

A Preliminary Study of Pilgrimage Tourism in Barahachhetra, Nepal

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

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Abstract

Pilgrimage is an age-old phenomenon for people of all religions. Pilgrimage is often been defined as a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding. For the Hindus, Pilgrimage is associated with Moksha (liberation), one of the four Purusharthas (virtues), the other three being Artha (material value) Dharma (righteousness), and Kama (pleasure). The concept of pilgrimage tourism in the Hindu tradition is a recent one. In Nepal, where tourism has largely remained a seasonal business, pilgrimage tourism can be a perennial source of income especially because Nepal is home to some of the world's most important sacred Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage destinations. It is also noteworthy that according to 2011 official census in Nepal, more than 80 percent of the residents follow Hinduism (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012, p.4) and Nepal shares a free border with India, the country with the largest number of Hindu residents, in absolute terms, in the entire world. Barahachhetra in Nepal is as important as other pilgrimage destinations in Nepal, however, no studies have been carried out so far on

Keywords

*Pilgrimage,
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the status and potential of pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra. The authenticity of the pilgrimage sites, the hospitality culture and the peace experienced by pilgrims together provide a memorable pilgrimage tourism experience for the pilgrimage tourists visiting Barahachhetra. The prospect of pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra is immense and has a direct bearing on the preservation of the religious and cultural heritages as well as the economic condition of the residents therein. A coordinated approach initiated at the highest level of governance is required to study, promote and sustain pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra. In this study both pilgrimage tourism and religious tourism interchangeably used. Though spiritual tourism has become recently evolved, the authors did not visit on it although efforts have been made to highlight its significant in the introduction.

Introduction

Pilgrimage is an age-old phenomenon for people of all religions. Pilgrimage is often been defined as a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding. Pilgrimage, commonly defined as wandering towards sacred sites as an act of will or religious obligation, has been at the core of religious tourism since ancient times (Josan, 2009; in Hung, Yang, Wassler, Wang, Lin, & Liu, 2016). Contrary to this early definition of pilgrimage as religious activity there has been a shift that researchers now began to discuss the modern ideas of pilgrimage in the context of spiritual rather than through religious motivations and actions (Collins- Kreiner, 2016). The current definition of pilgrimage entails “a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding” (Barber, 1993; in Durán-Sánchez, Álvarez-García, Río-Rama & Oliveira, 2018). State it differently, from time immemorial, pilgrimage sites worldwide have attracted large number of people, thus it is no wonder that this phenomenon has increasingly become a subject of academic inquiry (Bhardwaj, 1983; Blackwell, 2007; Coleman & Eade, 2004; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Vukonik, 1996; in Buzinde, Kalavar Kohli, Manuel-Navarrete, 2014). Scholars from various disciplines such as geography, religious studies, anthropology, and cognate disciplines have examined pilgrimage to illustrate complex connections to various cultural, social, political, economic and /or environmental dimensions of society (Dubisch & Winkleman, 2005; Moronis, 1992; Shinde, 2011; Singh, 2011; Turner & Turner, 1978; in Buzinde et al., 2014). Among many, Victor Turner (1973) was the pioneer to conduct conceptual study on pilgrims and pilgrimage using the concept of ‘liminality’ to describe the process of pilgrimage and pilgrim’s experience.

The special issue of *Annals of Tourism Research* (1992) dedicated to the topic in 1992 marked a turning point in pilgrimage research, which by that point had entered the ‘growth stage. In the introduction to this issue, Smith (1992) argued that the

contemporary terminology that identified the ‘pilgrim as religious traveller and the ‘tourist’ as a vacationer was a culturally constructed polarity that veiled or blurred the travellers’ individual motives (Smith,1992; in Collins-Kleiner, 2016). It is Stausberg (2011; in Collins-Kreiner, 2019) who put lights on pilgrimage tourism as a new interest in pilgrimage emerged in the 2000s via scholars concerned with the field of tourism and religion.

However, on pilgrims and tourist, Smith (1992) points out, although the most widespread current use of the term “pilgrim” refers to someone on a “religious journey,” the Latin peregrinus from which pilgrim is derived “suggest broader interpretations, including foreigner, wanderer, exile, and the traveler, as well as newcomer and stranger.

This comprehension of pilgrimage as religious to secular activity requires clear demarcation. Religious tourism can be defined as the visit of sacred places to participate or follow up religious ceremonies and the pilgrimage in the form of visits or activities to fulfil religious duties in the evaluation of tourism understanding. It mostly covers tourist trips to perform the religious beliefs and/or to see the centers of faith attractions in the evaluations of the tourism phenomenon (Heidari et al., 2017; in Heidari, Yazdani, Saghafi, & Jalilvand, 2017). Rinschede (1992; in Heidari et al., 2017) explained that travel behaviour, including travel patterns, transportation choices, seasonal demand and socialization processes are all affected by beliefs, especially in the context of religious tourism. For Wright (2007) religious tourism is a form of tourism where by people of faith travel individually or in a group for pilgrimage, missionary leisure or fellowship purposes. The destination will be a religious site. Many scholars see religions tourism as nested with in cultural tourism, because religion is understood as a part of culture (Rinschede, 1992; Santos, 2003; Singh & Sagar, 2004; in Shinde, 2007, p.187) and, in more practical terms, provides a range of resources including ‘religious sites and artefacts’ used in the creation of cultural tourism (Nolan & Nolan, 1989; Gettigan, 2003; in Alderman, 2002). Religious site visitors tend to travel with family members or organized groups, and their trip is highly seasonal, influenced not only by climate and weather but also by the occurrence of holidays, ceremonies and work schedules. often transform religious tourism into mass tourism, because significantly, more secular visitors are also attracted to religious tourism sites. In this case, the tourism business itself acts as a direct commercializing agent of religious heritage attractions.

Given the increase in faith travel in recent years, at a recent UNWTO Conference, definition of religious tourism was Expanded as ‘a form of tourism that has its goal, a destination which is able to provide diverse religious resources for the fulfillment of religious and non religious purposes and experiences’ (Shinde, 2015, para3; in Shinde, 2016, p2). Cohen’s quest for a theology of tourism and recent trends of

existing pilgrimology (Singh, 2005) have become central attraction to all religious and secular groups in the 21st century. Religious pilgrimage has exploited in recent years, mainly due to improved transportation facilities and the visible rise in the material prosperity of potential pilgrims. As a result of this convergence between better transport technology and greater wealth, these sacred places are becoming increasingly commoditized. Now drawing both hard core devotees, and casual pilgrim's visits with recreational activities. The thread reveals a rising pattern of geocapital formation around prominent shrines and temples, especially those situated in readily accessible places (Bhattarai, Conway, & Shrestha, 2005, p678).

Spirituality, on the other hand, is a set of ideas that one can find in religious traditions but which also exist independently of them, including an emphasis and culture of the self, wholeness, holism, and (inter) connectedness, meaning, search/ quest, and experience-orientation, monotheistic, cosmology, peacefulness/tolerance, and similar positive value commitments (Heidary et al., 2018). Spiritual tourism is a more abstract, multi-faith and eclectic one in which tourists seek meaning, engagement and peace through activities such as meditation (Heidary et al., 2018). Chaline (2002; in Heidary et al., 2018) states spiritual tourism as an extraordinary experience. What is anticipated in spiritual tourism destination is not holiness or divine visions. Fedele (2012; in Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017), for example, in referring to the growing spiritual tourism traveler, coins the term 'new pilgrims' followed by 'unchurching' (Wood, 2007; in Cheer et al., 2017), 'discursive shifts' (Fedele, 2012; Kujawa, 2012; in Cheer et al., 2017), and 'subjective turns' (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; in Cheer et al., 2017). The precursor for formal recognition of spiritual tourism as a category or genre of tourism was the inaugural and so far only United Nations World Tourism Organizations (UNWTO) summit on the topic at Ninh Binh City, Vietnam in November 2013 (Cheer et al., 2017). In light of broader transformations in the way people are searching for transcendence in life, travel has become an important practice in the emerging spiritual market place. Paul Brunton, holds the mantle as one of the pioneers in the West in the quest to understand spiritualities in the East, and in embarking on the journeys, he critically explores the work of gurus, mystics and spiritual teachers among others to elucidate their wisdoms (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; in Cheer, Belhassen & Kujawa, 2017). Brunton (first published in 1934; in Cheer et al., 2017) exemplifies what Roof (2001; in Cheer et al. 2017) defines as 'reflexive spirituality' best described as a cultural movement of a contemporary attitude toward spirituality that promotes the use of reason while exploring spiritualities. The reflexive and critical examination of spiritual paths is considered one of the hallmarks of the contemporary spiritual movement, and spiritual tourism is one of its manifestations (Besecke, 2014; in Cheer et al., 2017). The study of Buzinde et al. (2014) shows that the motives encompass a need for

spiritual connectivity (devotion of self) and spiritual knowledge attainment (from *sadhus* or saints).

Pilgrimage, thus, in broader sense can be interpreted as a kinetic ritual where people engage with a landscape's imminent features and aura. Such an approach can lead to an analysis of how "mobile practices help construct apparently charged places, "the powered place", and the "role of landscape aesthetics in the 'spiritual magnetism' of pilgrimage sites"(Maddrell et al., 2015; O'Brien, 2008; Mantsinen, 2020; in Eade, 2020).

Pilgrimage is a long established form of religious mobility (Collins- Kreiner, 2010a; Jackowski & Smith,1992; Smith, 2003; in Kim Kim & King, 2016)As one of the oldest manifestations of religious expression, pilgrimage has shown the capacity to address participant spiritual needs and associated values. Pilgrimage experiences may be positive and life-changing (Digance, 2003; Smith 1992). The recent revival in popularity for pilgrimage manifests postmodern features (Courtney, 2013; Reader, 2007; in Kim et al., 2016).At the United Nations' inaugural International Congress on Tourism and Pilgrimage in Spain (UNWTO,2014; in Kim et al., 2016), speakers noted the potential contributions of pilgrimage tourism to inner fulfillment and satisfaction through psychological and physical enhancement.

Pilgrimage destinations have benefitted massively from the global expansion of the travel and tourism sector. These are not just those organized by religious institutions, such as Mecca, Varanashi, Amritsar, and Lourdes but also destinations associated with alternative cults usually categorized as "new age", "alternative" or "spiritual" (Fedele, 2013; Rountree, 2006; Ivakiv, 2001; Bowman,1993; in Eade, 2000). The intimate relationship between pilgrimage and tourism has been analyzed in terms of such hybrid categories as pilgrimage tourism, tourist pilgrimage, and religious tourism (Nolan & Nolan,1989; Eade, 1992; Vukonic,2002; Badon & Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2016; in Eade,2020).Four common distinctions in the types of religious sites, namely pilgrimage shrines, religious structures, festivals and purpose-built attractions, are identified in the literature (Nolan & Nolan, 1992; Shakley, 2003; Shoal, 2000; in Hung et al., 2016).Whereas pilgrimage shrines primarily serve spiritual journeys, religious structures are common places of worship, and festivals are often religious gatherings. Pilgrimage shrines are also considered inherently sacred (Olsen, 2003; in Hung et al., 2016), however, purpose-built religious attractions are designed to draw visitors for tourism (Hung et al., 2016). Cohen (1992a; in Collins-Kreiner, 2016), for example, proposed distinguishing between two different types of pilgrimage centers: the formal and the popular. Formal centers are those characterized by an emphasis on serious and sublime religious activities. The rituals at centers are highly formalized, decorous and conducted in accordance with orthodox precepts. The popular are those in which folklorist activities are of greater importance, ever

taking precedence over the more serious and sublime activities. The rituals at such centers are less formalized and less decorous, and conducted in accordance with little local traditions. The pilgrims' principle motive for the pilgrimage ...is typically a personal request or the fulfillment of vow (Collins-Kreiner, 2016). As Gupta (1999, p.91) notes, a part from the distortional aspect looked at from the broader point of view, pilgrimage involved sight seen, travelling, visiting different places, in some cases, voyaging by air or sea etc. and buying the local memorabilia almost everything a tourist dose. The evolving phenomenon is viewed favorably because it brings apparent benefits to pilgrims, local communities, and society (Gupta, 1999). Thus the formulation of Turner and Turner's (1978, p20; in Olse, 2010) Classic line; "...a tourist is a half-pilgrim, if a pilgrim is a half-tourist" (Turner & Turner, 1978).

