Strengthening Prosperity and Peace through Code of Ethics Embedded Responsible Tourism: How Far It Works for Trekking Porters (deprived workforce) in Nepal?

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Abstract

In addition to pledging economic prosperity, the existing body of knowledge reveals that tourism can bring and accelerate peace. The trek/tour operators can play an important role in this process through the application Code of Ethics (CoE) embedded responsible tourism. However, trekking porters' case in Nepal is not only under researched but also against the above set assumption. In this context, the key focuses of this article is to assess the existing CoE embedded responsible tourism policies and practices and examine the key items related with porters' portering profession.

Methodologically, this research has utilized mixed information (qualitative and quantitative). Within the constructivist research paradigm, forty trek operators which employee trekking porters, were surveyed. Additionally, seven trekking porters (as the center actor of this research) and few leaders of tourism workers' unions were also interviewed. The findings reveal that CoEs emerge as valuable basis for assuring prosperity and peace. It finds improvements on key measuring items like porters' minimum wages, carrying loads, safety gears and clothes, and emergency evacuation in the management of trek operators but with sporadic lapses too. The existing tourism policies and strategies are found highlighting the need of CoEs but silent on the nitty-gritty of such ethics. This paper recommends for recruitments of all porters' through policy led establishment of a national Porter Referral Center (PRC) and all jobs assignments through mandatory job contracts. Finally, it necessitates for both ethics and regulation to go hand in hand for making tourism a true peace builder.

Keywords: *Prosperity and peace, trekking porters, code of ethics, responsible tourism, trek operators*

Introduction

Since the beginning of human civilization, 'prosperity and peace' has remained the most esteemed aspiration for humanity. At the start of new millennium and up to the outbreak of COVID-19 infectious disease, tourism has remained one of the world's largest industries and a highly potential social force (human phenomenon) which is interconnected with very important aspects of humanity and human wellbeing. The gigantic global tourism industry with 1.5 billion international arrivals in 2019 shows it as one of the most remarkable economic, social and environmental phenomena in the present peace time (UNWTO, 2020).

In Nepal, strengthening prosperity and peace for all are fundamental sources of aspiration in the aftermath of a decade (1996 -2006) of armed conflict (post conflict era), a number of years of political transition afterward and the recent Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

global pandemic induced enduring health crisis. Amidst few key sectors that can strengthen socio-economic prosperity and wellness in Nepal, tourism as a people-centered service industry and a social force has enormous prospective. As a receiving region with the blending of unique nature, age-old culture and multi-ethnic human aspects; Nepal poses the strong 'pull factors' and 'immense potential' for the development of tourism. In this context, there are some notable positive economic indicators (e.g. revenue USD 724.34 million, jobs 1,027,000 and direct contribution to GDP 7.9 percent from 1,197,191 international tourist arrivals in 2019 until the outbreak of COVID-19) of tourism in Nepal. Despite those, the national development goals (e.g. driving inclusive growth[1], contributing in common social wellness-being and harmony[2] and strengthening prosperity, wellness and peace through code of ethics embedded responsible tourism plan, policy and actions) from tourism are yet to be materialized in Nepal (Jones, 2013; MoCTCA, 2016; Upadhayaya, 2019; Upreti et al., 2013; WTTC, 2019; Zurick, 1992). In such a context, Jones (2013) highlights unethical tourism business practices in Nepal and stresses for the formulation and application for code of ethics in tourism. Upadhayaya (2019) reveals that the peace related objectives of tourism cannot be achieved well due to the insufficiency on (a) planned development, operation and purposeful management of tourism directed to enhancing socio-economic foundations and intercultural relations, and (b) scaling up of the joint effort for appropriate plan and management of tourism by all stakeholders at provincial level and well coordination of province with local and national levels. In context of a conceptual discourse on tourism, security and peace issues, Upreti et al. (3013) indicate about a number of internal and external factors posing constraints for the inclusive growth of tourism. Such few key internal factors include (a) intra-organizational conflicts (labour disputes) between owners and workers resulting in some kinds of mild violence (b) inter-organizational conflict on various business management and operational issues or the lack of common agenda among tourism stakeholders, and (c) lack of equity and justice within the existing structure of tourism. There are two reasons which collectively form the root causes of labour disputes. The economic supremacy of tourism business leaders (owners or management of tourist accommodations) of tourism industry under the dominance of neo-liberalism and the enduring political influence to and affiliations of labour unions (laborers) with political parties as the political supremacy.

This trend of the 'conflict sensitiveness' of tourism has resulted with inequality in distribution of tourism-based income, lack of reciprocal relationship between guests and hosts, lack of equal treatment to domestic tourists in comparison with international tourists during peak tourism season, and lack of amicable relationship between management and laborers in tourist accommodations.

Thus, the overall transformation of tourism in Nepal is interrupted and incomplete. For this reason, the interrelation between tourism and prosperity led peace is observed to be not smooth and cordial but critical. The existing body of knowledge (Din, 1988; Farmaki, 2017; Grandon, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles & Blanchard, 2010; Levy & Hawkins, 2010; McKercher, 1993; Nepal, 2020; Pratt & Liu, 2016; Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010; Tarlow, 2011; Upadhayaya, 2013) reveals that strengthening prosperity and wellness for all through tourism remains at best as a futuristic statement.

