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**COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Tourism
Industry in Nepal**

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Article

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Abstract

The article aims to measure the impact of novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on tourism industry in Nepal. The pause of tourism mobility for months due to an abrupt halt of transportation means; shuttered borders; and stay-at-home orders by government has brought adverse effects on Nepal's tourism industry and its stakeholders. Likewise, airlines, accommodation, transport operators and other sub-sectors of Nepal are suffering due to international travel bans. There are spillover impacts of the pandemic on the socio-cultural structure, human psychology and global economic system where tourism industry is no exception. The impacts are gradually unfolding. Hence, the study also focuses on the preparedness and response strategy of stakeholders for combating this pandemic which has brought crisis and fear to Nepal's tourism industry. The research is qualitative in its nature and followed basic/fundamental research type to expand knowledge on this topic which will shed light on the significant impact on the tourism industry in Nepal. The study is based on both primary data collected through interviews with intended stakeholders and the review of several relevant secondary sources.

Introduction

According to Wu, Chen and Chan (2020), "COVID-19 is a contagious respiratory illness caused by novel

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coronavirus” which was spread very fast (Baker & Rosbi, 2020, p.189) and has a long incubation period (Zaki & Mohamed, 2020, p.1). The new coronavirus was discovered in December, 2019 for the first time in Wuhan, China (ADB, 2020a; Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020, p.1; Folinas & Metaxas, 2020; UNWTO, 2020a; Ulak, 2020; Zhu et al., 2020) later declared a pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO) on 12 March, 2020 (Sigala, 2020). Pandemic is the form of epidemic that spreads through human population affecting large numbers of people of the entire world (Samal, 2014, p.165). This pandemic is one of the most impactful events of the 21st century (Zenker & Kock, 2020) and considered catastrophic event after World War II (Gössling et al., 2020) which is affecting global economic, political, socio-cultural systems, and tourism (Estrada et al., 2020; in Folinas & Metaxas, 2020; Sigala, 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has brought uncertainty and spillover impact on almost all the sectors, and its enduring crisis on global tourism is a burning issue. Tourism industry is gigantic, global business accounting for 10.4% of GDP and 10% of global employment (Joppe, 2020; in Menegaki, 2020). Similarly, Nepal has also been affected adversely by the pandemic, and its preliminary impact recorded 14.37% loss to Nepalese economy as a repercussion of travel restrictions and flight cancellations (Shrestha, 2020). Nepal’s tourism industry generated NRs. 240.7 billion in 2018 that stood at 7.9 percent GDP (Prasain, 2019). There are about 200,000 people who are directly employed in hotel, restaurants, trekking, mountaineering, airlines and other tourism subsectors in Nepal (Asian Development Bank, 2019) and all of them are significantly affected by the pandemic. This is not the first crisis that tourism industry of Nepal has experienced of this level, the sector was hard-hit by catastrophic earthquake & trade disruptions along the southern border in the year 2015 which had resulted in 33% tourism decline (ADB, 2019; in Ulak, 2020, p.2), and now it is COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the intensity of coronavirus and its health impact, Nepal Government had to cancel the ambitious campaign “Visit Nepal Year 2020” which aimed in bringing 2 million tourists in Nepal (Ulak, 2020). According to Nepal Tourism Statistics (2019), there are altogether 1254 registered hotels (star and tourist standard categories); 29 international airlines flying to Nepal; 20 domestic airlines; and 2649 registered trekking agencies and other subsectors which are having tough time to sustain their businesses. According to Ojha (2020), tourism-related businesses due to the lockdown and no prospect of tourist arrivals at this moment, many businesses around 10,000 can no longer sustain as they are paying NRs. 15,000-4.5 million as a monthly rent to their landlords. Therefore, to find out “the major impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism industry in Nepal” is chosen for this study. The findings of the impacts are illuminated in the paper.

The first case of COVID-19 in Nepal, according to Bastola, Sah, Rodriguez-Morales, Lal, Jha, Ojha, Shrestha, Chu, Poon, Costello, Morita, and Pandey (2020), was detected on January 13, 2020, a 32-year-old man, a Nepalese student at Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan China, returned to Nepal tested positive for 2019-nCoV on real time Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) assays at the WHO laboratory in Hong Kong who got discharged on January 17, 2020 as his clinical condition improved (Bastola et al., 2020) which was also the first ever case in South Asia (NDTV, 2020; in Poudel & Subedi, 2020, p.1). As of August 22, 2020, there are 22,812,491 confirmed cases worldwide and 795,132 have lost their lives (World Health Organization, 2020).

As of August 22, 2020, the COVID-19 update of Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) (2020b) published that Nepal Government has tested 5,92,418 citizens through PCR and total Rapid Diagnostic Test (RDT) has been done to 3,12,402 peoples out of which 31,117 have tested positive; 11,658 people are quarantined; 12,621 people are kept in isolation ward; 146 have lost their life and 18,350 infected COVID-19 patients have already recovered. According to Koirala, Yadav, Yadav, Koirala, Khatiwada and Dhakal (2020), “Nepal has reached to third stage of pandemic” where the source of the infection is untraceable; this stage is identified by people who haven’t had travel history getting affected by the virus; spread is extremely contagious and difficult to control (The Economic Times, 2020).

Objectives of the study

Most of the researches are focusing on immediate effects of pandemic; however, one has to take into account the long-term and indirect effects as well. Therefore, due to this hard to predict long-term and indirect effects, careful study with prediction, and more long-term research projects are needed (Zenker & Kock, 2020). The pandemic crisis is still continued and researchers are engaged in their in-depth study of this phenomenon. The main objectives of this study is to measure the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism industry in Nepal and to expand the knowledge on this topic which will serve as a reference to students, researchers, tourism entrepreneurs and consultants. The study is confined to introduction, review of literatures, research methodology, findings & discussion and conclusion.

