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Tourism entrepreneurship in Nepal: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores the opportunities and challenges of tourism entrepreneurship in Nepal. This is achieved by providing five Nepalese entrepreneurs and a tourism official with the opportunity to offer their views and perspectives. To this end, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. We sought to understand the entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges by interviewing the entrepreneurs who are also at the forefront of various organisations of the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs. Some of them have also served as members of the National Tourism Board of Nepal. The received data were analyzed using a thematic approach. With illustrations from the views of the tourism entrepreneurs and a tourism official, this paper notes that the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are optimistic about their opportunities to run a successful business. The Nepalese tourism industry, however, has encountered challenges due to the lack of adequate infrastructure for its sustainable growth, such as lack of sufficient connectivity for aviation, poorly managed ground transportation system and poor-quality road networks. Similarly, the technological backwardness, absence of effective tourism marketing strategies, recruitment and retention of skilled human resources and unethical industry practices among the entrepreneurs are other major challenges faced by the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs. Should these issues be addressed, Nepal has enormous potential to become a successful and competent destination in the global tourism market.

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy and an important contributor to the world's economic growth (Andereck et al., 2005; Amin and Ibrahim, 2015;

Kc et al., 2021). This sector of economy has also been identified as a crucial tool for the economic prosperity of developing countries (Ekanayake and Long, 2012). In Nepal too, tourism is considered as a backbone of the economy (Agarwal and Upadhyay, 2006; KC et al., 2021) because the tourism sector in Nepal is one of the largest industries in terms of employment creation, sources of foreign exchange and revenue generation (Rijal, 2018; Tan et al., 2019). Nepal has benefited from the tourism industry both economically and socially. This is because tourism has played a vital role in uplifting the economic status and improving the living condition of backward regions as these regions are usually the areas of attractions for tourists. Nepal is rich in its natural beauty, cultural heritages and historical monuments which are great attractions for the visitors from all over the world, thus, having potential to take the Nepalese economy to a new level (Dhungel, 2015; Jaiswal, 1018). This is because the tourism industry can contribute to the national economy by offering opportunities for earning foreign currency, reducing poverty, and improving living conditions (Arshad et al., 2017; Jaiswal, 2018).

Nepal's tourism industry is the country's leading source of international revenue. According to World Travel and Tourism Council (2019), Nepalese tourism industry earned 40.7 billion rupees in foreign earnings and directly or indirectly supported 1.05 million. Besides being a major contributor to the development of the economy, tourism has had a significant impact on infrastructure development and sanitary conditions of Nepal (Arai and Goto, 2017). Despite the fact that the tourism industry in Nepal has great potential to become an important industry and contribute significantly to the nation's economy, the sector has not yet gained the momentum it needs to flourish (Subedi, 2018; KC et al., 2021). While Nepal has the potential to be one of the most competitive travel destinations in the world, several challenges have affected the region's tourism industry growth (Shrestha and Jeong, 2016; KC et al., 2021). To date, many researchers have explored a number of topics pertaining to the

tourism industry of Nepal, including the socio-economic and environmental impacts (Tan et al., 2019). However, research relating to the entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges in Nepal's tourism industry are still in its infancy. Thus, it seems vital to identify both the challenges and opportunities of the Nepalese tourism industry in order to develop it for the country and the people as a whole (KC et al., 2021). To this end, this research has been conducted to identify the entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges within the tourism industry of Nepal. It is anticipated that the findings of this research will contribute to the existing literature of Nepalese tourism as well as provide practical recommendations to both the industry and policy makers.

The remaining of the chapter is organized as follows. We start by providing a general overview of Nepal and its efforts to establish itself as a competitive tourism destination. After this, we discuss the methodology we used in this study. Then, we discuss the findings of the study. Finally, we conclude the chapter by offering recommendations for policy makers and practitioners.

Nepal as a tourist destination

Nepal is a landlocked less developed country (LDC) situated in South Asia (Gauchan and Shrestha, 2017; Subedi, 2018). The country sits between two much larger countries in terms of land mass, China and India (Subedi, 2018). Topographically, the country is divided into three regions, which include the Himalayan in the north, the Hilly region in the middle and the plain land in the south (Gauchan and Shrestha, 2017; Regmi and Walter, 2017). All areas are endowed with their own unique landscapes, diverse climatic condition, flora and fauna (Regmi and Walter, 2017; Thapa and Dhimal, 2017). The elevation of the country ranges from 60 metres above sea level to the highest peak in the world, Mount Everest, at 8848 metres. In addition, Nepal is home to some of the world's highest mountains (Regmi and

Walter, 2017; Paudel et al., 2021). Eight out of 14 of the world's highest summits are in Nepal (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012).

Similar to its natural diversity, the demography of Nepal also comprises of different groups of ethnic people having their own languages and cultural traditions (KC et al., 2021). As such, Nepal is home to 40 ethnic groups with their distinct cultures, languages, and mystical traditions (Regmi and Walter, 2017), making the country physically, demographically, and culturally diverse. According to both KC et al. (2015) and Regmi and Walter (2017), despite the country being economically poor, Nepal is immensely rich in terms of topographic features and natural and cultural heritage. Thus, due to the nation's natural and socio-cultural riches, Nepal is often referred to as heaven on earth by people in general (Parker, 2005).

