Ecotourism Practice with Community Based Home-stay Program in the Gandaki Province of Nepal

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Abstract: Community based home-stay tourism (CBHST) has been promoted by the provincial government of Gandaki in recent years for the socioeconomic benefit it provides to the local people in Nepal. However, the degree of involvement of local people in community based home-stay tourism varies between different localities and districts of the province, depending on the natural and cultural attractions, and hospitality practices in the host communities. This study discusses the local participation, benefit sharing and the practices to preserve culture and nature based tourism products. The study explores the involvement of local people in home-stay tourism by analyzing the data collected using face to face interview with a targeted home-stay operators and members of the home-stay management committee. The study reveals that local people are actively involved in the operating and benefit sharing of CBHST; hence it is an appropriate ecotourism model for local involvement and promote rural tourism based on local skills, knowledge and resources.

Keywords: community participation, conservation, ecotourism, home-stay tourism, hospitality

1. Introduction

Nepal is unique in that the climatic conditions vary from place to place, in accordance with the geographical features. In the north, summers are cool and winters are severe, while in the south, summers are tropical and winters are mild. Nepal has namely five major seasons: spring, summer, monsoon, autumn and winter. Nepal also has diverse ecological zones with rich biodiversity (Gurung 2011). Together with its unique nature and socio cultural identity, Nepal has become a popular tourist destination in the world. The mountainous landscapes together with hospitable ethnic communities, has made it possible to develop nature and culture based tourism as a low cost, eco-friendly alternative to support socio economic growth and fight poverty (Upadhyaya and Uppreti 2006; Sharma 2017).

Community-based home-stay is one of the rural tourism enterprises that have seen a lot of growth in recent days. It has been one of the pillars for fostering ecotourism around the globe by uplifting local communities. Home-stay accommodation focuses on traditional life style, local culture and customs to attract the tourism which have economic potential for the operators (Lama 2014). CBHST has helped boost local economy, society and environment. It gives focus on traditional life style, culture and customs of local communities by increasing employment opportunities, improving living standards and public-private investments (Bluiyan et al. 2013). During the stay, tourists form close bonds with their host families and become familiar with their culture, traditions, food, traditional outfits, and their community. Guests are greeted in their local tradition and can follow daily activities which the host family follows (Hamzah 2008).

Home-stay was introduced by the Government of Nepal, to allow tourists to interact and experience direct day-to-day life of local communities. The concept of home-stay addresses the theme of eco-tourism in Nepal (Thapaliya et al. 2013). Village tourism and community based home stays are part of ecotourism. They are popular with tourist because they offer unique opportunities for comfortable cultural immersion. Home-stay is instrumental to the economy of Nepal and in the development of an economically backward region which has insufficient resources to develop the agricultural and industrial sectors (Sharma 2011). Nepal has immense potential for tourism development as it is endowed with many places that can attract tourists from all over the globe. Most tourists visit Nepal because of the natural beauty of the White Mountains, green hills, forests, lakes and rivers for the purposes of adventure and pleasures. Nepal is a place of adventure and attracts activities like trekking, boating, hunting, mountain flight, paragliding, and rafting. Furthermore, it is also rich with unique cultural heritage of ethnic communities, traditional practices, ancient temples and monasteries associated with Hindu and Buddha religions (Gurung 2007). The people
of Nepal are known for their friendliness and innocent smiles. These are attributes that attract tourists to visit Nepal.

Nepal received around 1,197 thousand tourists in the year 2019 by air (77%) and land (23%). Of this number, 65 percent visited Nepal for the purpose of pleasure (MoCTCA 2020). Nepal received total revenue of 671 million US Dollars, averaging $48 per tourist expenditure per day. This contributed to 11.2 percent of the foreign exchange and 2.3 percent of the country’s GDP. Among the total visitors, about 34 percent were tourists i.e. around 400 thousand visited in Gandaki Province. Visitors were accommodated in 1,254 hotels with a carrying capacity of around 41 thousand beds per day in the country. Gandaki Province shared about 36 percent of the accommodation capacity. Furthermore, there were 389 home-stays with 1,088 beds per day along with private and community accommodation facilities. This was done through registered home-stay, mainly in rural areas of the country (MoCTCA 2020). The province of Gandaki, was pioneer to operate CBHST in rural villages in Nepal since 1997. Officially there are 32 registered Community Based Home-stays villages with 463 households, providing 1,696 beds (PMoITFE 2075).

