1994, p. 36), there can be no doubt that 'geomancy, the art of divination by geographical features, plays a vital role in determining a place of pilgrimage in Tibet. Dowman (1988) and Bubriski and Dowman (1995) too, see places of pilgrimage as "focal points of energy" or "power place". In the words of latter, the pilgrim's destination is always a special point of the earth's surface endowed with a powerful mystique (van Spengen, 2013).

### **Research methodology**

This descriptive research has some exploratory quality. The respondents were interviewed in depth to learn about their first-hand experiences. The results of this stage usually serve as the foundation for future studies so proper precautions must be taken. A qualitative method is appropriate when a subject or phenomena has to be explored since there hasn't been much study done on it. When a researcher is unsure of the crucial variable to look at, exploratory qualitative research is helpful (Creswell, 2002).

Authors such as Glaser and Strauss (1967), Yin (1988), Elaenhardt (1989), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Goulding (2002), as cited by Castellanos-Verdugo, Caro - Gonzalez and Oviiedo-Garcia (2010), indicate that the grounded theory methodology is appropriate when studying a contemporary phenomenon in the context of real life and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clear.

Grounded theory is a systematic methodology that has been largely applied to qualitative research conducted by social scientists. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to collect the data, the key informants were selected on the basis of their knowledge regarding Halesi. The respondents were from hotels, priest, local tourism authority, local residents, pilgrims, transportation authorities, stalls, local leaders, advisors, experts and local guides etc., where open ended questions were developed to collect more related data for the study. Informal discussions with visitors, local people, shopkeepers, saints etc., as well as in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions, unstructured interviews and semi structured interviews were adopted.

The field was visited by second author who carried out fieldwork in Halesi. A total number of 38 days were spent in the research site in two phases: 7<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021 to 16<sup>th</sup> Nov 2021 (10 days in the first phase), and from 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022 to 16<sup>th</sup> April 2022 in the second phase in the field where all the required information was collected accordingly. This was studied for the purpose of preparing Master's Dissertation based on the convenience of the researcher and the fieldwork. After the submission of dissertation, we (the research supervisor and the researcher) decided to work on pilgrimage tourism at Halesi which is totally revised form of dissertation including new perspectives of the study.

## **Findings & discussions**

### **Myths associated with Halesi**

There are myriads of myths related to the site of Halesi. Different groups of people believe different things related to the origin and importance of this place. Mainly, three dominant forms of myths are significant. Religiously and culturally people are attracted, scientifically it is said that it's a volcanic eruption starting from human era and thirdly it is assumed that people used to stay in cave and spent their life as usual as per the respondent Tawarung Rai (Pseudo nym). This research unearthed different mythologies related to Hindu, Buddhist and Kirat mythologies. The following section presents the myths related to this place.

*According to Kirati myth, in this place Kirati (Rai) originated and started from hunter gatherer society i.e., the people observed sprouts of crops from the grains that were found inside the stomach of preyed dove and from that the members of hunter gatherer society knew about germination of seeds giving rise to initial form of agriculture and the society was gradually changed into initial form of civilization. The kirati population believes that Halesi is their place of ancestors i.e., place of origin.*

*It is also believed that the human civilization started from here where people used to stay in cave and dark places i.e., bukto also known as khim (ghar). Kirati*

*(Rai) worship Paruhang (Mahadev) and sunnima (Parvati). It is also believed that the pair of dogs of hunter Bagh Bansi Rai from gairigoth, chased the deer, while chasing the pair of dog entered the cave and Bagh Bansi Rai could not enter the cave searching his dogs that day there, so he returned to the same place with his brothers the next day and he was not able to find the dogs but while searching they found that there was a snake wrapped around the stone which symbolizes Mahadev i.e. Paruhang the appearance of Mahadev in the form of kirati culture.*

*As per Buddhist myth, Guru Padmasambhava, one of the bodhisatwo (buddha ko doshrorup), travelled from Oddiyanato Maratika cave for meditation and achieved longevity followed the path from Halesi to Tibet where he focused on expanding Buddhism. Sherpas, lamas and other Buddhist who visits the holy site for meditating purpose aims for longevity and it is also believed that the result of meditation has led 100 years of longevity.*

Padmasambhava the second buddha and Great Acharya from Oddiyana acquired “Vidyadhara immortality” in union with the consort while in the large and exceptionally superior place known as Maratika. Amitayus revealed his face at this moment, and Padmasambhava gained a vajra body devoid of birth, death, aging, and withering. This greatest place was entitled Maratika, or that which puts an end to death, since it is recognized for releasing people from death (Pema, 2019). Further, Pema writes and mentions as “Maratika-the cave that puts an end to death” in *The Precious Garland of Vaidurya, a biography of one hundred treasure-revealers [tertons]*.

