

Political Dynamics and Influence on Tourism Development in Chitwan

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of political dynamics and policies on tourism development in Chitwan, Nepal. Chitwan, known for its rich natural and cultural heritage, has faced opportunities and challenges in its tourism sector due to its complex political dynamics. This study uses a qualitative research approach to examine how historical events, governance, and socio-political factors have shaped tourism development, drawing on secondary data from historical documents, reports, and local archives. Additionally, informal interviews with 75 respondents, including both domestic and international tourists, offer practical insights into the political influences on tourism. Findings indicate that while Chitwan's tourism sector has benefited from its cultural diversity and natural beauty, it is also significantly impacted by political instability, poor infrastructure, and security challenges. Issues such as insufficient policing, lack of high-tech security, and political unrest have hindered its potential. The study highlights the need for improved governance, infrastructure development, and a more stable political environment to promote sustainable tourism in the region. This research contributes valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to enhance the tourism industry in Chitwan while addressing political challenges that affect its growth.

Keywords: Chitwan, governance, political influence, sustainable tourism, tourism development

Introduction

Tourism refers to the movement of people to various destinations for purposes such as leisure, business, education, or cultural exploration, offering them opportunities to gain new experiences, understand diverse cultures, and engage in relaxation or professional growth (Hunziker & Karpf, 1941). As a multifaceted industry, tourism thrives on peace, safety,

and security, which are essential conditions for its successful development, as highlighted by Bhatia (1996). The global significance of tourism is evident in its economic impact; for instance, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reported that in 2023, approximately 1.3 billion people travelled worldwide, generating a remarkable \$1.8 trillion in export earnings (UNWTO, 2014). This substantial growth underscores the transformative role of tourism in fostering international exchange, economic development, and cultural understanding, making it an indispensable aspect of modern global interaction.

Tourism is a vital driver of economic, cultural, and social development, playing a significant role in fostering global interconnectedness. Economically, it generates substantial revenue, supports millions of jobs, and contributes to the GDP of countries worldwide, particularly in regions reliant on tourism as a primary source of income. Culturally, tourism promotes understanding and appreciation of diverse traditions, histories, and lifestyles, fostering mutual respect and preserving heritage (Sharma, et al, 2013). Socially, it encourages cross-cultural exchanges, broadens perspectives, and enhances global cooperation. Additionally, tourism stimulates infrastructure development, such as transportation and hospitality, benefiting both locals and visitors. Its ability to bridge gaps between nations, enhance economic resilience, and support sustainable development highlights its importance as a cornerstone of modern global interaction.

Tourism in the modern world has emerged as a dynamic and rapidly growing sector, contributing significantly to the global economy and fostering cross-cultural interactions. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals have consistently grown over the years, surpassing 1.5 billion in 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global travel. Advancements in transportation, digital technology, and the increasing desire for unique cultural and natural experiences drive this growth. Tourism now accounts for around 10% of the global GDP and supports approximately one in ten jobs worldwide, reflecting its economic importance (Rasoolimanesh & Jaafar, 2016). Trends such as sustainable tourism, eco-tourism, and digital nomadism have gained momentum, driven by the demand for responsible and flexible travel options. Additionally, emerging markets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are witnessing significant tourism growth, contributing to regional development and global connectivity. Despite challenges such as environmental concerns and political instability in certain regions, tourism remains a key driver of globalization, cultural exchange, and economic resilience (Fakhar, 2008).

Successful tourism relies heavily on peace, safety, and security, as they are essential for creating an environment where travellers feel confident to explore new destinations. When these conditions are present, tourism flourishes, attracting visitors who contribute to local economies, cultural exchange, and infrastructure development. However, in the absence of peace and security, tourism declines drastically, as instability, violence, or natural disasters deter travellers (Sharma, et al., 2013). Political unrest, terrorism, or health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can lead to travel bans, economic losses, and a negative