Taking into account of this fact that according to 2017 estimate about 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key religious sites every year, some 600 million national and international religious trips are made around the world, generating around US \$ 18 billion in global revenues (Ali & Cobonaglu, 2020), tourism management has been a central concern in pilgrimage tourism. Management, according to Jones et al. (2000: in Fadare 2015, p.221), is planning, organizing, leading and controlling of resources to achieve organizational goals effectively and efficiently. Resources are assets such as people, machinery, raw materials, information skills and individuals responsible for supervising the use of an organization's resources needed to achieve its goal. The associated body of literature generally deals with the production and consumption facets associated with pilgrimage. From a production perspective, researchers have focused on management and planning issues related to a wide variety of pilgrimage sites as well as the overall ambience of such locales (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). This body of literatures highlights the active involvement of multiple governance levels and the intricate inner workings necessary to manage pilgrimage sites, which are increasingly dependent on tourism infrastructure (e.g. hotels, travel agencies, tourism offices etc.) for their success (Shinde, 2010). Drawing on a consumption lens, some researchers examine the experience and characteristics of pilgrims. Earlier work on this matter focused on juxtapositions between pilgrims and tourists arguing that the two can be mapped opposite ends of a continuum on which the former occupies the sacred end while the latter is situated on the secular end (Cohen, 1991; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Smith, 1992; Buzinde et al., 2014). The creation of typologies evident in the aforementioned line of research was generally based on classifying attendants' motivations as religious (pilgrims) or non-religious (tourists); the former was regarded as someone in search of spirituality or religious absolution while the latter was motivated by curiosity. Studies, such as the one conducted by Hudman and Jackson (1992; in Buzinde et al., 2014) indicate that pilgrimage travel often combines religious devotion and touristic pleasure.

One of the most important goal that organizations and their members try to achieve is to provide goods and services that customer desire. The extent of ability and capability of managers to manage these sites and determinant factors in the consumption and satisfaction level of the consumer in the religious sites. Stoner et al. (2001: in Fadare 2015, p.221) see planning as the process of establishing goals and suitable courses of action for achieving them; organizing involves the art of turning plans into actions; controlling ensures that actual activities conform to plan activities; while leading and motivating is the process of directing and influencing the task-related activities of group members or an entire organization (Fadare 2015, p.221)

Barahachhetra

Barahachhetra is one of the four main pilgrimages in the Hindu tradition: Barahachhetra, Muktikchhetra, Hariharchhetra and Kuruchhetra of which first two are in Nepal and the latter two are in India. But in Nepal, people are well acquainted with four different pilgrimage regions (or *chhetra*) which are known as Pashupatchhetra, Ruruchhetra, Barahachhetra, and Muktikchhetra also called char dham (four main pilgrimage centers). Barahachhetra is a Hindu pilgrimage.

Holy places in both Nepalese and Indian culture are described as *tirtha*, a consecration of cosmic influence in the topography wherein culture, geography and spirituality interact with each other in the formation of meaning, symbolism and transcendental power within a territory altogether converges into wholeness called “sacredscapes” (cf. Singh 1995; Singh, 2013, p.123). The word “*tirtha*” refers to a ‘ford’ or river-crossing and, by extension, these are places that allow passage between the mundane and spiritual realms (Bhardwaj & Lochtefeld, 2004; in Singh & Haigh, 2015, p.783). Each Hindu pilgrimage is a ‘*tirthayatra*’ (*yatra* refers to the journey) and the geographical manifestation of each ‘*tirthayatra*’ evokes a new kind of landscape that, for the devotee, overlays sacred and symbolic meaning upon a physical and material base. Hindu pilgrims often conceive their sacred journeys as an earthly adventure that combines spiritual seeking and physical tests (Sax, 1991; in Singh & Haigh, 2015, p.783). Spaces become sacred according to historical, social, and cultural context of particular religious traditions. Places of both religion and tourism range from the predominantly tourism (Bremer, 2005, p.9260).

Sacred landscapes are understood as narratives, which are re-enacted through rituals and processions (Yaeger & López, 2018, p.1). The sacred landscape combines the absoluteness of space, relativeness of places and comprehensiveness of landscape; thus altogether result to a ‘wholeness’ carrying the inherent and imposed spirit of ‘holiness’, which is to be called ‘sacredscapes’ or *divyakshetra* (Singh & Rana, 2017, p.1). Shinde (2010) expresses a sacred landscape is associated with the presence of divinity, which is made accessible through religious symbols and rituals such as

pilgrimage. Campo (1998; in Alderman, 2002) used the term pilgrimage landscape, to stress the relationships between people and place. No place is intrinsically sacred. Pilgrimage, and their attendant landscapes, are social construction a perspective that recognizes the role played by “humans in their creation, appropriation, organization, and representation (Camp, 1998, p.42; in Alderman, 2002). According to Shinde (2010), pilgrimage landscape may have elements of natural beauty, connecting these elements with legend stories, meanings and rituals that heighten their aesthetic value (p.103). David Kinsley (1998), as cited by Shinde (2010), rightly observes that “[w]here we might see simply rivers, hills, pond, and forest, the pilgrim sees a landscape charged with divinity, a land that was actually saved by mythic events”.

There are altogether 51 *Shakti(s)* of which 41 are in India and the rest in the nearby countries (Singh, 2013, p.121). One of these Shaktipithas is the Dantakali Temple which is also located in Barahachhetra. Different ancient scriptures such as the *Bhagavat*, *Skandapurana*, and *Barahapurana* provide legends about Barahachhetra. The most popular story is that in the ancient times, Lord *Narayana* (or Lord *Vishnu*), reincarnating as *Yagnabaraha*, rescued the earth from the demon named *Hiranyaksha* who had drowned the Earth inside the ocean, and the Lord's rage did not subside until his body touched the *Kokah-Kaushiki* (name of two sacred rivers) confluence. This pleased the Lord and he started residing in the confluence of the *Kokah* and *Kaushiki* that day onwards as per the request of *Kokah* (Devacharya, 2019, p.4).

Lord Baraha is considered the third of nine incarnations of Lord *Vishnu* in the Hindu mythology. The word 'Barahachhetra' is made up of two words, Baraha and Kshetra. *Baraha Avatar* refers to the *Baraha* (boar) incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Likewise, *akshetra* (or *chhetra*) may denote a place where there is a temple (circuit areas) or where there is held to have been a person or event of sacred, religious or dharmic importance (Singh, 2005, p.217). Thus, literally, Barahachhetra translates as 'the area of Lord Baraha'. For this reason, pilgrimage to Barahachhetra is considered especially important to the *Vaishnavites* (followers of Lord Vishnu). The *Himwatkhand* of *Skandapurana* has mentioned the area of the Baraha hill as 1 *Yojan* (= 4 *Kosh*, 1 *Kosh*= 1.8 km) and the area within a radius of 3 *Yojan* (=12 *Kosh*) from the Baraha hill as *Mokshadayak* (having the ability to grant liberation). Likewise, chapter 140 of the *Barahapurana*, has mentioned the area of Barahachhetra within the radius of 5 *Yojan* (=20 *Kosh*, 1 *Kosh*= 1.8 km) with the Lord Baraha Temple as the center (Khativada, 2009:114-115).

The sacred landscape of Barahachhetra comprises of the different temples, sacred rivers, sacred spaces, Sanskrit schools, religious sects, daily rituals, festivals and religious fairs. According to *Himwatkhand* of *Skandapurana* (Ch. 17-33; in Devacharya, 2019, p.4), those who visit Barahachhetra are relieved of all of their sins. Likewise, chapter 140 of the *Barahapurana* states that the merit gained by fasting,

bath and other religious activities in these pilgrimages results in ascension to the Vishnuloka (Khativada, 2009, p.157-158).

The pilgrimage system in Barahachhetra is comprised of both the sacred and the secular landscape. The secular landscape of Barahachhetra includes its physical setting and other natural attractions. The non-religious natural attractions in Barahachhetra include: the KoshiTappu Wildlife Reserve, motorboat adventure, from Chatara to the Lord Baraha Temple and onwards to Dhankuta, rafting from Dolalghat, Kavrepalanchowk district to Chatara and so on. Barahachhetra lies in eastern Nepal at a distance of approximately 470-600 kms. from the capital city Kathmandu of Nepal. However, flights from Kathmandu to Biratnagar are also available from where pilgrims can get connected to the road trip. The distance from Itahari in the Mahendra Highway to the main Lord Baraha Temple is 42 km. There is moterable road from Jhumka to the main Baraha temple. Chattara is considered as the entry point to Baraha temple distanced with 8 km. Some pilgrims will also go to Barahachhetra from Dharan. The pilgrimage site is located in altitudes ranging from 185 m. to above 1600 m. above the sea level. The weather in Barahachhetra Municipality is mostly hot. The main pilgrimage site lies in the hill which is close proximity to Koshi river. Plenty of tea shops, restaurants, souvenir shops, individual religious offering mobile shops are located in Barahachhetra. The site includes car parking, secular buildings, main entranc gate, nine religious temples, *Dharmashala*(s) (religious rest houses) and *Ashrams*. It is the shelter where spiritual and yogic disciplines are pursued. It also caters food and accommodation for the pilgrims. Barahachhetra is inhabited by mixed ethnic/caste groups.

Present day important pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra include: 1. Lord Baraha Temple, 2. *Kokah-Kaushiki* confluence, 3. Suryakunda, 4. Bhawanithan Temple, 5. Lattenithan Temple, 6. Dantakali Temple, 7. Vishnupaduka, 8. Ramdhuni, 9. Bhim Sheela, 10. Gomukha Tirtha, 11. Kubjambra Tirtha, 12. Yammavyasan Tirtha, 13. Matanga Tirtha, 14. Bajravawa Tirtha, 15. Guptabaraha, 16. Shringighat, 17. Devighat, 18. Brahmakunda, 19. Chakrakunda, 20. Shri ChhinnamastaBhagawati. 21. Auliya Gaddi Math, 22. Maina Maini, 23. Mahankali Temple, 24. ChhintangBhagawati Temple, 25. Pindeshwor, 26. Budhasubba, 28. Auliya Gaddi Math, 29. Aadibaraha. It is believed that the present appearance of original temple of Barahachhetra was rebuilt by Juddha Shumsher in 1991 (1934 AD) after the temple was demolished by the earthquake of 1933. The importance of this sacred site has been mentioned in Brahma Purana, Varaha Purana, Skanda Purana and even glorified in the Mahabharat epic.