*As per Hindu myth, Bhasmasur the devil was attracted towards Goddess Parvati and performed penance or strict meditation, and pleased by his devotion Lord Shiva gave a bardan (granted a boon) to Bhasmasur that is, if he kept his hand on anyone's forehead then he would be turned to ashes i.e. Bhasma. No sooner lord Shiva gave his assent 'tathastu', to try out this boon Bhasmasur ran after lord Shiva himself. Shiva escaped from Bhasmasur and reached to Halesi. After knowing that Mahadev was in trouble, lord Vishnu disguised himself as Parvati who performed a dance and Bhasmasur imitated her, while dancing she placed her hand over her forehead and Bhasmasur did the same and he was turned to ashes. Thus, this demon was killed.*

### **Halesi: Polyethnic pilgrimage**

Halesi is a polyethnic destination attracting pilgrims mainly from the three faiths namely Hinduism, Buddhism and Kirat. Hindu pilgrims believe this place as the sacred place of Mahadev and Parvati. Similarly, for the Buddhist pilgrims this place has high regards since Guru Padmasambhava meditated along with his disciple

Mandarava. For Kirats, Halesi holds even more important position since they believe the Kirati Civilization originated and evolved from this place itself.

Here, broader view of pilgrims has been obtained after the interviews conducted during the field research that clearly showed that a vast majority of pilgrimage tourist pay a visit to the sacred sites and other nearby sites in Halesi for fulfilling the vow and commitment: “Most of the pilgrims converged that they visit Halesi to gain peace and to heal their soul” (Source?!).

The Kiratis has long association with Halesi even before the place was known publicly. They believe that they have been living in Halesi from decades. The place Tuwachung which is situated a bit above or near Halesi cave has its own importance i.e., the story begins with the two sisters *Tyoma* and *Khaima* weaving the looms. It is also believed that agriculture started in this area. One of the respondents stated:

*They take Halesi cave as Makhim (Mang= ancestral parents, Khim=house/residence) since it was a sacred place of their ancestors and as well that the two Kirati priests named Mathur and Kathur used to worship in Halesi for 215 years ago, even today at Halesi cave, the Kirati people perform their Sakela Sili, a cultural dance on this special occasions*

Different caste of Kirati (Rai) is found in Khotang and they are “*Chamling, Sampang, Thulung rai, Koi, Bantawa rai, Khaling, Doomi, Ambule rai, Puma rai are residing in Khotang*” (source?).

One of the six holy sites for Vajrayana Buddhists across the globe is Halesi. Acharya Padmasambhava is thought to have meditated at the holy site and attained enlightenment. It is also believed that the Tibetan ministers are thought to have travelled to Nepal (Kathmandu) during the time of King Thisong Dechan via the Maratika route. According to Dijum Rinpoche, Padmasambhava performed a penance at Halesi. The Main Guru who visited Halesi Maratika are Thulsig Rinpoche, Khenje Rinpoche, Dijum Rinpoche and Shakya Khoma Rinpoche.

### **Religious discipline of pilgrims**

Some of the common practices practiced by pilgrims at almost every important tirthas are holy bath, vows, prayers, gift and charity. The gods and goddess of Tirtha are to be propitiated by chanting their names, remembering their sanctity by cultivating devotion and by performing puja (worship) and arti (burning lamp) to them (Jha, 1985; Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021, p.146)

Group of Hindu pilgrims (Female) visited on Thursday from Chitwan were in the cave shrine and explained:

*We had fasting for the day and we were seated inside the cave shrine praying to the god for long time observing, connected to the site. They explained that they*



*had made a commitment that they would again visit Halesi. They further stated that it was a miracle that God stayed in this place.*

### **The tradition of priest**

Halesi has a tradition of the priest belonging to a Hindu community from particular lineage mentioned earlier. Accordingly, the regular rituals in Thubtenchholing Gumba are practiced by the lamas which includes morning and the evening rituals and other lamas are also seen inside the cave practicing mantras and prayers.

