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### The Prospects of Domestic Tourism in Post-Covid Nepal: Connecting the Missing Dots

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#### Abstract

*Nepal has experienced challenges in developing its international tourism business during Covid-19 and domestic tourism has not yet been considered a viable alternative to the allure of foreign travel in Nepal. There are no statistics on domestic tourism in Nepal. Worldwide, domestic tourism has been sought as an alternative to revive the tourism industry during a pandemic, and the Ministry of Tourism and Nepal Tourism Board is implementing strategies and plans to promote domestic tourism in Nepal.*

*This study aims to investigate the potential of domestic tourism in Nepal from the perspective of domestic tourists. The study is qualitative in nature and has used an online survey from May to June 2020. Data has been analyzed thematically using SPSS, MS-Excel, and descriptive statistics. This study attempts to connect the dots by focusing on domestic tourism and tourist destinations in Nepal in accordance with respondents' opinions. The findings reveal that the tourism industry can potentially be revitalized by domestic tourism. A high percentage of respondents indicated that the Covid lockdown has floored the tourism sector however, they are highly motivated to*

*travel domestically rather than overseas despite the travel restrictions. To summarize, the potentiality of domestic tourism to strengthen the tourism industry should be further explored, and the absence of strategies and policies, travel restrictions, lack of provision of tourism infrastructure, and safety protocol are barriers to the flourishing of domestic tourism.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Domestic Tourism, Guest and Revival

## **Understanding Domestic Tourism**

Domestic tourism is travel by residents of a country within or outside the same state and territory during the same day or overnight and this does not include traveling for school or work (Quinn, 2010; Kabote et al., 2017; Muyobo et al., 2020). Caletrío (2012) declares domestic tourism simply as tourism within the resident's country. Becken (2009) defines domestic tourism as trips for any purpose that exceeds 40 kilometers outside a person's daily environment.

Domestic tourism is the key contributor to the global tourism market, accounting for an average of 75% of the global tourism expenditure (Demunter & Dimitrakopoulou, 2011; Yap & Allen, 2011; Ghimire, 2013). Domestic tourism may range from enjoying and experiencing activities and places by local people within their local community (Kabote *et al.*, 2019) to what Urry and Larsen (2011) referred to as the tourist gaze concept that entails day-long trips to landscapes different from daily experiences (Gallarza, *et al.*, 2018; Nagai & Kashiwagi, 2018). While developed countries have high domestic participation, it is less accounted for in developing countries (Ndlovu *et al.*, 2011; Kabote *et al.*, 2019).

To understand domestic tourism, tourism distribution, geography, diverse culture, and tourism economy needs to be deeply evaluated. The tourism literature has recognized that the endeavor to visit an attractive place generally is a compromise between the cost and effort of taking the trip and the anticipated benefits of the experience (Tian, *et al.*, 1996; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Domestic travelers decide on domestic destinations by analyzing travel costs between intrastate and interstate (Hyubers, 2003). The primary motives of domestic tourism in developing countries include visiting friends and relatives, private and corporate events, religious ceremonies, and pilgrimages (Opperman and Chon, 1997; Luvsandavaajav *et al.*, 2021).

Meeting the demands of international and domestic tourists by providing tourism-related goods and services can bring positive economic outcomes to a nation (Cook *et al.*, 1999; Chui *et al.*, 2015). Domestic tourism contributes to the wider distribution of national income (Canh *et al.*, 2020). Domestic tourists are indispensable for small businesses and self-employed sellers as they prefer local

vendors generating greater turnover for local economies and development compared to international travelers (Ashley *et al.*, 2000). However, it has not yet been considered in the nation's tourism industry (Gerosa, 2003; Mazimhaka, 2006).

Domestic tourism is now recognized for its pivotal role in underpinning the UK's social and economic fabric of rural and urban communities (Mazimhaka, 2006). After the September 11 attacks, the USA experienced an upsurge in domestic tourism (TIA, 2005, p.40). Domestic tourism contributed to 80% of the total generated tourism revenue (1772 billion US dollars) in the USA in 2014. China has elevated the appeal of domestic tourism via the development of new domestic routes and transportation infrastructures, simulation of charter flights for domestic transportation, congruence of international and domestic standards for the provision of tourism services, and financial support for tourism (Gudkov *et al.*, 2017).