Review of literature

COVID-19 pandemic

The World Health Organization designated the name of virus disease as ‘COVID-19’ where the ‘19’ in COVID-19 stands for the year, 2019, the virus that was first detected. The disease is caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Astuti, & Ysrafil, 2020, p.1; Gorbalenya, 2020; in Jayaweera et al., 2020, p.1). According to Guo, Cao, Hong, Tan, Chen, Jin, Tan, Wang, and Yan (2020),

the clinical characteristics of COVID-19 is an emerging acute respiratory infectious disease which primarily spreads through the respiratory tract, by droplets, respiratory secretions, and direct contact for a low infective dose. Wang and Du (2020; in Jayaweera et al., 2020, p.1) mentioned that it mainly transmits through aerosols and fomites. Aerosols are minute particles in atmosphere and fomites are inanimate objects that can carry and spread disease and infectious agents also called passive vectors (Zoppi, 2020). It is contagious during the latency period (Guo et al., 2020) as they can live up to 72 hours. It spreads primarily through contact with an infected person when they cough or sneeze; when a person touches a surface or objects that has the virus on it and then touches their eyes, nose and mouth (Baker & Rosbi, 2020).

The world has experienced numbers of major epidemic/pandemic in the last 40 years, yet none had similar implications for the global economy as the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al., 2020). According to Ranasinghe, Damunupola, Wijesundara, Karunarathna, Nawarathna, Gamage, Ranaweera, and Idroos (2020, p.2), the impact of this deadly virus is severe than estimated by specialists and the most exciting pandemic in the recent history which has already taken down 200 countries around the world with more than 1.9 million infections and over 120,000 deaths by 14th April, 2020 (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). Mensah (2020) stressed that the tourism industry has always been hardest hit by pandemics like Plagues, notably, the Black Death (1346-1353), Spanish Flu (1918-1920), SARS (2002-2004), H1N1 Swine Flu (2009-2010) and Ebola Virus (2014-2016). The pandemic outbreaks in the last two decades are Malaria; Dengue Fever/ Yellow Fever; Ebola; Zika Virus; Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS); Bird Flu or Avian Influenza or H5N1; Mad Cow Disease or Creutzfeldt- Jakob Disease; H1N1 or Swine Flu; SARS; and COVID-19 where the mortality rate of COVID-19 (1%-3.4%) is found lower than those of the MERS and SARS which reached 34% and 10% respectively and the seasonal flu mortality rate is (<0.1%) (Menegaki, 2020)

The distinction between the words pandemic; epidemic; and endemic is regularly blurred, even by medical experts (Intermountain Health Care, 2020). For instance, the sudden emergence and rapid global spread of a novel H1N1 influenza virus in early 2009 has caused confusion about the meaning of “pandemic” and how to recognize pandemics when they occur (Morens et al., 2009). The difference between an epidemic and a pandemic is to remember the “P” in pandemic which means a pandemic has a passport. A pandemic is an epidemic that travels and spreads over multiple countries or continents; likewise, endemic is a disease which belongs to a particular people or country that affects a large number of people within a community, population, or region (Intermountain Health Care, 2020).

In the 21st century, there are two identified immense drivers of change to tourism industry are climate change and global health emergencies (Jamal & Budke, 2020).

Tourists are typically risk averse and, thus, any actual or perceived threat to their health, safety or security is likely to influence their decision to visit a particular destination (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; in Speakman & Sharpley, 2012, p.1). For tourism destinations, a key success factor is the ability to provide a safe, predictable and secure environment for visitors (Volo, 2007; in Speakman & Sharpley, 2012, p.1). Therefore, the tourism industry tends to be highly sensitive to negative environmental factors (Hung, Tseng, & Petrick, 2007) like COVID-19 pandemic which has capability to persuade the mobility of tourism to immobility drastically. They are Zenker and Kock (2020) who argues that not all aspects of the current situation are novel and worth investing. Therefore, they have illustrated six paths of research area in their recently published article “*The coronavirus pandemic- A critical discussion of tourism research agenda*”. The six recommended paths of research area are; the level of complexity; change in destination image; change in tourist behavior; change in resident behavior; change in the tourism industry; and long-term and indirect effects. Therefore, the mentioned paths of study relate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in tourism industry.

They are Mansfield and Pizam (2005; in Kunwar, 2016) who focused on the guarantee of tourist’s personal safety should perhaps be the most important prerequisite for any aspiring tourism destination. When people fear to travel, isolation begins, xenophobia reigns and cross-cultural fertilization ceases, if the world’s travel industry cannot promote safe and worry-free travel experience then nation...suffer economically, socially, morally and spiritually (kunwar, 2016, p.3). Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon, which represents the set of movements generated by the search for places and activities that are different from usual and have no economic motivation which underlines the “mobility” as essential to tourism (Rocca, 2015). Therefore, the pause of tourism activities due to halt of travelers’ mobility amid COVID-19 pandemic has brought devastating crisis for the industry. Many countries are combating the situation effectively and many countries are suffering very hard (Ulak, 2020).