### **Halesi from route to road**

In order to preserve the cultural and natural importance of Halesi. The Halesi master-plan has been developed and is focused on the sustainability aspect which restricts the infrastructural activities that are likely to damage the scenic and natural beauty of Halesi. In this regard, local leader, Mayor Rai further illustrated:

*Halesi was not much popular among the common people in the past because people didn't have easy access to visit the site which is located in a complex geographical space despite having its incomparable religious importance. As time passed, infrastructures have been developed and a large number of pilgrims pay their holy visits to the site representing different religions. This has also benefitted the place to have sound socio-economic prosperity.*

### **Pilgrims' motivation, experiences & perceived importance**

From the study it was found that mainly pilgrims visit the holy site and its surroundings with different motivations, both religious and spiritual. Following sections provide an overview of pilgrims' motivation, experiences and perceived importance, here are some statements made by pilgrims about Halesi, Khotang:

*My ultimate intention of the trip to Halesi Mahadev is to escape from daily hectic life and spent some time with the nature and perform religious and cultural activities" i.e., connect spiritually to the destination.*

Halesi has been a pilgrimage site for heterogenous groups i.e., Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist and Kirati (Rai). One Buddhist pilgrim from Bulgaria spent three months of time in Halesi and other nearby sites. She explained her motivation in following words:

*I visited the religious site of Halesi for meditation. I visited nearby sites with cultural significance such as Kakani temple, Garuda, Mandarava cave, Manjushree cave etc. to observe the faith of number of pilgrims both, domestic as well as international visitors towards their respective deities." She further added "Guru Padmasambhava meditated in the holy place and achieved immortality and hence Buddhist pilgrims' visit and pray for longevity.*

A group from Tharu community visited Halesi, and were enjoying sacred performances inside the cave, the main leader answered that it's his third visit to the holy site and they all are the friends and relatives from same community. He further explained:

*Main importance of this place is religious and cultural, where a number of deities can be prayed at a time and is located in natural setting with the aim to fulfil one's commitment and vow made to the god. Other members of the same group also stated that 8 years old was suffering from leukemia and the community had a vow to pray to the god (Mahadev) for her recovery.*

It is believed that one of the very important and well-established reasons for believers to go on pilgrimages is fear of illness and desire for healing (in Jongmeewasin, 2016). The most common experiences from the pilgrims interviewed during the research related to the feeling of peace, satisfaction, bliss, and positive thoughts.

*The holy site attracts me due to religious and cultural harmony between heterogeneous groups, so time and again I visit this holy place. This place is also easily accessible, it's just 7-8 hours of drive from Bhaktapur to the destination and the local people and their behaviours have also influenced me to travel time and again.*

*The feelings and connection to the place comes from inner instinct and I am amazed after seeing the cave shrine it makes me perceive that the god and goddesses are still in the cave blessing us, the cave itself is a miracle.*

The group of Buddhist pilgrims were in Halesi with Rinpoche for conducting Pooja and they explained the following:

*Every year we visit from Gumba to perform aayu (for longevity) puja here in Thubtenchholing Maratika Gumba. Since, 2 years we were not able to come for pooja due to pandemic now we are here and stay for 4 nights and for 3 days we are conducting the pooja.*

#### **Accommodation and other facilities**

Accommodation and other infrastructures have been well systematized at present to let pilgrims visit the site comfortably compared to the past, however there are some inconveniences felt during the time of fair and some other special occasions. We can take the reference of quotes as follows:

*There is different provision of facilities to the pilgrims like public transportation services through the means of roadways and airways to the destination. On the other hand, local guest house and mid-range hotel which are focused on providing lodging and fooding facilities to the pilgrims visiting the destination with the provision of clean and comfortable trip to sacred place as per the standard. (Ward Chair Person)*

Tourism development committee spokesperson admitted that the basic provisions in any sites where numbers of visitors visit the place should focus on following:

*Tourist help desk, assurance of safety to pilgrims, banking service and hygienic foods and healthy living facilities.*

### **Pilgrimage and economy**

The economic activities of Halesi area have improved to great extent in recent time due to increasing number of pilgrims on the site which has contributed local and national economy significantly.