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1 It is a concept that advances equitable opportunities for economic participants during economic growth with benefits incurred by every section of society. It seeks to ethically and beneficially include the marginalized people in the production and consumption of tourism. See Scheyvens & Biddulph (2018) for more information

2 It refers to cordial relationship between employer and employees.

The aforesaid national state and international perspectives are importantly related to labor-intensive trekking tourism sub-sector in Nepal. Nepal's trekking tourism is a flagship product with immense prospective for prosperity and peace of trekking porters. However, the prevailing pattern of trekking tourism is marked as un-inclusive and inequitable for the lowest strata of workers and small entrepreneurs. Amidst these service providers, trekking tourism porters are presumed to be the most disadvantageous. Being placed at the lowest level of job hierarchy, Nepali trekking porters play immense role in making trekking accessible to the trekkers. These services providing key actors come from economically very poor families from many mountain districts, but work under adverse circumstances, without standard Code of Ethics (CoE) at the needed extent. Some of such discriminatory evidences include (a) lack of identifiability and verifiability (of experience) for their recruitments with the unavailability of Porters' Referral Center; (b) lack of formal contracts for most of the job assignments and domination of informal hiring via mediators or sub-contracting (c) inadequate support equipments (e.g. warm clothing, footwear, jackets, etc.) for protection in extreme climates (altitude, cold, rain and snow); (d) diversion of their tips by trek leaders or sirdars (guides) and so on. They have been now identified as the structural shortcomings for the healthy acceleration of the industry.

The dearth of "ethically embedded responsible tourism policy and actions" is supposed to be the root cause. Applying CoE is vital for enhancing not only prosperity and wellness but also peace in the war-torn and for a long time unstable country Nepal. In the aforementioned contextual background, this paper intends to address following questions:

- What is the conceptual meaning of peace and prosperity?

- What does peace and prosperity mean to tourism and is related?

- What are the ethically built-in and embedded responsible tourism policies, strategies and the good practices for prosperity and peace of trekking porters?

- How is the ethical treatment of tour operators on key measuring items of trekking porters that implies for porters' lasting prosperity and peace?

Methodology

This article is based on descriptive and exploratory research design where a critical scholarship study is the prime focus. It has employed mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) for gathering and analyzing data and generating results. Within the constructivist research paradigm, forty trek operators which employee trekking porters, were surveyed. Additionally, seven trekking porters (as the center actors of this research) and few leaders of tourism workers' unions were also interviewed. Regarding the quantitative method of research, the Ethical theory of corporate social responsibility (Garriga & Mele, 2004) is employed.

A number of tools like library (archive) search and literature review, survey questionnaires with the trek operators, and telephonic interview questionnaires with trekking porters and tourism workers' union leaders were utilized to facilitate the research.

Peace and prosperity: a theoretical debate

Peace is defined in a number of publications (Askjellerud, 2010; Galtung 1996; Salzar, 2006; Satani, 2003). These publications give attention to peace linking with conflict. The Oxford Dictionary of English (2005) states peace as : (i) freedom from disturbance, tranquility; (ii) a

state or period in which there is no war or a war has ended. In most of these literatures, peace is defined broadly as negative peace and positive peace. There is presence of structural and cultural violence in negative peace as it has yet denied the importance of additional elements such as harmony, justice, goodwill and opportunities for personal fulfillments (Galtung, 1996). The elements which shape the state of 'peacelessness' are termed 'structural violence'. Sugata Dasgupta named the state of 'absence of war' in developing countries 'peacelessness'. It is complex with multifaceted tasks like existence of poverty, disease, environmental disasters, racism, religious fundamentalism, alienation, discrimination, prejudice, ignorance, bigotry and hatred (Satani, 2003 as in Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010, p. xviii). Galtung recommends curative therapy which is about peace keeping for reducing violence in the state of negative peace.

Positive peace, on the other side, has been described as an absence of structural violence. According to Galtung (1996), positive peace is more than mere absence of war or even the absence of interstate violence. It is a concept which not only indicates absence of direct violence, but also includes a range of relationships up to a state where nations (or any groups and individuals in conflict) are collaborating and supporting relationships by respecting the right of others, acting justly and taking care of others. Positive peace is achieved when the state of 'peacelessness' has been improved. It is a social condition in which exploitation is minimized or eliminated. Its thrust is on peace building, the establishment of non exploitative social structure. Galtung recommends for preventive therapy for avoiding structural violence in creating the state of positive peace.

Combining both negative and positive peace as the real sense of peace, Galtung (1996) offers two compatible definitions as the theoretical foundations of peace: (i) Peace is the absence/reduction of violence of all kinds, and (ii) Peace is non violence and creative conflict transformation. There are following two major elements of these definitions of peace; (i) Peace study is the study of the condition of peace. (ii) Peace work is work to reduce violence by peaceful means. The first definition is violence – oriented; peace being its negation. It recognizes that peace is the absence of violence of all kinds – cultural, structural and direct. A state of peace exists where conflict is unlikely to occur. The second definition is conflict oriented which stresses that conflict can be resolved without recourse of violence in a creative way. Galtung (1996) referring his two definitions of peace, mentions that to know about peace (well-state) we have to know about violence and conflict (ill –states). The in-depth scrutiny of the definition and nature of peace reveals that 'Peace by Peaceful Means' is the essence of the peace theory of Johan Galtung.

Commenting on the submissions for the book, Tourism, Progress and Peace (Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010, p. 242), the editors well remarked, 'it is clear that many of the approaches and activities identified do not occur as spontaneous outputs of mainstream tourism and that there is a need for tourism to be purposefully managed if it is to help meet the peace objective'.

Negative peace is nothing more than the absence of physical violence. It's an example from Nepal where Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist rebels had not physically hurt the visitors but collected tax as extortion from tourists and trekking agencies at popular trekking routes during a decade (1996-2006) of armed conflict (Upadhayaya, 2013). There is presence of structural and cultural violence in negative peace.

Positive peace substitutes freedom for repression, equity for exploitation, solidarity for fragmentation and participation for marginalization. The participatory peace starts with

ordinary citizens participating in their chosen way of life (Galtung, 1996; Moufakir & Kelly, 2010).