perception of affected regions. Additionally, a lack of safety measures, poor governance, and inadequate infrastructure further diminish the appeal of destinations, discouraging visitors and damaging local livelihoods. Therefore, fostering a stable and secure environment is fundamental for tourism to thrive, ensuring mutual benefits for both travellers and host communities.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the leading international organization in the field of tourism. It promotes tourism as a driver of economic growth, inclusive development, and environmental sustainability by providing leadership and support to the sector in advancing knowledge and tourism policies globally (INSEC, 2007). While minimizing its potential negative impacts, the UNWTO is committed to promoting tourism as a tool for achieving the United Nations' broader development goals (UNDP, 1994). In this context, Nepal's tourism policy has been formulated with the aims of increasing national productivity and income, enhancing foreign currency earnings, creating employment opportunities, reducing regional imbalances, and projecting a positive image of the country. Nepal's Hindu and Buddhist heritage, along with its cold weather, are strong attractions for visitors (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2012). The image of a country or any tourist destination depends on the quality of its tourism products, which include not only natural and cultural assets or the economic environment but also the social and political climate, state order, and citizens' safety.

Tourism, both domestic and international, significantly impacts the economies of source and host nations. In Nepal, regions like Chitwan play a pivotal role in the country's tourism landscape. Historically a royal hunting reserve for Nepali Rana rulers and their guests (1846–1951), Chitwan is now renowned for its natural and cultural heritage. Chitwan National Park, established in 2030 BS and later designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, spans 932 sq. km and is home to diverse wildlife, including tigers, rhinoceroses, and migratory birds, making it a haven for nature enthusiasts. The region also boasts cultural diversity influenced by hill migration, featuring ethnic communities like the Tharu and Gurung. Visitors are drawn to its temples, traditional dances, canoeing experiences, and homestays. However, Chitwan's reliance on tourism makes it susceptible to challenges like pandemics, which have caused economic and social disruptions, including unemployment and poverty (Kunwar, 2022). To address these issues, policymakers in Chitwan focus on sustainable tourism practices to preserve its ecological and cultural integrity while mitigating risks from natural disasters and health crises.

The objective of this study is to explore the impact of political history and policies on the development and sustainability of tourism in the Chitwan district. It examines how historical events, governance, and socio-political dynamics have shaped Chitwan's tourism industry, contributing to both opportunities and challenges in the region.

Methods and Materials

This study is conducted within the qualitative research paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring the complex relationship between politics and tourism in Chitwan. The

qualitative approach enables an in-depth analysis of the historical, cultural, and political dimensions that have influenced tourism in this region. Secondary data forms the primary source of information, gathered from various libraries, archives, and personal collections. These data sources include historical documents, reports, journal articles, government policies, and records of local governance.. The study utilized printed and digital secondary sources, including books, articles, and official records available in libraries and online databases. Access to personal archives and local collections also supplemented the research. For analysis, descriptive and analytical methods were applied, using word processors and qualitative data analysis software to organize and interpret the information systematically. Although the study primarily relies on secondary data, it incorporates insights from respondents to enrich the findings. A total of 75 respondents, were interviewed informally to gather their perspectives on Chitwan's tourism and the political factors affecting their experiences. These interviews helped contextualize the secondary data and provided practical insights into the impact of political decisions on tourism.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and analytical methods. The descriptive method helped in summarizing the historical and political context, while the analytical method was applied to interpret the influence of political factors on tourism development. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between politics and tourism in Chitwan. By employing these methods, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how political history and governance have shaped the tourism industry in Chitwan, offering valuable insights for policymakers, stakeholders, and researchers in the field.

Literature Review

A. K. Bhatia (1996), in the book *Tourism Development: Principles and Practice*, discusses how tourism develops globally, its effects on society, and how societal and political conditions influence tourism. He emphasizes that political stability is a fundamental requirement for tourism development in any country. While the book does not specifically address the impact of Nepal's political situation on tourism, particularly in Chitwan, it provides valuable theoretical insights into the relationship between politics and tourism. Sapkota (2023), in the book *Tourist Identity of Chitwan*, highlights the historical and political influences on Chitwan's tourism development. Sapkota asserts that Chitwan's significance as a major tourist destination in Nepal stems not only from its natural beauty but also from its political, social, and cultural context.

Kunwar, et al. (2022), in their discussion on the effects of COVID-19 on tourism in Sauraha, Chitwan, also explore the role of the region's political climate in shaping its tourism industry. Although various authors have examined tourism activities in Chitwan and the influence of politics, the specific positive and negative impacts of politics on tourism in the region remain underexplored. This study aims to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between politics and tourism in Chitwan.