*Basically, pilgrims travel in group with families, friends, relatives and very few are solo travellers so they book rooms contacting through telephone and some pilgrims directly visit hotel for the accommodation and food facilities without prior bookings. (a local resident)*

Following are some statements made by a local entrepreneur regarding the influence of Halesi in local and national economy:

*Pilgrims have contributed a lot to boost up local economy together with national economy as they buy the local products for performing rites. Moreover, hospitality business has well been benefitted by the pilgrims resulting the exchange of culture and better economy. (A group of stall grocers Infront of Halesi Maratika cave).*

### **Donations**

Mainly revenue of Gumba and Temple is dependent on the pilgrim's donations and offerings in temple i.e., *dan, dakchina, bheti, sahayog (donations)*. Gopal Giri, main priest, discussed about the donations and financial offerings made by pilgrims as follow:

*Since Hindu, Buddhist and Kirati (Rai) they all visit Halesi Maratika cave to pray and perform sacred rituals to their respective deities and overall donations are collected in box until it gets full enough and the boxes and premises inside the temple are monitored by CCTV around the area and counting are made by each representative with police representative in temple management building so transparency is maintained. "Fee from poojas are the sources of financial aspect for the temple and monasteries and it has created employment generation, infrastructure management, information desk, help desk, emergency services, social services as well.*

Donations made in Gumba are one of the sources for operating the Gumba Mrs. Doma Sherpa who take cares of Gumba (monastery) explained the followings:

*It is operated by the management committee of monastery itself and the donation and other funds are managed by "Thubtenchholing Maratika Gumba" which is*

*yet enough for entire management of monastery itself and 50 students studying inside.*

### **Pilgrimage and environment**

The major concern in today's date is sustainability in relation to environmental aspect and is one of the crucial phenomena to carry out in tourism destination. The Halesi cave itself is found in natural setting and other sites nearby is also associated with nature so for sustainable tourism practices, environment should be preserved and conserved with values. Halesi Tuwachung ward office explained the followings:

*All the efforts are being made by different concerns in order to conserve the environment around including waste management, drainage, sewage, plantation etc. Moreover, awareness of pilgrims and restrictions imposed by local and central government on touristic activities have been contributing a lot to develop sustainable tourism in the site.*

### **Future prospects of Halesi**

Pilgrimage tourism has been active and quite vibrant in recent years because people are being aware of its cultural and religious value. The traditional and religious prospect for the pilgrims is high and with the development of infrastructure, this place can progress in the coming future. According to Rotherham (2007), "Tourism related with religions, places, and pilgrimages is acknowledged as ever more essential for both religious reasons and economic benefits," as cited in (Jongmeewasin, 2016, p. 18). Underlying this study, the polyethnic pilgrimage destination has immense possibility with the number of increased pilgrims in compare to past years.

As Per Hari Sharan Rai (Pseudonym) addressed and presumed the following in the context of the future of Halesi:

*Earlier, pilgrims were seen in major events and festivals but nowadays a greater number of pilgrims are seen in weekend and holidays too who spent overnight worship to respective deities and travel back to their own place. Due to expansion of roadways and improved transportation services as well as upgraded accommodations services the destination has been a day travel to the pilgrims to experience the cultural harmony, natural landscape, perform sacred rituals, pray, worship and get free from daily hectic schedule.*

Another respondent Chewang Sherpa (Pseudonym) added the view focusing the increased number of pilgrims:

*It is estimated that more visitors are seen which directly increase the demand of ritual offerings and other associated products but the number of stalls is also increasing so there is competitive scenario in stall sellers and these stall sellers need to work in weekdays and get ready for weekend as well as in holidays and*

*in fairs and festivals stall sellers should be prepared with product due to more frequency of pilgrims all around.*

Halesi Tuwaching Municipality has implemented short- and long-term plan to conserve the area and develop sustainable pilgrimage tourism. We can take some examples of effects of the interventions made by local authority as follows:

*Reduced corruption in the temple and improved accountability and transparency of all the financial transactions of the temple, Built the road and better walkway and entrance to the temple as it was a difficult path previously, Built meditation spaces with proper lighting and other facilities, CCTV cameras are installed in the temple property and around to minimize theft and robbery cases around the touristic destination, Created an information desk to help, manage and promote the tourists who came to visit this place for their ease and convenience, Building the surrounding and mismanaged temples with marbles and terracotta, building the three taps outside the temple for drinking water facilities in collaboration with khanepani sansthan. Together with this, electricity, drinking water and sewage and garbage management have been given due priority by local authority.*

#### **Destination effectiveness**

The parameters such as attractions, amenities, accessibility, image, price, human resources were examined during the research and the responses from the Halesi Tuwaching Municipality have been stated below:

**Attractions:** The focus of visitor attention is on the holy site (Halesi Maratika) itself which attract pilgrims from Hindu, Tibetan and Buddhist communities and motivate them for travelling to the destination.