Ecotourism has become an alternative approach for overcoming the problems of traditional tourism, with the assumption that there will be minimum negative impacts and maximum benefits for the local people and their environment (Neupane and Thapa 2004). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES 1990) introduced ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural resource areas that conserves the environment and improve the well-being of local people”. TIES indicate visiting natural resource areas with emphasis on learning, environmental protection and helping community development by providing alternate source of livelihood to local communities which are more sustainable (Aryal et al. 2019). Among the different forms of alternative tourism, the well-known concept of ecotourism sounds much closer to the community based tourism with respect to home-stay in rural areas. The TIES (2015) has redefined the ecotourism with its three pillars focusing on local community as: “responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustain the well-being of local people and involve interpretation and education for the staff and guests”. Nepal has also endorsed the community based home-stay tourism policy with the main objective of distributing benefits equally to all the people within the community, encouraging equal participation, increasing local income, and upgrading local livelihoods (MoCTCA 2011).

To what extent are local people enjoying the benefit? How does CBHST support the economic well-being of local communities? The focus of this study is to search for answers to these questions and to discuss and analyze ecotourism practices by contributing to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research area

Gandaki province is situated in the central part of Nepal (Figure 1), with an area of about 22,587 sq km or 15.3 percent of the country’s area (NRB 2075). The province is boarded by international boarders of China in the north and India in the South. Furthermore, Bagmati province is to the East and Lumbhini and Karnali provinces are to the South and West of Gandaki. Pokhara, the capital city of Gandaki province is one of the most popular tourist destinations or domestic tourism market of Nepal. This province is especially famous for trekking, mountaineering, rafting and other adventure activities with excellent natural beauty and can boast of three of the highest mountains in close proximity, all over 8,000 m above sea level i.e., Dhaulagiri (8,167 m), Manaslu (8,163 m) and Annapurna (8,091 m) (Gurung 2011). The river corridors, basins, valleys and hills are full of scenic beauty with springs, waterfalls, lakes, caves and unspoiled biodiversity-related attractions, and a tranquil atmosphere. The ethnic rural settlement villages with their traditional culture have been developed as home-stay tourist destinations (Sharma 2011). This is because the villagers have enormous natural and cultural attractions for tourism and have strategic positions from the city centers.

Gandaki province is divided into 11 administrative districts and expands across all three climatic zones of Nepal. Manang and Mustang districts are in the high mountainous region in the north and Nawalpur is the only district in the inner Terai region, in the south. The rest of the eight districts are on the mountainous or hilly region. However, some of the settlements in the northern part of Myagdi, Baglung, Kaski, Lamjung and Gorkha are also in a high mountainous region. The province
is also the meeting point of migrating Mongoloids and Aryans from Himalaya, mountains and Terai regions of Nepal, which are also attractive from a cultural point of view (Gurung 2011).

2.2. Data collection

There were 32 community based home-stay villages officially registered in the eight district of this province. Purposive random sampling method was used to select 50 percent home-stays for the primary data. The primary data for this study were collected through a face to face interview with home-stay operators of CBHST. Focus group discussions were done with the members of Home-stay management committee and local community leaders as stakeholders of CBHST. Next, tourism experts and local leaders of the tourism business association available in Pokhara served as key informants. Secondary data were collected from publications of Ministry of Tourism, Nepal Tourism Board, Provincial Government of Gadanki and Home-stay Association of Nepal, and other related organizations published and unpublished reports and documents.

2.3. Research design

Ecotourism practice in community based home-stay tourism has covered multi disciplinary activities, so a combination of quantitative cum qualitative approaches of the research seems to be an appropriate for this study. Hence, the study is based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The perceptions or opinions of the other stakeholders in the community were collected from focus group discussion and key informants interview, and analyzed with qualitative approach. Further, the related data with home-stay status and ecotourism practice were collected with the help of questionnaires to the respondents. Descriptive statistics was used to discuss the overall position or status of CBHST in the study area. The operational status of homestay and the related variables of home-stay practice were tested quantitatively. The chi-square test was applied to show the relation between the operational status of CBHST in terms of occupancy with the use of local skills and knowledge, conservation practice of natural and cultural heritages and the promotion of local foods and products. The core value of this research is to understand the CBHST operators’ perceptions towards the line of ecotourism. Moreover, to evaluate the community based home-stay program through the values they associate with in their home-stay villages.
3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Background of the respondents

