

CRITIQUING THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICES OF DOMESTIC TOURISM IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Nepal is a very rich country in terms of its natural beauty along with cultural variety. It has been an attraction for not only the foreigners but also domestic travellers. However, the contribution of domestic tourism in the development of this sector has been overlooked. After the Covid-19 pandemic, domestic tourism is in the stage of commercialisation. In this context, this paper aims to critique the concept and practices of domestic tourism in Nepal in view of the analysis of the existing problems and prospects in fostering domestic tourism in Nepal. This study is based on reviewing the various related literatures. The study finds lack of strategic plan, lack of meaningful collaboration and consensus in policy development among the various tiers and actors of the government, less travel culture of the people, inadequate infrastructures, insufficient organisation, lack of forward and backward linkages and human resource capability as major problems whereas natural and cultural diversities, increasing focus of different tiers of the government, popularisation of new destinations through social media, growing interest in domestic tourism, indefinite pandemic, growing travel culture in urban areas, popularity of home stays, growing number skilled manpower in the sector are the prospects of domestic tourism in our country.

I. INTRODUCTION

I. Introduction

Little is known about domestic tourism in Nepal but, given that its value is estimated to be at least equal to international tourism, it is poorly understood and under emphasised by government, international agencies, and some in business (Badal & Kharel, 2019). The possibility of tourism in Nepal is very high because of its geographical location, its culture and traditions, landmarks, and its natural beauty (Sthapit, 2020). Nepal's major tourist activities include wilderness and adventure activities such as mountain biking, bungee jumping, rock climbing and mountain climbing, trekking, hiking, bird watching, mountain flights, ultra-light aircraft flights, paragliding and hot air ballooning over the mountains of the Himalaya, hiking, and mountain biking, exploring the waterways by raft, kayak or canoe and jungle safaris especially in the Terai region (MOFA, n.d.). These activities are popular not only in Nepal but also throughout the world and are gathering the attention of many travellers. Moreover, with a vast variety of culture and traditions, it is always a treat for the tourists to observe the life of different communities in Nepal. On the other hand, Basnyat, Shrestha, Shakya, Byanjankar, (2020) argued that existing domestic tourism literature predominantly focuses on the potential of domestic tourism and the measurement of its demands, but it greatly ignores the issues and challenges in the domestic tourism industry. Domestic visitors are not welcomed as foreign visitors in many places of Nepal;

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poor infrastructure, including poor coverage and low quality of roads, and unreliable domestic air services, increases the costs and reduces the value captured from tourists (Badal & Kharel, 2019). Since the country's tourism industry has been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting domestic tourism is a key to the revival of the sector (THT, 2020 Sept 28). Bangladesh is a country that has been heavily reliant on domestic tourism from its inception. When the country's residents were released from the lockdown in the second half of 2020, the sector had an opportunity to slowly rebuild through domestic tourism (Rasal, Sukrana & Naiem, 2021).

In this context, this article aims to critique the concept and practices of domestic tourism in Nepal in view of the analysis of the existing problems and potentialities in fostering domestic tourism in Nepal.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses review of literature concerning the concepts and theories of domestic tourism as well as the domestic tourism policy of Nepal.

2.1 Concept and theories of domestic tourism

Choo (2015) describes domestic tourism as tourism involving residents of one country travelling within their own country. It has been a well-established practice, happening in every country or region in the world. Several positive contributions portray domestic tourism as a vital dimension upon which to attain sustainable tourism development and these include destination exposition, destination appreciation and economic development (Kabote, 2020). A strong relationship among tourism and visiting friends and relatives and religious pilgrimage has been found in countries with a long history of domestic tourism (Rogerson & Lisa, 2005). On the contrary, mass domestic tourism has only recently emerged due to increased disposable income, introduction of labour rights associated with leisure and vacation, governmental policy about the deregulation of internal movement, and so on (Scheyvens, 2007).

To expose tourism destinations to the outside world, domestic tourists assume various positions and functions within the tourism industry such as being information bureaus, ambassadors, role models and tour guides to attractions and destinations within their communities (Kabote, 2020). According to a recent report published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), domestic tourism accounts for 73 per cent of total Travel and Tourism spending globally in 2018; thus, it is a key driver of the tourism sector. Countries rely on domestic tourism as a tool to reduce poverty, improve infrastructure, and generate employment and most importantly to drive economic growth (Tourism Teacher, 2021).

According to the Caixa Bank Newsletter (2019, Jan), there are some points that differentiate domestic tourism from international tourism. First, domestic tourism is less seasonal, and a vitally important aspect for the sustainability of the tourism industry and labour market. Secondly, foreign tourists spend more days in the destination while domestic tourists spend shorter stays but travel more often. Moreover, the shorter trips made by domestic tourists is the main reason why they spend less but their daily expenditure is also lower.