**Amenities:** Various services and facilities which add to the pilgrim's experience visiting the holy site are:

*Halesi has the provision of basic infrastructure such as utilities, as well as direct visitor services such as lodging, visitor information, recreation facilities, guides, operators catering and grocery facilities.*

**Accessibility:** In order to facilitate the visitors for travelling to Halesi, one can have easy access either through roadways or airways.

**Image:** A unique character or destination image is crucial in attracting visitors to the destination i.e., religious harmony and tolerance:

*Halesi is creating an image as one of the holy sites, where 3 heterogeneous groups are sharing the cultural and religious harmony which has created a positive image of the destination itself and is one of the spots for Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist and Kirati (Rai). It is not sufficient to have a good range of attractions and amenities*

*if potential visitors are not aware of this. Therefore, Various means can be used to promote the destinations image (e.g., marketing and branding, travel media, e- marketing). The image of the destination includes uniqueness, sights, scenes, environmental quality, safety, service levels, and the friendliness of people.*

**Price:** Pricing of accommodation, food and other services are cost effective in Halesi area which has also contributed to promote Halesi as one of the major attractions for pilgrims in Nepal.

**Human resources:** Halesi a place with polyethnic significance where all the provisions of basic facilities are available to the pilgrims:

*Well-trained tourism workforce and citizens who are equipped and aware of the benefits and responsibilities associated with growth of number of visitors accordingly for the positive and effective continuity to make Halesi as a polyethnic pilgrimage destination requirement of skilled as well semi-skilled manpower is a crucial factor but in present context it lacks human resources who are the actors transferring a site as a pilgrimage destination with its potentialities.*

Therefore, the indispensable elements for the pilgrimage destination like Halesi Maratika need to be managed in accordance with the destination plans and strategies.

### **Problems and challenges**

During the study, numbers of respondents were interviewed and majority of respondents highlighted the following problems and challenges in the polyethnic pilgrimage tourism site Halesi, Khotang:

*The major problem is the problem of water. Accordingly, majority of the respondents explained, 'there is severe scarcity of water in Halesi. The scarcity of water has created myriad of problems and some of these problems are exacerbated due to the scarcity of water. The scarcity of water has created problem to operate the accommodation, food service and agriculture.*

Based on the interviews with locals, the study has found out some other issues and problems as follows:

*This respondent illustrated the problems of electricity together with poor infrastructure as well as political and social ignorance which have resulted in social unrest and lack of harmony among local people. Electricity, being the foremost factor to development and quality life, has tremendous roles in service and hospitality sector but in the context of Halesi area, irregular supply of it has made negative impacts in multiple aspects including problem of quality foods. Furthermore, it is affected by poor infrastructure. Likewise, according to Chiange Rai (Pseudonym), the problem of brain drain and complex topography have been a serious concern at present as there is lack of youth force to carry out*

*social interventions and topographic complexity on top, has raised the concerns of safety for pilgrims. Nevertheless, all such issues are under the serious priority of local government so as to develop Halesi area as a safe destination for pilgrimage.*

### **Discussions**

One of the important polyethnic pilgrimage sites in Nepal which is situated in Khotang district comprises historical, mythical, cultural, religious, archaeological and geological significance due to which pilgrims and visitors are directly motivated towards the holy site and its nearby places which is attracting numbers of domestic as well as international pilgrims and non-pilgrims. Halesi is one of the holy sites visited by pilgrims that required preservation and conservation of heritage. Since the establishment of Guthi (As quoted by Buffetrille (2012), Guthi means a system of land grants for the benefit of temples and monasteries to finance the religious activities), the preservation and conservation of Halesi was continuing and now its responsibility has been shifted to Halesi Tuwachung Municipality

### **Pilgrims' motivations**

Pilgrims' motivations of Hindus align with the idea of Bhardwaj (1983; in Buzinde et al., 2014, p. 14). On the contrary, the Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims' motivation depends on consultation with Buddhist pilgrimage guidebooks. There are three pilgrimage guide-books known as *dkar-chag*, *gnas-yig* and *lam-yig* to holy places that one can appreciate - names apart- the originality of any one guide-book (Macdonald, 1985, p.4). In the context of Hindu motives, Bhardwaj classified the motives in two categories. The first motive is related to "mundane existence" and may entail a request to a particular deity or "expiation of a ritual impurity that an individual may have acquired" similarly the second motive deals with acquiring "spiritual merit", which may entail the sacred performances in the holy site. Discussing principal motivating factor associated with first motive is the 'deity' whereas the 'pilgrimage' is the key element in the second motive. Here, linking with the Halesi Maratika the first motive relates with the spiritual connectivity where pilgrims leave their ordinary lives behind and embark on spiritual journey and believe that the divine power cleans their sins and second motives connects to the spiritual knowledge attainment, which focuses on attaining religious discourses valued for their ability to offer spiritual direction. On the other side, the Tibetan Buddhists pay homage to Halesi because according to their belief, Guru Padmasambhava and Mandarava are said to have obtained their supreme mastery of immortality at the time of the Tibetan new year according to a local oral tradition (Buffetrille, 2012)