Many scholars are advocating that the crisis brought by the COVID-19 is ‘Black Swan Event’ which was unpredictable or unforeseen event, typically one with extreme consequences without any head up. Taleb (2007; in Omelchenko, 2020) who has developed *black swan theory* is against the advocacy that COVID-19 crisis is ‘black swan event’. The black swan theory or theory of black swan events is a metaphor that describes “an event which comes as a surprise, has a major effect, and is often inappropriately rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight” (Vice President News, 2020). As published in *Ihodl.com* (2020; in Omelchenko, 2020), the real black swan is the events of September 11th which was not predicted. The coronavirus pandemic was predictable, which means it is a “white swan”. White

swans are a financial crisis that doesn't happen spontaneously, but naturally. The pandemic was predictable, businesses and governments around the world have no excuses for such a low level of preparation for the spread of the virus; however, the further course of events is unpredictable. Governments in the initial stage were not spending a single penny in January; however, they are now going to spend trillions (Omelchenko, 2020). It is projected that this pandemic could cost the world \$2.7 trillion, equivalent to the UK economy (Mensah, 2020).

Impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry

Zenker and Kock (2020) argue that the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism industry is tremendous even in its early stage. The ripple effect of this pandemic has reverberated through every corner of the globe, causing lives and jobs of many (Mensah, 2020; Menegaki, 2020) there are 75 million jobs in tourism at immediate risk and the industry are to lose more than 2.1 trillion US\$ (WTTC, 2020; in Zenker & Kock, 2020). Hung, Mark, Yeung, Chan, and Graham (2018) assumes that based on previous experiences, some hospitality-related stakeholders may be better prepared, in terms of emergency preparation and working with customers. However, there has been always a problem of humans that they do not learn a lesson from past event or they are least bothered after eradication of crises.

Bas and Sivaprasad (2020) studied on the impact of pandemic on tourism industry in the United Kingdom where they identified hospitality and leisure sector provide employment to 3.2 million people; produces £130 billion of economy activity and in terms of taxes; and generates £39 billion in taxation for the government (UK Hospitality Workforce Commission, 2018; in Bas & Sivaprasad, 2020, p.6). Based on the study, they anticipated 75 million jobs are at risk in the travel and tourism sector; similarly, 20% to 30% expected drop in international tourist arrivals; and the sustainability risk for 80% of small and medium sized firms amid COVID-19 in United Kingdom (Bas & Sivaprasad, 2020).

Folinas and Mextas (2020) assessed impacts on those countries that were initially affected by COVID-19 where China is the first country whose economy were adversely affected 70,000 theatre in Mainland China were closed down; the majority of airlines canceled or canceling flight to and from China; and all tourism activities have been disrupted. Similarly, they also focused their study in Italy and found almost 90% of hotel and travel agency bookings for March 2020 canceled in Rome; and up to 80% in Sicily (Faderazione Italiana del Turismo, 2020; in Folinas & Metaxas, 2020, p. 5) which contributes huge damage to the tourism sector and are estimated at €200 million for the first quarter of the year. Gold Coast or Cairns in Australia where visitors were reduced by 90%; and the estimated loss was 100 million Australian dollars by March 2020 and about a loss of 1800 local jobs (The Guardian, 2020; in Folinas & Metaxas,

2020, p.6). Destinations like Las Vegas, gambling tourism based economy, one of the most happening economic hub (Eadington, 1999; in Folinias & Metaxas, 2020, p.7) according to National Geographic (2020; in Folinias & Metaxas, 2020, p.7) has to suffer due to pandemic; they had also studied the impact of coronavirus on travel industry of U.S.A. where they found the impact is six or seven times greater than the 9/11 attacks, which is \$2 trillion in economic output and supports 15.8 million jobs in U.S.”

A report published by UNWTO (2020b) forecasted that the pandemic could impact international tourism industry even much adversely. The report shows international tourist numbers have fall down by 22% just in a first quarter (Q1) of 2020 and could fall 60-80% in the whole year that translates into US\$ 80 billion loss. The UNWTO survey report also shows that the estimated recovery of the tourism industry will begin only from the year 2021 as domestic demand will recover faster than the international demand. The experiences from previous crises, leisure travel are expected to recover quicker, particularly travel for visiting friends and relatives, than business travel. The travel restrictions chain effect on air travel according to UNWTO (2020b), there is a massive decline in air bookings worldwide in Q1 which is 80%.

According to OECD (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented crisis in the tourism economy, the impact is estimated to 60% decline in international tourism and can rise to 80% if recovery is delayed until December; international tourism is expected to rebound first with specific geographic-regions (e.g. in the European Union); likewise, domestic tourism is expected to recover more quickly which will help to recover the tourism economy. Hence, the impact of crisis depends upon the duration of the crisis and the speed of rebounding travel and tourism industry. There are three different scenarios for tourism recovery; scenario 1: International tourist arrivals start to recover in July, and strengthen progressively in the second half of the year, but at a slower rate than previously foreseen(-60%); scenario 2: International tourist arrivals start to recover in September, and then strengthen progressively in the final quarter of the year, but at a slower rate than previously foreseen(-75%); scenario 3: International tourist arrivals start to recover in December, based on limited recovery in international tourism before the end of the year (-80%) (OECD, 2020; UNWTO, 2020b). The impact of COVID-19 in airline bookings in different region as presented in table.1.

Table.1: Estimated impact of three-month lockdown on 2020 air travel capacity.

S.N.	Region of Airlines Registration	Decline (%)	Capacity Change (% year on year)*			
			Q1 (JFM)	Q2 (AMJ)	Q3 (JAS)	Q4 (OND)
1	Asia Pacific	-98%	-18%	-50%	-25%	-10%
2	North America	-67%	-8%	-50%	-25%	-10%
3	Europe	-76%	-10%	-90%	-45%	-10%
4	Middle East	-65%	-23%	-80%	-40%	-10%
5	Africa		-10%	-60%	-30%	-10%
6	Latin Americas	N/A	-9%	-80%	-40%	-10%
7	World Total		-14%	-65%	-33%	-10%

Source: UNWTO (2020b); Gössling, et al. (2020)

*Q=Quarter of the year.