Geographically and culturally, Nepal is highly diverse (Gauchan and Shrestha, 2017). As such, in less than 200 kilometres, Nepal's altitude varies from 62 meters to 8848 meters, resulting in a variation in climatic conditions and associated ecological and cultural zones, providing the tourism industry with diversified products (Aryal, 2020). A number of things make Nepal unique, but perhaps the most important are its sheer natural beauty, Himalayan ranges including world's highest summit Mount Everest, cultural diversity, and religious sites, thus making the country as a unique tourist destination having potential to become a game changer for the overall development of the nation (Batala et al., 2019). In appreciation of Nepal's tourism potential, Badal and Kharel (2019) argue that the tourism industry is the only sector of the economy capable of transforming the nation, because other sectors require extensive capital and skilled human resources, which Nepal cannot afford at the moment.

Nepal's Approaches to the tourism

Although tourism is one of the highly regarded business sectors in Nepal, the country has a relatively short history of tourism development, making it a recent phenomenon (Thapa, 2003; Bhandari, 2010; Biswakarma, 2015; Kharel, 2019, Thapa and Panta, 2019). The history of modern tourism in Nepal begins from 1951 when the country was officially opened for international tourism (Brown et al., 1997; Batala et al., 2019). Prior to this, and throughout much of its history, Nepal had been a country mainly isolated from the rest of the world with access only being granted to the official guests of the ruling classes, a few British recruiting officers for the Gurkha regiments, foreign development officials and scientists (Stevens, 1988; Richter, 1989). However, on opening its borders at the start of the 1950s the Nepalese government started expanding the country's diplomatic ties with the rest of the world, which in turn opened the country for international visitors. Since then, the country has actively sought to develop tourism and has extended a warm welcome to overseas visitors to further this aim (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012; Regmi and Walter, 2017).

After introducing the tourism industry into the country, Nepal has undertaken several initiatives from supporting its growth to recognising tourism as a tool for development. For instance, in 1957, The Tourism Development Board, which is now known as the Nepal Tourism Board, was established to execute tourism-related activities, such as promotion, marketing and the branding of the Nepalese tourism destinations in both the domestic and international arenas (Batala et al., 2019). In 1959, Nepal obtained membership of the International Union of Official Travel Organisations (IUOTO), which became the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in 1974 (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012). Nepal also became a member country of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) in 1963. Nepal's connection with these organisations not only gave the country an exposure to international community but also aided to develop and improve tourism opportunities, which

became significant steps to furthering the country as a tourist destination throughout the world (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012). The open border policy coupled with the country becoming a member of IOUTO and PATA helped to contribute to a steady growth in international tourist arrivals to Nepal (Upadhyaya et al., 2011; Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012).

As there was not an established tourism sector in Nepal prior to the 1950s, there were no policies and plans in place for its development (Stevens, 1988; Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012). However, since approving tourism as an industry, Nepal started formulating its tourism plans and policies. This began in earnest in 1956 following the development of the National Periodic Plan, which reflects the Nepalese government's national vision, plans and policies for development (Upadhyaya and Sharma, 2010; Sedai, 2011). Following its initial instigation, successive Nepalese governments have taken some remarkable initiatives to support tourism development in the country. For instance, the First Plan (1956-1961) prioritised the creation of tourism specific institutions by founding the Nepal Tourism Development Board, a government Tourism Department at the national level, Tourist Information Centre, and a Hotel and Tourism Training Centre (Sedai, 2011; Regmi and Walter, 2017). During this period, the first tourism development plan of Nepal known as the 'General Plan for the Organisation of Tourism of Nepal' was prepared in 1959 by George Lebrec, a French national, with the help of the French Government (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012). Subsequently, in the Second Plan (1962-1965) there was an attempt to decentralise tourism beyond Kathmandu by recognising other cities, e. g. Pokhara and Lumbini as tourist destinations because most tourism prior to this period was concentrated in Kathmandu (KC et al., 2021). The Third Plan (1965-1970) focused on easing the complex legal and administrative measures to make the country more welcoming to visitors (Regmi and Walter, 2017). This included loosening of once strict visa policies and the development of infrastructure for customs and immigration formalities (Stevens, 1988). During the Fourth

Plan (1970-1975), a ten-year Tourism Master Plan 1972 was created, and the Ministry of Tourism was established (Regmi and Walter, 2017). This Tourism Master Plan offered the Nepalese government comprehensive guidelines and direction for developing the tourism sector in the country (Lama, 2016; Subedi, 2018).

The agenda of tourism decentralisation initiated during the Second Plan was further stressed in the Fifth Plan, which ran from 1975 to 1980 (Regmi and Walter, 2017). The Fifth Plan also focused on discouraging the use of imported goods and encouraging indigenous skills in the tourism industry to create jobs for people living in rural areas (Regmi and Walter, 2017). The thrust of the Sixth Plan (1980-1985) was to increase foreign exchange earnings by attracting tourists with high spending power and increasing the length of their stay (Thapa, 2003; Subedi, 2018). The Seventh Plan (1985-1990) put emphasis on the creation of more employment opportunities through stimulation of the tourism industry (Thapa, 2003). The focus of the Eighth Plan (1992-1997) was to promote the environmental, historical and cultural assets of tourist destinations and to develop links between tourism and other sectors of the economy (Subedi, 2018). The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) concentrated on developing tourism in an integrated and coordinated manner along with other sectors of the economy, identifying it as a new potential economic sector requiring long-term vision (Subedi, 2018). The Periodic Plans formulated after 2002 have sustained the major initiatives taken in the previous plans (Regmi and Walter, 2017). As such, tourism in Nepal has remained at the forefront of development initiatives despite changes in governments and the deposition of the king in 2008 (Bhandari, 2010; Paudel et al., 2021).