### **Pilgrimage tourism in Halesi**

Both, local as well as international pilgrims, from home and abroad i.e., nations such as China, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Russia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Bhutan,

India, Tibet, Ukraine, as well as European countries, Canada are found visiting the holy place. A greater number of Buddhist pilgrims travel from China, Taiwan, Tibet, and other countries. Hindu pilgrims primarily come from the South Asian region. Firstly, for any region to prosper, there must be efficient and effective management of both human and natural resources, which aids in economic growth as well as sustainable environmental practices. There are no homestays in the region; however, if proper guidance, training, and motivation are provided, the area can have a good prospect of homestay. According to the information provided by the ward office, currently all locals are operating guest houses and hotels with inadequate facilities, maintenance, and cleaning whereas well facilitated hotels are mostly owned and operated by the outsiders with standard tariff. Local business seems to have ignored local productions to serve the guests because of low productivity due to lack of effective water supply and tough topography. Hence, agricultural output is relatively low. All raw materials are brought from surrounding Terai regions and maintained for market sale.

Tourism is a labour-intensive industry offering employment to skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manpower. The problem of unemployment is more acute in the developing countries. It employs large number of people and provides wide range of jobs, therefore increasing number of visitors, facilities and services can provide visitors/pilgrims to at least select the available facilities as per their convenience. Apart from this, a large number of human resources get employment opportunities. Vocational training and development should be prioritized at the local level with an emphasis on empowering, motivating, and energizing people to improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities, resulting in productivity and development, i.e., attempting to make them more capable of finding the best decisions to improve their living standards by taking initiative in different opportunities and prospects that are suitable and have more possibility in return.

It is believed that *Tyoma* and *Khaima* started to cultivate and process cotton and made clothes (handloom). Similarly, Cotton farming should be prioritized which has both historical and mythical significance in protecting and promoting local knowledge. The basic infrastructure of tourism i.e., roads, public awareness, sanitation, communications, transportation, water supply, airport, public utilities and accommodation units provide jobs for thousands of workers. The promotion of tourism can be a great encouragement to economic development. Halesi, being a polyethnic pilgrimage destination, can attract thousands of Hindus, Buddhist and Kirat (Rai) pilgrims for performing sacred rituals. Master plan of Halesi has focused on many physical, cultural, natural and architectural perspectives to promote foreign participation to increase the number of pilgrims/visitors which seems to be a positive sign of prosperous Halesi.



### Other forms of tourism

Pilgrimage is the beginning of tourism in every country (Bhatia, 1994; Ulak, 2022, p.2). Nowadays, visitors are practicing and experiencing different forms of tourism based on the purpose of their visit. Travelling to places like Halesi which has own significance i.e., natural, religious and cultural can be travelled and experienced by the visitors as per their purpose. Basically, more numbers of visitors are the pilgrims in the holy site today but the destination has the attributes accompanying other forms of tourism with a greater number of sites in nearby destination.

The motivation of spiritual journey is multifaceted and multi-layered concurrently. Even where religion is the main motive, other motives can come into play as explained by Blackwell (2007, in Jongmeewasin, 2016) where study of travellers to the holy land were underpinned by religious motives, they were also seen as opportunities for adventure, advancement and wealth creation. Moreover, given the intensity of motivation needed for spiritual journey, expectations will be higher than for religious tourist. Accordingly, secular and religious significance coexist in religious sites because these places attract those with an interest in heritage, culture, history and general sightseeing as well as devotees (Wong, Ryan et al., 2013; B. Kim et al., 2019). Similarly, Halesi has its unique history, culture, heritage, environment, sceneries, sociality, and other aspects since it is a place where three different groups live together in harmony. Therefore, different forms of tourism can be practiced enhancing following activities;