There is inwardness among tourists' expectations, destination attributes, amenities, and competitiveness (Dwyer, 2014; Rahman, 2021). Therefore, analysing the challenges and opportunities has become vital essential tourism services and management

(Madhavan & Rastogi, 2011; Rahman, 2021). A country's competitiveness depends on its openness, naturalness, climate, recreational amenities, infrastructure, historical and cultural attractions, and available information about the destinations (Madhavan & Rastogi, 2011). The quality of roads and highways, transport facilities, and telecommunication technology influences destinations' selection (Hueng, 2001; Rahman, 2021).

2.2 Tourist development stages and domestic tourists

Referring to Urry and Larsen tourist gaze concept and other arguments, Kabote (2020) argues that domestic tourism is made up of various building blocks as local people appreciate the value of tourism and its healing power. The figure below shows the development stages and degree of tourism formalisation matrix.

Development Stage	International Tourist		
	Macro Domestic Tourist		
	Micro Domestic Tourist		
	Backyard Domestic Tourist		
		Informal Tourism	Formal Tourism
		Degree of Tourism Formalisation	

Figure 1: Tourist development and formalization matrix (Kabote, 2020)

The above figure indicates that there are four stages in tourism development. These stages are backyard domestic tourist, micro domestic tourist, macro domestic tourist and international tourist in which equally tourists start by exploring their local communities before going further afield. Through exposure they are motivated to explore more and further away from their local community and there is a need for the right political and economic environment to prevail before that can happen (Kabote, 2020).

Backyard domestic tourists spend their leisure time outside their home somewhere in their locality like the dating of young couples. Though micro domestic tourists are local people, they are fully aware of attractions within their locality. They are taken as excursionists or informal domestic tourists or micro domestic tourists. On the third stage, macro domestic tourists appear who visit attractions within their country outside their locality. These tourists also need the facilities like guest houses, lodges, hotels, and restaurants which make them formal tourists. Finally, international tourists travel outside their country. It indicates that the international tourists are the extended form of domestic tourists crossing the various stages as mentioned above.

2.3 Domestic tourism in Nepal: Policy Review

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) has stressed on the development of the tourism industry as the basis of the national economy through identification, protection, and promotion of various Nepalese heritages. It has also assured the benefit of the tourism industry to local people under its national policy. For this, the significance of domestic tourism cannot be ignored.

The Tourism Policy-2008 has promised to develop domestic tourism as a subfield of tourism business. In this regard, it has emphasised to develop and expand internal tourism in various locations of Himalayan, hilly and Terai region of Nepal. Moreover, those people who visit inside and outside their locality are recognised as domestic tourists as micro and macro domestic tourists in theory. Travel incentive leaves, and educational observation tour are encouraged for government employees to enhance domestic tourism. For this, various tourism packages are developed in the coordination of the private sector. Furthermore, local travel concession programmes will be encouraged to attract domestic tourism for the employees of all sectors.

Similarly, the Fifteenth Periodic Plan (2019-2024) of Nepal has opted for the strategy to identify, develop, and promote new tourism destinations for the promotion of internal and external tourism considering regional balance. The annual federal budget of 2021/022 has allocated the budget for developing new tourism destinations. Moreover, the recent announcement of providing a forced leave facility of ten days to government employees in the budget of the FY 2021/022 (2078-2079 BS) is a public policy development that can bring about desirable changes in the promotion of domestic tourism..

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III. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research approach and technique

The study is based on review of the existing studies (literature) in the subject area. It has basically reviewed scholarly literature available online and related to domestic tourism in Nepal. Various research journals, newspaper articles, official reports, and webpages of government and non-governmental organisations, were reviewed for which a 'keyword search technique' was used in Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Academia. These documents were examined with respect to their relevancy, and suitable ones were taken for the study. During the study, the theories from literatures were linked with Nepalese tourism context as found in various study. The findings of various studies were compared and analysed. Based on those literature review, the concept, and practices of domestic tourism in Nepal are critically reviewed to analyse its problems and prospects.

3.2 Limitations

This review paper has several limitations. First, it only used the electronic search which covers few available resources in this area, that too mostly available online. Secondly, it has used secondary data that would lack empirical tests. The availability of few and similar literatures would also limit the analysis and results. It could spare the room for improvements for future researchers and scholars in their future review and research works.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Domestic tourism is the tourism involving residents of one country travelling within that country. According to the Nepal Tourism Board, "any activities confined within a country that involve tourist activities for which people leave their residences for more than a 24-hour period." Before some years, domestic tourists were not regarded as tourists. After the earthquake in 2015, NTB launched campaigns like 'Ghumphir Year' in 2016, to attract domestic tourists (Sen, 2019). Moreover, the government of Nepal had declared the year 2020 as "Visit Nepal 2020" which was disrupted by the novel coronavirus resulting in travel bans and lockdown. However, Nepalese have started developing a trend of travelling to various new domestic destinations. Trekking, hiking, and short trips have now become popular in Nepal (Rana, 2021). Domestic attractions are being promoted well and the number of domestic tourists is increasing but it still lacks proper commercialisation (Panjiyar, 2016). Most of the domestic travels happen during the Dashain and Tihar festival holidays in our country.