Domestic tourism may experience an increase ten times greater than the current international arrivals due to the rapid rise in the trend of domestic tourism in some developing countries (Mazimhaka, 2006). Domestic tourism accounts for around 80% of the tourism economy worldwide and hence, can help stimulate economic recovery for countries overly dependent on international tourism (Dieke, 2000; Neto, 2002)

### **Effects of Negative Events on Domestic Tourism**

The development of the tourism industry is quite susceptible to negative environmental factors such as disease outbreaks, natural disasters, financial crises, serious social conflicts, war, terrorism acts, a shift in market tastes, and the seasonal nature of the industry itself. (Coria, 2004). The contribution of domestic tourism can be felt and recorded when a country faces hindrances to the development of the international tourism industry (Mazimhaka, 2006). Bonham *et al.*, (2006) observed an increment in domestic tourism to Hawaii after the terrorist attack in the USA. Salman *et al.*, (2007) established that the Chornobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 did not affect domestic tourism in Sweden, and Hamilton and Tol (2007) asserted that climate change did not have negative impacts on domestic tourism in Germany, the UK, and Ireland.

Gudkov *et al.*, (2017) put forth strategies for the introduction of recreational tax deduction, special tax regime formation for tourist firms, full exemption of tax for accommodation facilities, transportation tax deduction for vehicles, and waiving of VAT for domestic transportation.

## **Tourism During Covid-19 Pandemic in Nepal**

Covid-19, first identified in Wuhan, China in 2019, is an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 and has spread globally causing Covid pandemics (Hui *et al.*, 2020). The Covid pandemic has brought an unprecedented halt to tourism activities and traveler's mobility on a global scale. As per the August–September issue of the World Tourism Barometer by UNWTO (2020), international tourist arrivals have declined 65% in the first half of 2020 over the same period last year worldwide. Similarly, this issue of the World Tourism Barometer by UNWTO, further states a loss of 440 million international arrivals due to a massive fall in international travel demand during the first half of 2020, which further translates into the loss of about USD 460 billion in export revenues from international tourism.

Meanwhile, in Nepal, the tourism industry in 2018 contributed 7.9% of Nepal's GDP and supported 1.05 million jobs, and was expected to provide 1.35 million jobs by 2029 (Prasain, 2019; Sah *et al.*, 2020). The embassy of Nepal officially introduced Visit Nepal 2020 campaign on 1 January 2020 intending to attract 2 million tourists, generate 2 billion dollars and create job opportunities (Sah *et al.*, 2020). The repercussions of Covid-19 on the Nepalese tourism industry have been widely documented. Nepal even saw a temporary halting of 'on-arrival visa service' from March 7 to 30, 2020 for individuals arriving from China, Japan, Italy, South Korea, and Iran (My Republica, 2020), imposing travel restrictions on Nepal from March 24 to July 21, 2020. Health certificates were required for people entering Nepal and the government advised against non-essential trips. From March 14 to April 30, 2020, Nepal suspended on-arrival tourist visas and implemented restrictions for travel within land borders, and expeditions on Mount Everest (The Kathmandu Post, 2020). The study further amplifies that travel restrictions are implemented during pandemics (Peak *et al.*, 2018; Muley *et al.*, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2020).

Ulak (2020b) has analyzed the preparedness and strategies employed by the tourism industry of Nepal to mitigate the loss faced by the tourism sector due to Covid-19. Khanal (2020) has noted that domestic and international travel and tourism restriction has been recorded for the first time in Nepal due to Covid-19. Domestic tourism is expected to recover quickly amidst longer international travel bans. Dahal (2020) recognized the lack of statistics on Nepalese visitors traveling for leisure purposes suggesting Nepalese travelers' willingness to explore tourist destinations after the relaxation of government travel restrictions.