The aforementioned various state of peace (negative and positive) with reference to tourism sector has been addressed by a number of commentators with a variety of critical propositions and emphases (Askjellerud, 2010; Higgins-Desbiolles & Blanchard, 2010; Leong, 2008; Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010; Villiers, 2014). These publications reveal that there are some specific indicators for 'peace through tourism' which fall under the characteristics of ethically adapted responsible tourism. The literatures on 'peace through tourism' draw attention to the need of formulation and application of CoE for peace sensitive responsible tourism business.

Prosperity and peace through tourism: a critical review of existing body of knowledge

The continuous growth of modern tourism as 'an industry' both at global and national levels until COVID-19 had created enormous economic values. The review of literature of various scholars (Becken & Carmignani, 2016; Farmaki, 2017; Leong, 2008; Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010; Pratt & Liu, 2016; Satani, 2003; Sharma, 2012; Var & AP, 1998; Villiers, 2014; Wohlmuther & Wintersteiner, 2014; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016) from peace-tourism camp states the positive relationship of tourism with prosperity and peace on both breadth and depth of their arguments. Nonetheless, these literatures also necessitate a closer critical look at the role of tourism at a time of globalization, structural inequality, overconsumption, discrimination, immigration, terrorism, home-grown terror, man-made and natural catastrophes, perceptions, and rising poverty.

The proponents of peace through tourism are of the views that tourism promotes peace but only with certain conditions. They are of the views that tourism development initiatives are likely to have also a peace building effect if (a) tourism is participatory and responsible to the disadvantaged workers (e.g. trekking tourism porters in Nepal) and local stakeholders, (b) there are environmental friendly practices of tourism, (c) policy makers strengthen frameworks that amplify tourism's positive impacts, (d) there is better intergovernmental relations between tourist generating and receiving country, (e) there is value chain linkage in local economy, and (f) there is contact with marginalized ethnic and racial groups that reduce prejudice, etc. But the opponents of peace through tourism reveal that tourism is not the cause of peace and mutual understanding; rather, it is an outcome (Farmaki, 2017, Khalilzadeh, 2018). Even in the era of COVID-19 and beyond for its recovery and reform, advocates of industry rapid recovery stand opposed to wider efforts to reform tourism to be more ethical, responsible and sustainable (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). Thus, the potential of tourism to contribute for peace is one of the most complex and basic ideas that tourism and hospitality researchers and educators are trying to investigate promote and empirically support. This scenario is equally applicable in case of Nepal as a tourist destination.

The essence of the work of aforementioned commentators is that appropriate tourism operation, management and development may serve as effective means to ward off potential conflict, particularly at the micro-level. This is relevant with trekking tourism sub-sector in Nepal. There is absence of the proper management and dignified inclusions of porters and subsequent building and strengthening of prosperity and peace through tourism. For it, the outbound and inbound tour operators who followed and applied CoE (ethical aspects) are assumed to be weaker (Grant-Sasson, 2016; International Porters' Protection Group, 2017;

Khadka & Paul, 2015; Lonely Planet, 2019; Mountain People, 2021; Newcomb, Sherpa, Nickol & Windsor, 2011; Marsh, 2002; Sharma, Upreti & Upadhayaya, 2010).

CoE as a basis of prosperity and peace-responsive tourism: Conceptual and theoretical foundations

Code of Ethics is a systematized set of standards or guiding principles determined by moral value for dictating the right conduct of a profession. Codes of ethics are generally sets of rules for behaving in a certain way, and are voluntary, frequently self-imposed and self-regulatory. Ethics is often associated with an array of terminology namely; morals, values and norms, which are often interchangeably used to all mean being ethical (Fennell, 2018; Jamal, 2019; Kampaxi, 2008; Lovelock, 2008; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013; Upadhayaya, Khatiwada, Upreti, & Sapkota, 2013; Upadhayaya, 2014; Weeden, 2002). Characterized as non-statutory, disciplinary, and self-imposed; CoE represent an "Ethical Road Map" to guide key sectoral players in sustainably maximizing benefits.

A CoE in tourism includes strategic actions, policies, and adaptations related to tourism sector that minimizes the negative effects of conflict and promotes cooperation and peace (Sharma et al., 2010). Ethics has real potential to emerge as a new platform in tourism studies (Fennell & Malloy, 2010). Several research publications have signified the need and value of CoE for peace-responsive tourism with varied emphases (Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010; Sharma et al., 2010; Upadhayaya, 2014). Some studies (Holden, 2003; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013; Villiers, 2014) emphasize CoE as a way of addressing urgent "big-picture" tourism-sector problems (e.g. air travel, nature conservation and global warming) as well as more micro-scale everyday issues involving individual tourists, or indeed, individual tour operators.

CoE amidst others (e.g. fair employment conditions, partnerships, waste reduction, resource sustainability and education, community involvement, capacity building, etc.) is one of the specific guiding principles of responsible tourism. Responsible tourism is the guiding principle of sustainable tourism as well as world peace.

Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1 derived by the researcher after the review of literatures, attempts to establish relationship between CoEs and durable peace and prosperity at destinations.
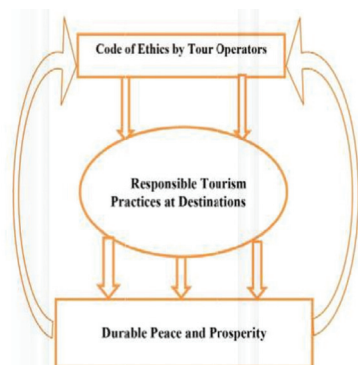

Figure 1: *Conceptual Schema on the interrelationship between CoE, responsible tourism and peace and prosperity*

Source: Developed by the author

The more tourism corporate sector considers social responsibility and applies CoEs and its consisted responsible tourism principles and practices, the more it will help to accelerate prosperity and peace and mitigate conflict. On the other hand, the establishment of peace and prosperity would not only prevent conflict in responsible way but also persuade and support to strengthen the application of CoEs.