4.1 Problems

All services in the tourism industry in Nepal are designed targeting foreign travellers whether it is hotel/restaurant or transportation ("Post Covid-19," n.d.). Stakeholders feel that challenges like demonetisation, goods and services tax, lack of infrastructure, connectivity, and advent of over-the-air (OTA) have stalled growth (TravTalk India, 2020). Tourism organisations have not

maintained the record of internal tourism movement. Domestic visitors are not treated as foreign visitors in many places of Nepal, charged more by local peoples, irresponsible nature from travel and trekking guides, local people, and lack of proper information about local areas are some of the factors hindering the domestic travellers. Besides them, frequent strikes, insufficient information about destinations and hotels giving less priority to domestic visitors are also problems in domestic tourism. Hence, the government has a huge role to play if the industry is to successfully tap the country's growing domestic tourists (Lama, Dec 6, 2020). Depending on the articles reviewed, existing problems in the domestic tourism sector of Nepal can be listed out as below:

a. Strategic problems:

- ☞ There is a lack of strategic planning to develop domestic tourism.
- ☞ Domestic tourism has not been considered to alleviate poverty and generate employment.
- ☞ There is a lack of meaningful collaboration and consensus in policy development among the various tiers and actors of the government.

b. Structural problems:

- ☞ Lack of diversity in tourism products and destinations is also one of the problems of the sector.
- ☞ Kathmandu, Chitwan, Pokhara, Lumbini, Annapurna Circuit, Everest Base Camp, Mustang among others are popular destinations among both international and domestic travellers. However, places like Dolpo, Taplejung, Ramechhap, etc., remain underrated among tourists (Sen, 2019).
- ☞ Insufficient infrastructure is also the demotivating factor for this sector.
- ☞ Different government and private sector organisations rarely provide leave or leisure vacation to their employees' recreation.
- ☞ Both forward and backward linkages are not adequate for fostering this sector.

c. Operational problems:

- ☞ There is the lack of suitable and organised tours focused on domestic tourists.
- ☞ Domestic tourism in Nepal is mainly reliant upon seasonal trends. Most Nepalis pack their bags and head for tourists' hotspots like Manang, Mustang, Rara Lake, Ghandruk only during peak season (Neupane, 2019).
- ☞ Various facilities and attractions are focused on international tourists rather than domestic tourists.
- ☞ Tourism information centres are not being prioritised by provincial and local governments.
- ☞ There is not sufficient coordination among the stakeholders in this sector.

d. Behavioural problems:

- ☞ Some of the ethnic conflict and extremism are also challenges.
- ☞ In conservative societies, some customs are not open to others and influences from outside are viewed suspiciously.
- ☞ Nepalese people travel to visit their friends, relatives, and religious places but tourism is not viewed as a necessity till date. Therefore, the present travel culture of Nepali people can also be taken as a challenge for domestic tourism; and it needs policy intervention to improve things.
- ☞ Local tourists are less interested in domestic destinations. They are not welcomed as foreigners as well.
- ? Feedbacks of the tourists are not taken seriously for improvement.

4.2 Prospects

If an adequate level of infrastructural support like roadways, accommodation and other basic services are arranged properly and promotional campaigns conducted effectively, the trend of domestic tourist movement will go upward and will be the dependable sources for the tourism development (Dhakal, 2015). According to Nepali Headlines (2017, April 5), the government has taken some initiatives to promote domestic tourism through efforts like travel incentive leave, encouraging employees to visit various tourist destinations while being paid for it. However, it has not been effectively enforced.

The focus of the tourism industry has not been much concentrated on domestic tourists, but this segment is also offering hopes and has the potential to inject more life in tourism sector (Panjiyar, 2016). There are a diverse range of products available to people travelling, from adventure tour and mountaineering options to relaxing honeymoon packages and these products are well dispersed (Badal & Kharel, 2019). The variety in climate and culture of Nepal equally attracts Nepali people. Yangprayong and Suwanrat (2021) concluded that the potential factors of cultural tourism in the Songkhla old town were found to have strengths in terms of location and being culturally diverse while the weak points were pricings of goods and services that did not reflect their real cost; and found to have opportunity in trending in cultural tourism with government tourism promotion policies when the obstacle was economic slowdown. The SDG's target 12.b stressed developing and implementing tools to monitor sustainable tourism's impact on job creation and promoting local culture and products. Tourism can play a vital role in conserving local culture by selling local products and increasing employment.(Rahman, 2021)

Nowadays, domestic tourists are also oriented towards adventure sports like Bungee Jumping, Rafting, Paragliding, mountain cycling, hiking etc. Also, a number of Nepalese going for trekking in various trekking trails of Nepal is increasing annually. Be it adventure tourism or sight-seeing or just travelling to major tourist destinations, domestic tourists already occupy a huge chunk in the tourism market (Panjiyar, 2016). According to New Business Age (2021, Feb 7), domestic tourists are also contributing to popularising new tourist destinations that used to go unnoticed before.