Asia and the Pacific suffered the biggest drop and started to decline, with the introduction of travel restrictions in China. Air bookings from Europe, the Americas, Africa and the Middle East all had suffered severe declines in the first quarter of 2020. ICAO data shows a sharp 38% decline in world total air capacity in March, with massive double-digit decreases across regions. The latest estimates for the full-year 2020 compared to baseline would be a reduction of 39% to 56% of seats offered by airlines if the recovery is in late May, 49% to 72% if the restart is in Q3 or later. International passengers would decline 44% to 80% in 2020; likewise, IATA estimates that revenue passenger kilometers (RPks) will be -38% lower than in 2019, with a resulting revenue loss of US\$252 billion (IATA, 2020; in Gössling, 2020; UNWTO, 2020c). Similarly, UNWTO (2020b) report shows a decline of 22% in international passenger demand (RPks) in January-March, with a 56% drop in March.

It is estimated to cross 40 billion Nepali Rupees (332 million U.S. Dollar) loss if the lockdown continued until July 21, 2020 in Nepal; a task force of NTB has estimated the loss of 10 billion Nepali Rupees (83 million U.S. dollar) each month during the lockdown in the hospitality sector such as hotels, travels and aviation. Nepali government relaxed lockdown on June 10, 2020 allowing most of the economic activities except tourism sector, particularly hotels and airlines sectors. Tourism entrepreneurs on June 12, 2020 submitted a memorandum to Nepal's Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai with a demand of reopening the sector along with the permit to operate tourist vehicles, remove garbage from the mountains and carry out infrastructure development in tourism destinations in the mountain regions where there is not thick settlement. Likewise, they asked the government to reopen the hotels and airline sectors as they are struggling to pay staff amid continued closure.

They also seek certainty of reopening the sectors so that they could plan for the future as tourism season for trekking and mountaineering is near (Xinhua, 2020).

Tourism crisis

Mair et al. (2014) states that, “various tourism researchers have called for proactive crisis response and management planning based on learning from SARS”; however, Jamal and Budke (2020), did not find the proactive crisis response on this event (COVID-19 pandemic) and depict his view that “unfortunately, coordinated crisis management and communication plans have rarely been implemented effectively at the local or country level. The issues are not merely economic recovery, destination image management, media management and promotion (common industry-related themes).” WHO (2020) claims that Chinese authorities have acted swiftly and decisively since the breakdown of the COVID-19.

Eid and Arnout (2020, p.2) stressed that the crisis is an emergency that damages society and may bring it to its collapse, and it may be economic and may be social. Every crisis can bring emergency in tourism industry and should be combated with proper crisis management strategy in order to minimize crisis impact. “*Defining Crisis and Emergency*” an article published by Callahan (1994) puts light on the difference between crisis and emergency. The author has attempted to link the relationship between crisis and emergency as “a crisis is not an emergency and an emergency is not a crisis. It is a time of great disagreement, confusion, or suffering. Both are independent of each other, although they certainly coexist.

Flaunker (2001; in Kunwar, 2016, p.10) explain crisis as having detrimental or negative effects on the organizations as a whole, or individuals within it. Crisis due to biotic organisms (e.g. disease outbreaks-epidemics and pandemics) (Specht, 2006; in Kunwar, 2016, p.10) can create economic, physical and social damage. Crisis are chaotic and complex and their impacts can make long lasting changes to systems, but these changes they can be positive or negative (Ritchie, 2004; in Kunwar, 2016, p.15). In regards to the impacts of crisis in tourism, Beirman (2011) defined crisis as “...an event or set of circumstances which can severely compromise or damage the marketability and reputation of a tourism business or an entire tourism development region”.

Kunwar (2016, p.1) mentioned that crises are of different nature and crises are inevitable and their impacts do not leave the tourism industry untouched. Eid and Arnout (2020, p.6) highlighted four different types of crises; 1) Economic crises: such as poverty, unemployment, loans, etc; 2) Social crises: including the marriage crisis, divorce, marital infidelity, the housing crisis and others; 3) Political military crises: such as the battle, strikes; and 4) Health crises: such as disease, epidemics, and plague.

According to Al-Tayeb (1992; in Eid & Arnout, 2020, p.3), the crisis management has four stages; the stage of mitigating the crisis (the quality of the risks and the surrounding circumstances and the prediction of the surrounding hazards are determined); the stage of preparation (drawing up a complete plan to face the crisis); the stage of confrontation (a decisive stage in managing the crisis, on which the size of the losses depends); and the rebalancing stage (a relatively long-term plan is drawn up according to the effects of the crisis). Likewise, Institute of Public Relations (2007) highlighted crisis management is a process designed to prevent or lessen the damage as crisis can inflict the industry. As a process, crisis management is not just a single job; it can be divided into three phases; pre-crisis phase, crisis response phase, and post crisis phase.

