

## **Tourists' Perception of Destination Image of Chautara: A Study of Cognitive and Affective Dimensions**

**Amit K. Mishra**

Chautara Multiple Campus

Email: [akmishra2044@gmail.com](mailto:akmishra2044@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Domestic religious tourism plays a significant role in boosting the local economy and preserving culture. This makes the destination image an important part of tourism planning. Thus, the study investigates cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image of Chautara, Sindhupalchok, specifically in relation to the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple during the annual Jatra. The study is exploratory in nature. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data from 200 domestic tourists visiting Gaurati Bhimsen Temple. The statistical software SPSS was used to analyse the data. Further, the study found a significantly favourable cognitive image (Mean = 4.11) for safety, religious attractions, landscapes, and facilities. However, the affective image was somewhat favourable (Mean = 3.87), reflecting satisfaction and spiritual attachment. Infrastructure and service-related factors, however, were given lower ratings. Thus, the findings of the study suggest that policymakers and marketers should improve service quality and tourist experience to enhance the affective image and support sustainable domestic religious tourism at Chautara.

**Keywords:** destination image, cognitive image, affective image, religious tourism, domestic tourism

### **Introduction**

Domestic tourism is essential not only for the socio-economic growth of destinations but also for preserving their religious and cultural significance (Bayih & Singh, 2020). Domestic tourism accounts for a significant share of total tourism income in a developing

nation such as Nepal. It plays a critical role in boosting the local economy by generating employment opportunities (Kadayat & Upadhyay, 2024). However, technological advancements have intensified competition among destinations. Destinations are now competing to differentiate their image and achieve a competitive advantage through digital platforms. Thus, understanding how tourists view a destination has become an important factor in effective planning, marketing, and development.

Religious tourism is the oldest and fastest-growing form of tourism. It is also known as spiritual tourism, pilgrimage tourism, sacred tourism, or faith tourism (Mishra, 2025). This phenomenon has become a significant economic and social force. It helps tourists learn about local culture and religion, creates jobs for local people, and boosts national economies by increasing foreign exchange (Kim et al., 2020; Gite & Mishra, 2024).

Today's competitive environment makes it essential for destination managers to create a unique destination image. This topic is central in tourism research because it strongly influences how travellers choose destinations, their satisfaction, and their future intentions (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). A positive destination image attracts first-time tourists and encourages repeat visits, positive word of mouth, and recommendations (Chen & Tasi, 2007). This study examines tourists' perceptions of the destination image of Chautara, Sindhupalchok, Nepal.

Chautara, located in Sindhupalchok District, Nepal, is a popular destination for domestic tourists due to its religious, cultural, and natural attractions. Specifically, the GauratiBhimshen Temple holds religious significance for both Hindu and Buddhist worshippers. People come to visit the temple for spiritual fulfilment, to receive blessings, and to take part in cultural traditions. It attracts a huge number of domestic pilgrims seeking spiritual fulfilment, blessings, and cultural involvement. Moreover, on the auspicious date of Kartik Shukla Purnima, Gaurati Bhimsen Temple hosts a major annual Jatra (Festival), during which a large number of devotees from Sindhupalchok district and the capital city, Kathmandu, visit the temple to pay homage and participate in religious rites (Chautara Sangachokgadhi Municipality). Despite its growing popularity, Chautara remains under-researched regarding how domestic tourists evaluate its destination image, particularly from cognitive and affective perspectives.

### **Literature Review**

Destination Image has long been recognised as a significant factor in the decision-making process for choosing where to visit (Cherifi et al., 2019). Destination Image can be

defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that an individual holds about a destination. The destination image evolves as a result of tourists' experiences, information sources, and emotional connection with the destination (Crompton, 1979). Furthermore, the tangible attributes of a destination are significant in shaping perceptions of the destination (e.g., infrastructure, accessibility, and facilities. This dual character of destination image is especially important for religious and cultural tourism sites, where emotional and symbolic factors play a significant role (Seabra et al., 2020).

According to Sarma (2007), a tourist destination's perceived image is a subjective mental construct that differs considerably from the impressions other tourists form. Destination image originates from collective concepts that include cognitive and evaluative components (Embacher & Buttle, 1989), even though it is an expression of expressive knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginings, and emotional thoughts that people may have about a particular place (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977). Thus, destination image appears to be associated with tourists' subjective assessments of the place (Bigné et al., 2001). In conclusion, each forms a global, changeable, and holistic perception of a certain tourist site (Kotler & Gartner, 2002).