Responsible tourism is about using tourism "to create better places for people to live in and for people to visit." Responsible tourism is the guiding principle of sustainable tourism as well as world peace (Leong, 2008; Leslie, 2012). Responsible tourism simply means holidays that care about local communities and culture as well as wildlife conservation and the environment. Responsible tourism was defined by the International Centre for Responsible Tourism in its 2002 Cape Town Declaration which is summarized as follows (Goodwin, 2014; Leslie, 2012).

The objective of responsible tourism is to create better places for people to live in and to visit where CoE related guidelines could be the blueprint for their voluntary contribution. Thus, the CoE could be effective means for responsible tourism. For responsible tourism endeavor at global inter-governmental level, UNWTO formulation of 'Global Codes of ethics for Tourism' (GCET) is commendable (Friedl, 2015).

Theoretical framework

Ethical theory of Corporate[3] Social[4] Responsibility[5] (CSR) (Garriga & Mele, 2004) is utilized for this work. For theoretical purpose, CSR is defined as 'the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large (Holme & Watts, 2000). Ethical theory of CSR understands that the relationship between business and society is embedded with ethical values. With a reciprocal relationship between a responsible tourism business of corporate sector and sustainable peace building (Moufakkir & Kelly, 2010), CSR is supposed to be a major long term interest and a determinant in addressing the issues of responsible tourism development and an agent to invite durable peace. This theory reveals about the ethical responsibilities of corporations to society in two forms namely (a) before profit obligation and (b) after profit residual activity (Hopkins, 2011).

Before profit obligation is a business strategy of corporate sector in which there is contribution towards society and even beyond society of businesses based on gross sales ratio and not on profit. There are socially responsible principles embedded in business strategy of corporate management in this category where profit is considered as 'by-product'. Social Tours in Nepal presents one of its examples. Based on before profit obligation CSR principle, it funds its cultural and social programs not by profits, but by gross sales, so that profitability does not influence the firm's level of involvement.

On the other side, after profit 'residual' activity is a residual activity after business transaction and profit. This category of CSR is also known as a philanthropic contribution. For example, there are many tour and trek agencies in Nepal which practice this.

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3   Corporate means treating the main stakeholders of a company in a responsible manner
4   Social means the social system and includes finance, economy, environment as well as social issues both inside and outside the firm.
5   Responsibility is about taking issues seriously that effect the corporate body or institution and about acting within and even beyond societal norms.

Plans, policies and strategies for the prosperity and peace of tourism workers

There are few plans, policy and strategic documents in Nepal which necessitate code of ethics for making tourism responsible for the prosperity and peace of workers including trekking porters who are at the lowest stratum in the job hierarchy.

- Tourism Policy 2008
- Three Year Plan Approach Paper (2010/11-2012/13) of National Planning Commission
- National Tourism Strategic Plan 2016-25
- Trekking Information Management System (TIMS) Operational Directives (2010)
- Code of Conduct (CoC) for Peace Responsible Tourism in Pokhara: A Manual (2013)
- TAAN's Trekking and Mountaineering Business Code of Conduct (2066)
- Code of Conducts (Planning and Managerial, Environmental and Biodiversity related, Socio-cultural, Economic and Safety and Security related) for Sustainable Tourism on Machhapuchhre Model Trek (2009)

The key thrusts of few of those policy and strategy are offered in succeeding paragraphs in brief.

Tourism Policy 2008: The point number 11 under working policy 9 dha and policy 8 na of the Paryatan Niti 2065 (Tourism Policy 2008) reveals "Paryatan byawasaiharuma byawasaikata ko bikash garna aaphno byawasaisanghaharu marphat achar sanhita lagugarna protsahit garinecha" (it will be motivated to implement Codes of conduct through their professional associations to develop professionalism in tourism) (MoCTCA, 2009).

Three Year Plan Approach Paper (2010/11 – 2012/13): The concept paper of the national planning commission [Three Year Plan Approach Paper (2010/11 – 2012/13)] also clearly stated that 'Codes of conduct for tourism business will be implemented through their own associations' (NPC 2010, p 98). However, these visions are kept away from being materialized except limited action. Such limited application include for example the Trekking and Mountaineering Business Codes of conduct applied by Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal (Shrestha, 2009)

National Tourism Strategic Plan 2016-25: The National Tourism Strategic Plan (2015-24) states "there is a need for an agreed code of practice (incorporating code of ethics) for service standards across the tourism sector" (MoCTCA, 2016, p. 31).

Guided by the aforementioned policy documents, there are following few national level organizations working for strengthening prosperity and peace of trekking porters in Nepal.

- Nepal Tourism Board → Trekkers Information Management System
- Porters' Progress
- International Porters Protection Group

- Kathmandu Environmental Education Project → Porters' Welfare Program

- Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal, Kathmandu

- Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal, Western Regional Association, Pokhara

At international level, a number of tourist destinations like Sikkim (India), Bhutan, Hong Kong, Australia, and South Africa are on the forefront and notable to formulate and apply good practices on CoE in tourism industry. Amidst these tourist destinations with diverse focuses for strengthening responsible and sustainable tourism, Hong Kong's attention is on tourist guides for their accountability for responsible tourism and Canada's focus is on tourists for their responsible roles to minimize the negative impact to be caused by tourism activities.