Pilgrims visit Barahachhetra all the year round, however, the months of *Shrawan* (Jul-Aug) and *Kartik* (Oct-Nov) sees the highest influx of pilgrims. An exclusive list of different festivals, fairs and occasions celebrated in Barahachhetra include: The *Kartik Mela* (October-November), *Poush Aunshi* (December-January), *Sorah*

Shraddha (September) (16 days for *Shraddha* rituals), *Makar Sankranti* (January-February), *Bala Chaturdashi*, *Shrawan* (July-August), *Bol Bam* (the prayer of Lord Shiva), *Sri Krishna Janmasthan* (Lord Krishnas Birthday ceremony), *Falgun Purnima* (the holy festival observed in February-March), *Navaratri-Vijaya Dashami* (tenth day of Durga Puja observed in October-November), *Buddha Purnima* (full moon of Baishak-April-May), *Chaitra-Ramnavami* (March-April), *Laxmipuja* (worship to the Goddess of Wealth in November), *Mahashivaratri* (worship to Lord Shiva in February-March), and *Harisayani Ekadashi* (the eleventh day of each lunar fortnight, totaling twenty-four times throughout the year). *Ekadashi* is observed as an auspicious holy day of religious fasting specially by those thousands who look upon Lord Vishnu, rather than Shiva or Buddha as the Supreme God (Anderson, 1977, p.175) .

The purpose of visiting Barahachhetra mainly with the goal of getting religious merits. The carry out *Shraddha* (post-death rituals) and other religious rituals such as such as *Homa*, *Yajna* (religious sacrifice), *Bratabandha* (sacred thread wearing ceremony), *Bibaha* (marriage), *Rudripath* and *Purana* (worship and recitation of Hindu sacred texts), and participate in the different religious fairs organized in the different pilgrimage sites. Furthermore, the importance of pilgrimage in Barahachhetra can also be linked to the more recent *Kumbha* tradition in Chatara, Barahachhetra. On another note, the area of Barahachhetra also overlaps with another important sacred area known as the *Rudraksharanya Kshetra* or the abode of Lord Shiva. The area of *Rudraksharanya Kshetra* extends 80 miles east of the *Kaushiki* River, and has north-south length of 80 miles (Acharya, 1999, p.69).

Considering the fact of what has been discussed above about the religious trips around the world that 2017 estimate generating around US \$ 18 billion in global revenues (Ali & Cobonaglu, 2020) as one of the most prominent pilgrimage regions in Nepal, Barahachhetra can contribute in generating significant amount of revenue from pilgrimage tourism. Thus, the objectives of this research are to assess Barahachhetra as a pilgrimage tourism destination and to study the sacred landscape of Barahachhetra. The study is of significance for students and researchers of tourism, particularly those interested in pilgrimage tourism, to general readers and policymakers on the subject. The lay out of this paper includes introduction, methodology, review of literature, findings and discussion, and conclusion.

Review of literature

Pilgrimage as a social phenomenon has been the focus of studies by numerous academic disciplines, including History, sociology, geography, anthropology, and psychology. Pilgrimage of various types have been an important part of most religious, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism (Tanka, 1981:240-257; in Hudman, 1992, p.107). Scholars have approached the study of pilgrimage

travel from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. These have included anthropology (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008; Cohen, 1992; Graburn, 1983; Turner & Turner, 1978; in Kim et al., 2016), geography (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; Kollins-Kreiner & Wall, 2015; in Kim et al., 2016), sociology (Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1976), and religious studies (Gesler, 1996; Reader, 2007; Vilaca, 2010). Much of the attention evident in the tourism literature has evolved identifying the dichotomy between sacred and secular pilgrim motivations (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006; Damari & Mansfeld, 2014; Devereux & Carnegie, 2006; Hudman & Jackson, 1992; Vukonic, 1992; in Kim et al., 2016). Commercialization and commodification are concepts that have mostly emerged through post-modern ideas, such as sceptical views on power relations, nostalgia, and perceived loss of authenticity (Bailey, 2008; Cole, 2007; Goulding, 2000; in Hung, Yang, Wassler, Wang, Lin, & Liu, 2016). Commodification is typically defined as tourism that transforms a culture or heritage into a commercialized product, which is packaged and sold to tourists for their consumption (Cole, 2007; in Hung et al., 2016). Similarly, commercialization involves rendering tourist sites available for profitable purposes (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; in Hung et al., 2016). Both concepts are believed to diminish authenticity (Taylor, 2001; in Hung et al., 2016) and to ultimately reduce the value of tourism product (Go, 1997; Swain, 1989; in Hung et al., 2016). Contrary to this, the commercialization of tourism sites also generated economic opportunities, part for local businesses (Mason, 2004; in Hung et al., 2016).

Among these various discipline social anthropologists are pioneers to the study of pilgrimage by focusing on its connection to various social dimensions and as a vehicle through which to understand complex societies and civilisations (Vidhyarthi, 1961, 1979). In the earlier anthropological studies of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka Pfaffenberger (1979) and other scholars (see de Silva, 2016) are based on functionalist approach (de Silva, 2016). However, more recent studies put their theoretical arguments against a 'universalistic' perspective emphasise the importance of considering multiple historical representations of Buddhist pilgrimage centres in Sri Lanka, rather than studying them as a unified tradition. The most sustained response so far to Turner's model has been provided by Eade and Sallnow in their important edited volume *Contesting The Sacred* (1991; in de Selva, 2016). They not only challenge the anti-structure hypothesis but also posit a new general approach (post-modern) to the anthropological study of pilgrimage. Nevertheless, Victor Turner's (1973; in Buzinde et al., 2014) work is perhaps the most recognized contribution to pilgrimage studies that draws on an anthropological understanding of the phenomenon. Turner is credited with devising a universal theory that is broadly centered on the idea that pilgrimage is a process of moving from the familiar to the anti-structural 'other's and back, and the period of being away from structure (the liminal or luminous period) is characterised by the existence of a communists quality of relationship

among participants. The former creates the situation in which the latter can flourish (Morinis, 1992, p.257; in Bizande, 2014).

Since the early 1990s researchers have shown increasing interest in the emergence of religion- induced travel (Kim, Kim, & King, 2019). Kim et al.'s. (2019) analysis of 84 studies generated four main themes. These include how religious tourism evolved from pilgrimage, the perceptions of religious tourists, religious tourism destinations, and religious tourism infrastructure (Kim et al., 2019, p.4). The literature review shows that 46 research were conducted in the Asia-Pacific region, 26 were undertaken in Europe, three in America and six in Africa. The most popularly researched countries were: India, Israel, and UK followed by China, Spain, Greece, and Malaysia. The literature review reveals that the most frequently researched creed was Islam followed by other creeds and demonstrations: Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Christianity, Orthodox, Anglican, Zionism, Taonism, Judaism, Mormonism, and Secularism, and United African Apostolic Church (Kim et al., 2019).

It is Vidyarthi (1961) who first proposed the model of the 'sacred complex' in his study of pilgrimage in Gaya, India. Vidhyarthi's descriptive framework theory is an extension and formulation of planning theories which has been followed by Jha (1971) and Vidyarthi, Saraswati and Jha (1979). In their studies they theoretically and methodologically developed 'The Sacred Complex (a sacred geography', 'sacred performances', and 'sacred specialists) as one of the most important tools for understanding Hindu civilization. These studies enhanced to the several Indian scholars to conduct research in different pilgrimages under the heading of pilgrimage tourism. Authors such as Shinde (2010) and Sinha (2014) have also conducted case studies on pilgrimage tourism destinations using the concept of 'sacred landscape'.

In the context of Nepal, scholars like Jha (1971), Messerschmidt (1989) and Pandey (2000) have carried out studies on pilgrimage only. In 'The Sacred Complex in Janakpur: Indological, Sociological, Anthropological, and Philosophical Study of Hindu Civilization, Jha (1971) analyzes the sacred complex of Janakpur from a Hindu civilizational perspective using the concepts formerly applied by Vidyarthi (1961) and he too concludes that the sacred complex of Janakpur is tradition-oriented and that 'the boundary of a nation is not the boundary of a civilization' (1971, p.105). The two papers by Messerschmidt (1989) on Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath, Nepal, provide an anthropological study of the cultural aspects of the Muktinath geography, and sociological dimensions of the Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath, respectively. The first paper highlights Muktinath as a sacred field perceived in their own ways by the Hindu and the Buddhists and identifies and elaborates some outstanding attributes of the religious and geographic field of Muktinath (Messerschmidt, 1989, p. 94) while the second paper examines the sociological aspects of Hindu pilgrimage in Muktinath from a perspective beyond 'communitas', 'liminality', 'structure' and 'anti-structure'

highlighting that pilgrimage to Muktinath is a sacred journey (Messerschmidt, 1989, p.116). Concurring with the findings of Vidyarthi (1961) and Jha (1971), the author also affirms that Hindu pilgrimage may be viewed as an enhanced or encapsulated image of Brahmanical society in which structure-affirming behavior is expected (Messerschmidt, 1989, p.117). Pandey's (2000) book 'Sacred Complex of Ruruksetra: A Holy Tirtha of Hinduism in Western Nepal' uses the trio concepts of 'sacred geography', 'sacred performances', and 'sacred specialists'. The significant aspect of this book is that unlike Vidyarthi (1961) and Jha (1971), the author has dedicated a full chapter on cultural tourism that also incorporates eco-tourism, trekking tourism and rafting tourism.

Various authors have carried out general introductory works incorporating limited information about different pilgrimage sites. For instance, 'Tirthpariyatan' by Gautam (2014) includes a theoretical treatise on pilgrimage and provides a narrative introduction to different pilgrimages in three countries, including 137 pilgrimage sites in Nepal. The author puts a great emphasis on promoting domestic pilgrimage but there is little or no focus on international pilgrimage tourism. Likewise, theoretical treatise on pilgrimage tourism by Kunwar (2017) in his academic work 'Tourists and Tourism' is brief but does not entail any case studies of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal.

Turning to the works on pilgrimage tourism in Nepal very few academic works have been accomplished and they are recent. Examples include works on the Manakamana Temple in Gorkha by Bleie (2003), Lumbini by Nyaupane (2009) and Kunwar and Ghimire (2012). Tone Bleie (2003), in his study, expresses that there is a need to balance promotion of pilgrimage tourism with developmental and commercial interests. In their article, Kunwar and Ghimire (2012), argue that Lumbini as an International Pilgrimage destination is authentic both in terms of visitor experience (activity-related authenticity) and the toured objects (object-related authenticity).

Finally, coming back to the works on pilgrimage in Barahachhetra, various works have been concluded by Acharya (1999), Khativada (2009), Bajracharya (n.d.), Bhattarai (2018), Barahachhetra (2016), Ghimire (2019), Devacharya (2019), and others. Moreover, various important pilgrimage destinations in Barahachhetra such as the Budhasubba Temple, Dantakali Temple and Pindeshwor Temple which are indispensable in the identity of Barahachhetra as a pilgrimage region, have been excluded. Man Bajracharya's work "Shri Barahachhetra 'Avilekh: Bhagawan Shri Baraha Vishnu Ra Auliyababa Nishan" outlines the different mythical dimensions of many pilgrimage sites within Barahachhetra and few details on local development of the sites. The author uses both verses from Sanskrit as well as their Nepalese interpretation which makes the work basically a religious treatise rather than an empirical study of pilgrimage tourism. In his book 'Dharan-Dham-Sangraha', Bhattarai (2018) presents the importance of Pindeshwor, Dantakali, Panchakanya and

Budhasubba along with their myths and legends, and the origin, types, importance and various usage of *Rudraksha*. The book is important because it details the deep religious meanings of the described temples and attempts to induce people into visiting these places. Moreover, its contents are offered in three different languages: Nepali, Hindi and English, which makes it accessible to both domestic and international audience in these three languages. Whereas these works shed light on Barahachhetra from a pilgrimage, cultural or religious point of view, not a single academic work has been conducted in Barahachhetra exclusively from a pilgrimage tourism perspective which highlights the importance of this Hindu pilgrimage destination. Therefore, it was necessary to conduct this research on Barahachhetra from a pilgrimage tourism perspective.