It is not only threat and challenges this pandemic has brought since its existence, it has also given a chance to the human civilization to rethink and remodel their lifestyle as well as to the industry for changing the patterns of service and business which is an opportunity to enhance the strength of the human civilization and industries respectively. Innovation and digitalization in industries can bring new revolution for much progressive business and to combat crisis (UNWTO, 2020c)

Preparedness and response plan

Chang, McAleer and Ramos (2020) published an article on “*A Charter for Sustainable Tourism after COVID-19*” where they presents 10-point charter that is necessary to establish a balanced and sustainable tourism, travel, and hospitality industry are; 1) social distancing especially for religious, adventure, farm and MICE tourism; 2) travel and entry restrictions on tourism numbers should be applied at domestic and international destinations; 3) personal protective equipment (PPE) should be mandatory for medical tourism, air travel and sea travel; 4) the medical and health situation at the destination should be controlled to ensure safety by implementing frequent monitoring; identifying early indicators of the risk of resurgence; designing and implementing health and safety procedures; developing robust tests for tourists to control disease and pandemics; 5) transform any future crisis into an opportunity for sustainability by (monitoring the potential tourism demand; prioritizing segments and anticipating changes in tourist behavior; ensuring connectivity and strengthening relationships with range of distribution companies; guaranteeing links between potential visitors and destinations; restarting tourism activity to maximize economic, social, and environmental contributors; minimizing any negative impacts of restarting the tourism economy); 6) transport systems including air, sea, trains, buses, taxis should impose updated rules and regulations regarding social distancing and safety standards, especially for (tourist sources and destinations; boarding and disembarking; serving meals, on-board activities, and side-trips; improved medical facilities and highly trained on-board health workers;

seating arrangements on board); 7) major events tourism should impose updated rules and regulations regarding social distancing, especially for (sports events; musical performances; theatrical performances; concerts; fairs; expositions); 8) the trade-offs between domestic and international tourism for air, land and sea passage requirements; 9) hotel accommodation needs to take into account social distancing at (the lobby for check-in and check-out; serving meals; social activities); and 10) industry knowledge and experience should be used to control increases in insurance premiums and exclusions for pre-existing illnesses (Chang et al., 2020).

Nepal Preparedness and Response Plan (NPRP) have been designed in order to be prepared for responding and managing pandemic crisis tactfully. The main objectives of NPRP are; to support the government of Nepal in preparing and responding the COVID-19 pandemic of a scale that requires an international humanitarian response (including mitigation of social and economic impacts); and to ensure that affected people are protected and have equal access to assistance and services without discrimination, in line with humanitarian principles and practices (NPRP, 2020).

According to ADB (2020b), Nepal Government announced a series of measures to contain the spread of increasing COVID-19 cases and increasing fatalities on 20 March 2020 that includes; suspension of all international flights from March 22; closure of all public and private offices; halting the operation of long-route public buses; sealing all land border crossings; and contribution of NRs 100 million or about \$ 1.0 million to the recently established SAARC fund to combat COVID-19 pandemic (ADB, 2020b).

As per MoHP (2020a), the preliminary preparedness and response of Nepal for coping with COVID-19 pandemic are; Nepal established health-desks at the international airport and border check points starting in mid-January with India; Nepal government called lock down effective from 24 March, 2020 to 15 April, 2020; the lock down also sealed the land-borders with India and China along with all international flights suspended; schools/colleges and other educational institutions were closed; temporary hospitals and quarantine centers are being set up across the country; laboratory facilities are being upgraded and expanding; hospitals are expanding ICU units and isolation beds are adding; and required medicines and test-kits are arranging by the government.

Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) has prepared the guideline on the safety measures to be implemented for the tourism sector once the nationwide lockdown is lifted and business becomes normal (The Himalayan Times, 2020a). NTB is also promoting payments through the digital wallet for all kinds of transactions in the tourism industry, which helps maintain social distancing and also suggested that other activities be conducted electronically so that most dealings are paperless. The hygiene protocols

have been prepared for hotels, restaurants, vehicle operators and tour, trekking, mountaineering and rafting agencies aiming to prevent the COVID-19 cases.

Hotels and restaurants resumed their services from July 30, 2020 implementing highest standard of sanitation and hygiene protocol for safety; however, large parties and receptions are prohibited (Nepali Times, 2020). The hygiene protocol guideline has mentioned several action plans that the management team of the hotels and restaurants should follow strictly; any rooms occupied by sick persons must be cleaned and disinfected in order to manage the case and mitigate impact among clients and staff; recommended to use infrared thermometers for temperature screening of guests; installation of an automated sanitization tunnel or disinfection sprayer to sanitize the luggage; compulsory use of PPEs (face masks, gloves, protective apron (disposable) and full-length long-sleeved gown) and maintain social distancing measures by front desk staffs and other staffs; promote cleaning of hands and respiratory hygiene in hotel premises; table setups should ensure social distancing of more than one meter from one table to next; reduce contact/touch points as much as possible, arrange virtual check-ins and check-outs as well as halt room service facilities, closure of gym/health club facilities for a temporary period; hotel rooms must be vacant for 48 hours after the last guest checks out (The Himalayan Times, 2020a).

Meanwhile, the guideline for trekking, mountaineering, tour and rafting agencies has made it a must to disinfect the workplace and use PPE; mandatory health declaration form (COVID-19 negative); maintaining personal hygiene; ensuring social distancing during the tour or trek; and to follow safety measures of the MoHP and the WHO; manage and maintain the beds set up at a distance of two meters for each trekker; one camp must be set up at a distance of 30 meters from another camp; mandatory reporting of trekking guides at local government everyday during a trek; officials from Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) must maintain a log book; set up of emergency help desk on trekking trails operating round-the-clock (The Himalayan Times, 2020a). The participation of entire tourism stakeholders is required to follow the benchmark of the protocol post-pandemic crisis for gaining back guests' confidence to revive and sustain the industry.

Likewise, the guidelines for tourist vehicles stated that the seat next to the driver must be vacant and a two-meter distance must be maintained between passengers; seats that can be taken must be clearly marked and personalized pick up and drop service to the extent possible must be provided. The draft of the board has already been submitted to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation as well as other stakeholders for suggestions (The Himalayan Times, 2020a). The vehicle should be disinfected by spraying disinfectant after service; sanitizer at the entry point of vehicle is must; check the temperature of individual; wearing effective PPE all the

time by staffs; barricade the driver seat and passenger seat of taxis by shielding using plastic materials to avoid the transmission.