## **Research Methodology**

Denzin & Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as multi-method in focus, employing an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This paper sought to explore the prospects and challenges of domestic tourism and the willingness to travel during and post-Covid. The objectives of this study were assessed using an explorative qualitative inquiry. A purposive and convenience sampling approach was used in targeting study participants because of travel and mobility restrictions amidst Covid. Electronic and social media were employed to distribute the survey questionnaire. An in-depth google form survey was held from May to June 2020 with 28 respondents using a closed and open-ended questionnaire guide. The targeted participants for this study were mostly domestic tourists who had traveled in the past 1 year before Covid. Primary data from interviews have been complemented with data from unplanned observations from the secondary data that was collected from various books, journals, reports, articles published in newspapers, and information through the usage of the websites. Data collected were analyzed thematically with the aid of SPSS and MS Excel and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings of this qualitative study have been presented in the form of a narrative.

## **Domestic Travel Behavior, Pattern, Purpose, and Destination: Respondent's Point of View**

The Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is a landlocked country in South Asia bordered by India and China. Endowed with natural beauty, Nepal has 9 national parks, 3 wildlife reserves, 6 conservation areas, and a hunting reserve covering 28,999 square kilometers, 19.7% of the total area of Nepal. Nepal boasts of providing the best view of snow-capped mountains including Mt. Everest, the tallest mountain on the earth along with other cultural, traditional, and religious heritages such as Pashupatinath Temple, the World's biggest shrine of Lord Shiva. Manang and Mustang, once forbidden kingdoms, provides the traveler with opportunities to traverse remote beauty and wilderness.

All respondents agreed that tourism has a significant contribution to the economy and Covid has released an economic tornado. Lockdown has not only brought about economic repression but has also changed the daily lifestyle of respondents in unprecedented ways. 82.1% of the respondent fear that Covid will affect their decision to travel, 10.7% disagree with the fear of Covid-19 affecting their decision to travel and 3.6% of the respondent argue that travelers will travel no matter the crisis. 46.4% of the respondent had plans to travel as domestic tourists despite Covid lockdowns, 46.4% had no plan and 3.6% wanted to travel after the flattening of the covid wave. 3.6 % of respondents however do not want to travel at all. The preference for the place of stay during the trip was homestay (57.1%),

relative's home (39.3 %), camps, and tents (3.6%). Only 10.7% of the respondents prefer to stay in a 3-star hotel while opting out of 4-star and 5-star hotels.

Commenting on the picturesque beauty of Nepal, Respondent R12 reveals:

*“Nepal is a heavenly place full of hidden caves, sacred religious sites, ancient temples, incredible treks, and many more”.*

Another respondent R27 says,

*“Want to visit all tourist destinations once local travel restrictions are eased and there is lesser travel anxiety.”*

Preferred domestic destinations for leisure travel included tourist attraction sites like Illam in the east, Pokhara, Chitwan, Mustang, Biratnagar, Everest Base Camp, Lumbini, Jhapa, Annapurna Base Camp, Ghandruk, Ghale Gaun, Tilicho Lake, Shuklaphat Wildlife reserve, Parsa Wildlife reserve, Chitwan National Park, Jagdishpur Lake, Kathmandu valley and Bardiya National Park in the west. Swoyambhu, Kalinchok, Muktinath, Chandragiri, Patan Durbar Square, Bhaktapur Durbar Square, Manakamana, Halesi Mahadev, Janakpur Dham, Pashupatinath Temple, Janaki Mandir, Lumbini, Kathmandu Durbar Square, Changu Narayan, Mahabaudha, and Namobuddha are the preferred heritage sites for the respondents. Apart from different national parks and hunting reserves, Dolpo, Manang, Bharatpur, Sauraha, Rara lake, Fewa lake, Tshorolpa, Mardi Himal Trek, and Helambu Trek are also preferred domestic destinations.

The respondents are well aware of the significance of following health protocols, proper social distancing, appropriate medical tests, and hygiene standards. All of the respondents want easy access to Covid testing in areas where they will be traveling. Safety and security are necessary for both domestic and international travelers. Travel anxiety due to fear of COVID-19 can negatively impact travel intention (Luo and Lam, 2020).

It is intriguing to see the different types of tourism enlisted under domestic tourism by respondents. Ski Tourism, Dark Tourism, Wellness Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Rural Tourism, Geo Tourism, Agritourism, Sports Tourism, Eco-Tourism, Festival Tourism, and Leisure Tourism are among the diverse aspects of domestic tourism in Nepal. Diaspora Tourism, Nostalgic Tourism, Adventure Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Pilgrimage Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, and Medical Tourism needs further exploration under Domestic Tourism according to the respondents.