### **Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Destination Image**

Previous research on destination image has significantly influenced our knowledge of tourist behaviour (Lee & Park, 2023). Tourism researchers have presented many definitions of destination image. According to Marques et al. (2021), the destination image is commonly defined as perceptions or understanding of a location. A destination image is the combination of cognitive judgments and affective feelings about a specific area that an individual collects and recalls (Akgün et al., 2020). The perception of a destination, whether a country, city, or region, is subjective and shaped by personal views, impressions, ideas, and emotions (Woosnam et al., 2020). One of the most recent definitions of destination image was put forth by Lee and Park (2023), who proposed that it could be based on the following elements: (a) it creates a holistic impression or a personal perception of destination attributes; (b) it has functional features, that is, tangible and intangible aspects, with intangible aspects referred to as psychological features; and (c) it has common functional characteristics, such as prices and lodging types, transportation and weather infrastructure, or unique activities or characteristics.

Tourism researchers (Marques et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2014) present diverse perspectives on the dimensions of destination image in the literature.

Zhang et al. (2014) defined destination image as including overall image, cognitive image (CI), affective image (AI), cognitive-affective joint image, and self-congruity. Similarly, another study by Marques et al. (2021) investigated destination image from cognitive, affective, and unique perspectives. While prior research focused on the two components of cognitive and affective image in evaluating a destination, recent studies have examined the destination as a multifaceted construct, including cognitive, affective, and conative images (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). According to Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021), the cognitive image dimension refers to an individual's personal beliefs, perceptions, or attitudes toward a destination. Tan and Wu (2016) define the affective image dimension as personal feelings and emotions towards a specific place. Rasoolimanesh et al. (2021) define the conative image dimension as the active contemplation of a place for future travel. Several investigations (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Tan & Wu, 2016) have focused on cognitive and affective images, as well as behavioural intention, as outcome factors in the research model. Tasci et al. (2022) found that conative image dimensions are unnecessary in these circumstances.

Thus, the study investigates tourists' perceptions of Chautara's destination image in Sindhupalchok.

### **Methodology**

This research is mainly exploratory in nature. This study aims to obtain comprehensive information on tourists' perception of the image of Chautara as a tourist destination. The researcher aimed to perform an empirical study by analysing statistical data from both primary sources.

The two constructs, Cognitive and Affective Image, for the research have been adopted from a previous study (Khan et al., 2017). These constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale from “Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree”.

Data were collected from in-depth interviews with 10 residents regarding the historical perspectives on the Gaurati Bhimsen Jatra, celebrated annually in Chautara, and the historical background of the Bhimsen Temple. Additionally, 200 pilgrims visiting Chautara during Gaurati Bhimsen Jatra were interviewed using questionnaires to collect data.

Furthermore, the collected data were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency and percentage were used to describe the respondents' profile, and Mean and Standard deviation were used to describe tourists' perceptions of Cognitive and Affective destination image attributes of Chautara.

### **Analysis of Tourists' Perception of Destination Image of Chautara**

### **Descriptive Statistics of Cognitive Image**

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of the cognitive image traits of Chautara as observed by domestic tourists ( $n = 200$ ). The cognitive image was evaluated using 10 criteria, which included infrastructure, facilities, safety, cultural and religious attractions, cleanliness, and environmental conditions. The total mean cognitive image score is 4.11, indicating an overall favourable perception among domestic tourists of Chautara as a tourist destination. Further, the individual cognitive image item "Chautara offers suitable accommodation facilities for visitors" (CI1) scored the highest mean ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 0.728$ ), indicating strong agreement among domestic tourists regarding the availability and adequacy of accommodation. Compared with the item's low standard deviation, this indicates a high level of consensus among respondents.

Similarly, the items related to natural beauty and cultural & religious attractions, such as beautiful natural surroundings (CI3) and interesting cultural and religious attractions (CI5), both scored a mean of 4.22. These high mean scores indicate that Chautara is positively perceived by domestic tourists for its natural beauty and religious & cultural significance. Likewise, local food (CI4) received a mean score of 4.21, indicating the significance of local cuisine in shaping a positive image of Chautara. However, the SD of CI3, CI4 and CI5 (0.84, 0.81 & 0.814) indicate the comparatively low consensus among respondents.

Perceptions of domestic tourists regarding infrastructure and safety related item were also scored positive. Furthermore, the mean score for general infrastructure quality (CI2) is 4.15, whereas the mean score for safety for domestic tourists (CI6) is 4.03, which indicates the respondents feel secure during their visit to Chautara. Similarly, the historical and religious significance of Chautara, such as the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple (CI7), was also perceived positively by the tourists ( $M = 4.12$ ).