The employees of TIA have undergone extensive training for achieving highest standard and following procedure to maintain hygiene and safety along with establishing standard operating procedures (SOPs). Sanitization for the travelers is set from runways to arrival lanes. All the employees will be geared with personal protective equipments (PPEs) (Mask, face visors, gloves, body suit). They have special alertness system adopted in the passenger crowded area of airport terminal building. To minimize the risk of virus transmission, highest vigilance system is being adopted so as to keep and maintain social distancing in between or among passengers. They have set special awakening for health check up and technical arrangements at the airport. TIA is sensitive enough for disinfecting all sides and corners of airport premises for safe exist of travelers landing to Nepal and to the safe destination from the airport complex, transportation management and infrastructure development is already equipped within this lockdown period has been effective to get prepared to response and combat COVID-19 crisis (NTB, 2020).

Similarly, the domestic & international flights will resume services following safe-travel guidelines. All passengers will be required to take health precautions during flights. Airline companies are preparing themselves during this time in order to serve the passengers safely when it resumes applying and implementing all the SOPs and guidelines.

Buddha Air, a domestic airline of Nepal is conducting a mock drill at the airport regularly to help understand and better implement the protocol in much effective way once it resumes; frontline staffs will be provided with standard PPE to maintain safety and hygiene including sanitizers, masks and gloves; contact details of the passengers along with IDs scan will be recorded for tracing if required; aircrafts and ramp buses will be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized using standard solutions as suggested by CAAN and WHO; the premises and check-in counters as well as baggage areas will be regularly sanitized; sanitizer and face shield will be provided to the passengers with mandatory body temperature scanning; magazines and catering services will be suspended for time being (Buddha Air, 2020).

Developed countries like U.S.A., Italy, Spain, South Korea, Japan, China, and others were significantly affected by the COVID-19; however, with the better preparedness and response to the COVID-19 crisis, those countries have succeeded to resume tourism activities following hygiene and safety protocols. The lockdown restrictions in European countries seems eased from June 1, 2020 as there were people flocking from Athens to Amsterdam to visit museums and bar for the first time in months

(DW, 2020). Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) has also prepared the guideline on the safety measures for the tourism sector to manage and combat the COVID-19 crisis after the lockdown is eased and businesses are resumed. Associations of tourism sectors of Nepal have started providing training to their employees on the protocol and its benefits. The Nepal Department of Immigration (DoI) Kathmandu resumed their services from June 15, 2020. Therefore, all visa holders requiring any visa-related services should consult DoI for information about visa matters. According to Tourism Mail Crew (2020), Nepal is planning to implement the following rules for international travelers amid COVID-19 are; compulsory certificate of COVID-19 negative issued within past 72 hours of arrival to Nepal; quarantine at the booked hotel till PCR test report is issued (6 estimated days).

Methodology

The research design is qualitative in its nature and followed fundamental type of research to expand the knowledge on the subject. The research is based on both primary and secondary data. Altogether, it took four weeks (July 3, 2020 to July 30, 2020) for the researcher to complete series of interviews (unstructured) with the intended stakeholders (Nepal Tourism Board; Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal; Hotel Association Nepal; Nepal Association of Tour and Travel Agents; and Nepal Mountaineering Association) of tourism industry. Each interview lasted about 40-60 minutes. The questions were related to interviewees' experience of pandemic and their reflections on the crisis management of COVID-19 pandemics, with the same questions about the impacts on tourism industry and its stakeholders were included. Pseudonyms are used to address the interviewee. The data collected from the stakeholders are analyzed and presented in findings.

Similarly, secondary data were extracted from published journals; articles and emerging media coverage sources. The first step of secondary research is to develop a research question on which investigation will be carried out. The research question is –“what are the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism industry of Nepal?”. The second step involves in collecting the relevant data; similarly, third step in this study is collected data were evaluated for the study and finally in the fourth step, the evaluated data is concluded.

Findings and discussions

Asian Development Bank (ADB) Report (2019; in Ulak, 2020) shows that tourism industry earns on an average 25% of the total foreign exchange. China is the second highest source of tourist in Nepal contributing 20% to the hotel occupancy (Shrestha, 2020) and Chinese tourists have drastically decreased in February and March, coinciding with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic (Khadka et al., 2020). According to Ulak (2020), tourism industry in Nepal was gradually shifting from

passive-impetus to active-impetus with many mega projects initiation including; Gautam Buddha International Airport in Lumbini; Pokhara Regional International Airport; Tribhuvan International Airport Capacity building; and Fast-track road to Nijgadh were under construction to cater the tourism industry of Nepal. Likewise, numbers of hotels and restaurants as well as new destinations development were on pipelines which are partially halted amid COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Hoque, Shikha, Hasanat, Arif and Baker (2020), the impact of COVID-19 on human body has grown significant fear among travelers. The tourism industry is fragile and sensitive; thus, it will take longer time to return to normalcy as tourists need confidence to travel. Tourism recovery is not based on lifting of lockdown (imposed travel bans); the sector will recover only when the situation is safe to travel; recovery of the tourism industry can be through a travel concession for employees to revive the domestic tourism. Domestic tourism cannot revive just by advocating; it requires proper roadmap and strategy. It is very important to survive only then revival is possible in this situation. There is a chance of tourism entrepreneurs to go bankruptcy as only few can survive till 2020 in this situation but they cannot hold to 2021 if there is no recovery plan of the government and the stakeholders in this phenomenon. Therefore, it is obvious that the industry will experience some degree of slump if there is no proper roadmap in time. The consequences will be severe as thousands of people will be jobless. The stakeholders of tourism industry of Nepal shared their experiences of COVID-19 pandemic impact on their business and provided suggestions for managing this catastrophic crisis strategically and mitigate its ramifications.