Methodology

No previous studies have been conducted in Barahachhetra from a pilgrimage tourism perspective. Therefore, an exploratory research has been carried out. Phenomenology as methodological approach has been used to present original views, perspectives and experiences of the respondents: both the hosts (service providers) and the beneficiaries (the pilgrims). Phenomenology is an epistemological endeavor and calls for an analysis of 'the things themselves' (Eberle, 2014, p.184, 198). In this study phenomenology thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness, and, in its most comprehensiveness sense, it refers to the totality of lived experiences that belong to the single person. However, within phenomenology, consciousness enjoys a privileged status because it cannot be avoided (Giorgi, 1997, p.236). In this study, the authors have followed larger hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach opens up a multitude of data sources such as interviews, biographies, autobiographies, and video or in fact any source that might help explicate the experience in questions. The phenomenological perspective aims to return to the experience as lived and provide a detailed description of a phenomenon based on the structure and meaning of an experience (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 1997; in Brymer, 2010). Although Barahachhetra entails a broad region, this study delimits to eleven pilgrimage sites located within Sunsari district. Moreover, the focus is on the Lord Baraha Temple site including the case study of the *Kartik Mela* (religious fair) organized therein. Primary emic perspectives were used to generate authentic findings. Though this site was visited by the first author earlier before and post-pandemics, the second author of this article conducted fieldwork in Barahachhetra for his master's thesis. A total number of 24 days were spent in the research site in two phases: from 24 September to 04 October, 2019 in the first phase, and from 01 November to 13 November, 2019 in the second phase. The total number of respondents in this study was 274 and they were chosen primarily based on the non-probability purposive sampling. Respondents included pilgrims,

priests, religious leaders, religious seekers, hoteliers, shopkeepers, journalists, social workers, intellectuals, locals and other various service providers. Qualitative analysis of primary data collected through audio records, video records, direct observation, field notes, inference notes and pictures were done using the tools of coding, sorting, imagery, semiotics, themes, dominant themes, categorization, and triangulation. Many follow up calls were made to the respondents during the data analysis phase in order to obtain additional or new information from research participants.

Findings & discussion

Importance of Barahachhetra

Every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrimage tourists visit Barahachhetra to pay respect to their deities, to participate in religious fairs, and to conduct various religious rituals. Barahachhetra is not the name of a single pilgrimage site or a Temple. Rather, it comprises of an indefinite (in the sense that not all sacred elements have been identified, conserved or studied) cluster of Temples, sacred spaces, water bodies, objects, and idols amongst others. According to a pilgrim:

“Every spot where you set your foot, every stone that you turn and every waterspot you encounter in Barahachhetra is sacred. Many smaller sacred spots described in the scriptures are yet to be properly identified, recognized and protected.”

An elderly priest and astrologer from India attending the *Kartik Mela* in the Lord Baraha Temple outlined the importance of bathing in the confluence of *Kaushiki* and *Kokah* in the following words:

“This is my 25th visit to the temple. Bathing in the confluence of the Kokah and Kaushiki Rivers grants fertility to men and women. I have advised many infertile men and women in India to take a holy bath in Kokah-Kaushiki and those who have done that have borne children.”

A pilgrim provided the following testimony on the uniqueness of the Vishnupaduka Temple:

“I’ve heard that pilgrims from Nepal who go to visit Gaya, Kashi are asked if they have already performed Shradha in Vishnupaduka as that is the first place for Shradha to be done. Conducting Shradha (ancestral rite) of ancestors will free them. Shradha in Vishnupaduka can be done even by people who do not know the Tithi (date and time) of death of their deceased family members.”

Indeed, it is believed that Lord Vishnu, along with his wife Laxmi, had carried out *Shradha* rites in Vishnupaduka (Varahapurana, Chapter 140; in Acharya, 1990, p.35). As per the Brahma Purana

By worshipping Vishnu, one achieves one enjoys material enjoyment in this world and Mukti (freedom) in the other world. By drinking the water of Kokah,

great sins are destroyed, one achieves religious merit. One achieves heaven by fasting in Kokah Tirtha. Giving donations to Brahmins, saints, poor, and those worthy of receiving donations in Kakahtirth leads to achievement of unceasing merit and destruction of the life-death cycle. In Magh Krishna Pakshya, one should go to the origin of Kokah (Vishnupaduka) for pilgrimage for 5 days and carry out Shraddha rituals. Whoever does Shraddha of their ancestors, without doubt, will achieve above-mentioned merits. (Brahmapuran, Chapter 110; in Acharya, 1990, p.32).

The region of Barahachhetra has been a religious area since a long time and both domestic and international pilgrims have visited the pilgrimages in Barahachhetra for decades. An intellectual from the Lord Baraha Temple area familiar with the major temples in Barahachhetra made the following statement:

“Foreign pilgrims mostly comprise of Indians but you can see Hindu pilgrims from other countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand and, sometimes, even Maldives. Occasionally, even white-skinned Hindu foreigners can be sighted.”

Barahachhetra not only attracts to the Hindu pilgrims but also it attracts to the heterogeneous mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, Kirat, Hindu-Buddhist, Hindu-Kirat, Bonpo, Muslim, and Kabir followers as evidenced by this research. More than half of the pilgrims interviewed during the research said they had visited at least one pilgrimage site in Barahachhetra in the past. Many pilgrim groups come to Barahachhetra with the plan of visiting multiple pilgrimage sites near and far.

The leader of a group of 40 Indian pilgrims from Matigara, Siliguri, India said:

*“We visited Dantakali Temple on our way here. We will stay awake throughout the night singing Bhajans (devotional songs) and eat after 10 am tomorrow morning after visiting the temple. Tomorrow we will go to Ramdhuni first and then onwards to Pashupatinath in Kathmandu. On our return, we will also go to Manokamana and Janakpur.”*All these statements reveal that Barahachhetra is one of the important sites of Nepal.

The National Tourism Strategic Plan 2016-2025 claims that almost 15% (by air) of arrivals from India, 60% of arrivals from Sri-Lanka and 45% of arrivals from Thailand visit Nepal for religious purpose (Baral & Bhandari, 2016, p.11). There is no official data on the number of pilgrims visiting the pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra. The priest of the Lord Baraha Temple priest estimates that approximately 5-6 hundred thousand pilgrims visit the temple annually. However, the pilgrims' turnover depends much on the religious occasions. For instance, approximately 4 hundred thousand pilgrims visit the Pindeshwor Temple during the Bol Bam Mela in Shrawan, and an estimated one hundred thousands visit the Ramdhuni on the day of *Balachaturdashi* (Hindu

festival that falls on the 14th day of waning phase of the moon in the Hindu lunar month of Kartik/Mangsir- Nov-Dec), and 2- 2.5 hundred thousands pilgrims visit the Vishnupaduka Temple during the occasion of *Poukhe Aunshi* (Hindu festival/ occasion falling on the new moon day before the first day of the lunar fortnight in the Hindu lunar month of Poush (Dec-Jan) when people conduct *Shraddha* rituals for the freedom of their ancestors). The most significant change that Barahachhetra witnessed more recently is the commencement of the famous *Kumbha Mela* in 2002 that has brought Barahachhetra into limelight like never before. A responsible member of the Jagatguru Peeth Pracheen Haridwar Chataradham estimated: that approximately 1.5 crore (=15 million) pilgrims participated in the third *Kumbha Mela* organized in Chatara in 2014. However, not all temples receive the same number of pilgrims.

Some of the common practices, which are practiced by the pilgrims at almost every important *tirthas* (pilgrimages) are holy bath, vows, prayer, gift and charity, *pinda dan* (offer of rice-balls in the name of past ancestors of both paternal and maternal sides), *tarpan* (offer of water to the past ancestor, gods, and rishis) etc. The gods and goddess of a *tirtha* are to be propitiated by chanting their names, by remembering their sanctity, by cultivating devotion and by performing *puja* (worship) and *arti* (burning lamp) to them (Jha, 1985, p.14-15). The pilgrims visiting Barahachhetra were observed engaged abundantly in *pinda dan*, *tarpan*, holy bath, vows, prayers, and *Shraddha* rituals.

Myths and legends of Barahachhetra

Myths and legends of Barahachhetra are one of the main components of the sacred landscape of Barahachhetra. For instance, although the ancient legend of Vishnupaduka relates to Lord Vishnu's footsteps and performance of *Shraddha* of his ancestors, in more recent times, the Vishnupaduka temple was found in 1913 AD by a shaman of 'Tamang' ethnic group. The temple priest narrated:

“At a point in time, the villagers in Vishnupaduka faced hard time and often fell ill when Laxman Tamag, the village Shaman, went into trance and informed that Lord Vishnu's steps were buried in the place and if they were dug out and worshipped, there would be peace in the village.”

While the myths and legends can be traced back to the Hindu *Puranic* scriptures, some of them are more recent. The recent ones, for example include the story of two *Siddhas*: the Auliya Baba and Baba Banakhandi both of whom were contemporaries and lived approximately 400 years ago. A local teacher from Chatara shared:

“Auliya Baba is believed to have got his name due to his miraculous power to attract and absorb parasites of Malaria from his patients, which he would bind in a handkerchief. On the other hand, Baba Banakhandi had the ability to turn

anything into the thing he desired using his tongs. He could plant mango in a Sakhuwa tree (Shorearobusta)."

It is evident from the interviews with pilgrims that myths and legends related of different pilgrimage sites and temples in Barahachhetra attracts and mystifies many and transports them into the realm of imagination and reverence. The recently constructed *BarahaKundain* the Lord Baraha Temple area is one example of man-made symbolic representation of the related legend of Lord Baraha that leaves the pilgrims wondering.

The Kumbha tradition

The term *Kumbha Mela* comes from the Sanskrit word 'Kumbha' meaning 'urn' and 'Mela' meaning 'fair' or 'gathering' (Verma & Sarangi, 2019). Participating in *Kumbha* helps to get rid of draught and excessive rain, makes the earth full of production and wealth, enables people to get right direction from saints, sages and religious leaders, enables one to garner religious merit and so forth (Khativada, 2009, p.391). According to ancient Hindu scriptures, in the course of the *Samudra Manthan* (churning of the Ocean), four drops of the nectar fell on four places of India: Haridwar, Ujjain, Nashik and Prayagraj where the *Kumbha Mela* is organized every twelve years (Devacharya, 2009, p.42). The fair is held at above mentioned four different places in a cyclic manner after every three years (Mallinson, 2015; in Verma & Sarangi, 2019). The *Kumbha* tradition started in Nepal from 2002.

A local intellectual from Chatara said the following:

'The credit of systematically collecting and putting forth the proofs of the religious importance of Barahachhetra and Kumbha Mela among the intellectuals and public in Nepal goes to Shri Shri 1008 Balsanta Mohansharan Devacharya Maharaj. With his initiative, altogether two Purna (full) Kumbha and two Ardha (half) Kumbha have been organized so far'.