The preceding discussion shows that the government of Nepal emphasizes the promotion of Nepal's tourism industry with utmost priority since the country opened its boarder for international visitors. However, despite Nepal's continued efforts to increase its share of the international tourism market by prioritizing the industry in its national plans, the

growth of the industry has been fraught with several challenges (KC et al., 2021). As a result, the country has not been able to develop its tourism industry to its full potential (Subedi, 2018; KC et al., 2021). To this end, the purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the literature by examining the entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges in the Nepalese tourism industry through the perspectives of tourism entrepreneurs and government officials.

Methodology

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative approach to research is expected to allow researchers to conduct in-depth investigation by exploring the meaning that human beings ascribe to the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2014; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, qualitative approach has been suggested to be the best suited methodology for preliminary explorations (Patton, 2014; Chan et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2017). Hence, this methodological approach was considered to be suitable for this research because there is a general lack of research about the prospects and challenges of the Nepalese tourism industry to date; thus, it still remains as an emerging area of enquiry.

Given the objectives of this research, it was important to recruit the interviewees who have in-depth knowledge of not only their own tourism businesses, but also the overall tourism sector, we used purposive sampling method to select interviewees. This is because purposive sampling method allows researchers to make use of their judgments as to who can be best placed as a source of data to achieve study objectives (Sharma, 2017; Kumar, 2018). In collaboration with the Nepal Tourism Board, 6 interviewees were selected. Among them, five interviewees were leading tourism entrepreneurs in Nepal and were expected to have depth and breadth of knowledge of not only their own business but also the whole national tourism sector. In addition, a member of the national tourism board was also interviewed for

his perspective on the tourism industry's opportunities and challenges. Table 1 provides some information about the interviewees and their current affiliation with the tourism sector.

Serial Number	Identifier	Role(s)
1	R1	Owner of a four star hotel (Involvement in the tourism sector for over 20 years)
2	R2	Owner of a hotel and the President of Hotel Association Nepal (Involvement in the tourism sector for over 25 years)
3	R3	Owner of a three star hotel (Involvement in the tourism sector for over 20 years)
4	R4	The Head of Nepal Association of Travel Agents and owner of a travel agency, a restaurant and a hotel (involvement in the tourism sector for over 20 years)
5	R5	Board member of Pokhara Chamber of Commerce, former President of Nepal associations for travel Agents, former Vice president of Pokhara Tourism council (Involvement in tourism sector for over 35 years)
6	R6	Head of Nepal Tourism Board, Pokhara

Table 1: Research participants

Data collection for this study was performed using semi-structured interviews. The advantage of using semi-structured interviews in this research is that this method offers an opportunity to prepare a set of questions and themes which help to keep the interview process controlled and focused and flexibility to pose additional questions if further information is required from research participants (Huss, 2009; Wilson, 2013). Given that this research is concerned with understanding different people's perspectives about tourism opportunities and challenges, semi-structured interviews were regarded to be helpful in gaining detailed information on the issue being investigated. An interview guide was developed keeping the research aim and objectives at the centre. All interviews were conducted in Nepalese language and digitally recorded with prior consent from the respondents. All interview

records were transcribed in using the Nepalese language first and then later translated into English.

All information collected for this study was analyzed by the thematic analysis method, which is one of the widely used data analysis methods in qualitative research. Although thematic analysis is a popular method to analyze qualitative data, there is no agreement among researchers about how thematic analysis is carried out. Thus, different researchers have suggested different processes (Boyatzis, 1998; Alhojailan, 2012; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). With regards to this study, data analysis was performed by adopting the six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is acknowledged to be the most influential approach due to it offering a clear and practical outline for analyzing qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

Tourism entrepreneurial challenges in Nepal

The analysis of the interview data reveals that Nepalese entrepreneurs in the tourism industry face a number of challenges, which are discussed in detail in the proceeding sections.

Infrastructural challenge

Tourism is fundamentally linked with infrastructure because infrastructure and connectivity play a central role in developing tourism by facilitating access to destinations (Jones, 2013; Khan and Rasheed, 2016). Infrastructure is important to generating tourist arrivals, since effective infrastructure contributes to the best services and to the development of local tourism (Jamil and Puad, 2011). Furthermore, infrastructure elements such as airports, access to roads, road transportation, and flights are vital for attracting tourists (Arshad et al., 2017). In the context of Nepal, the issue of infrastructural challenge is one of the major areas that all interviewees mentioned during the interview. According to R6, *“the number one challenge is infrastructure of Nepal not having innovation in this sector.”* It has also been identified that the lack of infrastructure, particularly aviation connectivity, is one of the main impediments

to further development of tourism in Nepal. For example, there is only one international airport, which is located in Kathmandu. As a result, all international tourists visiting Nepal are bound to travel via Kathmandu. Similarly, the country's national carrier which is known as Nepal Airlines, with its limited access to international markets, has often been questioned for its effective and efficient services. This has further led to the Nepalese tourism industry's high dependence on international aviation industry. In the view of R2, *"we do not have our own national flights across different parts of the world which I think is very important for these days tourism. We are fully depending on other flag carriers."* R6 agrees with the above statement and says, *"our flag carriers are in very limited numbers. We have to fully depend on other nation's flights."* The issue of air connectivity can also be understood in the words of R5 who said, *"the main challenge is air connectivity. We do not have our own flag carrier to establish link with the rest of the world."*