In the list of declarations and institutions, Cape Town Declaration adopted after the Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations by 280 delegates from 20 countries in 2002 provides guiding principles for economic, social and environmental responsibility. The reviews of international research literatures find that there are few international practices for the wellbeing of trekking porters too. Those are examples of good policies and practices of ethically embedded responsible tourism guidelines from a number of countries (Responsible Tourism, 2019; Day, 2016; Kilimanjaro Porters Assistance Project, 2017; Parks Canada, 2017; Tourism and Civil Aviation Department, 2011; United Nations Environment Programme and World Tourism Organization, 2005). Few examples of such policy and practice related case studies of ethically adapted responsible tourism operations from other countries are mentioned below.

a) Canada: Codes of ethics & Guidelines for Sustainable Tourism

- It is Canada's policy guidelines for tour operators, ministry of tourism and sustainable tourism endeavor.

b) India: Code of conduct for Safe and Honorable Tourism in Sikkim

- Adopted on July 2010, it is a strategy to meet 'Suraksha' (Safety) which is one of the seven pillars (welcome, information, facilitation, safety, cooperation, infrastructure development, cleanliness) of tourism as stated in the National tourism policy of 2002. It aims to strengthen the critical pillar of 'Suraksha' (Safety) and ensure that Indian tourism follows international standards of safe tourism practices, applicable for both guests (tourists) and local hosts (tourism service providers) who may be impacted by tourism in some way.

c) Peru: Inca Trail - Porter Welfare

- It includes practical aspects like maximum weight limit of 20 Kg for porters, minimum wages of US$15 per day and encouragements to tourists to book their holidays through responsible trekking companies. However, it is very unlikely that porter welfare is high on the company's concerns.

d) Tanzania: Kilimanjaro Porters Assistance Project (KPAP)

- Established in 2003, the KPAP is a legally registered not-for-profit organization that works to improve the working conditions of the porters on Mt. Kilimanjaro area in Tanzania. KPAP's work has had a tremendous impact for porters

climbing Mount Kilimanjaro by lending mountain clothing to porters free of charge, providing educational opportunities to porters, advocating for fair wages and ethical treatment by all companies climbing Kilimanjaro and encouraging climbers to select a climbing company with responsible treatment practices towards their crew.

Applications of these guidelines address the concerns of tourism workers like trekking porters who are at the lowest strata of job hierarchy. However, it is not the case with Nepal due to the lack or weaker CoE framework for tour operators. Thus, Nepal lags far behind on it. The shortage of "ethically embedded responsible tourism policy and actions" structure is the reason behind it which has resulted as a bottleneck for sustainable prosperity and peace of trekking porters.

Nepal's trekking tourism: state of implication for sustainable prosperity and peace of porters

As a mountainous destination, it has tremendous potential for tourism in general and trekking based adventure tourism in specific. Nepal offers an extensive network of trails as "Great Himalaya Trails (GHT)" in the hills and mountains distributed across 10 GHT sections. It has the potential to be established as an emerging brand for mountain tourism identity of Nepal that represents the trekking sub-sector as the flagship product. Trekking is the largest tourism segment with one fourth of visitors. Trekking is a major focus of outbound tour operators selling Nepal experiences in Europe, USA, Japan and Australia (MoCTCA, 2021).

A large segment of travelers participate in tourism in Nepal through their connections via the tour packages formulated by the tour operators in tourist generating countries and such packages operated by Nepal's 6,540 numbers of registered trek and tour operators (MoCTCA, 2021). As intermediaries on behalf of suppliers of services and customers for peaceful and respectful socio-economic exchange, tour operators should have high responsibilities to be ethical with maximum awareness of the consequences for their actions on destination stakeholders. With the significant market share of the tour operators in Nepal, they are responsible for both positive and negative impacts. On the negative side, the prevailing pattern of trekking tourism is noticed to be not inclusive and just for the lowest strata of workers. Trekking porters are such workers at the lowest strata of job hierarchy.

Trekking porters are important labor segments (like backbone) for trekking tourism who belong from economically poor rural mountain areas and migrate from one to another mountain region to sale their labor. They are physically the most hardworking and have to struggle to sustain their and their families' livelihoods. They generate hard work based valuable income. They are marked as underprivileged and the most disadvantaged laborers. Despite being the important labor segments for mountain tourism in Nepal, these labor segments are little recognized and remain under-appreciated.

There are codes of ethics related interwoven lapses on a number of measuring items (table 1 below) on behalf of tour operators. Those lapses have not only bottlenecked porters' quality of service to clients but also forced them to survive in socio-economically backwardness, vulnerable and marginalized state throughout life. Nepalese porters suffer four times more accidents and illnesses than western trekkers. The tourism industry is service-oriented and must ethically treat the trekking porters. But the larger scale negligence have compelled them to fall and remain in risk and vulnerability (Basnyat & Schepens, 2004; Dawadi, Basnyat, &

Adhikari, 2020; GFNTU, 2017; Hillman, 2021; Shakya, 2009; Upadhayaya & Upreti, 2011). The dearth of "ethically adapted responsible tourism policy and actions" is the root cause (Upadhyay, 2019; KC, 2021).

As the part of responsible tourism practices, tour operators have high and valuable roles to apply ethical treatments on a number of key measuring items like (a) job engagements through contracts, (b) minimum pay (fair wages), (c) load carrying limitations, (d) distribution of mountain clothing, outfitting gears and safety equipments on free of charge, and (e) proper care including emergency evacuation for sick and injured porters, and so on.

Status of ethical treatments on key measuring items of trekking porters

A survey to 40 trek/tour operators reveal following scenario on trek/tour operators listed and applied porter ethical treatment standards on key measuring items.