Concept

The present study examines the politics dynamics and influence on tourism activities in Chitwan, located in Bagmati Province, Nepal. Political instability, including frequent changes in government and political activities, has long negatively affected Nepal's tourism sector. Chitwan, in particular, has experienced significant political activity due to its diverse population, formed by migration and settlement from various parts of Nepal, creating a dynamic and politically active society. Political events such as rallies and processions during federal, local, and provincial elections often disrupt tourism activities in Chitwan. Despite being an important tourist destination near Chitwan National Park in Sauraha, known for attractions like elephant trekking, jungle safaris, and Tharu cultural dances, political instability sometimes deters both domestic and international tourists. This instability has hindered the region's tourism potential. However, with sustained political stability, Chitwan has the potential to thrive as a tourist destination due to its proximity to Kathmandu, excellent transportation links, national parks, quality hotels and restaurants, and rich cultural heritage.

Findings and Discussions

Chitwan National Park, Nepal's first national park, was used as a royal hunting reserve from 1846 to 1951 by the Nepali Rana rulers and their guests. Historic photographs from various Rana collections depict shocking scenes of British and Nepali rulers engaging in hunts of tigers, bears, rhinoceroses, and other animals. Today, the park stands as a symbol of natural conservation and a major attraction for nature lovers. Located 150 kilometres west of Kathmandu, Chitwan is ranked as the third most visited tourist destination in Nepal, attracting approximately 250,000 visitors annually from around the world (Baral, 1998). The park, established in 2030 BS, spans 932 square kilometres and is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It offers a variety of attractions beyond its natural beauty, including temples such as Bikram Baba, Lami Taal, and Tamor Taal, as well as activities like elephant rides and community forest exploration.

Chitwan's rich cultural heritage adds another dimension to its appeal. The Tharu community's lifestyle, culture, and traditional dances draw significant interest from tourists. Visitors can also explore an open-air sculpture museum and enjoy picnicking in the serene environment. The area is renowned for birdwatching, especially as it serves as a winter home for migratory birds from Siberia. Additionally, Chitwan is home to diverse wildlife, including deer, tigers, and rhinoceroses. Other attractions include Bishazari Taal and Jalbire Waterfall, which is a short twenty-minute walk from Jalbire Temple. For those seeking unique experiences, canoeing and homestays with the Gurung community are popular options (UNDP, 2008).

Chitwan's socio-cultural diversity is another key attraction. The population consists of numerous ethnic groups with distinct traditions, festivals, and rituals, reflecting a rich tapestry of cultural heritage. The migration of people from the hills has contributed to the region's demographic and cultural mix, evident in the presence of Buddhist monasteries,

Hindu temples, and other faith-based institutions. Tourism in Chitwan has significant economic importance, with over 80% of tourists arriving in Nepal by air. However, sustainable tourism management remains vital. As the World Tourism Organization (1987) emphasizes, tourism must balance economic, social, and aesthetic needs while preserving cultural integrity, ecological processes, and biodiversity.

Studies have highlighted the economic value of tourism in Chitwan's development (Puri, 2009). However, challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic have severely impacted the local tourism industry in areas like Sauraha. The pandemic led to revenue losses, unemployment, frustration, and poverty among locals. At the same time, it provided opportunities for health awareness, business collaboration, and infrastructure maintenance (Kunwar, 2022). These challenges underscore the need for policymakers to adopt preventive measures and risk assessments to ensure sustainable growth in the region's tourism sector.

This study highlights that safety and security play a key role in the development of tourism. Security, however, cannot be generalized, as its definition varies from one person to another. To explore how respondents perceive tourism and crime, they were asked to respond to a series of questions. The following table presents how tourists view security issues differently. The results clearly show that tourists have varying opinions on these matters, as indicated in the table below, where respondents shared their understanding of tourism-related crime, safety, and security (Bhusal, 2007).

To further discuss these issues, it was important to address the various challenges related to security in tourism. Respondents were asked to identify the components of a safe and secure environment, and the following results were found. Tourism has become a popular global leisure activity and is one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing industries in the world. Tourism is important because it allows people to explore other countries, their people, and cultures, fostering mutual understanding and building bridges between nations. Through tourism, different cultures come together.