The interviewees think that the lack of adequate international flights to Nepal, which are relatively expensive compared to other similar destinations, has discouraged the tourists from travelling to Nepal. In the view of R6, *"because of expensive air fare our probable visitors may alter their destination where they can get better air fare."* Likewise, some interviewees believe that the insufficient provision of international flights to and from Kathmandu has also contributed negatively to the tourists' intention to revisit Nepal. As R4 says, *"I think the main reason behind not coming for revisit is fare. Generally they [tourists] view Nepal as a cheap destination but they cannot get it such in air tickets. They may get cheaper stay but getting here becomes expensive."* However, Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are hopeful that if the Nepalese government makes provision of additional flights to and from Nepal, there is high potential to increase the visiting numbers. According to R5, *"if we would have our own flag carriers, definitely we would get higher number of guests."* Thus in order

to increase the number of tourists and encourage their revisit to Nepal, the Nepalese government has to take initiatives to expand its aviation connectivity with other countries.

The diminishing trust of international community towards Nepalese aviation industry has also impacted the Nepalese tourism industry negatively. This is evident on the restrictions imposed on the Nepalese airlines by international communities on its safety ground. R2, *“Nepalese airlines are blacklisted by International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). Tourists do not trust our flights so guess the situation.”*

In addition to air connectivity, road networks are also viewed as one of the important reliable elements that can enhance the attractiveness of a destination (Arshad et al., 2017). In the case of Nepal, the poor road network is another infrastructural challenge mentioned very frequently during interviews. There was not a single interviewee that did not refer to the poor quality and connectivity of roads in Nepal. According to R5, *“the number third [challenge] is public transportation in Nepal. It is not tourist friendly. We have very poor road condition.”* This view is supported by R1 who is of the opinion that, *“our transportation system is very below to their [tourist’s] expectations.”* The poor quality of road networks and poor transport management in Nepal has resulted in tourist spending more time while travelling from one place to another, which often led to tourists’ dissatisfaction. For example, R4 says, *“the other complaint is time taking on road travel from Kathmandu to Pokhara. The two hundred kilometre travel takes eight to ten hours, which is whole day. Sometimes it becomes a matter of laughing/joking.”* In the view of R5, *“most of our guests are complaining about it [poor road condition]. Poor road condition has led other effects like how much time should it take to travel 200km distance...it takes at least eight hours to travel Kathmandu to Pokhara which is only 200 kilometres.”* The deplorable condition of the road network which has been an obstacle in tourism business in Nepal is clearly understood in the view of R4, who shared his experience that he had when he visited West Bengal, India for the promotion of his business.

According to R4, *“few months ago I was there in West Bengal, India, they were saying that if you made good road to different places like Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan and other associated places, you need not come for promotional campaign. We will send as much tourists as you can keep them in your hotel.”* The above view shared by this interviewee reveals the potential of the Nepalese tourism industry that can be achieved by introducing new road connectivity and improving the existing ones.

The availability of reliable energy infrastructure is also viewed as one of the best ways to enhance the attractiveness of a destination (Arshad et al., 2017). However, in the Nepalese context, poor availability of electricity services was another tourism entrepreneurial challenge revealed in interviews. The interviewees suggested that the irregular power supply has compelled the entrepreneurs to use alternative source of energy such as petrol or diesel generators for power supply. This has led into an increased cost and the entrepreneurs had to compromise on the quality of services in order to compensate the increased cost. According to R6, *“power shortage is the most common one. If there is power cut, they have to manage it from other sources that increases the overhead cost which ultimately lead to compromising on the quality of rendering overall service quality. There are many disturbances due to the not reaching the destination in time.”* Another interviewee reflected how the irregularity in power supply also impacted negatively on the quality of food they provided to the tourists. As R2 mentions, *“if there is longer time power cut. How we can properly fridge the food stuff.”* Hence, the inadequacy of the basic infrastructure required for the tourism industry such as aviation connectivity, robust road networks and electricity services, which are prerequisite for the tourism development (Jamil and Puad, 2011; Jones, 2013; Khan and Rasheed, 2016; Arshad et al., 2017), has posed challenges to the Nepalese entrepreneurs to successfully run their businesses despite having enormous tourism potential. This is because tourism growth is also dependent on various factors including the development and improvement of

infrastructure (Thapa, 2003). This finding supports the view of Aryal (2020) who argues that in spite of Nepal's huge potential; most of its tourism activities are concentrated in a few destinations while others remain unexplored primarily due to scarce tourism infrastructure. Furthermore, the lack of tourism infrastructure not only posed challenges to the existing entrepreneurs but also became a hindrance for the new investors to invest in the tourism sector as one of the main reasons for investment reluctance in Nepal's tourism sector has to do with the lack of adequate basic infrastructures (Upreti et al., 2013).