Home-stay tourism in Gandaki province seems ethno friendly from this study. Out of a total of 234 respondents from the CBHST operators, 89 percent were from the ethnic community. Gurung, Tharu and Magar had the most response with 58.1 percent, 13.7 percent and 11.1 percent respectively. The presence of upper castes was 10 percent and the minorities groups, Dalit (low caste) were only one percent respectively. The response shows that the major share of the home-stay operators was from the ethnic community or the ethno friendly culture of community based home-stay tourism in the Gandaki province of Nepal (Figure 2). The concept of ethno friendly nature of rural tourism activities was also observed in similar studies in Nepal (Neupane et al. 2013; Dahal et al. 2020). As the province is dominated by the population of those ethnic communities who are very rich in their traditional folk culture, that could explain the results from the responses.

Furthermore, there is a general observation that the ethnic communities have culturally rich tradition, they are open minded, innocent and frank in their behavior, and more hospitable in comparison with other communities in Nepal (Gurung 2007). Celebration with Folk songs and festival dances are part of their traditions and lifestyle. This has been a magnet which attracted tourists to those community based home-stays as supported by similar studies in Chin et al. (2014) and Aryal et al. (2019) on rural destinations.

Among the home-stay operators, 61.5 percent of them were in nuclear family and 38.5 percent of them in joint family system. Most of the CBHST operators are in the experienced age group and retired from Gorkha soldiers and pensioner civil servants. The results also show that community based home-stay tourism is the attraction or interest for adult of ages 40 to 59 years, with 118 respondents (i.e. 50.5%). Community based home-stay tourism has become part of life in old age for the senior citizen (Chen et al. 2018). These are mostly retired army personals and civil servants (Gurung 2007). About 19.2 percent of the operators were senior citizen in the age group of greater than 60 years. However, another strong presence was in the youth group, 76 in number i.e. 32.4 percent, with the age group of 20 to 39 years (Figure 3). This shows the emerging interest in tourism business among the new generation of the rural villages.

Home-stays are basically established and operated in rural settlement in the Gandaki province and even in the Nepalese context. The data shows women friendly management of CBHST in the study area. Women play a dominant role as home-stay operators, in addition to managing domestic activities including cooking and house-keeping as similar result found in a study by Acharya and Halpenny (2013). In this study, the majority of the respondents,146 of them or 62.4 percent home-
stay operators were female and only 37.6 percent were male. It shows the major roles of mothers’ group to welcoming visitors as well as managing and operating community based home-stay tourism in their respective villages.

Tourism is a low skill labor intensive industry that benefits to the locals (Dragulanescu 2010). Community based home-stay seems an appropriate alternative business for basic level man power, with minimum requirement of primary level of education. About 41.1 percent and 30.3 percent respondents have primary level education and only literate respectively (Figure 4). This is the reason that CBHST has been popular as small scale business in the rural villages of Nepal. The requirement for home-stay businesses are mainly based on traditional knowledge and skill for the hospitality, culture programs and innocent life style rather any modern technology. Out of the total, 71 operators (i.e. 30.4%) have not achieved any formal educational degree from the school and college but still operate a successful home-stay in their locality.

3.2. Ecotourism practice in community based home-stay

Basically, this study discusses and analyses some ecotourism activities like conservation of nature, local benefit in terms of income and employment, opportunities to learn, and capacity building among host and guests. Some 86 percent of the home-stay operators claim they collect community fund which ranges from 5 to 20 percent of their home-stay income, whereas 14 percent of them left it on voluntary contribution from the home-stay guest. Mostly they have been using the fund for biodiversity conservation and local development in their communities. The result exactly tallies the findings of similar studies like Fennel (2002) and Dahal et al. (2020). Further, the study shows that about 80 percent respondents received exposure visits, 74 percent participated in different
training and seminar and 45 percent of them attended workshop and promotional shows on capacity buildings of local people from the CBHST, and similar results were observed in past studies (Sunlu 2003; Liptom and Bhattarai 2014).