The items relating to hygiene and cleanliness (CI8) and the friendliness of local people (CI9) had slightly lower mean scores of 3.98 and 3.93, respectively, indicating general satisfaction among respondents. However, the results also identify areas for further improvement to enhance the destination image. The item concerning a pleasant climate for year-round visits (CI10) recorded the lowest mean score ( $M = 3.88$ ), reflecting only moderate agreement among respondents.

Standard deviation values ranging from 0.728 to 0.874 indicate a reasonable level of agreement among respondents across all items. Overall, the findings demonstrate that domestic tourists hold a strong and positive cognitive image of Chautara, particularly

regarding accommodation, natural scenery, and cultural or religious attractions. These results reinforce Chautara's potential as an emerging domestic tourism destination.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Cognitive Image*

Code	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
CI1	Chautara offers suitable accommodation facilities for visitors.	4.36	0.728
CI2	Chautara has good quality general infrastructure (roads, electricity, water supply).	4.15	0.874
CI3	Chautara has beautiful natural scenery and surroundings.	4.22	0.84
CI4	Chautara offers appealing local food and refreshments for visitors.	4.21	0.81
CI5	Chautara has interesting cultural and religious attractions.	4.22	0.814
CI6	Chautara is a safe place for domestic tourists to visit.	4.03	0.802
CI7	Chautara has important historical and religious sites, such as the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple.	4.12	0.838
CI8	Chautara maintains good hygiene and cleanliness at tourist and religious sites.	3.98	0.83
CI9	Local people of Chautara are friendly and welcoming to visitors.	3.93	0.732
CI10	Chautara has a pleasant climate for visiting year-round.	3.88	0.77
	<b>Cognitive Image</b>	<b>4.11</b>	<b>0.8038</b>
<b>n=200</b>			

Source: Authors' Primary Data

### **Descriptive Statistics of Affective Image**

Table 2 above presents descriptive statistics on how domestic tourists (n = 200) feel about Chautara. The affective image reflects their emotional responses to the destination. The overall mean score of 3.87 suggests that domestic visitors have a moderately positive emotional view of Chautara.

Of all the affective image items, "Overall, I feel happy and satisfied during my visit to Chautara" (AI10) had the highest mean score ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). This shows that most visitors feel a high level of emotional satisfaction. These results suggest that Chautara gives domestic tourists a positive emotional experience overall.

Items related to safety and emotional attachment also received good ratings. Feeling safe and secure in Chautara (AI1) had a mean score of 4.05, and emotional attachment from religious and cultural significance (AI9) had a mean of 4.03. These findings emphasise that the safety and cultural or religious ties are important in shaping how visitors perceive the destination. "Spiritual peace and devotion" (AI7) received a relatively high mean score of 3.84, indicating that the temple serves as a significant source of religious and emotional fulfilment. Similarly, the positive emotional impression of Chautara as a religious destination (AI8) received a favourable rating ( $M = 3.88$ ).

Items associated with cleanliness, comfort, transportation, parking facilities, and financial services received moderate mean scores, ranging from 3.63 to 3.80. Comfort and relaxation during travel (AI3) recorded the lowest mean score ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 1.083$ ), suggesting that some visitors experience discomfort or stress while travelling within Chautara. The higher standard deviation values for these items indicate greater variation in respondents' emotional experiences, which may result from differences in travel conditions and individual expectations.

Standard deviation values from 0.89 to 1.088 show moderate differences in how tourists feel emotionally. Overall, the results show that domestic tourists have a positive emotional attitude toward Chautara, particularly regarding satisfaction, safety, and emotional attachment. Still, there is room to improve comfort, cleanliness, and convenience for visitors.

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics of Affective Image*

Code	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
AI1	Visiting Chautara makes me feel safe and secure.	4.05	0.923
AI2	Chautara conveys a sense of cleanliness and orderliness.	3.8	1.088
AI3	I feel comfortable and relaxed while travelling within Chautara.	3.63	1.083
AI4	The transportation facilities in Chautara make me feel convenient and stress-free.	3.75	1.011
AI5	The availability of parking facilities in Chautara makes my visit pleasant and hassle-free.	3.78	1.016
AI6	The availability of financial services (ATMs and banking facilities) makes me feel confident when visiting Chautara.	3.65	1.03
AI7	Visiting the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple evokes a sense of spiritual peace and devotion.	3.84	0.92
AI8	Chautara creates a positive emotional impression on me as a religious destination.	3.88	0.904
AI9	I feel emotionally attached to Chautara because of its religious and cultural significance.	4.03	0.962
AI10	Overall, I feel happy and satisfied during my visit to Chautara.	4.24	0.89
	<b>Affective Image</b>	<b>3.865</b>	<b>0.9827</b>
<b>n=200</b>			

Source: Authors' Primary Data

### Findings

The present study examined domestic tourists' perception of the destination image of Chautara, with special reference to the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple, by analysing both cognitive and affective dimensions.