The four *Kumbha* events were organized in the following dates:

1. 14 April 2002- 15 May 2002 (First *Purna Kumbha*)
2. 20 March 2007- 19 Apr 2007 (First *Ardha Kumbha*)
3. 31 March 2014- 2 May 2014 (Second *Purna Kumbha*)
4. 6 April 2019- 7 May 2019 (Second *Ardha Kumbha*)

It is obvious that the *Kumbh Mela* in Nepal hold far more religious significance. The organization of *Kumbha Mela* in Nepal is not only a means of gaining religious merit but also a significant step towards promotion of other authentic pilgrimage sites in Nepal.

The tradition of priests

In most cases, each of the prominent temples in Barahachhetra have a tradition of priest from a particular lineage. The priest of the Dantakali Temple mentioned:

'Khanals (Brahmins) were the first priest of the Dantakali Temple since the rule of the Sen Kings, and, in 1968, during the rule of King Girwanyudhha Bikram Shah of the Shah dynasty, this was acknowledged in a Tamrapatra (Copper plate record) authorizing Khanal families to continue this tradition. Today, we take turns among 8 Khanal families to work as priest of the temple for one year.'

Likewise, the priest of the Lord Baraha temple is related to the *Bhandari* family and the priest of the Vishnupaduka Temple belongs to the ethnic Tamang tradition. Furthermore, the current priests of the Panchakanya Temple in Dharan is the fourth in his generation of *Bajracharya* priests, and the priest of the Budhasubba Temple is the fifteenth in his generation of ethnic Magar.

Healers and Aghori

Generally the pilgrimage region will be visited by many healers and *aghoris* (the ascetics of Shaiva sect). One such healer providing services in Chatara briefed about her service as follows:

"Mostly people with madness, paralysis, sudden loss of voice, and possessed by spirits visit me. I treat them as per the guidance I receive from "Bhagawati" (a word used to denote a female deity or Goddess) and they get cured. I usually provide these services during evenings."

A local intellectual from the Lord Baraha Temple area mentioned about the work of an *Aghori* (a *Sadhu* from a particular ascetic *Shaiva* sect) called '*Tyaginath Nepali Baba*' who visited the Lord Baraha Temple for decades until 2013 during the *Kartik Mela* (October-November fair):

"During his visits, Tyaginath Nepali Baba provided the locals with very effective medical treatment. For example, he treated my son for very high fever in a day and, once, miraculously healed an elderly woman who was on the deathbed. She lived for 13 more years after that." This *Aghori*, also known as Yogiraj Dr. Tyaginath Aghori, passed away at the age of 126 in March, 2020.

Religious sects, Sadhus and other service providers

Some of the main religious sects and organizations existing in Barahachhetra are:

- Jagatguru Peeth Pracheen Haridwar Chataradham, Chatara
- Jagatguru Shree Ramanandacharya Sewa Peeth, Chatara

- Aadhya Jagatguru Shree Shankaracharya Peeth, Chatara
- Shree Bhubaraha Ramanuj Peeth, Chatara
- Advait Sanstha SamrakshyanManch, Chatara
- Geeta Brahma Chintan Yogashram, Chatara
- Shree Panchadusnaam Samyukta Juna Akhada, Lord Baraha Temple area
- Baba Banakhandi Udaseen Ashram, Ramdhuni

The presence of these religious sects and organizations plays an important role in keeping alive the religious and spiritual atmosphere in Barahachhetra. They on the one hand provide guidance and an abode to the religious seekers while on the other hand, they help in the promotion of Barahachhetra as a pilgrimage tourism region. Examples include: the initiative of Shri Shri 1008 Balsanta Mohansharan Devacharya Maharaj to begin the tradition of the *Kumbh Mela* in Barahachhetra, the organizing of the *Shree Ram Tarak Brahma Maha Yajna* (claimed to have been organized for the first time after 705 years) organized by the *Jagatguru Shree Ramanandacharya Sewa Peeth* from 10 Feb 2019 to 19 February 2019. Likewise, the *Naga Sadhu(s)* belonging to the Shree Panchadusnaam Samyukta Juna Akhada in the Lord Baraha Temple area fulfill an important role in carrying out the *Auliya Baba Nishan* ceremony in the Lord Baraha Temple during the *Kartik Mela*. Volunteers belonging to these sects and organizations also present themselves during the different important religious occasions to serve the pilgrims. Several other *Sadhu(s)* and spiritual groups can be seen providing their services to pilgrims in the temple premises. There are other spontaneous volunteer organizations or people who serve free food to the pilgrims during large religious fairs and events and consider it their way of serving the Lord.

Sanskrit education centers

There are two main Sanskrit study centers in Barahachhetra. The first one is *Pindeshwor Vidhyapeeth* (Campus), located in Pindeshwor, Dharan Sub Metropolitan City, ward no. 14 and the next one is *Shri Radhakrishna Sanskrit Ved Vidhyashram Gurukulam Madhyamik Vidhyalaya* located in Chatara, Barahachhetra Municipality, ward no. 1. These two institutions can be a good destination for pilgrim tourists interested in Sanskrit studies. While the students, graduates and priests from these Sanskrit schools usually provide religious services to the temples and pilgrims in Barahachhetra, they also immediately make up for any scarcity of priests during any occasions or events.

A group of student priests from the *Gurukulam* in Chatara who arrived in the Lord Baraha Temple area during the *Kartik Mela* informed:

“Our teacher decides on whose turn it is in a particular day. We take whatever the pilgrims or ritual organizers give us. We heard that today the ritual organizer is giving us NRs. 1500 each. High pilgrim presence in Baraha temple brings more opportunities to practice our knowledge and to earn too.”

Religious discipline of pilgrims

The pilgrimage rules mainly lay emphasis on fasting, sexual abstinence, rejection of soft bed and aid of vehicle making journey and walking without shoes *tirtha-yatra* (Jha, 1985, p.14). Some of the common practices, which are practiced by the pilgrims at almost every important *tirtha(s)* are holy bath, vows, prayer, gift and charity, *pinda dan* (offering of rice-balls in the name of ancestors of both paternal and maternal sides), *tarpan* (offering of water to the ancestors, gods, and rishis) etc. The gods and goddess of a *tirtha* are to be propitiated by chanting their names, by remembering their sanctity, by cultivating devotion and by performing *puja* (worship) and *arti* (burning lamp) to them (Jha, 1985, pp14-15).

Pilgrims coming to Barahachhetra are well aware of the religious austerities to be followed before and during the Temple visits. The group leader of a *Bengali* pilgrims from India noted:

“We observe fasting, some even without drinking water, on the day of Ekadashi. After sunset, we carry out the Ekadashi Pooja and, thereafter, stay awake the entire night singing praises and hymns to the Lord. The next day, we will eat only after completing the Darshan of the temple at the auspicious time pre-determined by our priest.”

As a sign of austerity and devotion many pilgrims visit the temples on foot. For instance, many pilgrims travel on foot from Chatara to the Lord Baraha Temple during the *Kartik Mela*. This also holds true for pilgrims visiting other temples, particularly for the Pindeshwor Temple, during the *Bol-Bam* (dedicated to the Lord Shiva) fair in the month of *Shrawan* (July-August). Moreover, *Bol-Bam* refers to pilgrimages and festivals in India and Nepal glorifying Shiva. The festival runs in the month of *Shrawan*. A devotee takes a holy dip in the sacred river. Most pilgrims observe a fast on Monday during the month.

Donations

Donations comprise an integral part of Hindu pilgrimage. Usually, during temple visits, pilgrims offer donations either to the priest or in the donation box placed in the temple area. However, in the case of Barahachhetra, during special occasions and big fairs, the temple management committees make announcements to induce pilgrims to donate. During the *Kartik Mela*, it was evident that *Barahachhetra Samrakshan Manch* members appealing pilgrims to donate money for gaining religious merit.

These announcements highlighted how the outlook of the Lord Baraha Temple area had transformed due to the construction activities in the temple area.

Pilgrims' motivation and experiences

From this study, it was found that pilgrims visit Barahachhetra with different motivations, both material and spiritual, but return with largely similar experiences. Following are some of the statements made by pilgrims on why they visit Barahachhetra.

"Eight years ago, when my son was very sick, I came and prayed for his good recovery in Dantakali, and he recovered. Thereafter, I often come to Dantakali with my family." (A female pilgrim visiting Dantakali)

"I come here each year to fly pigeons. This brings peace in my heart and my faith binds me in morality." (A domestic pilgrim visiting the Lord Baraha Temple)

"In our Rajbanshi community, we have a belief that if one offers sacred water of the Koshi on the head of Lord Baraha, one escapes the birth of pig (boar)." (A pilgrim attending the Kartik Mela in the Lord Baraha Temple)

"We came to Vishnupaduka to conduct Shraddha for our dead ancestors. It is said that once you do the Shraddha in Vishnupaduka, the ancestors get liberated." (A group of pilgrims in Vishnupaduka)

A teacher leading an educational tour of students to the Temples in Vijayapur, Dharan stated a different motive:

"Our cultural values are diminishing and the cultural knowledge of the new generation is also diminishing. Therefore, we thought an educational tour to religious destination is a way of transferring cultural knowledge to the new generation."

Experiences

The most common experiences from the pilgrims interviewed during the research related to the feelings of peace, satisfaction, bliss, and positive thoughts.

"I feel divine whenever I come here. The locals respect the pilgrims and in my 25 years of pilgrimage to this place, none of our women were ever harassed by anyone even when we slept in the open." (A pilgrim leading a group of 42 members interviewed in the Lord Baraha Temple)

"When I saw the idol of Lord Baraha, I instantly believed that the Lord really resides in the temple. Our pain and pleasure and our hearts have completely surrendered to god." (A first-time pilgrim from India visiting the Lord Baraha Temple)

A female pilgrim expressed her dilemma about bringing together pilgrims from her hometown in India:

"I plan to bring a group of my Indian friends who have been wanting to come here for long. I just need to ensure that they get proper facilities when they come here. The road should be bigger and smoother and the temple should have grandeur of its own."

A local intellectual recalled the experience of an Indian pilgrim he had met in the past:

"I had once met a pilgrim who had had a bad experience with the 'Panda' (local Brahmins who act as middlemen and are known for their notorious extortions from pilgrims) in Gaya, Kashi. He told me that he was impressed during his visit in Barahachhetra as he did not have to deal with any 'Panda' here."

Hosts-guests interaction

The host-guest interaction (originally developed by Valene L. Smith in 1977) between the pilgrims and their local hosts is one of the most important features of Barahachhetra. The quality of hospitality provided to the pilgrims by the local hosts is evident in the pilgrims' commendation of the hospitality they receive from their hosts including the hoteliers, shopkeepers, priests and others. When big fairs and religious events are held in Barahachhetra, many pilgrims stay overnight to attend these events. However, despite the presence of *dharmasalas*, there might not be enough accommodation for the pilgrims and finding a hotel to stay might be out of bounds for several reasons.

When asked how such situations are resolved, the manager of *Shree Barahachhetra Dharmashram Samiti* in the Lord Baraha Temple area said:

"We allow pilgrims to accommodate even in the rooms, balconies, and spaces that are not normally meant for them. They also accommodate in the hall opposite to the temple. During the Kartik Mela, virtually all houses in the Temple area get converted to temporary lodges for the pilgrims. We do all we can."