Table 1: Survey results on key measuring items in relation to porters' ethical treatment

Measuring items	Trek/Tour operators experiential observations			
	Matters considered correct	No. of operators	Matters considered not correct	No. of operators
Porters recruited through systematic formal channel (authorized porters referral center)	✓	0	✓	40
Porters employed through formal contracts as against the informal hiring via mediators or subcontracting	✓	25	✓	15
Minimum pay (fair wages) practiced through wage paid via mediators or subcontracting	✓	40	✗	0
Ethnic identity influencing employment relationships	✓	30	✓	10
Existence of adequate and safe shelters for women porters with no assurance of good food and warm drinks on trails	✓	10	✓	30
No practices of hiring porters who are juniors and inexperienced (below 18 years of age)	✓	8	✓	32
Proper practice of load limits concerning safety (adjusted for altitude, trail paths and weather conditions)	✓	22	✓	18
None of the opportunistic behaviors of extractive guides and naike (porter leaders) by demanding commission from rest of the ordinary porters	✓	10	✓	30
None of the practice of diversion of porters' tips by trek leaders or Sirdars (guides)	✓	20	✓	20

Porters' noticed with the habit of being over drunk of alcohol for self-reliance	✓	22	✓	18
Inadequate information (education) about the risks of high altitude with porters themselves	✓	35	✓	5
Susceptibility to Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) with low land porters (non-Sherpa Nepali porters)	✓	12	✓	28
Meager professional capabilities and behaviors of porters	✓	26	✓	14
Easy catching with diverse and severe illness including fever-suspected typhoid, high altitude cough, AMS, gastroenteritis, severe anxiety, High-Altitude Cerebral Edema, cellulitis-induced septicemia, musculoskeletal problems, etc.	✓	15	✓	25
Poor preventive measures with a good trekking schedule and adequate acclimatization	✓	17	✓	23
Distribution of mountain clothing, outfitting gears and safety equipments on free of charge	✓	28	✓	12
Proper care including emergency evacuation for sick and injured porters	✓	34	✓	6
No availability of well defined code of ethics for the proper responsible management of porters	✓	37	✓	3

Source: Field work

The table above shows mixed results in relation to dealing of tour operators with porters on a number of ethical issues. As per the table above, there are a number of ethically interwoven operational, management and policy related challenging factors at varied scale (low to high scale) like: (i) lack of identifiability and verifiability (of experience) for their recruitments due to the absence of porters referral center (ii) lack of formal contracts for most of the job assignments and domination of informal hiring via mediators or subcontracting; (iii) ethnic identity influencing employment relationships; (iv) lapses on standard medical, accidental and search and rescue insurances; (v) lack of adequate, separate and safe shelters particularly for women porters; (vi) inadequate support equipments (e.g. warm clothing, footwear, jackets, etc.) for protection in extreme climates (cold, rain and snow); and (vii) lack of load limits in practice concerning safety (adjusted for altitude, trail paths and weather conditions). Furthermore, other factors are (viii) inadequate information (education) about the risks of high altitude; (x) susceptibility to Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) with low land porters (non-Sherpa Nepali porters) as high risk groups; (xi) catching with diverse and severe illness; (xii) poor preventive measures with a good trekking schedule and adequate acclimatization, and so on. These information reveal that despite being the important workforce for mountain tourism in Nepal, trekking porters are little recognized, underappreciated and are in vulnerable position.

As ascertained by a number of publications too (Basnyat & Schepens, 2004; Grant-Sasson, 2016; Hillman, 2021; International Porters' Protection Group, 2017; Khadka & Paul, 2015; Lonely planet, 2019; Mountain People, 2021), the aforementioned issues have not only forced the underprivileged trekking tourism porters to survive in socio-economically backward and marginalized state throughout life but also bottlenecked thousands of porters' quality of services to trekking tourists. In this context, there are some important and interesting information from the side of trekking porters who were surveyed to avail the ground based information. Responses from seven trekking porters from varied destination areas reveal following ground information.

Ms. Shova Bika is from Dandakharaka-2, Artha, Parvat who lives temporarily at Malepatan, Pokhara, Kaski. She shares her 5 years of portering experience as follows:

> I am contacted directly by trekking company whenever there is trekking trips ready to move. But there is never any job contracts signed. We including the trek leader are in the list of company's work order. Daily wage I get for trekking in Annapura region is Rs. 1550. I have to buy food on trek but no need to pay for sleeping as my lady trek leader shares rooms with me. But occasionally I/we have to sleep in dining room of tea houses and tent too when there is scarcity of rooms during peak season. There is some convenience when we have share rooms among many of us like other lady trek porters and lady trek guide. Though I have not become sick and caught of accident till date, but I do not have much idea as how it works for our safety in case of such a situation occurred. (Personal communication on 24 September 2021)

Mr. Pahalman Baramu, a trekking porter from Paku Gorkha (Presently living in Pokhara, Kaski) for 18 Years shares his difficulty:

> I (as a porter) never received the established rate of Rs. 1932.00 as the daily wage while working in Annapurna Conservation Area trekking trip. The received wage was between Rs. 1200-1500 for a day. I had to accept this lower rate without any demand/bargaining/opposition due to the fear of losing this job if not accepted. This first time rejection could also affect of another call for similar job. The load to be carried was varied between 15 to up to 50 Kg in average. However, the weight sometimes Surprisingly became lesser between 10-12 kg while working for FIT guests who were booked through travel agency and hotels in Pokhara. I observed the trek leader allocating low weight to a porter who is his relative or nearer. Few large trekking agencies have insured porters with medical, accidental and search and rescue insurances. For foods, all porters had to pay around Rs. 200 for each meal for which the meal charge is collected by the a representative of local committee formed by local hotels in destinations areas on trekking routes (Personal communication on 17 September 2021)