Mr. Rana (pseudonym) opined that “COVID-19 is an unexpected crisis for global tourism industry. Hotels in Nepal have suffered a lot due to this sudden and unforeseen event. Many hotels are not being able to provide salary to their staffs had brought significant effect to the employees. HAN however has come up with 12.5% salary to their employees even in this pandemic to support the employees financially. There are many small and medium sized hotels which are about to close due to not being able to pay rents to the landlords. With the permission to open the hotel, there is a spectrum of hope that the industry can revive following the guidelines of the hygiene protocol. The employees are trained to follow the SOPs guided by the protocol and maintain all the standard of sanitation and hygiene to minimize chance of transmission of coronavirus. The association is very hopeful that the domestic tourism market will flourish soon as Nepalese loves travelling which could help revive the industry to its feet once again.”

There are altogether 1254 registered hotels (star and tourist standard categories) (Ulak, 2020) which are impacted adversely with no businesses in the hospitality sector such as hotels, travels and aviation as a result of travel restrictions and pause

of mobility for months has resulted in 332 million U.S. Dollar loss until July 21, 2020 in Nepal (Xinhua, 2020). The hotels, restaurants and other tourism subsectors has already started to train their staff to follow the hygiene guidelines (The Himalayan Times, 2020b) to mitigate the virus transmission and safe-guarding both the hosts and the guests. The industry shall start with the domestic activities and then regional tourism movement will come to existence and finally the international tourists movement can be seen (UNWTO, 2020b) which is been advocated by many tourism entrepreneurs in Nepal too.

Mr. Chhetri (pseudonym) opined that, *“we raised the voice for overall tourism industry by suggesting the government to address it in the Government Budget for Fiscal Year 2077-2078 as a strategy to mitigate and manage the crisis. Therefore, the association is advocating for providing loan in lowest interest possible; however, government has agreed to reduce the interest by 5%. But still our voice is that, the collateral should be revalued by the bank for the added loan at this time. We have also requested all the landlords to waive off 50% rent and majority of the landlords have agreed upon. The major problems of members accredited to IATA and inbound tour operators in Nepal are; they have to refunding the booking amount as there is no possibility of the activities; paying salary and clearing rent is another major issue. Finally, the association has been educating the agents and agencies to follow the hygiene protocol as a guidelines and a ground to resume the operation. He further added all the operators should follow the protocol starting from the airplane, airport, transport, hotel, sightseeing, trekking and expeditions and other tourism related activities so there will be a minimized chance of the transmission”*.

The situation had gone worst that the impact of the pandemic has spilled over everywhere causing multiplier effects. The employees and daily wages staffs are suffering the most as they are not getting full salary which brings a situation that is very hard to even manage their daily necessities. To cope with the situation, the tourism stakeholders have urged government to come with some relief packages so that they can sustain their business and contribute to the nation in future. Majority of the landlords have agreed upon the waiving of the rent by 50% amid the lockdown which is a great initiation for supporting the tourism businesses. Meanwhile, deduction in the interest rate of the bank loan would be a great relief to all the tourism-related businesses. Besides, following of hygiene guidelines would definitely disseminate a positive message to tourists and built a trust upon the nation's preparedness to invite tourists again.

Mr. Sherpa (pseudonym) opined that, *“trekking agencies of Nepal are having significant effect of this pandemic; however, there has not been any support from the government. Provision of soft loan for the sustainability of the business has*

been proposed to government; NRs. 2 million loans for at least one year without collateral or loan on the basis of registration and tax clearance for salaries, rent, and other debts. He clarified that no agencies have reached the worst condition to shut their business; however, if the pandemic continued and crossed the upcoming autumn season then there is a high chance of closure of businesses. Following the hygiene protocols by the stakeholders to operate the business is must, he adds that government should also help the agencies to survive until they revive as tourism industry is the most fragile industry which gets impacted fastest and requires the longest time to revive. After the government approves to resume the trekking, the porters will be provided all the necessary gears mentioned in the protocol to maintain sanitation and hygiene during trekking, camping, and dining”.

There are 2649 registered trekking agencies which generated NRs. 46,92,26,347.7 (MoCTCA, 2019; in Ulak, 2020) which are being severely affected. Therefore, soft loan of up to 2 million on the basis of registration and tax clearance as they have proposed to the government can be a preliminary relief package to the tourism businesses. It not only helps to sustain the business and mitigate the immediate impact of the crisis rather it can be used in employee’s welfare and can retain the employees. As stated by the respondent, it is obvious that tourism industry unlike any other businesses is most fragile as it gets impacted the most in any negative events and takes the maximum time to revive. Hence, it might leads to job losses of maximum employees that will impact society significantly as a repercussion.

Mr. Waiba (pseudonym) expressed his view on COVID-19 that, *“he would like to first thanks Government of Nepal for lifting the lockdown and allowing to open the tourism industry; however, opening the business will not bring tourism to the country. Tourists are reluctant to travel due to fear of the pandemic as no vaccine is yet introduced in the market; hence, he stressed on the proper implementation of protocol is must, as fail to do so can bring a very disastrous repercussion to the industry. NMA is ready to implement all the protocol and he adds they are capable to follow all the SOPs and guidelines. Nepal government should disseminate the protocol to each and every one so that it could be followed and not just uploading on websites will work since many guides and porters are not in a position to browse and understand.*

Nepal generated NRs. 240 million/US\$ 1.6 billion in 2019 through mountain expedition (Wengel, 2020); and the royalty received by the peaks in 2018 was US\$ 1,062,816 (MoCTCA, 2019; in Ulak, 2020). International tourists are willing to visit Nepal for trekking and expedition as 20 percent of the bookings are still not cancelled (The Kathmandu Post, 2020c); however, they are concerned about the safety. Brining tourist is a one challenge in this scenario but in other hand the challenge would be the

impact they bring if the protocol is not followed properly and minutely by individuals in the field. There are employees who are illiterate working in the mountaineering associations should be trained and educated about the protocol so that they prioritize during the activities in the field.