The priests or other temple staffs guide the pilgrims regarding the appropriate way of the temple *darshan* process. The temple management committee members and even other locals help stranded pilgrims whenever there is a need. During the *Kartik Mela*, it was observed that some pilgrim groups negotiated with some hoteliers for group discounts on dinner and the hoteliers agreed. The researchers experienced their share of hospitality in Barahachhetra offered by a few interviewed respondents who were either tempo drivers or street vendors. In Barahachhetra, the local hoteliers and sellers also acknowledge religious needs of the pilgrims. This was exemplified in the compliance by the local hoteliers in the Lord Baraha Temple area to an official

police circular issued on 4 November 2019 on the prohibition of public sale of alcohol and meat products in the local hotels. A hotelier familiar with this rule remarked:

“This has been done because during the Kartik Mela last year the pilgrims got a bad impression due to open sale of meat, fish and alcohol.”

Animal sacrifice is a feature of many Hindu temples in Nepal. Although Barahachhetra is not untouched by this tradition, there are hints that the temples in Barahachhetra are slowly eliminating animal sacrifice. For instance, no animal sacrifice exists in the Lord Baraha Temple, the Pindeshwor Temple, the Ramdhuni Temple and the Vishnupaduka Temple. Other temples carry out animal sacrifice but they too are changing. For instance, sacrificing of pigeons is no longer allowed in the Dantakali Temple. In the Auliya Gaddi Math, animal sacrifice is done in the Kali Temple but the priest is of the opinion that it should stop one day. Animal sacrifice is huge in the Budhasubba Temple but on request of the Buddhist communities, the Temple management committee does not promote visit to Budhasubba on the day of Buddha Jayanti, the most important occasion in the Budhasubba tradition, in order to subjugate, on that day, the fervor created by animal sacrifice.

The sellers and local livelihoods

While the priests, religious sects and healers are busy providing their services to the pilgrims, the hoteliers, permanent shopkeepers, temporary shopkeepers, street vendors, and hawkers, from near and far, are also important in providing services to the pilgrims. The pilgrimage in Barahachhetra can be metaphorically referred to as a ‘pilgrimage’ of sellers as, for the sellers, it is akin to attending a pilgrimage when they are able to operate their business to pilgrims during special events and occasions, and even during normal times. The hoteliers and shopkeepers remain especially busy during important occasions and may hire extra workers or expand their business to take advantage of increased flow of customers. During the *Kartik Mela* in the Lord Baraha Temple, many sellers from the nearby villages and villages of other districts such as Dhankuta, Udaypur, Bhojpur, Saptari, Janakpur, and Birgunj come to sell different products. They are also joined by a number of sellers from India.

If there is one most important item that pilgrims can buy in Barahachhetra, it is the *Rudraksha* (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus*). It is sold in all the major pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra. While *Rudraksha* seeds are accorded religious importance in Hinduism, they are also considered to have medicinal properties according to Ayurveda (homeopathic). Pilgrims and *Sadhus* (the holy saints) buy *Rudraksha* during during the *Kartik Mela* in Barahachhetra and they can buy it for a very cheap price. Moreover, especially those coming from India remain assured that they will not be cheated with fake *Rudraksha*.

“We bring Rudraksha from our own farm. 30-35 households are engaged in Rudraksha farming in Suryakunda area; we collect from them also. We sell highest amount of Rudraksha in the Kartik and Maghe Mela in Lord Baraha Temple area.” (A Rudraksha seller from Suryakunda interviewed during the Kartik Mela)

Following are some other testimonies to that provide evidence that pilgrimage tourism is an important source of livelihoods for local hoteliers, shopkeepers and other service providers:

“Approximately 60-65 households in Barahachhetra temple are fully dependent on hotel business. I believe 75% of our income comes from pilgrims.”(An hotelier from the Lord Baraha Temple area)

“Three hotels are operating here and the business is okay. The road gets obstructed due to flood during rainy season and we close down from Ashad to Bhadra (Jun-July to August-September). If pilgrims could visit the temple round the year, it would benefit 30 households in this area.”(A snacks shop owner in Vishnupaduka, Dharan)

Interconnection between the temples

Pilgrimages sites and temples in Barahachhetra are interrelated. This is evidenced by the following examples. The delivery of the *Auliya Baba Nishan* from Auliya Gaddi Math to the Lord Baraha Temple is an indispensable ritual carried out during the *Kartik Mela* in Barahachhetra. Likewise, the sacred water to be offered in Pindeshwor temple in Dharan needs to be collected from the confluence of the *Kaushiki* and the *Kokah* Rivers near the Lord Baraha Temple. Similarly, if the holy fire in *Ramdhuni* is extinguished, it should be re-lit by bringing the holy fire from the Pindeshwor Temple in Dharan and vice-versa.

There is a particular order in each pilgrimage site or temple that the pilgrims need to follow to complete a systematic *darshan* (to prostrate the Gods at the sanctum) of the site. For instance, in the Lord Baraha Temple perimeter, the *darshan* of the gods should start first with the *darshan* of the *Gurubaraha* followed by the Lord Baraha Temple and others. Similarly, the *darshan* in the Pindeshwor Temple follows a particular order from the left to the right. Likewise, pilgrims should pay a visit to Auliya Baba Gaddi after visiting Lord Baraha Temple in order to reap appropriate religious merit.

Ritual procedures

Some unique features of the Temples visited were explored in some length during this field research. The priest of the Lord Baraha Temple mentioned the following feature about the system of worships in different temples:

“In the Baraha Temple, we follow the Vedic method of worship while in the Dantakali Temple and the Pindeshwor Temple, they follow the Shakta and Shaiva methods of worship, respectively. Cooked food is offered to the Pindeshwor Baba in the Pindeshwor temple during Pooja and other rituals but offering cooked food is strictly prohibited in the Lord Baraha Temple”

A member of the temple management committee in Budhasubba said the following:

“The most unique feature of the Budhasubba temple is that it is a temple without idol, ‘flesh’ and ‘alcohol’ are offered to Budhasubba. Other characteristic features are: the bamboos in here are without tips, crows do not come to this place, and no dew falls inside the temple premises even when the outer premise is soaked with dew. Likewise, so many animals are sacrificed and there is blood everywhere however there are no gnats.”

The main priest of the Pindeshwor Temple stated:

“The inner structure of the main temple is not believed to be made not by a mortal being but rather by Lord Bishwakarma (the god of architect) himself especially because of the unique geometric design of its inner roof which is made up of a single piece of stone.”

Indeed, the said architect leaves any pilgrim viewing it in a reverential awe as one cannot logically discern how such architect could be created from a single piece of stone.

Pilgrimage and the environment

Adverse impact on the environment is one of the key concerns in Barahachhetra. A few examples demonstrate the impact of human activities in Barahachhetra on the environment. These include increased number of landslides in the Chatara-Barahachhetra route during monsoon due to improper road construction, reduced ground level in the vicinity of the Panchakanya Temple in Dharan due to excess extraction of red mud rendering tree roots to be visible, increased deforestation in the Ramdhuni Preserved Forest leading to changed outlook of the place, pollution of the area on the bank of the Kokah River near the Lord Baraha Temple and the Vishnupaduka Temple due to unmanaged dumping of wastes. An Australian adventure tourist who was interviewed made the following statement:

“We came Kayaking to Barahachhetra. The fast-running river water, the hills, the wilderness, and the helpful people are all beautiful but we could see many landslides during our journey. That is probably due to tree logging as we could see tractors full of logs on the road.”

Conflicting Issues

A book (Dharan-Dham-Sangraha), some brochures and postcards have been published by the Dharan Tourism Development Committee which incorporate some pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra. The Barahachhetra Samrakshan Manch has published brochures and some introductory books about Barahachhetra. The Manch has developed a concept note and proposal for the construction of 'Vaikuntha Sarobar' Master Plan in June 2019. Bol Bam Shree Pindeshwor Babadham Samiti has published some booklets about Pindeshwor. Although the local government bodies regularly allocate budget in topics relevant to pilgrimage tourism, they have not been effective. Likewise, conflicts were observed between the main priest and the temple management committees. In a few temples, priests were not invited in the meeting of the temple management committee. The Brihattar (the greater) Barahachhetra Vikas Samiti, the largest government committee has remained non-functional since the existing structure was dissolved in February 2019 after Nepal embarked on three-tier governance structure (as of 30 November 2019). For instance, in the *Kartik Mela*, no active local government participation was observed. Besides, there was no significant coverage of the fair in prominent newspapers. Besides, lack of robust tourism infrastructure- primarily good roads and public transport, transparent income management of temples, rampant encroachment of temple areas, lack of temple maintenance and necessary caution therein, lack of data, lack of promotion, were other management issues observed to be prevalent in Barahachhetra. There is no coordinating mechanism in place among the concerned municipalities or districts exchange information and work together for the enhancement of pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra.

The researchers learned about a conflict between two religious leaders from two different sects in Barahachhetra. A senior local government representative from Chatara opined:

“Common people should get the feeling of spirituality from saints, hence, it is good if saints complement each other’s work rather than compete.”

Discussions

Hindu pilgrims perceive the sacred landscape of a site in deep reverence and believe that the wishes asked with a pure heart will be granted. The sacred landscape in Barahachhetra includes the myths and legends, the sacred centers, sacred religious rituals, performances and fairs, religious sects, sacred specialists, and the sacred geography comprising of the diverse landscape from the plains to the hills and mountains, sacred water sources, mainly the *Kokah* and the *Kaushiki* (Koshi), the forests, the *Rudraksha* trees that are very much characteristic of the region and so forth. As soon as pilgrims enter this pilgrimage landscape, they are transported into

a realm of sacredness that brings to them an immense sense of peacefulness and satisfaction. An ordinary tourist might simply see rivers, hills, temples and woods in Barahachhetra, but the pilgrims see a landscape charged with divinity, a land that was actually shaped by mythic events (Kinsley, 1998; in Shinde, 2012 p.239).

As discussed earlier, at the root of the origin of Barahachhetra as a pilgrimage region lies the legend of Lord Vishnu who incarnated as *Yagnabaraha* and killed the demon named *Hirnakshya*. It was in the process of killing the demon that the Lord Baraha got so enraged that he travelled to different places of the Earth looking for other demons like *Hirnakshya*. His rage did not subside in any way and it was only after he reached the *Kokah-Kaushiki* (name of two sacred rivers) confluence when he fell into the river that he became devoid of rage. This pleased him and he wanted to give *Varadana* (boon) to river *Kokah* who asked the Lord to reside in the confluence of the *Kokah* and *Kaushiki* from the day onwards (Devacharya, 2019, p.4). Thus Barahachhetra is a rare example that demonstrates the power of sacredness of water. One should remember that in the Hindu tradition water is held especially as 'sacred'. The legend of Barahachhetra gives total substance to this belief. This notion of sacredness of the water is enacted by pilgrims who offer the sacred water of the *Kokah-Kaushiki* confluence during their circumambulation in the Lord Baraha Temple area and to the Lord Pindeshwor in the Pindeshwor Temple.

All pilgrimage sites visited in Barahachhetra have mythical mention in the *Puranic* and other Hindu scriptures. Narratives about places have gained prominence in tourism, and some of these narratives are based on mythical events. Studies of tourism show that individuals organize their experiences through myths (Hennig, 2002; Shields, 1991; in Nilsson & Blom, 2018, p.359). This is very true of Barahachhetra. The myths and legends are an indispensable element of pilgrimage in Barahachhetra and they need to be preserved, recorded and transferred to the pilgrims and public. Moreover, ignored mythological sites such as the Suryakunda in the Barahachhetra Municipality need to be revived. In one word, the sacred complex of Barahachhetra and pilgrimage tourism possibility therein is sustained, at the core, by myths and legends which provide the pilgrims with the prospects of salvation for themselves and their ancestors. The significance of a touristic destination, among other things, depends also on historical narratives (Massey, 2005; in Nilsson & Blom, 2018, p.367).

