

Transitioning into Tourism: Becoming a Trekking Guide

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Abstract

Primary focus of this study centres around trekking guides' perceptions and awareness on their chosen field of work. Attention is paid on highlighting their plight as well. Twenty-five Nepali trekking guides from Gorkha were interviewed at their place of work in Kathmandu to ascertain why they decided to enter into the trekking industry as a trekking guide. Reasons for becoming a trekking guide were explored using in depth interviewing techniques and a Grounded Theory approach to collect the data. The trekking guides transitioned into their career through travelling to Kathmandu in order to continue their education. They needed to support themselves by seeking out other employment opportunities. The livelihood of trekking guide provided this prospect for them. Qualifications in topography, antiquity, society, wildlife, trekking routes, high altitude sickness and emergency treatment, structural design, archaeology and religious belief in Nepal were all cited by the participants as being part of a qualification set required to work as a trekking guide. Many of the participants also spoke about risk in their employment. Risk to themselves and to the trekkers they guide were important themes to emerge from the research. Social welfare and financial aid policy and legislation for the families left behind to continue alone after trekking guide death would be one way forward for this revered and necessary group of Nepali workers to be recognized for the important work they do for their nation.

Keywords: *Trekking guides, transition, qualifications, risk, Nepal*

Introduction

In Nepal, the occupation of trekking guide includes guiding tourists around trekking routes in the mountains of the Himalaya. Each guide mostly has high levels of spoken English and oftentimes other languages. They are also educated in the geography, culture and natural surroundings of the Himalayas. Frequently, the occupation of trekking guide is only seasonal employment (Lundqvist, 2015). Outside of the peak trekking seasons, late March and April, or late September through to early November (Responsible Travel, n.d.), the guides are either students or oftentimes have another occupation (Lundqvist, 2015). This paper is concerned with male trekking guides and how they transition through the various levels to obtain trekking guide status.

A number of the most well-liked treks in Nepal include journeying to Annapurna, Everest, Kanchenjunga and Dhaulagiri (see Figure 1 below). All of these treks have accommodation facilities along the trekking trails, and this has enabled local inhabitants to earn a living through connections to tourism. Many have taken the opportunity to become a trekking guide (Nyaupane, Morais & Dowler, 2006). Employing a trekking guide is not only effective for creating local income but also an opportunity for tourists to understand the culture, rituals

and the significance of the location they are visiting (Adhikari, 2019; Nepal Tourism Board, 2018).

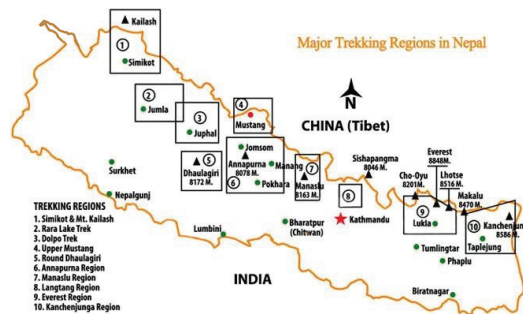


Figure 1: Major Trekking Regions in Nepal

Source: Tibet Vista (2022)

There are more than 1000 trekking businesses in Nepal that are registered with the Trekking Agencies' Association of Nepal (TAAN) (Baniya, & Paudel, 2016). A number of them are fully independent travel agents and others are internationally affiliated offices (Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Approximately 90% of these agencies are based in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal; thus, providing many choices for trekking tourists (MacLellan, Dieke & Thapa, 2000.). This also makes for a very competitive market for provision of trekking tours and trekking guides. Similar or equivalent services are offered by most of the trekking companies (Jones, 2013). What gives some of the trekking companies a competitive edge is the ownership of different features like staff insurance, local staff employed by the business, essential and appropriate equipment for the trek, well-practised, competent and knowledgeable guides who hold a trekking guide license issued in Nepal, suitable health and safety measures and an agreement with a local helicopter disaster evacuation business in case of an emergency (Gurung, 2017). According to Devkota (2011), the expression 'trek' is taken from the expression 'voortrekkers', Dutch forefathers who travelled through South Africa in their oxen days.