The respondents want to discover the true essence of domestic tourist destinations by trying local dishes, learning terms of the local language, visiting museums, temples, and heritages, buying local products, and engaging in local

culture. Domestic tourism allows citizens to play the roles of host and guest, with one being a domestic tourist and the other a service provider affiliated with the hospitality industry. Some of the respondents even expressed their desire as domestic tourists to visit health posts and hospitals of tourist spots and engage in interaction with the local community. Despite the devastation brought about by the Covid pandemic, medical tourism was the least liable to external circumstances (Ananchenkova, 2021). A novel concept of vaccine tourism was introduced during the pandemic providing opportunities for countries with vaccination surplus to offer medical tourism packages (Kaewkitipong *et al.*, 2021).

The respondents were requested to indicate whether they are in favor of using a platform that digitalizes traveler identification while visiting similar to international tourists. 85.7% of the respondents are willing to travel use a passport and 14.3% of the respondents are not in favor of using a passport during traveling. Not all domestic travel statistics are well documented in Nepal. The introduction of a digital platform identification log-in system for Nepalese traveling to different museums, tourist spots, base camps, national parks, hunting reserves, wildlife reserves, and heritage under the administration of local government will aid in the documentation of these trips.

Nepal is the second richest country in terms of inland water resources and can serve as a world-class venue for water tourism. Boating, rafting, and kayaking are preferred popular adventure sports by respondents in Nepal. The fast-flowing rivers provide high current water flow for rafting, kayaking in mountain water streams, ponds that source water to taps that depict elaborate carvings of mythic creatures (*hitis* or *dhungedhara*) along with the thrill of encountering jungle-clad slopes, wildlife, and birds make water tourism in Nepal delectable.

One respondent R16 conveys his dismay:

*“The level of walkability in Nepal is afflicted by the lack of basic services, the scarcity of road signs, and lack of proper guidance.”*

Respondent R26 expresses his thought:

*“The growing uncertainties of the possible natural disasters in a disaster-prone country like Nepal greatly affects the prospects of walkability.”*

Mountain tourism is the pioneer of the tourism industry in Nepal (Upadhaya *et al.*, 2008). Trekking and hiking attract more visitors than walking and cycling in Nepal. Maximum respondents have opted for trekking, followed by hiking and walking in heritage areas and cycling. Hiking and trekking in mountainous regions

allow the traveler to admire the sheer breathtaking beauty of these mountains and the rugged nature of trails. Treks can be strenuous due to challenges such as narrow pathways, the liability of natural disasters, cold weather-affected routes, lack of resting places, toilet facilities, and arrows trails which the respondents are conscious of. Walking is one of the most fundamental human abilities while traveling (Hall *et al.*, 2019). Walkability is still a concept in Nepal and has not been realized by domestic travelers. However, some walkability tours have been organized in the past, especially in heritage sites and biking competitions.

Biodiversity is indispensable for developing resilient tourism industry, despite the apparent lack of awareness of the positive and negative contribution of tourism development to biodiversity (Christ *et al.*, 2003). Ecotourism assists not only in the establishment of national parks and reserves that serve to conserve species and habitats but uplifts the tourism economy too (Buckley, 2009). The respondents believe that the locals and government should actively work on the preservation of biodiversity by implementing strategies and policies to save this sinking ship.

Respondent R2 believes that:

*“Following constitution is must and conservation of biodiversity at local community level along with acknowledgment of diverse ethnic groups of Nepal.”*

Respondent R5 ponders:

*“Tourism has become the best tool for conservation of biodiversity, hence, the infrastructure needed to advance ethnic tourism should be prioritized.”*

Nepal is a cultural mosaic comprising different caste and ethnic groups belonging to the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan linguistic families, possessing different languages and dialects as per the census of 2011 (Pradhan and Shrestha, 2005). The ethnic diversity of Nepal is ubiquitous. As per the eleventh census of 2011, more than 125 ethnic/caste groups and more than 123 languages in Nepal have been identified (Suhrke, 2014). For tourism, diversity is needed and for the conservation of the diversity of indigenous communities, dialects, culture, and ethnicity, tourism is even needed. Diversity is the product of tourism and tourism is the audience for diversity. The respondent’s view on people accepting all caste and communities shows that diversity in the human race is even important to be conserved for creating a better society. The motivation behind ethnic tourism is to allow travelers to have authentic cultural experiences, especially with minority groups. The respondents expect that some changes might be brought about in the



ethnic culture through assimilation of the traveler's beliefs and culture. The complex relationship between ethnicity, culture and tourism should not be underappreciated.