- So, to increase the visitor's length of stay there are other potential and adventurous sites if known to the visitors they might spend some time exploring other sites which can result in increased length of stay and increased spending pattern too so the sites like rock garden, Tuwachuung jayejum, Kakanidevi, Duksili etc. are to be marketed to the visitors visiting the place
- There are no recreational facilities to the visitors who stay overnight and spend their evening around the holy site so, different engaging activities like Sakela, Maruni, Balan, Sangini etc., should be promoted which reflect the culture and local flavours to the tourist.
- Tour guides and local guides should be made available to the visitors so as to organize visitors' activities.
- Clean and green practices are also to be adopted
- Province government and Diktel Majuwagadhi Municipality are in the process of finalizing Yalambar park, Bhulbhule, Bagaretal, Rupakot, Majhuwagadhi, Devithan, Tamke, Barahatal and other touristic places which also focuses on enhancing tourism in Diktel, one of the major cities of Himalayan area.

### **Pilgrimage tourism conflict, peace and harmony**

Smith (1992), addressed that wish-fulfilment is the powerful and jointly shared motive that provides the impetus for individuals to travel. It is a truism, as Vukonic (this issue) states, that the human species, although endowed with its enlarged brain and associations areas, regularly faces problems irresolvable by human means. "Hope" lies in the appeal to and dispensation from some form of the "super natural" (greater than the normal "laws of nature" such as God, spirits, magic and other anthropological synonyms). Similarly, there are conflicts because of cultural variations, linguistic characters of the groups misconceptions, for identity as well as for other various reasons but all groups try to be together i.e., and practice performances on their own way which results in cultural harmony among heterogeneous groups of believers in Halesi Maratika performing sacred rituals, celebrating festivals as per their own faith which is regarded as the element of peace in context to pilgrimage to Halesi.

Pfaffenberger (1983, p.62), highlighted that Buddhist pilgrims have had ample opportunity to learn Hindu styles of devotional religion, which was indicated as the innovation in pilgrim behaviours visiting the religious site Sri pada and Kataragama in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, 1978; in Pfaffenberger, 1983, p. 62). Similarly, the pilgrims visiting Halesi also gain the experience of innovations and gains opportunity to learn and participate in diverse religious activities. In the same way there is found Hindu pilgrims, temple management committee and other local stakeholders showing their compassion towards Buddhist institutions located in Halesi. Rural cosmopolitanism, peace, harmony, composite culture and reciprocity are the best example of power places of Halesi and its neighbouring areas.

### **Preservation and conservation**

Due to more numbers of pilgrims from different countries visiting Halesi Maratika having historical, cultural, religious significance, it is also believed that in *satyayug* lord Bishnu, *tretayug* God Ram and in *Dwaparyug* Balaram visited and prayed in the site. Different festivals are celebrated as well as holidays and weekends are also a time of celebration where the crowd of visitors are seen performing sacred rituals in the holy site and there is the tradition that during fairs and festivals, mela (gatherings of pilgrims) are organized. Realizing the importance of pilgrimage to economic prosperity of Halesi area, local authority has been working with priority with Master Plan coordinating with multiple stakeholders and central government.

Tourism preservation and conservation initiative to be undertaken by master plan:

- For physical development, first there should be full facilitated market, water, electricity, dharamsala, hotel, resort, Health, communication, peace and

harmony, security provisions etc. these are the facilities that are required for flourishing tourism activities.

- Activities like Halesi Mahotsav are to be organized time and again for enhancing domestic tourism
- Secondary level syllabus comprising of the course related to “Halesi” should be included in curriculum.
- Brochures, books, media and documents related to the holy site
- Immediate efforts for waste management and cleaning should be focused.
- Concrete infrastructures are also a matter to be considered for preserving and conserving the identity of the holy site.
- Local products are to be prioritized by local entrepreneurs.
- Activities around the site that might deteriorate the aesthetic beauty of the site should be prevented.

### **Impact of Covid-19**

Covid had an impact on the world’s tourism business. The term “pandemic” refers to a dangerous infectious illness that strikes simultaneously not only in one country but also throughout the entire variety of crises, including terrorism, armed conflict, pandemics, and environmental (Hawker, 2005; Crowther,1998; Sulkowski, 2020; in Kunwar, Adhikari & Kunwar, 2022, pp.115). Accordingly, The COVID-19 outbreak had an impact on the holy site of Halesi, which is well-known for its past, mythology, and religious beliefs. COVID-19, has decreased the number of visitors. Tourism was perhaps the most affected. Halesi Maratika Cave was also shut down during the pandemic. No tourists were permitted to travel there, and locals were also prohibited from entering the temple; only the priest could perform the regular rituals there. As a result, the majority of the stakeholders were negatively impacted and lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

### **Halesi master plan**

Nepal is a country having cultural and historical diversities. It is estimated that visitors in Halesi are in increasing numbers and the physical infrastructures and services are still insufficient and up to the mark, so all the responsible stakeholders are aware about the situation and needs of pilgrims. Besides the foreseeable higher prospects of pilgrimage and other related forms of tourism, the holy site and the destination is still lacking proper plans, policies, forecasting etc.