Objective

This research is concerned with male trekking guides currently living in and around Kathmandu who escort international trekkers to many places around the Himalayas such as Everest Base Camp, Annapurna Base Camp, Annapurna Circuit, Kanchenjunga and Dhaulagiri (Ale, 2019). The research investigates how the trekking guides came to be involved in the occupation and some of the effects being a trekking guide has on each of them (Hillman, 2019; Nyaupane, Lew & Tatsugawa, 2014). The research firstly investigates how the participants transitioned to and through this vocation. Secondly, how the guides obtained their qualifications was also examined. Finally, the risk involved in this profession was explored.

Literature review

The profession of guiding and interpretation can be traced back to circa 460 BC, when a portrayal of guides performing their work at the pyramids of Egypt is illustrated in the chronicles of Herodotus and Halicarnassus. These guides patronised the pyramids, and pundits who guided tourists at other sacred locations were also denoted as guides. The pundit/

interpreter is a recurrent character in tourism narratives throughout history. The pyramids were not the only ancient environments where guides were to be located. In the second century AD, the Romans were journeying to the lands of Homer and every locality had its cluster of interpreters (Hillman, 2012, 2005; Dewar 2000).

By the late 1800s, guiding and interpretation were attaining a more contemporary form. In New Zealand, a different circle of guides was becoming significant. The Maori guides of Rotorua became famous from the 1900s. All of them, except one, were women. Maori custom gives the females of the population the senior role in making the tourist feel respected. This custom defined the gender of the guides (Houkamau & Sibley, 2019; Yang, 2011). The designation 'guide' is still acknowledged with gratification by many of the females in the locality. The guides are frequently conferred with imperial accolades and retain a status of esteem in their districts. These female guides have always been deemed as 'different' from others in their culture (Hillman, 2012, 2005; Dewar 2000).

According to Holloway (1981), the role of the tourist guide, and in this case, trekking guide, is complicated and varied, comprising copious 'sub-roles'. Zhang and Chow (2004) have documented no less than 16 distinct roles attributed to guides, while Black and Weiler (2005) have observed 10 (Rabotić, 2010).

Cohen (1985), who was a forerunner of making tourist guiding a topic of research consideration, expands on the establishment and expansion of the guide's role. In his estimation, the role of proficient guides comprises two mechanisms: collective negotiation and social transactions. The first one pertains to the negotiator's role being in direct communication with tourists and the resident population. While the second one pertains to the facilitation of interpreting distinct societies (Rabotić, 2010; Hillman, 2006).

Weiler and Ham (2002) believe that travellers in general do not envisage much from the guided tour and guides, but merely want to pass a number of hours or days with the least possible discomposure, a quantity of data and enjoyment. Yet, Ooi (2002) implies that trekkers these days have a tendency to interpret everything they encounter in their own manner, prompted both by initially fashioned ideas and opportunities concerning the actual trek as advantageous to them (Rabotić, 2010).

Moscardo (2003) suggests that trekking guides typically deliver information on existing opportunities and options regarding in situ pursuits, fostering an awareness of safety and wellbeing, facilitating more effective dealings with conceivable complications during the trek, in addition to an enhanced perception of community alerts or exclusion warnings. Trekkers and tourists often do not observe cautionary signs or may even misunderstand them. In coordinated tourism, guides direct trekkers' awareness to such communications, describe their function, help clients to comprehend these notices and acknowledge them with agreement (Rabotić, 2010).

Consistent with Jennings and Weiler (2006), guides are distinguishable as prescribed and relaxed intermediaries, which can influence the attributes of the tourist encounter, either independently or collectively, underlining that social negotiation does not automatically bring about a high-ranking encounter. The interpreter's influence is sometimes not always a constructive one but is occasionally adverse or impartial. This is partially due to the point that awareness of the tourist encounter is contingent upon a tourist as a person, and to a lesser extent upon an intermediary, that is, a guide (see also Rabotić, 2010).