The findings of the study reveal that the domestic tourists perceive a strong and favourable cognitive image of Chautara with an overall mean of 4.11. Furthermore, tourists in

Chautara highly appreciated the attributes of accommodation, natural beauty, and cultural and religious attractions. The findings indicate that Chautara is perceived as a destination with adequate physical infrastructure and rich religious significance. Similarly, domestic tourists' perceptions of safety and overall infrastructure in Chautara are rated positively, reinforcing the place's appeal as a secure and accessible domestic tourism destination.

In contrast, the affective image of Chautara, with an overall mean score of 3.87, was moderately positive. Tourists expressed high levels of overall satisfaction, emotional attachment, and sense of safety, suggesting that Chautara evokes positive emotional responses among visitors. The spiritual peace and devotion experienced at the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple further strengthened the affective image of the destination. However, comparatively lower mean scores related to comfort, cleanliness, transportation convenience, parking facilities, and financial services indicate areas where visitors' emotional experiences could be improved.

Overall, the findings suggest a gap between cognitive and affective image, where tourists' evaluation of physical and functional attributes is stronger than their emotional experience. This indicates that while Chautara possesses strong tangible and cultural assets, enhancements in visitor comfort and service quality are necessary to strengthen emotional engagement.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to understanding destination image in the context of domestic religious tourism by examining tourists' perceptions of Chautara through cognitive and affective dimensions. The results demonstrate that Chautara enjoys a positive destination image among domestic tourists, driven by its religious importance, scenic environment, and cultural heritage, particularly centred around the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple.

The stronger cognitive image indicates that tourists recognize Chautara's infrastructural adequacy and religious value, whereas the relatively lower affective image highlights the need to enhance emotional and experiential aspects of the visit. Improving cleanliness, transportation convenience, parking management, and visitor services could significantly enhance tourists' emotional satisfaction and strengthen the overall destination image.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide valuable insights for local authorities, tourism planners, and destination managers to focus on experience-oriented improvements alongside infrastructure development. Strengthening the affective image of

Chautara is essential for encouraging repeat visitation, positive word-of-mouth, and sustainable domestic tourism development.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited to domestic tourists and relies on descriptive statistical analysis. Future research may incorporate inferential analysis, compare domestic and international tourists, or adopt qualitative approaches to gain deeper insights into tourists' emotional and spiritual experiences. Nevertheless, this study offers a meaningful foundation for positioning Chautara as an emerging religious tourism destination in Nepal.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study offer important managerial, policy, and theoretical implications for the development and management of domestic religious tourism in Chautara.

#### **Managerial Implications**

The strong cognitive image of Chautara indicates that tourists positively perceive its accommodation facilities, natural scenery, and cultural–religious attractions. Destination managers and local tourism entrepreneurs should capitalize on these strengths by positioning Chautara as a well-equipped and spiritually significant domestic tourism destination. Promotional strategies can highlight the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple, scenic surroundings, and annual Jatra as core destination attributes.

However, the relatively moderate affective image suggests the need to enhance tourists' emotional experience. Improving cleanliness, comfort, transportation convenience, parking facilities, and availability of financial services can significantly improve visitors' feelings of relaxation and satisfaction. Visitor-friendly amenities such as clean rest areas, signage, crowd management during the Jatra, and improved mobility services can strengthen emotional attachment and overall experience.

#### **Policy Implications**

For local government bodies and tourism authorities, the findings highlight the importance of experience-oriented destination development, not merely infrastructure expansion. Policies should focus on integrated religious tourism planning, especially during peak periods such as the Gaurati Bhimsen Jatra. Investment in sanitation, traffic management, safety measures, and public transport connectivity is essential to improve visitors' emotional perceptions.

Moreover, involving local communities in tourism planning and service delivery can enhance hospitality and authenticity, thereby strengthening both cognitive and affective

image. Community-based tourism initiatives can also ensure sustainable development while preserving cultural and religious values.

### **Marketing and Branding Implications**

The study suggests that destination branding for Chautara should go beyond functional attributes and emphasise emotional, spiritual, and cultural experiences. Marketing communication should highlight feelings of spiritual peace, devotion, happiness, and emotional attachment associated with visiting the Gaurati Bhimsen Temple and participating in the annual Jatra.

Digital marketing platforms, local media, and religious tourism campaigns can be used to project Chautara as a safe, spiritually enriching, and emotionally fulfilling destination for domestic tourists. Storytelling, festival-based promotions, and visual representation of rituals can further enhance destination image.

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