Mr. Karnalal Rai from Bhojpur (presently living in Nayapul, Kaski) for 10 years shares his portering experience as follows:

> I am mostly contacted by guide naike through telephonic conversation to assign portering jobs. I am offered Rs. 1,200-1,400 per day in camping trek. It went down to even Rs. 800 too but there was provision of free meal and breakfast with this rate. For tea house trek, I used to receive Rs. 1300 per day and Rs. 1500 if I went as a porter-guide for a trip assigned by guest house or hotel. The daily wage offered by hotel or guest house is some higher than a job assigned by naike or leader. It was not more than Rs. 1,500 even in trek to Everest. What even I could save was from tips coming from guests. Tips is also not sure as it is a voluntary matter. The carrying weight is from 20 up to 40 kg. The safety gears and equipments are provided when I have to go to upper region (danger zones). I as a porter face two major problems whose mitigation will be valued: (a) uncertainty of any fix rate of daily wage, and (b) lack of getting space in hotels and lodges during peak season when I have to go with 1-2 FIT tourists as porter-guide. It is because the tea

houses prefer to give their all rooms to group tourists, and not for a porter-guide like I. (Personal communication on 17 September 2021)

Mr. Pasang Sherpa from Okhaldhunga (permanent address: Khiji Demba VDC-08, Okhaldhunaga and temporary address: Sahidchowk, Pokhara, Kaski) with 18 years of portering shares his experience as follows:

> I have been involved in porter 18 years before and began as porter guide 12 years ago and got my porter guide license issued in 2014 AD. In these years, I have experienced that there is no any written contract in between porter and company but only with words of mouth. And there is a Naike who works as a bridge between porter and company. When there is need of porter, company or guide contact with Naike and they arrange few numbers of porters to that trek group for few amounts of commission in each porter they arranged to the group. The game of commission is played from the company to trek guide, trek guide to Naike, and then from Naike to porters through which porters is not getting enough money in obedience to their work. Also it goes same the tips that tourist provide for the porter. If tourist gives tips direct to the porters then there is not a problem but if they provide through guide, the half amount of money from tips to each porter is taken out by the guide as well. There is agreement on paper in which porters should carry weight up to 30 kg but in camping trek, they carry almost 45 kg of weight in one trek because they assign less number of porters than they should. They cut off the money from porters name to themselves. Some companies give the clothing to their porters if listed in the company otherwise they won't get that. And most of time the quality of product is so low which don't even protect the person wearing it. But now days, tourists also demand well equipped porters for their trekking period so that they don't have to worry about the porters' safety. This obliged the company to give proper equipment to the porters for the sake of tourist. In terms of rescue operation of porters, company seems to pressure insurance company for the rescue only if the relative or close one from the company is get in trouble. In others case, all porters are said that there is the facility of rescue if anyone gets caught in severe accident but only the relative or close one gets lucky. Only few companies give the brief about the code of conduct to porters. (Personal communication on 17 September 2021)

Hari Prasad Dahal from Jhapa (permanent address: Hallibari VDC-01, Jhapa and temporary address: Lakeside, Pokhara, Kaski) shares his experience of 21 years of portering as follows:

> When tourist came to trekking company or agencies, they contact me and other porters for the job. Sometimes, trek guide contact me and other porters for the job but most of the time, we have our own friend circle from where they get call for the job. Also, hotels and lodges also call us for the job. When they go to Everest region as porter they get payment of NPR. 1,500 to 1,600 and in Annapurna region, they get payment of NPR. 1,000 to 1,200. While they are in trek, they have to carry 20-40 kg of the weighs. In his experience, those kinds of companies only have the facility to rescue porters in emergency situation otherwise; they have to help one another in emergency. (Personal communication on 18 September 2021)

Jage Gharti Magar has been working as trekking porters for last 16 years. He is permanently from Sunsari VDC-03, Rolpa district and presently lives in Annapurna Tole, Pokhara, Kaski. He shares his portering experiences on measuring iteams and others as follows:

> I/we are not formally assigned to any porter work from any company but we are contacted through telephone from the company when needed. Also the wages are varied according to the trek we travel to. The wage ranges between NPR 1,200 to 1,500. I get exact amount on how much they have dealt. When you go through the company, there is the facility and paper work for insurance before the trip. I have experienced that porter had to carry weigh upto 40 kg in camping trek and in tea house trek, up to 25 kg of weight need to be carried which depends upon the size of the trekker group. (Personal communication on 19 September 2021)

Mr Ganesh Rai is from Mahakulung VDC, Solukhunbu who lives temporarily at Dikopatan, Pokhara, Kaski. He shares his experiences of portering as follows:

> Mostly, they are contacted through the telephone when the trek group is organized in the company and that person may be from the company or their friend as well. Daily wages varied according to the trek route and the distance they travel ranges from NPR. 1,500 to NPR. 1,800 and they get the wages on how much they have dealt. Porters are paid same wages in camping trek and in teahouse trek although they have to carry more loads in camping trek. They are insured from the company from where they travel and if the porters died in the accident in during trip, their family would get insurance money up to NPR. 1,00,000. Porters would get the facility of emergency rescue when they are assigned from high profitable companies only otherwise they have to travel all the way up to health posts or hospitals alone or with their friends and in this case, some of his friends had died on the way because they were abandoned by the companies. (Personal communication on 21 September 2021)

Interestingly, there are few ethical lapses from the side of porters too. They are for example (i) practicing the habit of being over drunk of alcohol for self-reliance (ii) porters' showing off poverty to tourists through various tangible behaviors, and (iii) their meager professional capabilities and performances (e.g., language barriers, lower level of knowledge on map reading, topography, altitude sickness, acclimatization, body hygiene) for self-reliance.