Spiteri and Nepal (2008) have observed that most trekking companies in Nepal are located in Kathmandu and commission trekking guides from right across the country. Their research found recurrent topics in the trekking guides' evaluations of matters of transformation of knowledge and stability connected to trekking and tourism. The majority of trekking guides considered that tourism and trekking have been a means to progressive economic exchange, but this was reduced by opinions of adverse change in other situations. Uncertainties connected to social transformation were common among the guides, who were apprehensive about the insertion of western ideals into rural communities (Holden, 2010).

Rabotić (2010) indicates that what trekking guides essentially demonstrate in their routine day-to-day employment is not merely contingent upon distinct characteristics, expertise and procured abilities or commitment to moral values. Existing administrative and socio-economic environments in which the trekking guides enact their pursuits should also be considered, in addition to the standing they have in their cultures.

Furthermore, Rabotić (2010) also questions whether trekking guides are, even though they are licensed by state agencies, equipped to undertake their multifaceted and multidimensional responsibilities. The method of their instruction in many nations is predominantly founded on reviewing high school facts on cultural customs, topography, history of specific regions etc., quite often overlooking presentation and interpretive talents, group interaction administration or anything else which also produces 'the art of guiding'. Some of these include crowd dynamics, direction-finding, evaluating group's capabilities, interpreting accurately, and scheduling commentary, relating stories, clarity, speechless communication and comparable activities. Cherem (1977) and Christie and Mason (2003) emphasise the significance of the proficiencies of delivery over authentic information in trekking guiding and he argues that all guides are initially interpreters, and subsequently knowledge experts.

Devkota (2011) states that trekking guides are those individuals who guide tourists to diverse locations and interpret the culture, environment, flora and fauna, mountains, religion and social norms to their customers. That is, trekking guides are similar to emissaries who initiate tourists in everything about the country being visited. Furthermore, trekking guides not only lead the trekkers but also act as a coordinator, administrator, custodian, first aid administer, interpreter and operate as a supplier of facts, like educators.

These different researchers and authors have ultimately voiced the need of better understanding of this trekking guides' community who in every way have been contributing in adding valuable aspects of tourism.

Methodology

Data were collected from 25 trekking guides employed by Nepal based large trekking companies located in Kathmandu. The research utilised semi-structured in-depth interviews to consult the guides on the subject matter of how they came to be involved in the occupation and some of the effects being a trekking guide has on each of them. Participants were engaged in a 45-60-minute interview, which was electronically recorded at their place of work. They were interviewed separately. The discussions were semi-structured owing to the fact that the question prompts were formulated in advance; as is appropriate in a Grounded Theory approach (Radel & Hillman, 2018). The question prompts were used to guide the interview. The themes of the inquiry were adhered to in each interview, with the purpose of accommodating noteworthy and unanticipated information that occurred. If the participant

highlighted a part of their lived experience as a trekking guide that was new, novel, or previously under/unresearched, this was explored in an in-depth manner during the interview.

All of the participants were interviewed in English, as all the guides were proficient in the language. All the trekking guides interviewed were male and ranged from 28 to 49 years of age. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed by a multilingual Nepali PhD research student. Question triggers, or prompts, that concentrated on length of time as a trekking guide, training undertaken for guiding, hours of work and types of treks conducted, risk and safety issues and length of time able to work in this occupation were asked of each participant. Further, basic demographic queries relating to their age and place of birth were also collected. All prompts were constructed through engagement with the reading matter on trekking guides, their health and other relevant issues for guiding in the Himalaya. Still, the conversations and dialogues with the participants were comprehensive interactions co-generated between the interviewer and participants to encourage the guides to offer their own lived experiences of their trekking work.

An application for ethics approval was submitted and granted from the author's university Human Ethics Committee.

Findings, discussion and results

The trekking guides in this research project were hired to guide trekkers on major trekking routes in Nepal. Many of them were attracted to the occupation because they could practice as a guide during the trekking seasons in Nepal, and still attend their school or university education. Some came to the occupation by way of beginning as a porter, and then working their way up to full trekking guide status. Many discussed the training received through recognized facilities (institutions) in Kathmandu. Others were wary about the risks they and their trekking groups and support staff encountered along the trails. This also included the fact that those who perished needed to be handful of compensations provided for after their demise. The themes to emerge from the research inquiry were 'transition to guiding', 'qualifications', and 'risk'. In the next section, transition to guiding is discussed first, followed by how the guides acquired qualifications in the trekking guide sector. Lastly, risk for both the guides and their trekking groups is considered.