Respondent R9 stresses the fact:

*“There is a lack of transport and communication facilities and limited energy sources especially while traveling in the hilly and mountain region of Nepal.”*

Respondent R10 conveys:

*“Vehicle accessible roads should be developed and electricity facility should be available. There is also the challenge of extending internet services in the most inhospitable and remote areas of Nepal.”*

Infrastructure can influence the social and economic development of the nation. 96.4% of the respondent agree domestic tourism can be a source of income generation and the remaining respondents do not think so. Domestic tourism fuels the country's economy by creating a demand-supply cycle within the country. The provision of tourism infrastructure is a positive contribution to tourist arrivals. Smith (1994) was among the first to appreciate the role of infrastructure in building a product experience. He emphasized that the availability or lack of infrastructure and technology in a tourist destination (for example use of internet and communications, transportation, water, and power supply) are determining features that can enhance the experience of the travelers. Tourists who hail from urban areas are used to modern service infrastructure that enables a high quality of life and they prefer to maintain the same lifestyle while traveling.

Sustainability should be assimilated into the DNA of tourism. Renovation of infrastructure should be ensured along with sustainability. Tourism generates waste in solid, liquid, and gaseous forms mostly in destination cities (Chan and Wong 2006). Napper *et al.*, (2020) reported the highest altitude microplastics ever recorded in Mt. Everest despite the high altitude and location away from major population centers. There is a need to disseminate the social and environmental advantages of proper waste management to the local community as a clean and litter-free ambiance will certainly enhance the quality of the tourist experience as well as the site (Jafari *et al.*, 2000). As per respondents, environmental stewardship should be focused on educating tourists along with local people and government bodies to minimize pollution and reduce, reuse and recycle waste products, and prohibit single-use plastics.

Respondent R19 states,

*“Engaging in nature-based tourism be a pathway for destressing and relaxation.”*

Respondent R21 says,

*“The potential negative influences of tourism on the environment should be addressed for a growth of sustainable tourist industry.”*

57.1% of the respondents deliberate that the employment of women, homeless people, and people with disabilities can inspire and persuade them to travel and 25% are not interested in the background of the employees. 35.7% think that service matters more than equity and they would like to see a capable person to be employed. Darcy and Daruwalla (1999) have addressed the trouble of traveling for people with disabilities. The tourism stakeholders need a reminder that access to tourism for the disabled still leaves a lot to be desired and further campaigns for awareness of the special needs of the disabled for tourism and employment should be launched. Many respondents think the right to travel for disabled people should be guaranteed and they should be easily able to access tourism like other travelers. Furthermore, equal opportunities can be provisioned in employing women and people with disabilities in the domestic tourism sector.

60.7% of the respondents are inclined to contact travels and tours for traveling to tourist destinations inside Nepal and 39.3% would not contact travels and tours. 92.9% believe that a tourist’s visit is an experience for both host and guest and 7.1% do not believe in this. All respondents believe the source of income for the tourism and hospitality industry is the spending of the travelers.

Respondent R17 voices:

*“Better experience of travelers leads to better marketing.”*

The distinctiveness of tourism lies in the that tourism cannot be sampled or experienced prior to purchase and exists only as information at the point of sale (WTO Business Council, 1999, Doolin *et al.*, 2002). The Internet can be the key to promoting and distributing tourism services as it offers global reach and multimedia capability for the information-based nature of tourism (Walle, 1996). As per respondents, tourism marketing can be done through social media, promotion of tourist attractions sites and local products, advertisement of local festivals, writing reviews in blogs, sharing pictures of tourist spots, and different forms using different channels of communication. One respondent observes that the promotion of tourism in the national and international arenas can attract both domestic and international travelers.