Circumambulation

Chief divinities of pilgrimage, process of *darshan* rituals, ancestral worship & libation, yatra marga (pilgrimage route), accommodation, religious souvenir, *darshan* etc. are some characteristics of Hindu pilgrimage. (Gautam, 2014). While of all these can be seen in Barahachhetra, the process of circumambulation as a way of the temple darshan (prostration) process deserves special mention. Circumambulation, known

as '*Parikrama*' in the Hindu tradition is the ritual of walking around a sacred object or place. Encircling a holy object or site is symbolic of an entire pilgrimage journey as well as a visible sign of a pilgrim's respectful adoration of the holy (Davidson & Gitlitz, 2002, p.113). These terms are mostly used in the context of religious deities in temples, sacred rivers, sacred hills and a close cluster of temples, and "doing a Parikrama", as a symbol of prayer, is an integral part of Hindu worship (Singh & Sehgal, 2017, p.450). In the context of pilgrimage to Barahachhetra, elements of circumambulation prevail in all pilgrimage sites and temples. As Sinha (2014, p.66) has discussed in the context of the sacred landscape of Braj, India, the sacred landscape of Barahachhetra is also felt, tasted, and inscribed in the body through daily rituals, circumambulation, festivals, fairs, and other life and death rituals that are constantly ongoing in one sacred space or the other.

Attractions & authenticity

Sanctity is central to the maintenance of the religious sense or authenticity of a place (Olsen, 2006; in Hung et al.,2016), and it is commonly used interchangeably used with authenticity in religious tourism. The concept of authenticity in relation to pilgrimage experience has been used quite often (Belhassen et al., 2008; Andriotis, 2011; Kim & Jamal 2007; in Jirásek, 2014, p.50). Authenticity in pilgrimage tourism can be termed as the originality pilgrims perceive in their experience of the pilgrimage site. The combination of the sacred geography, spaces, temples, rituals and fairs, specialists and rivers on the one hand, and the religious sects and organizations, *dharmashalas*, Sankrit education centers, local hospitality, authentic local products such as the *Rudraksha*, and the opportunity to explore non-religious natural attractions in the periphery of the pilgrimage sites render the pilgrimage to Barahachhetra an authentic pilgrimage tourism experience. The idea of authenticity became a central feature of tourism studies after Boorstin's (1964) proposal of the model of transformation of the historical traveler to a modern tourist whereby the latter enjoys the 'pseudo-events' instead of the real world around him, pilgrimage to Barahachhetra does not present any pseudo-events but authentic experience. Most importantly, pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra can be found as they have been described in the ancient Hindu scriptures, and various myths and legends relating to them testify their authenticity. Similar to what Kunwar & Ghimire (2012) found in their study of Lumbini, both the visitor experience (activity-related authenticity) and the toured objects themselves (object-related authenticity) can be experienced with regards to pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra.

Hospitality

It has been widely accepted that pilgrimage and religion-induced travels manifest a common sacred journey ritual (Sharply & Sundaram, 2005; in Kim, Kim & King,

2019). However, as secularisation has accelerated a growing number of anthropological studies have illuminated the sacred- secular bipolarity between pilgrimage and tourism and between pilgrims and tourists (Kim et al., 2019). As a core component of experiencing religious tourism and pilgrimage, hospitality is strongly rooted within religion (Kirilova, Gilmetdinova, & Lheto, 2014). Connecting with communities and strangers, hospitality is supported by diverse religious teachings. Apart from meaning of hospitality associated with religious values, commercial associations with hospitality lead to different interpretations and behaviours (Kirilova et al., 2014).

The word hospitality comes from hospice, an old French word meaning “to provide care/shelter for travelers.” (Walker & Walker, 2014, p.4). The origin of hospitality cannot be traced back to a point in time as hospitality has co-existed with civilization, only the forms have changed. Hospitality is an indispensable requirement for tourism to thrive. According to Lashley and Morrison (2000), hospitality requires the guest to feel that the host is being hospitable through feelings of generosity, a desire to please and a genuine regard for the guest as an individual (Lashley & Morrison, 2000; in Kunwar, 2016, p.58). As testified by the pilgrims during the field study, the hosts in Barahachhetra are found to exhibit a very strong sense of hospitality towards the incoming pilgrims. While some religious seekers arrive at Barahachhetra to supplement the work of their affiliated sects and organizations, others even extend any outstanding support to the pilgrims for example when they are stranded. The Nepalese brand of hospitality is *Atithidevo bhava* which means let the guests treat as God. Likewise, the *dharmashala*, hoteliers and the locals continuously cater to the pilgrims’ needs. Acknowledgement of past donations made by pilgrims, response to pilgrims’ queries by locals and hosts in the temple and non-temple areas, compliance on prohibition on the sale of alcohol are some other expressions of hospitality in the different pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra.

The changing tradition

The area of Barahachhetra has been at the forefront of important pilgrimage region in Nepal. However, Barahachhetra gained wider audience specifically after the commencement of the *Kumbha* tradition in Barahachhetra in Nepal in Apr-May 2002. Ever since, the *Kumbha* tradition has not only been attracting more pilgrims in the event and, by and large, in Barahachhetra as a whole, but also in educating the domestic pilgrims about the importance of Barahachhetra. Moreover, the outflow of Nepalese pilgrims to the *Kumbha Mela* sites in India has reduced to a large extent.

Pilgrims’ motivations

Motivation can be defined as the driving force that is within all human beings, that is something that commits a person to a course of action (Mullins, 2009, p.479–518; in Blackwell, 2010, p.27). Many pilgrimage places draw devotees through

their reputation for granting some specific spiritual, social or material blessing, usually expressed in terms of purification and the healing of soul, mind and body (Stoddard, 1997; in Singh & Haigh, 2015). However, Hindu pilgrimage is also a social duty, a rite of passage, and a way of gaining favor, which “equally involves searching for spiritual experience in special places and learning that these material places lie outside the spiritual, mystical, true reality” (Sopher, 1987: 15; in Singh & Haigh, 2015). However, there are limited studies into motivations for pilgrimage Blackwell (2010, p.26). Blackwell (2010, p.32-34), drawing from the various works of different authors, identifies a number of motivations for pilgrimage such as religion, adventure, religious merit, to get away from everyday living and so forth. In the field study regarding motivations for visiting pilgrimage center in Krakow, Poland, the authors identify three kinds of motivations: tourist motivations (sightseeing, prayer, pilgrimage), religious motivations (service, confession), and recreational motivations (walking, spending time with family) (Liro, Sołjan & Bilska-Wodecka, 2017, p.423). In the case of Barahachhetra, the motivations of pilgrims mostly conformed to religious motivations During pilgrimage, pilgrims may search for ‘a cure for physical or spiritual problems, or seeking a sense of belonging to fill a spiritual vacuum, or may be motivated by a deep desire to connect with like-minded individuals who will reinforce their sense of self and their place in the universe’ (Singh, 2013; in McIntosh, 2017, p. 10). This is largely true of the pilgrim tourists in Barahachhetra. The researchers found the following common types of motivation among pilgrims in Barahachhetra:

- a. To get rid of sins
- b. To avoid being born as boar
- c. To conduct *shraddha* rituals for liberating deceased ancestors
- d. To conduct specific rituals (e.g. *Rudri* recitation and *Navagraha Shanti*)
- e. To fulfill the Vakal (promise made to god)
- f. To get education
- g. To fulfill elderly’s wish for pilgrimage
- h. To get wishes fulfilled
- i. To wish for better future of family members
- j. To get rid of diseases and disability
- k. To attain peace of mind

Raj (2015, p.189) states the individual experiences of the participants in the Hajj ritual in the City of Makkah in the following words “*The hajj pilgrims feel unanimous in their view that nothing can quite prepare them for the sheer beauty of the experience*

and the overwhelming feeling of humbleness that overcomes one during the pilgrimage of hajj". The experience of the pilgrims interviewed in Barahachhetra with regards to their inner experience was no different. However, most of the pilgrims also seemed to be wary of the road condition, sanitation issues and limited police presence in the Temples they visited.

Typology of pilgrims

A widely followed theory of marketing argues that every market consists of groups or "segments" of customers with different needs and demands (Kamla-Raj, 2010; in Vijayananda, 2014). It should be noted here that segments are unlikely to be mutually exclusive, and this would also apply to pilgrimage tourism. To further identify the pilgrimage tourists and analyze his/her purchasing behavior, there is a need to build a typology of pilgrimage tourists. Typology comes from the Greek word "Typus" and describes various types of persons based on his/her behavior and attitudes (Rountree, 2002; in Vijayananda, 2014). The definitive study of typology would help to understand the characteristics and motives of different types of pilgrimage tourists.

Schmidt (2009; in Singh & Haigh, 2015, p.785) gives the following typology of pilgrims: devotional, healing, obligatory or socially required, ritual cycle and wandering. Most of the pilgrimage tourists the researchers came across during the field study confirmed to one or more of the first four in these categories. Singh and Haigh (2015, p.785-786) propose a five-fold typology of pilgrims based on their motivations: a) Tourists- who have no major spiritual or emotional engagement with the sacred messages of the site, b) Pilgrims of Duty- who travel to the sacred not necessarily through belief, but out of respect to their Social Dharma, c) Pilgrims of Need- people who travel on a pilgrimage in order to gain some result in the material world, d) Pilgrims of Hope- who seek spiritual uplift from association with the Supreme, and e) Pilgrims of Union- true Spiritual Seekers for whom all experience is a spiritual journey, who follow *moksha dharma*, a path that seeks escape from the material world and the Hindu cycle of rebirth. Most of the pilgrimage tourists in Barahachhetra seem to belong to two categories: 'Pilgrims of Need' and 'Pilgrims of Hope'. In the case study of the Haifa's Baha' 'i' Gardens, Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006, p.43-44) find the presence of both kinds of tourist despite the site's religious connotation: the secular tourist and the religious tourist. In Barahachhetra, it is mostly the religious tourists who visit but also those who visit their friends and relatives and come to enjoy the natural beauty of the region at the same time. During this field study, based on the frequency of visits, pilgrimage tourists could be categorized into two groups:

- a. Frequent visitors: More than 50% of the pilgrims who were interviewed during the field study had visited at least once before.

- b. First timers: Nearly 40% of the pilgrims who were interviewed during the field study mentioned that they were visiting Barahachhetra for the first time.

Likewise, on the basis of the stay duration, the following groups were identified:

- a. Day trippers: Most of the pilgrims visiting religious sites in Barahachhetra, in general, are day trippers. They tend to visit the intended pilgrimage site and return on the same day.
- b. Overnight stayers: During special occasions such as the Kartik Mela, Bol Bam and Kumbha Mela, many pilgrims visiting Barahachhetra stay for a night or two before returning from the journey.

Another distinct category of pilgrimage tourists identified was:

- a. Pollution makers: Sanitation is a significant issue in Barahachhetra. Particularly the pilgrims attending religious fairs and events contribute a significant portion of garbage and pollution in the pilgrimage sites.