Transition to guiding

The pathway of transition from the initial to the skilled guide's role has been comprehensively considered in Cohen's (1982) article. Of the group of 25 trekking guides, all of them were born outside Kathmandu, but currently resided in the capital city. Interestingly, all participated trekking guides in this research project related that they hailed from Gorkha. Gorkha features a scenic panorama of snow-capped mountain peaks, and this scenic settlement has long endured as a tourism focus for many Nepali and foreign tourists (Gautam & Rayamajhi, 2013). There were a number of reasons and justifications given by the contributors for how they came to be a trekking guide. One participant narrates that:

I was born in a village, came to Kathmandu for university study. My parents had not enough money and cannot afford those stay at Kathmandu and paying for study. I, then, searched some job. I got one job of porter to carry backpack, and then took some trainings including trekking guide, which improved English, apply for government licence for trekking guide and became a guide.

And another guide reiterates:

After finishing my School, I moved to Kathmandu for university study. That time, I was searching for part time job, and I came to know that trekking sector is one field. As I had interest with seeing new places, trekking and making new friends, I joined the trekking company. I did porter for 3 years and another 2 years as assistant guide and since last 6 years, as a guide.

These responses reflect the argument of Grossman-Thompson (2013) who suggests that guiding subsidizes the ongoing education of participants, while education affords respectability to their distinctiveness as workers. By engaging in further schooling whilst they work, participants put forward a persona of guides as knowledgeable and occupation focused (Grossman-Thompson, 2013).

Furthermore, the would-be guides have journeyed to a metropolitan area to seek out paid work based on an array of push and pull factors that have dislocated them from conventional agricultural work. Their migration is meaningful in determining their socio-economic status because they arrive in Kathmandu with limited reserves. That is, they have departed agrarian locations with little money and hope to expand their education into skilful employment in the tourism service sector. Second, as internal immigrants, they reside external to their extended family and pay rental fees for their accommodation. Many are residing collectively with mates or relations in tiny, communal dwellings (Grossman-Thompson, 2015). Another perspective from the oldest participant interviewed reveals that:

I used to work in adjacent cities of India and one of my friends from this trekking sector talked with me about this [trekking] sector. He shared me about some opportunities and started as a kitchen boy to carry on kitchen stuffs. One time, we had 46 people and I need to carry on the big baskets every day. I have to carry the things walking 6 hours every day but was very nice. At very first, I had to carry big luggage, but continued with patience to become a guide. I worked as porter for a year and for another 2 years worked in kitchen and became helper for next two years and then became guide. I had a big patience to become a guide. It's already 15 years that I have a guide licence.

Work-related narrations have established that there was a social structure through which most participants had progressed – from porter or kitchen assistant to cook, then to assistant guide, followed by trekking guide (Macdonald, Shrestha, Chhetri, Sherpa, L. R., Sherpa, Murray, & Sanati, 2015). A conventional example for beginning as a trekking guide is to begin as a porter, advance to an assistant guide and then transition to, or become a trekking guide (Stuhaug, 2013). This is perceived as part of the rite-of-passage for this workforce, and places them in a position to gain relevant training and thus, qualifications.

Qualifications

So as to be appreciated as a trekking guide, and to be sought out by companies, trekking guides can participate in many habits of training in order to be awarded accreditation in appropriate trekking responsibilities (Lugosi & Bray, 2008). The purpose enacted by trekking guides in generating and supplying tourism interpretations is considerable. They participate in a keyway to link the expectations of the trekkers by delivering perspectives fostered by the tourist market in Nepal (Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). Even though working as a trekking guide has been considered by some as an essentially episodic and periodic occupation for many people in Nepal until recently, it has gradually developed into an attractive vocation for many males (Upreti, Sharma, Upadhaya, Ghimire, & Iff, 2013). A bit old available figures indicate that approximately 650 trekking guides and 120 tour (local) guides obtain tuition and