Discussion and conclusion

The review of literature of various scholars in the thematic area of tourism, prosperity and peace reveals some positive relationship of tourism with peace on both breadth and depth of their arguments. However, the nature of modern mass tourism itself does not lend itself to meaningful transformation for Nepal's deprived workforce in general and trekking porters in specific.

As COVID-19 continues to drastically impact tourism globally, seasonal workers – such as trekking tourism porters – are dramatically affected. It is because the majority of porters are struggling to sustain their and their families' livelihoods. The structural negligence has compelled porters to fall and remain in risk and vulnerability. Majority of trekking porters, who are dependent on daily, seasonal and temporary income from portering in difficult terrain, are the most deprived, disadvantageous, and marginal.

The porters' plights reveal that almost all trekking porters are found employed without contracts from job offering companies. It is basically due to the lack of Porters' Referral Center that remains as the bottleneck for formalizing the portering job. A new daily wage (rate) of trekking porters is applicable with effect from January 1, 2019 (GFNTU, 2019). This rate is mutually agreed between three tourism workers unions (Nepal National Tourism Professional Organization, The Union of Trekking Travels, Rafting and Airlines Workers – Nepal and Nepal Tourism Workers Union) and Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal (TAAN). As per it, porters' daily wage is Rs. 1,932 for Annapurna and Langtang, Rs. 2,100 for Everest and Rs. 2,220 for Dolpa, Makalu, Kanchanjunga, Manaslu and Dhaulagiri trekking areas. However, these agreed rates are found to be not practiced fully. The most of the bigger trek companies normally assign one person (mostly Nike/ trek leaders/sirdars as the supplier of trekking porters) as their contractors for the supply of porters. The suppliers of porters, who are between bigger sized trek companies and porters, offer some lower wages to porters than the amount offered by the trek companies. As per the interview based information from tourism workers' unions' leaders, they (the suppliers of porters) are noticed

deducting few hundred rupees before paying wages to porters and becoming benefactors through this dealing as mediators. Here, trek companies deal about the daily rates of trek porters with such a contractor and not directly with the porters. Thus, porters are normally not in contact with the owners or directors of trek companies. The lack of porters' referral center and its strict application has supported this trend to continue. It also has compelled the hotels and lodges (instead of tour/trek agencies) to call porters directly and employ.

The maximum load carrying weight for porters is 20 Kg. However, this threshold is also neither practiced strictly nor there is any system of checking such loads by the concerned authorities on the trek routes.

The work of Hillman (2021, p. 91) rightly authenticates this issue by stating ' the research… and the weight of loads they are employed to carry, indicates the working conditions for the porters are frequently grim'.

So far it is concerned with distribution of mountain clothing, outfitting gears and safety equipments free of charge; it is found to be offered to porters in larger scale working for the upper mountain regions where there is higher possibility of altitude sickness. There is mix of results on the matter of proper care including emergency evacuation for sick and injured porters. Sometimes porters are found to be treated immediately in the case of emergency but not always. Surprisingly, occasionally porters are noticed to be left on their own who are in search of local health post or hospital for their survival. The one third of respondents (surveyed trek operators) reveled that there is the existence of adequate and safe shelters for women porters with no assurance of good food and warm drinks on trails.

Nevertheless the aforesaid context has been gradually changing today for the improvement of porters conditions with the important roles played by tourism workers' unions and rapid development on information technology. The social media, general print media, mobile phone communication, porters' unions, and tourism employees' unions (e.g. Union of Trekking, Travels, Rafting and Airlines Workers' – UNITRAV, All Nepal Tourism Workers' Union – ANTWU, Integrated Tourism Workers Union- Nepal - ITWUN, etc.) have played positive roles on sensitizing this issue and bringing some improvement on this matter. Tourism workers related all unions have collectively submitted the major problems of tourism sector laborers' to federal (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation) and provincial (Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment) governments to address the deprived tourism workers' (porters') issues through the tourism laws. Such new laws are in pipeline for formulation at seven province levels too. TAAN seems to play important role for porters' welfare in trekking. When a porter losses his/her life during trekking period, it provide Rs. 500,000 to family and up to Rs. 250,000 in case of severe accidents (personal communication with Bishnu Devkota, President of All Nepal Tourism Workers Union, Gandaki Province through telephonic interview).

At policy level, the existing policy thrusts (e.g. Tourism Policy 2008) are verified to be theoretical, vague, non-concrete, and largely noncompliant in actions and with the lack of adequate focus for mountain tourism and its deprived workers' like porters' life support systems (MoCTCA, 2009; MoCTCA, 2016; TRC, 2016; Upadhyay, 2019). More specifically, the available policies and strategies in Nepal are utterly silent about CoE to be followed by the tour operators. The majority of the trek operators in their survey reveal that there is no availability of well defined code of ethics for the proper responsible management of porters. Applying CoE (as before profit ethical obligation) along with the strict application of

regulation is vital for enhancing not only prosperity but also peace in the war-torn and for a long time unstable country Nepal. For the durable prosperity and peace, it is also required to strongly effectuate the social security fund with the provision of old age pensions (retirement funds) for porters. The channelizing of certain amount of TIMS revenue to this fund could support to standardize the quality of work of porters. Furthermore, the continuity of academic dialogue and policy revisits on porters' issues are important steps on this aspect.

Since this study touched to trek operators and porters to identify the state of application of key measuring items, an in-depth research with larger number of respondents (trek agencies and porters) on mitigation measures and building of mutually agreed CoEs framework or model is recommendable for future research.

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