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Pilgrimage Tourism Dynamics in Rural Nepal: Assessment of Growth Prospects and its Challenges in Haleshi

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Abstract

Tourism has unavoidable perspective worldwide. It is a multi-dimensional societal, cultural and economic activity that involves movements of people from one place to another place particularly out of their usual environment with the aim of getting knowledge on new place, cultures, religions, traditions and so on. Pilgrimage tourism is a specific type of tourism that involves travelling to the holy or sacred places for religious and spiritual purposes in different places around the World. This study aims at exploring opportunities and challenges of pilgrimage tourism in Haleshi area of Khotang district. Household questionnaire survey, focus group discussion, Key informant interview and field observation, interactions with tourists/pilgrims have been adopted as primary sources of data and published research articles, census data and government documents have been used as secondary data to accomplish this study. This study reveals that there are many opportunities like natural cave and beautiful sceneries, unique traditions and cultures, religious harmony among different religious group etc. for the development of pilgrimage tourism in the study area however, many challenges like poor infrastructures (road, communication, markets, hotels and accommodations), quality food, security services, public awareness, advertisement and publicity, safe water and sanitation are the notable problems faced by the pilgrimage tourists as well as local communities in the study area.

Keywords: Agriculture, infrastructure, economic, occupations, religious

Introduction

Tourism is regarded as a significant global industry with a potential for economic growth. Tourism consists of the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places away from their usual environment for leisure, recreation and other purposes (UNWTO,

2021). Pilgrimage tourism is an assemblage of behavior and services of religious tourist (Mishra, 2024). Among the various nature of tourist, pilgrimage tourists are that type of tourist who are motivated for religious purposes only (Rebuya, et al. 2020). Pilgrimage tourists are increasing day by day which is considered as fast growing industry around the world (Ghimire, 2023). Pilgrimage tourism is a type of tourism encouraged, either partly or wholly by religious motives closely or loosely connected with holiday making or with journey undertaken for social, cultural or political reasons over short or long distances (Nicolaidis and Grobler, 2017).

Tourism is one of the foundations and plays a major role in the Nepalese economy contributing employment generation and economic growth (NTB, 2023). In addition, tourism can also promote the preservation of Nepal's cultural and natural heritage by raising awareness and generating income for conservation efforts. Nepal is a famous destination for pilgrimage due to its prominent, glorious, and prideful historical and sacred places. The Hindu, Buddhist and other cultural heritage sites, unique culture and traditions of diverse communities are also key attraction for pilgrimage tourists in Nepal. About 13.1 percent of tourists visited Nepal for pilgrimage purpose (Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2023). However, there are several challenges hindering for the development of pilgrimage tourism at many of Nepal's religious sites. In this context, present study has attempted to explore the opportunities and challenges of pilgrimage tourism development in Haleshi area which is one of the most famous venerated pilgrimage site for Hindus, Buddhists and Kirats in eastern part of Nepal.

Methods and Materials

Primary data has been collected from hotel owners and local residents of the study area through the structured questionnaires with the total of 286 (of the total 771 households in ward number seven of Haleshi Tuwachung municipality), respondents (included social inclusion of gender, ethnicity, economic status, literacy), semi or unstructured interviews have been conducted with nine Key Informants (KII) including senior citizens, school teachers, security personals and local politicians (ward chair). In addition to this, five focus group discussion (FGD) methods have been adopted with community leaders and social and volunteer organization's members (eco-clubs and cultural-religious conservation clubs) and some of the existing situations of problems and challenges have been directly observed during the biggest festival of Balachaturdasi festival in field study period. Similarly, the secondary data has been collected from the published articles, census data and official documents like palika profile, brochure and pumplets about the information on Haleshi and surroundings. After the collection of relevant information from the field; data processing, management and analysis have been carried out with the help of MS Excel and SPSS computer software.