license from government-affiliated institutions like the Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM), and Nepal Mountain Academy (NMA) (MoTCCA, 2013) located in Kathmandu. These institutions are authorised to provide trekking guide training). In the course of the training, they study a diversity of facts and proficiencies. As an element of the subject matter, they study representative dialogues about Nepal; for example, its topography, antiquity, society, wildlife, trekking routes, high altitude sickness and emergency treatment, structural design, archaeology and religious conviction (Baral, Hazen & Thapa, 2017). Furthermore, they also study how to suitably extol the subject matter they learn. This incorporates the expression of description like terms for particular phrases, allegories, comedic achievement and inter-societal exchange skilfulness (Sharma, 2016). Related to this, one of the trekking guides told me:

I have government trekking guide licence, safety and security training, first aid training along with advanced level English language training as well. We learn from clients as well. We learn from different experiences.

The instruction and edification of those participating in the trekking industry is widely considered as an important priority (Terra Firma & Tourism Resource Consultants, 1998; Whinney, 1996; Go, 1994). This activity, possibly to a greater extent than various others, is consumer centred and depends deeply on staff who can supply a superior degree of service and have exceptional interaction and social abilities. Such expertise is principally developed by means of training (Black, Ham & Weiler, 2001; Whinney, 1996).

In evaluating the qualifications of the trekking guides, they are observed to have made various usages of language. There were also the guides who had achieved the qualification of the Secondary Leaving Certificate (SLC – Year 10 Level), some a Bachelor's degree, and also up to the Masters level (Devkota, 2011); and many other relevant levels of competency. One of the participant guides related that:

Yes, we have many certificates related to first aid, leadership, trekking guide licence, basic and advanced English courses as well.

And similarly, one of his co-workers also said:

It's of Hotel Management and Tourism Training Centre (HMTTC) (Now it known as NATHM) certificate, first aid training, Advanced English course. We did first aid training with Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal (TAAN) and Kathmandu Environment Education Project (KEEP) and HMTTC.

Fundamental is the requirement to ascertain what proficiencies and characteristics are needed to be an effective guide (Black, Ham & Weiler, 2001; Jacobson & Robles, 1992; Paaby et al., 1991). Conversely however, one participant narrated that certification as a trekking guide was unnecessary. According to him, everything he needed to know he was able to learn from practical experience on treks.

Our journey is step by step starting from porter, become assistant guide and full guide step. I raised in countryside and came to Kathmandu for job. I was asked to start as cook. One time, I was asked whether I can speak English. Another client gave me English magazine, I was unable to read. Later, I improved myself and became porter, assistant guide and later guide. I became porter and assistant guide for 7 years and then became guide.

This version of information is a practical way out in doing the guiding work applied at the local sites but at present the guiding job requires some certified official training experiences.

Nepal has established the requirements for trekking guide qualification throughout the country. The Hotel Management and Tourism Training Center (HMTC) (supported by the Nepali government and the International Labour Organization (ILO)) and privately owned enterprises, deliver required training for trekking guides. The Trekking Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN) and Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP) introduced an "Eco-Trekking Workshop" in 1991, which communicates management-oriented proficiencies. The training has also been facilitated further afield, in Sikkim and Bhutan (Lama & Sattar, 2002).

Dealing with risk as a trekking guide

Trekking is a significant adventure in Nepal's tourism sphere. Trekking is perceived as an average to low-hazard pursuit; involving some risk. Risk, as described by Beck (1992, 2009, 2010; see also Calhoun, 2010; Jarvis, 2007) is a unique, collective and adaptive explanation of contemporary reality (Hillman, 2019). Risk in the context of affecting trekking guides is mostly determined by the weather circumstances and includes rock and ice collapses, landslides, plunging into gorges, and abrupt weather fluctuations. What frequently stays overlooked though, is the reality that those districts are by and large harsh spaces, where extreme rock-strewn, frozen and glacial landscapes with inadequate ease of access, and variable risks of landslides, tumbling rocks and snow are intensified by harsh low oxygen levels and freezing environs (Gatterer, Niedermeier, Pocecco, Frühauf, Faulhaber, Menz, Burtscher, Posch, Ruedl & Burtscher, 2019). In relation to this, one participant related:

It was terrible and scary situation. Ice and rocks were falling down. 2 years ago, everybody cancel trip, but my clients wanted not to cancel, we continued and stopped the next day by losing the way to go. Clients want to go despite some risks, but we must to be responsible to overcome the worse situation. And yet a further participant said:

Landslides, floods are major risks (in trekking not only the landslides, floods are major risk; Acute Mountain sickness, snowfall, avalanche, crevas accidents in trekking peak climbings, etc. are the high risk factors). Porters are the worst affected and sometimes guides too. I think this is due to the lack of safety orientation, and can happen to anyone. When you want to make high passes, we need to do it in morning. In rainy season, risks are with landslides and also with yak train.

The trekking guides believe that extreme snowstorms activate rock falls, which trigger damage to individuals and possessions in conjunction with destruction of paths and tracks in trekking areas. Occurrence of erratic weather fluctuation, such as rainstorm and blizzard, therefore, directly affect the trekkers and trekking guides. These tragedies devastate the transport structure triggering obstruction of thoroughfares, trekking trails, mountaineering paths, disconnecting the supply chain to mountain settlements, destroying cultivated pastures, and polluting water supplies, which has adverse consequences for trekking and tourism-based operations and income (Devkota, 2017). The outcomes after risk or major hazard events experienced by trekking guides are an important theme that some participants in the research revealed:

I want government to think something for the families who lost their relatives during the mountaineering or trekking.

The importance of this issue correlates to welfare societies and operators delivering social services. Welfare is mostly given by means of personal arrangements. The impact of this topic relates to the demise of Nepali residents employed by trekkers, but the aftereffects that

occasion adverse effects impact remain relatives. The area of this research also identifies the reality that the bulk of fatalities transpiring at elevated heights are Nepali people, and not foreign trekkers (Lundqvist, 2015). Another participant trekking guide also suggests that:

Nowadays there are few rescue associations and facilities but are not enough. Big companies need to give more trainings to porter and guides about safety and security. Danger is also with porters. Until recently, porters were not insured but it is now compulsory, and the compensation given was not enough.

Residents of developing economies, such as Nepal, can rarely depend on municipal administrations to operate in an appropriate fashion, as they participate inadequately in social assistance schemes (Croissant, 2004). Instead, these administrations trust the market with a laissez-faire approach and, leave it to immediate family and relatives to provide in an acceptable and beneficial way (Tao, 2004).

Conclusion and implication

This research has shown that one group of male trekking guides in Nepal transition into this profession as a means of generating income when they move to Kathmandu to study. They commence as porters, then become an assistant guide, and finally reach the rank and qualification of trekking guide. All of the participants, except one, said that they needed and welcomed trekking guide training. Furthermore, all of them have faced risk and hazards whilst conducting foreigners on treks around the mountains of Nepal. Indeed, many deaths of guides, foreigners and locals occur each year. The research found that social compensation and welfare would aid those family members left behind to continue their lives in a comparable manner, and not plunge them further into poverty.

Limitation

There were five limitations identified by the author of this research project. Firstly, the trekking guides interviewed were male only. Secondly, all the male trekking guides were based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Thirdly, all the interviews were conducted in English as it could have limited their expression of lived experiences. Fourthly, all the participants were interviewed at their place of work, which may have had some bearing on how they responded to the questions. Lastly, the size of the interviewee cohort was limited to 25 individuals, all of whom were employed as trekking guides. Therefore, the findings of the research are not generalizable to the wider trekking guide population throughout Nepal, and in other global trekking destinations.

Future research

This research paper has laid the foundation for future research into the reasons why both male and female trekking guides decide to become a trekking guide in Nepal. Transition, qualifications and risk are relevant to both genders. So, an in-depth study focusing on both groups would benefit the trekking industry, trekking companies and the guides themselves. Policies on trekking and guiding livelihood, behaviour and working conditions of both genders would provide Nepali authorities with valuable information on which to evolve new guidelines. Trekking guides and their families have a right to be recognised and recompensed under appropriate legislation.

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