Accommodation with food and entertainment in rural settlements are some of the basic requirements with home-stay tourism. Guests stay in host family house, learn from each other and support family well-being (Bhuiyan et al. 2013). In the case of CBSHT, people are managing to provide those facilities with hospitality based on traditional knowledge and skill. Though about 74 percent of them received some sort of training on cooking, baking and housekeeping, they still provide traditional flavor to prepare local food items which are unique and interesting (Sciaini 2011; Dahal et al. 2020). They prepare popular Nepali dishes like “Dhido, Selroti” and the local drinks like “Raksi” prepared from local fruits and millet. As the survey data reveals, bread and pancake for breakfast items are locally prepared. Likewise, 45.7 percent and 66.2 percent households claimed that they serve local dishes and local drinks respectively to their guests. On the other hand, curry and roasted items like local chicken are prepared in Nepali style and traditional items like pickle, dairy products, honey and corn are included in the servings to their guest, using traditional practices, knowledge and skills. These activities directly support the economic benefit of local people which is one of the most prominent aspects of ecotourism.

3.3. Use of local knowledge, skills and resources in CBHST

A five point Likert scale questions of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree representing one through to five respectively were used to find out the real perception of the respondents in the practice of home-stay tourism. Accordingly, a mean value and deviation value were derived from the given scores of the respondents. In this study, 203 respondents (i.e. 86.8%) agreed that home-stay provides an opportunity to use ones knowledge and skills to earn income in the local community. At the individual level, only 2.1 percent disagreed with this view and 11.1 percent of them remained neutral. The mean value of using local skills and knowledge is 4.1 and there is a variation of 0.73 from the mean value of the use of local skills and knowledge in home-stay tourism (Table 1). This result shows that local skills and knowledge have significantly contributed to the operation of community based home-stays tourism and provide the immediate benefit to local people, and this finding is supported by studies like Kayat (2007) and Bhuiyan et al. (2013).

Table 1. Use of local knowledge, skills, traditional culture and resources in CBHST.

| Characteristics | No of HHs | Percent | Characteristics | No of HHs | Percent |
|-----------------|----------|---------|-----------------|----------|---------|
| Agree           | 203      | 86.8    | Agree           | 140      | 59.9    |
| Neutral         | 26       | 11.1    | Neutral         | 70       | 29.9    |
| Disagree        | 5        | 2.1     | Disagree        | 24       | 10.2    |
| Total           | 234      | 100.0   | Total           | 234      | 100.0   |
| Mean/SD         | 4.14     | 0.728   | Mean/SD         | 4.00     | 0.662   |

Source: Field Survey 2019/020

Likewise, 140 respondents (i.e. 59.9%) agreed that home-stays use local resources like traditional culture, festivals and religious sites to attract tourists into their community, whereas 29.9 percent were neutral on this view and 10.2 percent of them disagreed. The mean value to promote local culture and festivals is 4.0 and there is variation of 0.67 from the mean value to the promotion of local culture and festivals by home-stay tourism (Table 1). These results show that community based home-stays tourism have significantly contributed to the use of local resources and to promote the traditional culture and festivals. Similar conclusions were derived by Lama (2014) and Neupane et al. (2013) in the similar studies. These are clear evidence of the practice of ecotourism by operating the CBHST in rural villages. Further on top of this descriptive analysis the association between the status of home-stay operations and use of local skill and knowledge for community benefit in the CBHST at household level were discussed.

Chi Square test was conducted to assess the association between agreement with use of local skills and knowledge and home-stay operation. It reveals that there is strong association between agreement with the use of local skills and knowledge, and home-stay operation in CBHST (Chi-
Ecotourism Practice in Nepal

Square = 23.8, df = 2 and p<.001). The Phi value also reveals that there is more than 32 percent contribution of local knowledge and skills on home-stay operation at community level (Phi = .32 with p<.001). The result shows that the CBHST operation has positive association with the use of traditional skills and knowledge at local level.