Domestic tourism also contributes to the overall tourism sector via exposition of destination, appreciation of destination and economic development (Kabote, 2020). The author further argues well-travelled local people expose their visited destinations to other peoples. They also appreciate the destination via active participation, tolerance, good conduct and sense of ownership, management style and they become more welcoming to the tourists. Furthermore, these people can better handle the expectations of tourists. They know what to share with the tourists and where to take them. Therefore, well-advertisement to domestic tourists can have large volumes of tourists in small destinations.

Arrivals of international tourists in Nepal plunged by over 80 per cent last year; the country only received 230,000 foreign visitors in 2020 compared to 1,197,000 visitors in 2019. However, domestic tourism has become a saviour to many hospitality businesses and the local hoteliers, who usually do not consider Nepalese as tourists, are now relying solely on domestic visitors and are gradually seeing their businesses bouncing back as New Business Age (2021, Feb 7) published. The scenario provided tourism entrepreneurs more insight for the inevitability of

domestic tourism. For this, it requires our country to formulate and execute credible, effective plans and strategies in the hospitality and tourism sector that, in turn, demands abundant, well-administered research works in this sector (Sthapit, 2021). The country should concentrate on domestic tourism, eco-tourism, and sustainable tourism with special price packages offered to entice visitors (Rasal, Sukrana & Naiem, 2021). Based on the reviewed articles, the prospects of domestic tourism in Nepal can be pointed out as follows:

- ✍ Organisations are holding events in different parts of the country contributing to the domestic MICE (meetings, incentives, conferencing, and exhibition) tourism (New Business Age, 2021, Feb 7)
- ✍ Domestic tourism is stabilising the seasonal flows of international tourism. It is done by encouraging domestic tourism during the “off-season” periods related to Nepal’s international tourism.
- ✍ Home stays are being popular for both guests and hosts throughout the country.
- ✍ The increasing trend of travel culture of the urban people is supporting this sector.
- ✍ The availability of affordable experiences and packages meeting the needs of potential local travellers play a vital role to develop internal tourism. It can also be helpful in bringing innovation in services.
- ✍ Growing infrastructure across the country helps venture into new areas and engage people within the country for the tourism purpose.
- ✍ Federal, provincial, and local governments can collaboratively prepare a tourism development strategy.
- ✍ Various media news stories and feature stories have highlighted new destinations for the local tourists.
- ✍ The growing number of skilled manpower in the tourism sector through business and entrepreneurship, hotel management, travel and tourism management study, skills gained from foreign employment leave the space for domestic tourism business.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite various problems, domestic tourism has tremendous potential in Nepal. It is a ‘heaven-like’ beautiful country with the most diversified nature, climate, and culture. In our Nepali culture, guests should be treated as God. Hence, whether local or foreigner, they are supposed to be served accordingly. In our context, most of the services in the tourism industry are hitherto focused on foreign travellers. So, varieties of domestic packages that suit Nepali travellers should be developed and promoted, in the days to come, to bolster domestic tourism business. Basnyat, Shrestha, Shakya, Byanjankar (2020) concluded in their study how uncertainties created by the lack of institutional arrangements and prioritisation, and confusion around the appropriate ways and means of managing domestic tourism have contributed to the chaos in the private sector tourism industry in Nepal. However, there are some problems such as lack of adequate strategic plan, less travel culture of the people, inadequate infrastructures, lack of forward and backward linkages and lack of capable human resource in this sector while natural and cultural diversities, increasing focus of different tiers of the government in domestic tourism, popularisation of new destinations through social media, growing interest in domestic tourism, growing travel culture in urban areas, popularity of home stays, growing number skilled manpower in the sector etc. can be taken as prospects of domestic tourism in Nepal. Therefore, addressing problems, accepting challenges, proper planning, and most important willing to

change the concept of tourism will bring better perspective to tourism industry in Nepal without completely relying on external world (Panjiyar, 2016). Special stimulus package from the government is necessary for the travel and tourism industry to survive the current situation and revive after the pandemic (Deb & Nafi, 2020). In this context, suitable policy intervention, proper planning and management, human resource development, infrastructure development, capacity development of Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), public private partnership, promoting new destinations, adequate research in the sector are additional ways out to enhance the existing situation of domestic tourism in Nepal

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