The study area

Haleshi is located in the ward number seven of Haleshi Tuwaching municipality in the Khotang District of Koshi Province approximately 215 kilometers from Kathmandu, Nepal (Figure 1). It is situated between two major holy rivers of Dudh Koshi to the left and Sun Koshi to the right extended from 86° 25' 45" to 86° 45' 12" East longitude and 27° 05' 16" to 27° 14' 50" North latitude covering the surface area of 280.17 sq km and elevation ranges from 245 to 2290 meters above the sea level. Among the most popular pilgrimage sites of Nepal, Khotang Haleshi is a Mahadev temple located in a cave and one unique trio-pilgrimage site for Hindus, Buddhists and Kirants. It is also known as the Pashupatinath temple of eastern Nepal. There are others numerous small and beautiful caves surrounding the Haleshi area with historical and archeological identity.

The total population within the municipal area is 27,078, comprising 13,358 males and 13,720 females, distributed across 6,035 households. However, within ward 7 (study area) of the municipality, the population consists of 3,092 individuals, including 1529 males and 1,556 females residing in 771 households. The average household size in this ward is 4.01 and the sex ratio is 97.80. Hindus, Buddhists and Kirants are the main religious groups dominant in the study area, among them Rai, Chhetri, Magar, Kami and Brahmin are the major ethnic communities.

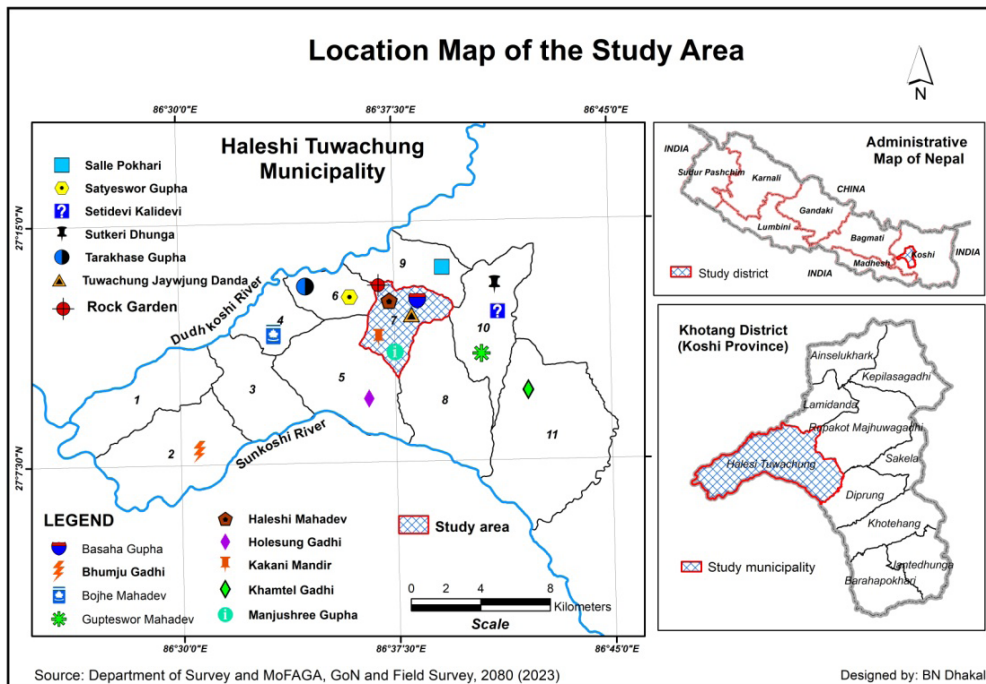


Figure 1: Location map of the study area

Results and Discussion

Historical development of pilgrimage tourism in Halesi

The Halesi Mahadev Temple is considered as one of the Pashupatinath temples in Nepal that has been extended as a crucial point for many religions for the last two thousand years and is a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, and Kirati (Rai) cultures, religions, and rituals. It is believed that inside the temple, the Halesi cave has been used as a place of abode for 6000 yrs. The location of the cave is connecting the holy rivers of Dudh Kosi and Sun Kosi River. Hindus worship Halesi Mahadev as the greatest god Devadidev, and believe that Lord Shiva concealed in the caves to flight the demon Bhasmasur. Similarly Buddhists consider Halesi to be one of their six major pilgrimage sites, and believe that the Buddhist guru Padmasambhava meditated in the caves and gained the power to live long. The caves are known as Halesi-Maratika among Tibetan Buddhists. Likewise, the Kirati people consider Halesi to be sacred because they believe the founder of the Kirat religion originated there. The Kirat Mundhum, an oral tradition, says that their ancestor Raechhakule (Khokchilipa) lived in the Halesi cave in the past. Due to this myth, Haleshi Mahadev has become the famous trio-pilgrimage site among the many religions.