Table 2. Association of operational status of CBHST and the use of local skills & knowledge.

| Operational status | Agreement with the use of local skills and knowledge in CBHST |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | Neutral          | Agree            | Strongly Agree | Total N (%) |
| Very good          | 26 (19.0)        | 76(55.5)         | 35(25.5)       | 137(100.0)  |
| Good               | 5(5.3)           | 37(39.4)         | 52(55.3)       | 94(100.0)   |
| Total              | 31(13.4)         | 113(48.9)        | 87(37.7)       | 231(100.0)  |

3.4. Economic benefit to local people and conservation of environment & biodiversity

A similar method of Likert scale used in the previous section was used to analyze the other related variables. Further, 195 respondents i.e. 83.3 percent agreed that community based home-stay provides an opportunity for economic benefit, in terms of income and employment opportunities to the local community, whereas 16.7 percent remained neutral and none disagreed. The mean value for providing local economic benefit is 4.1 and the variation is 0.67 from the mean value of the economic benefit in home-stay tourism (Table 3). This result shows that community based home-stay have significantly contributed to providing local benefit by creating income and employment opportunities to the local people. This finding is similar with the studies of KC (2017), Thompson et al. (2018) and Dahal et al. (2020).

Table 3. Local economic benefit and conservation of environment & biodiversity.

| Economic Benefit as income & employment to Local | Conservation of Environment & Biodiversity |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Characteristics                                  | No of HHs | Percent | Characteristics | No of HHs | Percent |
| Neutral                                          | 39        | 16.7    | Neutral         | 37        | 15.8    |
| Agree                                            | 126       | 53.8    | Agree           | 131       | 56.0    |
| St. Agree                                        | 69        | 29.5    | St. Agree       | 66        | 28.2    |
| Total                                            | 234       | 100.0   | Total           | 234       | 100.0   |
| Mean/SD                                          | 4.13 ± 0.669 | Mean/SD | 4.12 ± 0.653   |

Source: Field Survey 2019/020

Community home-stays have been practicing awareness program to promote greenery, minimize deforestation and plantations in open space, use of alternative energy to reduce fuel woods, waste and garbage collection and management, sanitation and cleanliness campaign in village surroundings to preserve the natural environment and biodiversity. The data reveals that 197 respondents (i.e. 84.2%) agreed that community based home-stays preserve the environment and biodiversity sites even to attract visitors to their communities, whereas 15.8 percent were neutral on this view and none disagreed. The mean value to preserve environment and biodiversity is 4.1 and there is a variation of 0.65 from the mean value to preserve environment and biodiversity by home-stay tourism (Table 3). This result shows that community based home-stays tourism have significantly contributed to conserve the environment and biodiversity at the local area for tourist attraction as supported by literature (KC and Thapa 2015; Acharya and Halpenny 2013; Speteri and Nepal 2008). These are clear evidence of the practice of ecotourism by operating the community based home-stay tourism in the Gandaki province of Nepal. Further the association between the status of the home-stay operations and the promotion of local foods, agroproducts and handicrafts at household and community level were discussed in this study.
Table 4. Operational status of home-stay and the promotion of local foods and products.

| Operational status | Neutral (% | Agree (%) | Strongly Agree (%) | Total N (%) |
|--------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|-------------|
| Very good          | 13(9.3)    | 82(59.0)  | 44(31.7)           | 139(100.0)  |
| Good               | 5(5.3)     | 36(37.9)  | 54(56.8)           | 95(100.0)   |
| Total              | 18(7.7)    | 118(50.4) | 98(41.9)           | 234(100.0)  |

Chi Square test was conducted to assess the association between promotion of local products at household level and home-stay operation. It reveals that there is strong association between the promotion of local products at household level and home-stay operation in CBHST (Chi-Square = 14.75, df = 2 and p < .001). The Phi value also reveals that just more than 25 percent contribution of home-stay operation to promote the local products at community level (Phi = .25 with p < .001). The result shows that the CBHST operation has positive association with the promotion of local foods cuisines, agro products and handicrafts at household as well as community level.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that local people are actively involved in the operations and benefit sharing of community based home-stay tourism with inclusive management practice. Communities have taken a collective initiative to preserve diversity of cultural and natural heritages as tourism products in their locality through utilizing the community fund they could collect from the operation of home-stay tourism. Furthermore the study concludes that community based home-stay tourism is the appropriate ecotourism model for local benefit in terms of income and employment opportunities by utilizing the local skills, knowledge, resources and promotion of local foods, agro and handicraft products. Another take away from this study is the consideration of concerns of local people through the lens of background knowledge of health and sanitation, as well as tourism and hospitality. Hence, the local efforts of managing nature and culture resources by community for tourism activities enhance the ecotourism practice of community based home-stay tourism.

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