Countries with a reputation for safe tourism can use this as a competitive advantage to attract various segments of the international market. This paper addresses some of the safety issues in tourism, with a focus on tourism safety in Romania, based on the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index, particularly the third pillar Safety and Security. It also includes the results of an online survey conducted with managers and employees in the tourism industry (Fakhar, 2008). In today's fast-paced world, travel has become an excellent way to relieve stress and anxiety. People seek change during holidays to relax and spend quality, memorable time.

Chitwan, with its stunning natural landscapes, offers a unique opportunity for ecotourism, which involves visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively untouched natural areas. Ecotourism is a responsible travel approach that promotes conservation while improving the economic conditions of local people. It helps conserve the environment for economic benefits and political empowerment (Sigdel, 2013). With advancements in science, technology, and communication, the world has become more interconnected. Chitwan is

well-positioned to showcase its natural attractions and draw the attention of global tourists to its potential for sustainable tourism.

Table 1

Challenges and Security of Tourists

Safety and Security of Tourists	N	Percentage
Visit to crowded public areas like lakes, parks	6	8.51
Visible presence of police in the tourist area	10	12.77
Presence of police in tourist area	6	8.51
Transportation of tourists through public transport	4	5.32
Transportation of tourists through hired motor cars	6	8.51
Protected travelling arrangements for tourist	9	11.70
Availability of information centers	16	21.28
Welcome and friendly atmosphere for visits	18	23.40
Total	75	100

Source: Field study – Aug, 2024.

The table above shows different components of safe and secured tourist environment. The researcher had identified eight different components of safe and secured tourism environment during the review of literature. The respondents were requested to pick the most important element. The above table depicts the number and the percentage of each selected component. There is no doubt that all the eight components have their strong role in maintaining the peace and harmony in tourism industry. However, it was found that the transportation of tourist in hired motor care has minimal effect in maintaining the security of tourist environment. We can say that people of Chitwan can boost up their tourism by providing welcoming and friendly environment. Tourist should feel free to stay here without any hesitation. It can be done by developing the awareness and development attitude towards tourist. there are different prices for Nepalese and foreigner. Essential services for foreign tourists should be made available On time. however, The absence of adequate information and failure to establish a network amongst hotel, travel and tour operators within the country. There is an inability to develop a network of reliable air services that enables tourists of various countries intending to come to Nepal to be able to come to Nepal. It is also clear that friendly and safe environment for the tourist can't be achieved without involvement and active participation of the local people and the government. There have also been changes in lifestyle, for example some retirement-age people sustain year round tourism. This is facilitated by internet sales of tourist services. Some sites have now started to offer dynamic packaging, in which an inclusive price is quoted for a tailor-made package requested by the customer upon impulse.

Table 2*Responsible Factors for the Increasing Tourism Crime in Chitwan*

Responsible for increasing tourism crime	N	Percentage
Tourism of Chitwan	7	9.33
National Government	4	5.33
Private sector (Owner)	4	5.33
Police	4	5.33
Private Sector	10	13.33
Organized Crime aliens	12	16
Unemployed Local People	6	8
Organized Crime Syndicates	7	9.33
Tourist themselves	13	17.33
People with criminal tendency	8	10.66
Total	75	100.00

Source: Field study – Aug, 2024.

The table above prioritizes the culprits responsible for the tourism crime in Chitwan. The researcher had identified different ten variables in order to prioritize as culprits. Out of 90 respondents only 75 respondents gave answer to this question. Remaining 15 respondents didn't share their view on this issue. The participants were requested to prioritize their perception on different variables and requested. The data shows that Chitwan tourism industry, private sector owner and employees had obtained low marks during this research. It shows that the Industry, entrepreneur and the officials were less responsible to promote tourism crime.