Socio-economic characteristics

The study area has its own socio-economic characteristics. Nepali is used as the major language however, Chamling, Wambule, Magar, Newar, Rai, Tamang, Sampang, Limbu, etc. are also spoken in the study area. People celebrate their tradition and festivals such as Shakela Naach, Lokdohori, Bhajan-Kirtan, Udhauli-Ubhauli and so on with different beliefs. The study area has a population consisting of 48 percent males and 52 percent females. Of this population, 12.4 percent are aged 60 and above, 86.6 percent are between 16 and 59 years old, and 1 percent are under 15 years old. This indicates that the majority of the population falls within the active age group.

Table 1 : Age composition

| Age structure | Total number | Percentage |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Below 15 | 3 | 1.0 |
| 16 to 59 | 248 | 86.6 |
| 60 and above | 35 | 12.4 |
| Total | 286 | 100.0 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Ethnic composition

There are different ethnic groups living in the study area. Among them, Rai (48.8 percent), Chhetri (25.8 percent), Dalit (Kami, Damai) (20.4 percent), Brahmin (4.5 percent) and others (Newar) are the major ethnic groups in the study area (Table 2).

Table 2 : Ethnic composition

| Ethics | Total Number | Percentages |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Rai | 139 | 48.8 |
| Chhetri | 74 | 25.8 |
| Dalit | 58 | 20.4 |
| Brahmin | 13 | 4.5 |
| Others | 2 | 0.5 |
| Total | 286 | 100.0 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Literacy status

The table below shows the literacy status of the people residing in the study area. Of the total population, 40.2 percent are under SEE, 28.6 percent are illiterate, 22.6 percent are grouped as literate, and 8.6 percent people have achieved SEE and higher level of education (Table 3). Though there is diversity in the level of education acquired by the residents of the study area, there is harmony among them in solving problems sharing their knowledge and skill.

Table 3: Literacy status

| Educational level | Numbers | Percentage |
|--------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Illiterate | 82 | 28.6 |
| Literate | 65 | 22.6 |
| Under SEE | 114 | 40.2 |
| SEE and higher | 25 | 8.6 |
| Total | 286 | 100.0 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Occupational structure

According to the respondents, they are involved in different occupations like agriculture, business, animal farming, services and tourism. Table 4 shows that largest group (49.1 percent) of people are involved in agriculture and livestock raising as their main source of income. Similarly 33.7 percentages of respondents are doing business as their major occupation and 6.4 people are doing government and non-government services in different sectors. About 4.4 percent of total respondents are involved in tourism activities and rest of them are pursuing other activities like porters and daily wages for their livelihood of life. However, they are unsatisfied with their occupations due to lack of market facilities and infrastructure for their agricultural products and so on. Some of them have shared their bitter experience of not being able to feed themselves, since the place does not have plenty of job opportunities, proper market and water resources.

Table 4: Type of occupation

| Type | Numbers | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| Agriculture | 106 | 37.1 |
| Business | 96 | 33.7 |
| Animal Farming/livestock | 34 | 12.0 |
| Services | 18 | 6.4 |
| Tourism | 13 | 4.4 |
| Others | 19 | 6.4 |
| Total | 286 | 100.0 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Tourism development activities in Haleshi Tuwachung

Religious places

There are many religious places in and around the Haleshi area. Most of respondents (67.8 percent) recommended *Haleshi Mandir* as the main religious place in the study area whereas there are also so many other important religious sites for tourist attraction. Among them *Kakani Mandir* (suggested by 42.3 percent respondents), *Gupteswor* cave (noted by 14.7 percent respondents) and similarly *Supteshwor* cave, *Manjushree*, *Tuwachong*, *Nagthan*, *Gurdhum*, *Tarkhase*, *Bashaha* cave, *Kalikaasthan*, *Devisthan* and *Bhagwati Mandir* are the important sites (Table 5).