Change in customer types

Historically, tourism in Nepal has been strongly influenced by the beauty of nature, since tourists initially visited Nepal to enjoy the natural beauty because it is known as a country endowed with unique landscapes, flora and fauna (Regmi and Walter, 2017). The diverse geography of Nepal from north to south features a range of scenic beauty, mountains, and distinct natural resources making the country ideal for tourism development (Bajracharya and Raju, 2020). Moreover, the Nepal's Himalayan ranges, the world's highest peak and eight of the fourteen tallest mountains of the world are located in Nepal, make the country a magnet for mountaineers, rock climbers, trekkers, and adventure seekers around the globe (Batala et al., 2019). However, the current scenario of Nepalese tourism industry is changing. It has been reflected in the interviews that Nepalese tourism industry is not limited to catering the traditional types of tourists who come to Nepal to enjoy the pristine natural resources and for trekking purposes, mainly the Himalayan ranges. Instead, the Nepalese tourism industry is currently expanding and many new types of tourists are visiting for various purposes. For instance, apart from the traditional types of tourists, there is a constant growth of adventure-seeking tourists, religious travellers, as well as corporate tourists. In the words of R1, *"we have different kinds of tourist; the categories are also increasing like adventure, holiday, religious and other categories...religious and corporate tourists are also increasing in*

number.” The above view is supported by R2, who mentions, “Initially mostly tourists used to come for trekking, but these days entertainment and corporate tourists are also coming. Some big corporate houses are organizing business meetings, conferences and other recreational activities here in Nepal.”

It has also been revealed by the interviewees that the majority of tourists to Nepal during the early days of the country's tourism development were from the western countries. However, this is not the case at present because Nepal is increasingly gaining its popularity as a tourist destination among its neighbouring countries, mainly China and India (Batala et al., 2019). In the view of R1, *“in previous days, tourist’s arrival here in Nepal ...was from America and Europe but these days we have huge number of tourists from neighbouring countries, India and China.”* According to R6, *“the neighbouring states of India, bordering with Nepal are getting high economic growth rate each year. It is easy for them to come to Nepal. Likewise, Chinese outbound tourist is also increasing which is being experienced in Nepal too.”*

It is obvious from the respondents’ views that the arrival of new types of tourist in Nepal can be an opportunity for the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to run tourism business sustainably. However, there are challenges en route to their success. For instance, there is a need to diversify tourism products and services with the rise of new types of tourists. This is because with the change of customer type the demand for goods and services also changes. As a result, it is important for the tourism entrepreneurs to diversify their tourism activities and make additional provisions to address the new demands posed by the new customers. Thus it is one of the major challenges for the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to develop new infrastructures and tourism products, as well as skilled human resources that are required to respond to the needs of the increasing new types of tourists.

Unethical industry practices

There has been a noticeable rise in ethical challenges for the entire tourism and hospitality industry (Elshaer et al., 2022). In the case of Nepal too, unethical industry practices among the tourism service providers is another challenge faced by the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs. It has been found that there is a general trend of reducing prices of the products and services offered among the entrepreneurs to increase the volume of tourists. This has further resulted in reduced profits despite serving more tourists. This could be due to price cutting practices resulting from the unethical practices. According to R6, *“there is unhealthy competition in service sector and also price undercutting. Entrepreneurs cut price of services to get more guests and total income decreased.”* Another example of unethical industry practice can also be realised in the words of R6 who opines, *“the first one is price and bargaining of service providers. They [service providers] give a message that these [other service providers] are cheating and I can get this service in very low rate. Such kind of bad message leads to visitors to suspect each and every service they receive.”*

Unethical business practices are the most significant factor in tourist negative experiences, causing them to switch to another destination and spreading negative word-of-mouth (Wong et al., 2021). This appears to be the case in Nepal because the interviewees reveal that the unethical industry practices is not only resulting in the profit loss of the tourism sector but also damaging the reputation of the whole industry. Furthermore, a price reduction resulting from ill competition may lead to a compromise in service delivery, which ultimately can result in tourists' poor experiences, posing a threat to the sustainability of the Nepalese tourism industry. Thus, it is necessary for the government sector to step forward to monitor and resolve the issue of unethical industry practices prevalent in the tourism sector before the industry's image is damaged. However, this is not happening so far. This is because the interviewees suggested that the Nepalese government has not adopted effective and efficient

monitoring mechanism to regulate the tourism industry. According to R3, *“there should be a regular monitoring from government like rate and service and facilities. There must be benchmark for every kind of tourism services like government of Bhutan adopted.”*

The interviewees firmly believed that the government should set certain standards in terms of facility arrangements, service quality, and pricing in order to regulate the tourism industry. This will assure uniformity of quality of services. However, this is not the case in the situation. The interviewees felt that the Nepalese government is not concerned about the way tourism businesses are operating and the quality of the products and services they are offering. The interviewees also believe that the success that the tourism entrepreneurs are currently achieving is mainly due to the efforts of the private sector. In the words of R4, *“our government’s attention is not for quality tourism. They should have minimum standard and benchmark in each area of this sector. Private sector is doing good and achieving success in tourism but government is not paying attention and not provided required facilities.”*

The above discussion demonstrates that there is a lack of strategic alignment between the tourism sector of Nepal and the government level. This is despite the fact that the industry being a backbone of the Nepalese economy. Hence, the government institutions of Nepal and the tourism sector need to work together to maintain the quality of services they intend to provide. Furthermore, based on the findings of this research, it can also be said that it is necessary for the government agencies and private sectors of the tourism industry to work together to decide the tourism products and the quality of services they intend to offer to the visitors.