Mr. Kahtiwoda (pseudonym) opined that *“this is an extra-ordinary and devastating event brought by COVID-19 pandemic in Nepalese tourism industry. It has created a fear to tourists and investors which have made millions of employees jobless. NTB has prepared hygiene protocol as guidelines to operate the industry (hotels, restaurants, vehicle operators and tour, trekking, mountaineering and rafting agencies) safely after the lockdown is lifted. He further added NTB should focus on the branding of Nepal as a healing, natural and wellness destination which would be a strategic response to tackle the crisis during the recovery period”*.

Government of Nepal had permitted hotels, restaurants and other tourism activities to operate effective from July 30, 2020 and had been planning to open international & domestic flights along with the long distance transportation by following standard of hygiene and safety protocols (maintaining safe-distance and putting masks) (Nepali Times, 2020; The Himalayan Times, 2020b). Nepal's only International Airport (Tribhuvan International Airport) had upgraded its facility and has arranged all the requirements to welcome the visitors with the highest level of safety and hygiene. The international flight operation was set to resume from August 17, 2020. However, with the rise of infection in Nepal, the schedule were postponed and the government decided to resume chartered flights and regular passenger flights from September 1, 2020 only, where tourists won't be allowed to arrive in Nepal until next notice. There is a prohibitory order in Kathmandu valley from August 20, 2020 and dozens of other districts (The Kathmandu Post, 2020a, The Kathmandu Post, 2020b). After three weeks of lifting the lockdown, the federal government has given local administrations and governments the authority to decide on restrictions and lockdown measures as COVID-19 cases continue to rise (Prasain & Pradhan, 2020).

The major findings of this study confirms that every subsectors of tourism industry in Nepal have been affected adversely by the pandemic which has multiplier effects on the economic and social systems; however, support/relief packages in terms of (soft loan, collateral-free loan based on registration and tax clearance, tax subsidies) from the government can provide oxygen to the business who is suffering from the COVID-19. Likewise, all the sectors should unite to follow the rules and regulations of hygiene protocol will definitely help in combating the pandemic and regain the confidence amongst both the hosts and the guests. Discipline of the hosts and the guests in following the norms of hygiene is a must, wearing mask, gloves, maintaining social distancing will be a “new normal” after the pandemic.

There is an estimated loss of 10 billion Nepali Rupees (83 million U.S. dollar) each month during the lockdown (Xinhua, 2020). Comparing the number of tourists in the previous year (2019), there were increasing numbers from the month of January till March, while in the current year the number has declined gradually. The number of tourists arrival till February were fairly good but the number of tourists drastically declined after the month of March, 2020. According to Khadka, Pokhrel, Thakur, Magar, Bhatta, Dhamala, Aryal, Shi, Cui, and Bhujju (2020), the tourist numbers as compared to the previous year, 2019, the declining rate of the tourist was 1.96% in January, 1.00% in February and 73.26% in March. Prasain (2020) published a report which shows only 30 foreign arrivals to Nepal in the month of May, 2020. This is a precipitous drop of more than 99.9 percent in tourist numbers compared to the same month in the year 2019 as there were 70,000 arrivals.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is having far reaching impacts beyond the health crisis, and it seems to get escalated. Nepal was least prepared for the pandemic of this nature and scale because limited quarantine service and health-related services were only developed in the initial stage. The performance of government on managing the crisis and deescalating ramification of the pandemic seems challenging with the increasing numbers of infection (Ulak, 2020). Thus, the lockdown strategy to eliminate the transmission seemed effective in the initial stage; however, it could not be the permanent solution. Therefore, Government of Nepal should trace the chain of transmission to control the pandemic as it has already reached the third stage (Koirala et al., 2020). Addition of health related service, PCR test facilities, quarantines and isolation wards were increased and upgraded with the help of WHO which is still felt inadequate with the rise of infected patients.

NTB has prepared a *hygiene protocol* as guidelines to be maintained strictly for resuming the tourism industry. Altogether, 270 travels and tour agencies, restaurants, curio shops and hotels have been closed in the past three months and around hundreds of hotels and around 10,000 tourism subsectors are facing problem to sustain their businesses amid COVID-19 crisis (Ojha, 2020). For the recovery of tourism industry, tourism sub-sectors' employees need extensive trainings and orientations to maintain highest standard of sanitation and hygiene; there should be strong monitoring mechanism for the actual implementation of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) for sanitation and hygiene guided by the protocol in the field; if any breaches or gaps are identified then immediate corrective actions must be taken; it is very essential to keep the employees in discipline to mitigate and eliminate the chance of coronavirus transmission. Hence, this practice will boost up the confidence level of flaccid travelers and motivates them to travel once again. There will be a behavioral change of both the hosts and the guests as the footprint of the pandemic which

will be experienced in tourism sectors in coming days. Avoiding contact and social distancing; wearing mask and PPEs will definitely decrease the charm of hospitality. Scholars are advocating tourism will revive through the domestic tourist movement and gradually international tourist mobility will help provide oxygen and spectrum to the tourism industry which has gone to coma being a patient of COVID-19.

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