Table 5 : Major religious places around Haleshi according to respondent's recommendation

| Main religious places | No. of respondents | Percentage |
|------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| <i>Haleshi Mandir</i> | 194 | 67.8 |
| <i>Kakani Mandir</i> | 121 | 42.3 |
| Gupteshwor cave | 43 | 15.0 |
| Sapteshwor cave | 42 | 14.7 |
| Manjushree | 26 | 9.1 |
| Tuwachung | 26 | 9.1 |
| Nagthan | 21 | 7.3 |
| Gurdhum | 21 | 7.3 |
| Tarakhase | 20 | 7.0 |
| Bashaha cave | 12 | 4.2 |
| Kalikathan | 10 | 3.5 |
| Devithan | 9 | 3.1 |
| <i>Bhagwati Mandir</i> | 8 | 2.8 |
| Marutika | 7 | 2.4 |
| Bauddha Gumba | 5 | 1.7 |
| Dumdeli | 3 | 1.0 |

Source: Field study, 2023

Note: Total numbers exceeded due to multiple response.

Current other tourist sites and facilities for tourism development

Apart from above mentioned religious sites, there are so many tourist centers around the Haleshi area. Among them, Rock garden, View tower, Children park, Kamal pokhari, Salle pokhari, Jorkaphal, Vabisyabani pokhari, Rupakot are the major places for tourism. Similarly, there are some other attractions for the tourism development such as religious harmony among different groups, cultural and spiritual practices and entertainment activities such as Bhajan-Kirtan, Saakela Naach, Udhauli-Ubhauli and more. Homemade products, such as small wooden and woolen crafts, along with local fruits, foods and drinks, are also popular attractions for tourism development.

Problems of religious tourism development in the study area

The Halesi area has several tourist sites, and the number of tourist is steadily increasing. However, respondents in the field study have highlighted numerous challenges. Most (73.4 percent of total) reported long standing issues with poor infrastructure, which have directly impacted tourism development, including pilgrimage tourism. Key obstacles include a lack of public awareness and publicity, (reported by 36.4 percent) inadequate food quality, insufficient accommodation, limited access to safe drinking water and market facilities, unavailability of fresh products, unreliable communication services, poor security and high youth unemployment. These factors are hindering the growth of tourism in the study area (Table 6).

Table 6 : Problems of tourism development

| Problems | Percentage |
|--|-------------------|
| Infrastructure like transportation/road and vehicles | 73.4 |
| Food and accommodation | 51.7 |
| Market facilities | 42.0 |
| Public awareness/education/advertisement | 36.4 |
| Water and Sanitation | 24.1 |
| Communication | 16.4 |
| Security management | 16.3 |
| Unemployment/Job opportunities | 15.4 |
| Others | 13.3 |

Source: Field Survey, 2023

In addition to above mentioned problems, other challenges have been noticed during the field study. Discrimination within localities, lack of government efforts and supports to develop the area, geographical challenges such as problem in road construction, narrow roads, landslides, and topographical inaccessibility and so forth are other severe obstacles for further development of this area.

Conclusion

Haleshi Tuwachung has a great potential in terms of pilgrimage tourism development that will contribute to the local communities as well as nation's entire economic growth. The Haleshi's natural and cultural attractions, religious harmony are a major pulling

factors for visitors and pilgrimage tourists which generate revenue for the government and create job opportunities for local communities. However, there are also several problems that need to be solved in order to fully realize the benefits of tourism. The lack of infrastructures like road, communication, markets, hotels and accommodations, quality food, security services, public awareness, advertisement and publicity, water and sanitation are the significant challenges that need to be addressed in order to ensure the sustainability of the tourism development in Haleshi Tuwachung area.

Additionally, several solutions have been recommended for the development of the area, including improving transportation and road conditions with wider spans, as well as managing drinking water through the use of available local resources, providing employment opportunities with ample trainings on local production tourist guide etc., manufacturing small scale industries for solving unemployment. In the same way, security management should be prioritized, awareness programmes should be conducted to help create equality between localities. The government should focus on developmental activities through annual budget allocation and management by all levels according to requirement to conserve the cultures, rituals and religions.

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