Lack of promotion as a tourist destination

The national government’s involvement in tourism development and promotion has an important role to play in enhancing the image of the national tourism industry and its destinations (Batala et al., 2019). However, the marketing and promotion strategies of Nepal

as a tourist destination is relatively low when compared to other tourism destination countries from a scientific and professional point of view (Batala et al., 2019). As such, the tourism entrepreneurs of Nepal believe that there are no sufficient initiatives taken by the national government for the promotion of the industry. According to R1, *“we have done nothing for promotion.”* R5 agrees with R1 and says, *“we are lacking on promoting our tourism. If we can provide that exposure, we may receive a huge number of tourists in Nepal.”* The interviewees think that most of the visitations in Nepal are due to the recommendations from the people who visited earlier rather than the promotional activities. R5 mentions, *“all our tourists till date are coming Nepal not from any government and other such mass promotion they are coming from person-to-person touch, mostly the visitors’ recommendation.”* Similarly, in the words of R1, *“in other countries governments are promoting tourism but in our case, guests are our promoting agents...we do not have destination promotional works. Our repeated visitors are the main to promote our tourist.”* The above views of the respondents show that instead of the Nepalese government the customers themselves are contributing to the promotion of the Nepalese tourism industry. The finding of this research supports the conclusion of KC et al. (2021) who conclude that a lack of marketing efforts has hindered Nepal's tourism industry's development. Furthermore, the finding also validates the argument of Shrestha and Jeong (2016) who mention that there is no aggressive strategy to develop the tourism sector in Nepal despite its wealth of diversity and potential. Thus, it is vital for the Nepalese government to adopt effective tourism promotion and marketing strategies because tourism innovation, and development cannot be accomplished without government involvement (Batala et al., 2019). However, this is what is lacking in the case of Nepal.

The above views shared by the respondents demonstrate the Nepalese government’s insufficient marketing and promotion activities of Nepal as tourist destination, as well as lack

of support to the sector's growth. Thus, it is fair to say that even though the Nepal government's recognition of tourism as one of the key industries with enormous potential in helping to revive Nepal's sluggish economy, it is not promoting the sector through innovative marketing strategies. Therefore, Nepalese government needs to work collaboratively with the tourism entrepreneurs to promote the Nepalese tourism industry by adopting modern ways of destination promotion strategies.

Lack of skilled human resources

Tourism is a service-oriented industry that relies heavily on providing high quality services (Ap and Wong, 2001). Tourism destinations are being forced to provide higher quality services and travellers because of rapid changes in the competitive environment (Martinez et al., 2014). Moreover, globalization has forced the entrepreneurs in the tourism industry to think globally. As a result, it is essential that employees are trained in such a way that they can compete on a global scale and meet the needs and demands of global customers. The task, however, is more challenging in markets that still operate in the traditional way (Badulescu and Rusu, 2009). Due to human resource constraints, for example a low level of education and literacy, and a lack of vocational education, businesses find it increasingly challenging to provide better service (Jones, 2013). This is exactly what is happening in the case of Nepal. It has been mentioned by the interviewees that it is difficult for them to find and recruit skilled human resources willing to work in the industry. This can be understood in the view of R4 who mentions, *“we lack appropriate human resources. We are not being able to develop and hold skilled human resources.”* This view is supported by R6 who is of the opinion that *“we also lack skilled human resources. Our human resources are not of international standard.”* This is mainly because of the insufficient number of educational institutions providing hospitality and tourism related training and education. Nepal's tourism education has not developed in accordance with the sector's development; this has resulted in

the lack of skilled human capital required for the tourism and hospitality sector. As a result, Nepalese entrepreneurs are facing difficulties to employ competent staff required to quality services. This situation can have negative impact on the overall tourism industry. This is because the lack of competent employees, who are not properly trained to serve tourist, can result in the customers' disappointment throwing the sustainability of the industry to doubt.

Retention of skilled human capital in the industry is another major challenge the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are facing. According to R5, *"the major challenge is outflow of skilled human resources from Nepal. We are not being able to retain them. We are trying but not being able for noticeable results."* It has been revealed that most of the skilled human resources tend to go to abroad for working due to their aspiration of earning more money than in Nepal. Hence, the Nepalese youth gain some skills by working in the domestic tourism sector and go for foreign employment to capitalize the skills they have learnt. According to R4, *"the main problem is going foreign country if he [employee] gains some skills on hospitality...it is our main challenge not being able to retain them."* This statement shows that the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are facing the consequences of skilled human resource brain drain, which needs to be addressed for the sustainable growth of the industry. To this end, the government agencies and the tourism entrepreneurs of Nepal need to work collaboratively to attract the Nepalese youths to work in the tourism sector by making them assured that they can earn a better future in Nepal. Similarly, the Nepalese government and tourism entrepreneurs can work together to expand the provision of tourism education in the Nepalese education curriculum, as well as open institutions to provide tourism and hospitality vocational training courses so that required skilled human resources are produced to meet the industry' demand.