Rejection of domination of Brahminical priesthood

The sacred landscape of Barahachhetra is not engulfed by the all-pervading influence of Brahminical Priesthood as concluded by Vidyarthi (1961) because the priests of the temples are not necessarily Brahmins by birth and are fully accepted by the pilgrims. The findings from this study also concur with what Jha's (1971) findings in his study of the sacred complex of Janakpur in that 'the boundary of a nation is not the boundary of a civilization' (Jha, 1971, p. 105). This is exemplified by the inflow of not only domestic pilgrims but also pilgrims from other countries, mainly India but also Myanmar, Bhutan, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. This unique finding from this study can be another pull factor for pilgrims from various religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Pilgrimage tourism and peace

The quest for healing, according to Dubisch and Winkelman (2005, p. 1; in McIntosh, 2017, p. 10) is often described by pilgrims in spiritual terms as restoring one's relationship with oneself (or one's God, whoever or whatever one might conceive that to be). In their case study of pilgrimage tourism in the Sindh Valley in Kashmir, Bhat & P. J. (2015, p. 65) conclude that the festive tradition in Kashmir that features in every district is regarded as the main tool for peace, communal harmony and common ethos of Kashmiriyat and that the religious festivals such as Kheer Bhawani uniquely help in promoting socio-religious harmony. The following elements of peace occupy a prominent space in the context of pilgrimage to Barahachhetra:

Religious tolerance, healing and rejection of violence

Tolerance is the "tendency to put up with individuals and groups that abide by a set

of values, norms, customs, and political goals that is different from one's own" (Russell & Steve, 2010; in Shinde, 2015, p.180). Religious pluralism implies co-existence of diverse religious beliefs and practices and the equal importance they garner from their respective followers (Shinde & Pinkney, 2013; in Shinde, 2015, p.180). Both intra-religion and inter-religion tolerance is observed in the case of Barahachhetra. The harmonious existence of different religious sects in Barahachhetra relates to intra-religion religion tolerance. Likewise, the co-existence of Hindu temples alongside Buddhist monasteries in pilgrimage sites in the region, and the diversity in the religion in the communitas of pilgrims, including Hindu, Hindu-Buddhist, Hindu-Kirat, Buddhist, Muslim, Kabir followers and Bonpo, visiting pilgrimage sites in Barahachhetra relates to inter-religion tolerance. Religious tourism can be a catalyst for peace and long-lasting friendship, and religious understanding between hosts and visitors. The dialogue between cultures, religions and broader civilizations offers an opportunity for tourism (UNWTO, 2007; Chand, 2010; Apostolopoulos et al., 2013; Sharma, 2013; in Bilim & Duzguner, 2015, p.86). In Barahachhetra, religious tolerance is displayed in the communitas of pilgrimage tourists from different religious sects and different religious traditions. Likewise, the acceptance of Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests in the different temples in Barahachhetra also reinforces religious tolerance, pluralism and acceptance.

Interviews conducted during the field research clearly showed that a vast majority of pilgrimage tourists pay a visit to the different sacred sites and temples in Barahachhetra for healing. As mentioned earlier, on the one hand they seek healing from the divine maladies, while, on the other, they seek healing from worldly diseases. Most of the pilgrims converged that their ultimate motivation behind visiting Barahachhetra was to gain peace and that their visit to Barahachhetra offered them a healing effect at the level of the soul.

Despite the fact that animal sacrifice is a common feature of many Hindu temples, a prohibition on animal sacrifice in the Lord Baraha Temple, Pindeshwor Temple, Ramdhuni Temple and Vishnupaduka Temple, and certain restrictions in other temples such as the Dantakali Temple, Auliya Math and Budhasubba Temple can be inferred as a gradual rejection of physical violence.

Pilgrimage & environment

The literature on pilgrimage has paid a little attention to the dynamics of environment in pilgrimage destinations and the implications of pilgrimage for sacred sites (Shinde, 2007, p.344). Even when environmental problems are recognized, they are articulated with reference to an imagined glorious past (Alley, 2002; Joseph, 1994; in Shinde, 2012, p.116). The fact that the ideas of environmental change are often limited to the effects visible in the religious-cultural sphere tends to overlook the use

of pilgrimage sites for different forms of tourism and the problems these generate in the physical environment (Shinde, 2012, p. 117).

In Barahachhetra the environmental element seems overlooked and ignored. The environmental degradation affects not only the religious environment land sacred landscape, it also has long term impact in the geography of the region. Taking the example of Tirumala-Tirupati, a popular pilgrimage center in south India, Shinde (2007, p. 349, 356) mentions growth in scale, frequency and character of pilgrims' visits one the one hand and urban growth of the place as two factors affecting the environment in a pilgrimage center. The study on Barahachhetra finds that the environmental degradation is primarily due to lack of efficient development project plans and the lack of robust waste management system and the contribution of irresponsible behavior of some pilgrims in 'pollution' of the environment can only have secondary attribution, and there is high likelihood that resolution of the former problem will largely resolve the latter problem. Above all, it should always be considered that undertaking a pilgrimage on foot is one of the ways to experience the numinous quality of the landscape (Entwistle, 1987; Haberman, 1994, in Shinde, 2012, p.117). In the case of Barahachhetra, pilgrimage on foot is the utmost expression of their devotion and commitment by the pilgrims and a polluted environment may dissuade pilgrims to undertake such journeys. The occasional master plans should account environmental factor as an important aspect of the overall plan and be implemented accordingly. Moreover, environmental impact assessment of development projects in Barahachhetra should be indispensable part of such such projects and should be strictly implemented.

Pilgrimage tourism sustainability

Sustainable tourism has three main objectives: meeting the needs of the host population; satisfying the demands of a growing number of tourists; and safeguarding the natural environment in order to achieve these aims (Cater, 1993; in Kunwar, 2017, p.273). It is only recently that scholars, governments, and tourism agencies have taken notice of the increasing numbers of religiously motivated travelers mainly owing to the economic potential of religious tourists (Olsen & Timothy, 2006, p.1). For example, in their quantitative analysis of socio economic impact of pilgrimage tourism in Mata Vaishno Devi shrine in Jammu, India, Ashfaq & Parveen (2014, p. 249) conclude that pilgrimage tourism particularly at the shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is the life line of Jammu region. In a later study on the same temple, Singh & Bahadur (2018, p.836) conclude that there is a positive relationship between the growth of pilgrimage tourism and other types of tourism and that the growth of pilgrimage tourism contributes significantly to the sustainable development of the host population. There is a rising pattern of geocapital formation around prominent shrines and temples, especially those situated in readily accessible places (Bhattarai,

Conway, & Shrestha, 2005, p.678). As found from the present study on pilgrimage in Barahachhetra, pilgrimage tourism has become a means of livelihoods for the locals from the areas adjoining the pilgrimage sites and for non-locals who arrive to Barahachhetra on different occasions to sell their products. In other words, earning from pilgrimage tourism has helped transportation personnel, hoteliers, shopkeepers, hawkers, street vendors and others. Moreover, the offerings made by the pilgrims makes a significant contribution to the temples in Barahachhetra. Pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra, owing to its potential to attract high number of pilgrims and devotees, also provides a reason for the local and the central level governments to come up with long-term and coordinated plans for enhancing pilgrimage tourism infrastructure in the region. Pilgrimage tourism sustainability of Barahachhetra also requires blending pilgrimage tourism with recreational tourism in the vicinity because except for the aspects of veneration and faith, regarded in a broader sense, pilgrimage involves trips in nature, trips, visiting various places [...] and purchasing some souvenirs (Gupta, 1999, p.31; in TÎRCA, Stanciulescu, Chis, & Bacila, 2010).

Destination brand management

According to Blain, Levy & Ritchie (2005, p.337), destination branding, comprises of a set of marketing activities, that, among other things, convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination and serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination. Destination image is defined as “not only the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination” (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991, p.8; in Blain, Levy & Brent Ritchie, 2005, p.330). In the context of pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra, the destination image warrants furthest attention because destination image has been shown to be a significant factor in determining visitor choice (Lee, O’Leary, & Hong, 2002; in Blain, Levy & Brent Ritchie, 2005, p.330). The various conflicts- between the priests and temple management committee, conflict between religious leaders, allegations on the *Sadhus*, insufficiency of tourism infrastructure, and lack of government action on pilgrimage tourism will all have an adverse impact on the destination brand of Barahachhetra. These need to be mitigated, addressed and overcome by highlighting the importance of the sacred element in Barahachhetra as a high-potential pilgrimage tourism destination and region.

Easy travel between pilgrimage sites, exploration of adventure tourism possibilities, introduction of recreational parks and picnic spots, and development of packages for blended religious and nature tours to Barahachhetra and Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve can make pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra a greater and sustainable possibility.

- 'Summer City' in Suryakunda area due to the variation of its climatic conditions from chilling cold to warm weather.
- Connecting Belka Municipality in Udaypur district and Sangurigadi Municipality in Dhankuta district through a bridge. Initiating Bungy adventure and Mainamaini Darshan in Udaypur district.

These possibilities need to be explored with a comprehensive plan. However, to enhance the pilgrimage tourism situation, in general, there are a number of tasks that can be initiated- first and the foremost, the focus should be on enhancing pilgrimage tourism infrastructure and promoting the region in different ways. There is a need to run one standard hotel at Chatara because Chatara is going to be newly emerging tourist attraction where every day more than one hundred fifty people, on the way back from Barahachhetra, will make river journey by motorboat at Koshi river. Now there are five small hotels including some restaurants which will provide lodging and fooding. The capacity of ten motorboats is estimated approximately one hundred forty seats which would be occupied by the pilgrims every day.

Some of the recommendations are:

- To bring environmental awareness at the pilgrimage site.
- Prohibit the use of plastic in temple area and make mandatory the use of woven leaves or plant based bags.
- Ensure dedicated garbage collection mechanism in all sites.
- Identify a special pilgrimage tourism souvenir that carries the identity of Barahachhetra. *Rudraksha* beads can be one of them.
- Ensure telecommunication and wifi in pilgrimage sites.
- Reprint different old and new books about Barahachhetra and provide them to pilgrim at minimum price.
- Create at least one dedicated website and a YouTube channel to promote Barahachhetra.
- Create links with Nepali and Indian religious TV channels to transmit information about the pilgrimage sites.
- Connect Barahachhetra Hindu pilgrimage tourism to Koshi Tappu Safari, trip, Vedetar hill station and Wetland areas in Sunsari district.
- There should be some signpost at the entrance point of Jhumka, Dharan and Chatara with distance, elevation and the name of the monuments located at Barahachhetra.

Conclusion

In align with the ideas of Raj, Griffin & Blackwell (2015, p.106), pilgrimage incorporates religious involvement as a central feature of the pilgrim's journey. This largely holds true for Barahachhetra, however the secular landscape is also an integral part of the pilgrimage system in Barahachhetra. This paper highlights the major characteristic features of pilgrimage system in Barahachhetra through the study of the sacred landscape of Barahachhetra. Barahachhetra apparently departs from Brahmanical priesthood, a feature that mostly dominates pilgrimage destinations and reflects. On the one hand its authenticity is reinforced by the myths and legends, fairs and festivals including other events such as the *Kartik Mela* and the *Kumbha Mela*. On the other hand, its unique features, outstanding elements of hospitality, religious tolerance and plurality, and possibility of blending pilgrimage tourism with recreational and adventure tourism provides a strong potential for sustainable tourism that can contribute to the region's economy. Therefore, Barahachhetra is an authentic pilgrimage tourism destination for people from all religions waiting for a comprehensive and coordinated plan to rejuvenate itself.

As time passed by, the change in the mode and method of travel also signifies a shift in the patterns of religiosity and religious behavior. The aspirations and demands of religious tourism, to a large extent, drive the packing of a pilgrimage landscape. It is necessary to consider such landscapes and contemporary pilgrimages (where root and body become road and car) as challenges for understanding the aesthetics associated with emerging forms of religious tourism (Shinde 2012, p.104).

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