The social, economic, and, environmental gains and expenditures associated with tourism growth if addressed can act as a solid foundation for the flourishing tourism industry from a qualitative perspective.

### **Covid-19 Economic Recession: Can Domestic Tourism Revive it?**

According to the WTTC research report, the contribution of domestic tourists in Nepal to the tourism industry revenue was a staggering 56% of the total Rs 240.7 billion revenue in 2018 (Nepalisansar, 2019; Prasain, 2019). Worldwide, domestic tourism represented 71.2% of all tourism revenue generated in 2018 with a stronghold in developing nations (WTTC, 2019). The tourism industry employs around 2,00,000 people in hotels, restaurants, mountaineering, airlines, trekking, and other tourism subsectors in Nepal (Asian Development Bank, 2019, Ulak 2020a).

With COVID-19, tourism in Nepal is at a crossroads. Altogether 1,254 registered hotels, 20 domestic and, 29 international airlines, and 2,649 registered trekking agencies and other subsectors were forced to shut down amid the Covid pandemic as a measure to control the Covid outbreak leading to loss of incomes and employment (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2019). Nepal experienced a grinding halt in the tourism sector due to travel restrictions and flight cancellations leading to a preliminary loss of 14.3% to the Nepalese economy (Shrestha, 2020).

On 12 June 2020, tourism entrepreneurs submitted a memorandum to Nepal's Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai with demands to reopen tourist areas, reopen the hotels and airlines, and certainty of reestablishing the tourism sector for mountaineering and trekking season (Ulak, 2020b). With the implementation of the highest standard of sanitation and hygiene protocol for safety, hotels and restaurants resumed their services from July 30, 2020, onwards with these protocols also being adopted by trekking, mountaineering, tour, and rafting agencies, and other tourism stakeholders (Nepali Times, 2020).

UNWTO 2020 survey report predicts that the tourism industry will begin steady recovery only from 2021 with domestic tourism leaping ahead of international tourism. Furthermore, leisure travel is expected to recover faster compared to business travel as evident from lifestyle changes during the lockdown period (Wyman, 2020). Hence, domestic tourism has become a potent solution to reviving the tourism industry. The question of whether domestic tourism can revive the tourism industry in Nepal can best be answered if a proper roadmap and strategies are employed to lift domestic travel (Ulak, 2020b). Likewise, if the government and stakeholders of the industry are not involved in preparing blueprints to boost domestic tourism, several entrepreneurs may become bankrupt.

Domestic tourism has been neglected in Nepal for the past 70 years. The estimated number of domestic travelers in Nepal is 5 million a year (Prasain, 2020). 1.5 million domestic tourists visited Lumbini in 2019 (Nepalisansar, 2020), but the records of numbers of domestic tourists visiting other domestic destinations like Pokhara, Chitwan, Annapurna Circuit, Beni-Jomsom region, and Mugu, have not been found in 2019. Deepak Raj Joshi, CEO of Nepal Tourism Board states, that domestic tourists started touring Nepal after the 2015 Gorkha earthquake (Nepalisansar, 2019), but the absence of the massive numbers of domestic tourists sheds light on the neglect of domestic tourism. Nepalese travelers spent approximately Rs 48 billion on international travel holidays in the first half of the fiscal year 2018/19 whereas foreign tourists only spent 36.5 billion during the same period according to Nepal Rastra Bank's data. Nepalese leisure travelers have the disposition to travel once travel restrictions are pulled off (Dahal, 2020). Although domestic tourism has been steadfastly growing in developed nations, they have not been a priority in Nepal. Promoting and motivating domestic tourism may be the key to flourishing domestic tourism in Nepal (Pradhan, 2020).

### **Prospects of Domestic Tourism Post Covid-19**

For the last 70 years, Nepal's tourism entrepreneurs have disregarded domestic tourists considering international tourists only as their source of income (Pradhan, 2020, Puri 2020). After the 2015 earthquake brought a halt to the international tourism market of Nepal, Nepal Tourism Board focused on launching the campaigns like 'Ghumphir Year' in 2016 to attract internal tourists (The Himalayan Times, 2020). Deepak Raj Joshi, former CEO of NTB states that there was an upsurge of domestic tourists after the earthquake of 2015 which changed the perception of domestic tourists. Despite Visit Nepal 2020 being canceled due to Covid-19, NTB is planning to celebrate 2021 as the year of domestic tourism (Tourist Mail Crew, 2020).