Technological backwardness

Over the past two decades, information and technology have revolutionised almost every sector of human endeavour (Tan et al., 2019). Technological innovations have opened up new horizons and new opportunities for businesses from a domestic to a global perspective (Tan et al., 2019). The proliferation of digital connections, improvements to communication and information technologies, and global competition are all reshaping the way businesses are conducted and how organizations compete (Ndou, 2004). The tourism industry is not immune from these global phenomena because the globalization of economic activities has led to the shifting of the tourism competition from the local level to the global one (Badulescu and Rusu, 2009). There is almost a brutal competition among business organizations resulting from technological advancement, thus, those who embrace new technologies will immediately identify all their opportunities and will be able to use them as an advantage to gain an edge over their competitors (Badulescu and Rusu, 2009). To this end, Nepalese entrepreneurs cannot keep themselves isolated from the technological advancement pervasive in this global marketplace (Shrestha and Jeong, 2016). Instead, they have to adapt to the technological changes and make efforts to use them in their business. However, this is what is lacking in the case of Nepalese tourism industry. This is because Nepalese entrepreneurs are still struggling to provide basic internet facilities to their customers. It has been revealed by the interviewees that one of the grounds on which they often get complaints from their customers is the quality of internet service. In the view of R2, *“the next complaining area is...poor internet service. They want to come in to the connectivity but due to the slow connectivity they may not properly communicate with friends and family. If we generalize our internet service it is poor.”* Similarly, R1 also reveals, *“our customers generally have good internet speed at their home and depend on it in many areas even they are in leisure time*

complaining frequently. It is not only this hotel's problem but also a main problem of all guest of Nepali tourism business."

The interviewees themselves accept that they have not been able to keep updated with the use of modern technology despite their realisation that it is vital for them to implement modern technology to remain in the market. For instance, R4 says, *"we are far behind in technology; we have to convince the guest and try our best for recovery."* The above view shared by the respondent demonstrate the poor access of the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to the modern technological reach, which is crucial to exist in the modern competitive market.

It has been argued that the social platforms facilitated by the technology such as social media, apps, blogs, and other media play a significant role in planning a tour, tourism must adapt business models and product offerings to attract this coveted demographic (Al Badi and Khan, 2020). Modern tourists often use mobile applications to ask for service from the service providers and to get information of the destination. These kinds of work also demand very reliable internet connectivity in every walk of visitors while they are in Nepal. However, the effective and efficient interactions with the people who prefer to communicate using the digital platforms provided by the modern technology seems to far from the access of Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs at least for now. As a result, Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are facing challenges to attract these new types of tourists who mostly rely on digital media while making their decision about their destinations of visit. Badulescu and Rusu (2009) believe that those who embrace new technologies will immediately identify all their opportunities and will be able to use them as an advantage to gain an edge over their competitors. Technological advancement has given rise to new opportunities to the entrepreneurs to extend the spheres of business beyond national boarder and into the global marketplace (Tan et al., 2019). However, this does not seem to be the case in Nepal. To this

end, it is fair to say that technological limitations have also been contributing to the slow growth of the Nepalese tourism industry. Thus, it is an imperative for the tourism business owners and the government sectors of Nepal to invest on modern technology and the production of skilled human capital that can make the effective use of digital platforms to attract modern tourists.

Opportunities of tourism entrepreneurship in Nepal

The analysis of the dataset reveals that there is a remarkable growth of Chinese and Indian tourist in Nepal. In the words of R4 *“these days Indians [tourists] are number one and Chinese are in number two.”* According to R3 *“there were very few Chinese tourist in past but they are in good numbers now. Within last two months we have served more than forty groups of Chinese guests.”* In terms of the increasing number of Chinese tourists, Nepalese entrepreneurs can capitalise this as a golden opportunity for their market expansion in China, which is the biggest tourism market currently. This is because China is becoming the number one source market as the Chinese tourists have become the leader buyers in international tourism market (Badulescu and Rusu, 2009; Kapiki et al., 2014). Furthermore, Nepal’s richness in its traditional and cultural resources can be showcased as an attractive tourism product to draw the Chinese tourists to Nepal. This is because the previous studies have demonstrated that the Chinese tourists are attracted by the traditional and cultural aspects of the tourist destination (Kapiki et al., 2014; Sotiriadis and Apostolakis, 2015). To this end, as long as Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are able to understand and respond to the interest of the Chinese tourists in the traditional and cultural aspects of destination communities, they can significantly increase their market share in China. Hence, the increased numbers of Chinese tourists can also be an opportunity for the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to strengthen the linkages between the tourism and handicraft businesses.

The previous discussions, thus, reveals that Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs have a great potential to increase their market share in China and India, which are not only big in terms of their population but also from the economic point of view. The finding of this supports the argument of (Jones, 2013) who remarks that due to the rising middle class in India and China, there is a tremendous opportunity for the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to tap into these markets.