This study was specifically conducted to assess the existing challenges facing tourism in Chitwan. The research used a combination of tools, including questionnaires for tourists, in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs, and field observations. The study applied an opinion survey method to gather views and perspectives from respondents. The findings revealed that most tourists visiting Chitwan did not report security issues to the local police, even though they faced challenges during their stay. Instead, they tended to report such issues to their respective embassies (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). Additionally, tourists involved in illegal activities also did not report incidents to the police. On a positive note, both domestic and foreign investments in tourism have been increasing, which is contributing to the growth of Chitwan's tourism industry. Tourists are drawn to Chitwan primarily for its natural beauty, unique cultural diversity, and adventurous activities such as mountain trekking and jeep safaris.

While the authorities in Chitwan are working effectively to monitor and take action against criminal activities, issues such as theft, robbery, cheating, and natural disasters were identified as major security threats to the region. On the whole, individual business owners in Chitwan have been making significant efforts to provide a secure environment

for tourists. Their contributions are commendable and play a vital role in ensuring safety. However, the community remains concerned about issues like education and unemployment, which are seen as major underlying causes of problems for tourists and potential security threats for future visitors.

Chitwan, as part of Nepal, has experienced massive structural changes, particularly in the transition from a monarchy to a democratic republic. This has led to fluctuating public expectations—shifting from high hopes to considerable frustration. The region has moved from an era of armed insurgency to a period of relative peace (though termed ‘negative peace’). The political landscape, once dominated by a narrow circle of stakeholders, is now characterized by multiple stakeholders with diverse and sometimes conflicting interests (UNICEF, 1996). The remarkable growth of tourism at both the national and international levels has brought significant economic, socio-cultural, and environmental benefits, increasing the attention on tourism as a potential force for peace. As Upreti, et al, (2013) note, tourism is increasingly viewed as a force for peace, a message that has gained traction among academics, consultants, and industry professionals alike.

The unique geography of Chitwan is not only an asset for attracting tourists but also presents opportunities for the region amid Nepal’s ongoing political transition. The constitution, the presidency, and the government are all changing, and political leaders have largely struggled to manage this transition. However, these transformations present both challenges and opportunities. The national focus is on addressing these challenges and seizing the opportunities that arise. Overcoming these challenges and succeeding on a national level will, without a doubt, affect Chitwan as a tourist destination both directly and indirectly.

Popescu (2011) explains that the local economic effects of tourism are determined by the share of tourism spending within the local economy and the resulting economic activities. In the context of tourism, it is important to increase the involvement of local communities, especially the poor, in the tourism value chain. This can help drive local economic development and reduce poverty.

Educational tourism has also grown in popularity, driven by the increasing desire for teaching and learning experiences outside the traditional classroom. The primary focus of educational tourism is for travellers to visit another country to learn about its culture. Similarly, ecotourism, which is focused on responsible travel to fragile and often protected areas, is gaining momentum. It strives to minimize environmental impact while educating travellers, providing funding for conservation, benefiting the economic development of local communities, and fostering political empowerment (Pizam, & Mansfeld, 2006).

Finally, pro-poor tourism, which aims to assist the poorest populations in developing countries, has received increasing attention in recent years. It is being addressed through small-scale community projects and initiatives by Ministries of Tourism to attract a larger number of tourists, thus helping local economies.

Conclusion

Chitwan is rapidly developing as a prominent tourist destination and tourism hub, attracting both foreign and domestic investments, which is fostering growth within its tourism industry. While the region has made notable strides in improving safety and security standards for tourists, there remain significant challenges that need to be addressed. Issues such as robbery, cheating, theft, strikes, and natural disasters continue to pose threats to the overall safety of the area. Despite efforts to enhance security, the existing systems remain insufficient, particularly due to the lack of high-tech policing and a robust intelligence network. Furthermore, the region faces infrastructural limitations and a lack of deep understanding of the tourism industry within the local community, especially in the peripheral areas. To sustain and further boost Chitwan's tourism potential, these gaps must be addressed by improving security infrastructure, investing in modern policing techniques, enhancing community awareness, and ensuring better coordination among local stakeholders. By tackling these challenges, Chitwan can fully realize its potential as a safe and attractive destination for tourists, benefiting both the local economy and its residents. The influence of politics in Chitwan's tourism sector is evident as political instability and inadequate governance have hindered the development of essential infrastructure and security systems. The lack of political consensus and effective policymaking has slowed progress in addressing security challenges, which undermines Chitwan's potential to fully capitalize on its tourism opportunities.

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