Yogesh Bhattarai, Former Minister for Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation, has put forth plans to give weekend holidays every week to provide ample time for leisure travel and incentives for domestic travelers to promote domestic tourism in Nepal (Onlinekhabar, 2020). The provision for the reopening of domestic airlines has been accepted from September 17, 2020 (Pokhrel, 2020). National parks, wildlife reserves, and conservation areas heavily hit by the covid crisis are ready now to delve into the tourist season (Mandal, 2020). The tourism sub-sectors are engaging in the crucial task of reviving the hospitality sector as the travel and mobility restrictions are easing (Sunuwar, 2020).

"To travel or not to travel post-Covid?" That is the current trending dilemma of millions of people. Domestic tourist movements are already stirring up economic activity. Prasain (2020) notes domestic bookings have been increasing gradually

after the first Covid wave for hotels and staycations in Pokhara and Chitwan for the upcoming festival season. Strengthening domestic tourism can pave the path to resilient tourism industry.

Nepal is one of the best destinations for rafting and trekking. After the Nepalese government rescinded the travel restrictions, domestic footfalls are gradually increasing in destinations including Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan, Lumbini, Annapurna, Everest, Manaslu, Langtang, Illam, Bardiya, and others (Alpine Adventure Club, 2020). Yeti Airlines is reported to have sold over 220 tour packages before and after Dashain after Covid-19 (Prasain, 2020). There has been a rise in domestic sightseers visiting Umbrella Street in Patihani, Namche Bazar, Everest, Ghandruk, Chitwan National Park, and Pokhara. Prasain (2020) further elucidates the experience of domestic tourists from an article published in The Kathmandu Post dated 2nd November 2020. A businessman with his family traveled from Jhapa to Shree Antu famous for sunrise and sunset views with panoramic scenery, and a small hill in Illam while spending only NRs. 2,000. This minimal cost was a pleasant surprise to the gentleman.

The introduction of safety and security measures for domestic travelers and the provision of taking travel guides for trekking areas are some of the interventions that can boost mountain tourism along with the development of systematic guidelines for domestic tourism.

### **Conclusion; Domestic Tourism: Connecting Missing Dots**

The Nepalese tourism sector came to a grinding halt due to the devastating earthquake of 2015, However, it managed to bounce back. The Nepal government and tourism entrepreneurs geared up to limit the aftershocks through substantial investments, meticulous preparation of a strategic framework, and strong promotion of domestic tourism. Nepal celebrated two “Visit Nepal” campaigns in the past to boost tourism in 1998 and 2011. However, Visit Nepal 2020 campaign was postponed due to the threat of Covid. As, tourism has several interconnected aspects ranging from economic to social to ecological, which has set a downward spiral in the tourism economy. In this regard, the government authorities and the private sector must collaborate in the same spirit to revitalize domestic tourism and rebuild tourist confidence in the wake of the Covid pandemic.

This study has sought to analyze the prospects and challenges of domestic tourism and the willingness of travelers to travel during and post-Covid. From the discussions above, we can infer that domestic tourism can gradually revive the declining tourism economy, however, the absence of domestic tourism strategies and policies can lead to its downfall. In the past years, there have been ups and downs in tourist arrivals due to the unstable political system and natural disaster-

prone geography of Nepal. Efforts to publicize the diverse geographical landscapes, rivers, mountains, and alluring antiquities, monuments, and religious sites of Nepal can enhance the nation's visibility and credibility in the international arena. Tour packages should be revised to meet the disposable income and purchase parity of the people to afford such non-essential travel should be developed by travel companies. Greater attention should be paid to promoting local distinctiveness, the development of base infrastructures, and sustainable tourism.

The study urges government departments, potential investors, tourism stakeholders, and NTB to explore challenges faced by domestic tourism to optimize economic benefits from domestic tourism. Recognition of social trends and patterns that can multiply benefits of the tourism industry, their evaluation and exploitation can generously tip over the sinking ship of covid tourism recession.

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There is no conflict of interest.

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