In addition, it has also been identified that big corporate houses from India, China and some European countries are also organizing business meetings, conferences, and other recreational activities in Nepal. According to R1, “...these days as growth of different corporations in India and China, these corporations bring their employees, agents, distributors etc. in groups and stay here in hotel to do meetings, seminars and other such activities.” Similarly, in the view of R2, “some big corporate houses are organizing business meetings, conferences and other recreational activities here in Nepal.” Hence, there is the opportunity for the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to further develop their business by promoting the country as a Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) destination. However, it is dependent on how the government and the tourism business sector work together for the development of physical and human capital required for the sector.

Likewise, the relatively stable political situation has also been perceived as an opportunity by the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs. It has been argued that the tourism industry is considered vulnerable to political instability (KC et al., 2021). In the case of Nepal, there has been evidence that various types of riots and instability occurred in the past due to a political cause, which contaminated Nepal's image as an unsafe place. However, this is not the case at present. According to R3, “the message must be conveyed worldwide that there is no security problem in travelling to Nepal...there are no more strikes and riots.” With a relatively stable political scenario, the tourism entrepreneurs have become optimistic. In the view of R2 ...new

constitution building process took place. All entrepreneurs were expecting better situation and it is going in positive direction.” Furthermore, the commitment of all major political parties of Nepal not to conduct any activities that can have adverse impact on the tourism sector has also been considered as a positive step towards the better future of the industry.

The ongoing construction of two international airports in Lumbini and Pokhara has also been perceived as a positive sign for the prosperity of the Nepalese tourism industry. In the words of R4, *“international airport is under construction which is an opportunity. It can help for making more reliable Nepalese travel.”* Similarly, R5 mentions, *“we are getting some good signals that international airports are either under construction or in preliminary survey in different parts of Nepal.”* These statements provided by the interviewees reveal that the ongoing construction of international airports has been perceived as a catalyst for the positive growth of the Nepalese tourism industry.

Conclusion

This research examined Nepalese entrepreneurs' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of the Nepalese tourism industry. The study has found various entrepreneurial challenges that are contributing negatively to the overall growth of Nepal's tourism sector. For instance, the dearth of adequate infrastructure development such as international aviation connectivity, the poor state of the road networks, and an inadequate supply of electricity are among the major challenges facing Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs. Similarly, technological backwardness, a lack of skilled and trained human capital, unethical practices among the service providers and a change in customer types are also some of the impediments of the Nepalese tourism sector.

While the study identified some challenges for Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs, it also recognized some opportunities. For instance, the increasing popularity of Nepal as a tourist

destination among its neighbouring countries China and India can be crucial for the enormous growth of the Nepalese tourism sector. There is also a possibility of Nepal developing itself a popular MICE destination, since a growing number of international organizations are choosing Nepal to hold their business meetings, conferences, and other recreational activities. Thus, in order to capitalise the tourism opportunities in Nepal, the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs are required to develop their capacity to address the changing customer needs and demands resulting from changing customer types. In addition to appealing the traditional types of tourists, Indian visitors and corporate tourist, it is important for the Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to develop tourism products that cater to the needs of Chinese tourists who dominate the market for purchasing tourism products. Furthermore, tourism entrepreneurs need to cultivate a culture of fair competition among them in order to ensure consistency in the products and services they offer. The result is improved customer satisfaction, as well as consistent income.

It has been found that due to their low level of digital literacy, Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs have hardly used digital platforms to promote their businesses. Therefore, it is important for Nepalese tourism entrepreneurs to learn how to maximise their access to the digital platforms to make optimal use of it to promote their businesses. For this reason, it is necessary for them to develop human capital that can play a key role in the digital transformation of the business. Moreover, to attract and retain skilled human resources within the Nepalese tourism industry, tourism entrepreneurs in Nepal need to introduce attractive package deals that can deter skilled people from leaving the country for employment.

Based on the findings of this research, Nepal needs to take many steps to enhance its tourism sector's success. What should be mainly emphasised is the introduction of new infrastructures and improvement of the existing ones. To this end, there is a need for Nepal to improve its aviation connectivity with the international community, making it easier for

people travelling to and from Nepal. Similarly, an improvement in the transportation system needs to be prioritised to make it easier for tourists to move around the country. To ensure that Nepal's tourism industry survives; the government must devise an effective marketing campaign to promote Nepal's tourism industry internationally. With the borderless world at our fingertips, it has become increasingly important to use information technology to reach out to every potential customer (Jaafar et al., 2011). As a result, the government should explore ways to promote Nepal as a tourist destination by utilizing modern technology among its potential customers. Similarly, to solve the issue of recruitment and retention of skilled human resources, Nepal's government and tourism entrepreneurs must work collaboratively to develop skilled workers required to meet the industry's demands. Additionally, it is imperative to introduce special packages to draw the skilled human capital, who are more interested in finding employment abroad than working in the Nepalese tourism industry. Another important issue raised by the respondents is the unethical competition among the tourism service providers, which has resulted in poor service quality. It has been argued that the sustainability of the tourism industry requires maintaining the quality of services (Arshad, 2017). Thus, the Nepalese government should work hand in hand with tourism entrepreneurs to determine the sector's quality of service. In addition, the development of a mechanism to monitor the tourism industry would contribute to the attainment of uniformity in the Nepalese tourism products and services.

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