Halesi Master Plan has come into existence in a participatory manner as representative from different political parties, different levels of government, advisors, Priests, local residents, local entrepreneurs, female and other related

stakeholders participated in separate discussions and meetings in order to collect the opinions and views of people from multiple levels and thereby include them under the main stream of overall pilgrimage development. Halesi Masterplan focuses on the development of the holy site and the plan focuses extensively on three tiers of planning like Short-term, Mid-term and long-term plan along with an ultimate focus on the religious, cultural, dignity, environmental conservation and the foremost focus on the economic sustainability which increases the living standard of the residing locals. There are always two concepts in development i.e., physical development and spiritual development, Physical development directly relates to infrastructure similarly spiritual development relates to religious faiths, beliefs as well as practices.

### **Conclusion**

Pilgrimage tourism is the subset of cultural tourism. According to Seaton (2013), as mentioned earlier, metempsychosis is ...a journey undertaken...as the replication of, and a comparator to, a previous one made by a historical or mythical figure or group, in which the subject to some extent adopts the persona of the original traveller (p.20).

Metempsychosis is exclusively and specifically a cultural tourism form, but metempsychosis affects all tourism, though it has particular importance for the culture tourist both involve transient performances. The word metempsychosis came from religious texts (e.g. Buddhist and Hindu), mythology (Eliade, 1984), folklore and fairy stories (Propp, 1971) (Seaton, 2013, p.19). The study of pilgrimage tourism in Halesi is directly or indirectly related to story, legend, myth and texts of Hindus, Buddhists and native people (the Kiratis). Therefore, metempsychosis as a concept fits in this study.

Pfaffenberger (1983, p. 62) highlighted that Buddhist pilgrims have had ample opportunity to learn Hindu styles of devotional religion, which was indicated as the innovation in pilgrim behaviours visiting the religious site Sri pada and Kataragama in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, 1978; in Pfaffenberger, 1983, p.62). Similarly, the pilgrims visiting Halesi also gain the experience of innovations and opportunity to learn and participate in diverse religious activities. In the same way Hindu pilgrims, temple management committee and other local stakeholders are found showing their compassion towards Buddhist institutions located in Halesi. Rural cosmopolitanism, peace, harmony, composite culture and reciprocity are the best example of power places of Halesi and its neighbouring areas.

Morinis (1994; in Hinmon, 2002) states that in most cultures, pilgrims tend to be self-labelling as such. Length of journey or the nature of the destination are lesser factors compared with the individual's view of the activity he sees himself to be undertaking (Morinis, 1994, p.7) "it is a kind of personal pilgrimage" or "it is a

pilgrimage of sorts.” Halesi is emerging as one of the major centres of attraction for the pilgrims all over the world which can be justified by examining the data of visitors every year. With such entire reality, pilgrimage tourism has well developed in Halesi area which significantly emphasize on the sociocultural and economic prosperity and strengthens locals’ standard of living, sparking interest in ensuring the area’s history and identity and promoting sustainable tourism activities which focuses on maintaining destination image to global audiences seeking to experience pilgrimage tourism visiting Halesi. Interconnected factors such as the locations visited and the activities engaged in by the pilgrims, influence the search for authentic experiences during trips to the holy sites. The components of authentic experiences may thus be related by looking at the interaction between place, belief and action.

Halesi is the same place for different people, culture, religion, ritual, and belief. The three traditions (textual, oral and ascetic) have shaped the existence of Halesi as permanent pilgrimage tourist destination. The motorable road has connected to Halesi from everywhere within Nepal. On the way to Halesi, the pilgrims enjoy a lot with the natural scenery, human habitation, new faces and new places, rivers etc. to what Urry (2002) calls spectatorial gaze, environmental gaze and anthropological gaze. The hotels including restaurants have also facilitated the pilgrims/tourists to stay at Halesi comfortably. Thus, Halesi is becoming very popular tourist destination for both domestic and international tourists.

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