

Mountain Tourism: A Boon or a Bane?

Impacts of Tourism on Himalayan Women

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Paper Abstract

The mountain people of the Himalayas are among the most socially, politically and economically deprived people in the world, and yet their stewardship of mountain natural resources is closely linked to sustainability of life in lowland areas. Among mountain population, women play a crucial, and in many respects dominant role in natural resource management, agricultural production, tourism and the well-being and very survival of mountain families. In mountain regions, as in the world over, women, as a class, are more undernourished, under-compensated for their labor, and under-represented in formal decision making bodies. The only measure in which women collectively come out 'ahead' is lifespan; those who endure seem to be hardy—though in Nepal, women's life span is in average shorter than the life span of their counterpart.

The condition of Himalayan women can be characterized by a few stylized facts (i) they are underrepresented in politics and bureaucracy; (ii) in South Asian countries more than 75% of mountain women fall below the poverty line; (iii) lack of infrastructure development causes inadequate access to basic services such as health, education, water, electricity etc; and (iv) existence of caste, gender and social exclusion further aggravate the already deplorable condition of these women. Hence, a strong initiative at the political, social and economic level is required to uplift these women. Furthermore, it is important that the respective governments identify competitive and high growth sectors such as tourism to integrate mountain women into the development mainstream.

Often, in the Himalayas income from agriculture is scarce and meager due to scarcity of productive land and inadequate access to irrigation. On the other hand, tourism is a major economic activity providing livelihoods to poor people. In Nepal, tourism generates about 122,745 direct employments and until recently tourism was the highest foreign exchange earning industry. Tourism's share in total foreign exchange earnings peaked at 21.4% in 1996, and then declined to 11.1% in 2004. Today, the Government has identified tourism as a strong sector, contributing significantly to socioeconomic development. This is evident in the role outlined for tourism to meet the Government's Tenth Plan objective to reduce poverty, improve gender equality and ensure social and economic development.

Trekking and mountaineering are major tourism activities that have helped uplift thousands of mountain people out of poverty. Every year, tourism generates employment for youths as mountain guides and porters, most of whom have very meager income from agriculture. In addition, trekking and mountaineering create opportunities for enterprise generation through the operation of tea houses and lodges along the trails. A majority of these lodges are run by women. Besides the above, tourism also

creates linkages for growth of other sectors such as traditional handicrafts and agro based businesses and restaurants—again, sectors that overwhelmingly involve women.

Notwithstanding the paramount importance of tourism in local economies of mountain regions, and its immense potential for women empowerment and poverty alleviation; the industry can be vulnerable to both internal and external crisis if it is not developed in a sustainable manner. Therefore, possible negative impacts from tourism such as cultural degeneration, environmental degradation have to be put in check or reduced. In this endeavor, mountain women that form the backbone of this industry can play a leading role to direct the industry out of any potential crisis.

1. Introduction

1.1 Evolution of Economic activities in the Himalayas

The Himalayas is one of the most famous mountain regions in the world, a hostile environment—ranging from 15,000 ft to 29,028ft—for human settlement. No wonder, the Himalayas have only few and scattered settlements consisting of people mostly of Tibeto- Mongoloid origin, predominantly engaged in trading, tourism and some agriculture. Historically, the people of the Himalayas are known to have survived by trading, herding and some agriculture. The adverse climatic conditions, unfavorable soil conditions and difficult terrain prohibit agriculture as an important economic activity in the northern Himalayan belts. The limitation of agriculture to mainly two crops—wheat and millet—also has a limiting effect on the range of food commodities that the people of this region consume.

With reference to the Himalayan belt of India, Tibet and Nepal, food grains were traded from southern markets in exchange for salt from Tibet. Thus, the principle form of economic activity for the Himalayan people was trading and herding. Every year, mountain people struggled to traverse difficult mountain passes to get to Tibet and trade yak, sheep, salt and wool.

In Nepal, trading and herding as the primary form of economic life for the northern Himalayan people lasted till the early 1950s. The decade saw the conquest of the world's highest mountain—Mt. Everest and opened the doors of tourism in Nepal. What followed was a revolutionary change in the lives of mountain people. The advent of mountain tourism brought a formal closure to the Trans Himalayan trade, changing forever the economic, social and cultural landscape of the mountain people of Nepal.

2. Status of Mountain Women

2.1. I am discriminated, but are you? Issues of heterogeneity of women

One of the least researched themes in the world remains the issues of mountain women. Despite having a prominent role in mountain communities, women still search for their history.

Sierra Tamang's article *The Politics of 'developing Nepali women'* argues that discourses and programs related to development of women initiated during the planned development periods of the Panchayat era was dominated by the discourses and concerns of upper caste Hindu women—the dominant religion, mostly belonging to the low lands—overlooking the heterogeneity of the country's population.

Sierra asserts that Nepali woman in these discourses was imagined as "patriarchally oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu'.

On the other hand, mountain women share a relatively egalitarian relationship with their male counterparts. Several anthropological accounts have demonstrated the ease with which mountain men and women interchange their role, and even when roles are defined as per gender, they are not necessarily of an unequal nature. Hence, unlike upper caste Hindu women who face discrimination on the basis of patriarchy and sexual purity, there are examples of several mountain groups that practice polyandry and mountain women have a good influential role in the social and economic activities of the family.

However, mountain women are primarily responsible for the collection of fire wood, water and fodder, and thus face great difficulty in the mountain slopes, with harsh climatic conditions. As a result, the economic conditions of these women are further degraded, resulting in a much heavier workload. The stress here is not on the relative status of mountain women vis-à-vis orthodox upper caste women, but the necessity to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity of women population. A unifying national narrative on gender would not only cause marginalization of certain population during policy formulation but would also give an incomplete and skewed understanding of the predicament of women in Nepal.

2.2. Rights over Natural Resources

In the 1950s, centralized policies of the Nepalese Government had an effect of weakening the influences of indigenous and minority women over their communities. The effects of centralization policies on community forestry and natural resource management had a substantial negative impact on most matrilineal mountain societies, as women of these societies lost control over their natural resources. Similarly, the official version of nationalization of community forestry was justified on the pretext of ecological conservation. Following which these community managed forests were converted into national parks and Government legislation was passed prohibiting local communities from using natural resources. The Nepalese mountain environment is living proof of how community management of natural resources is the most sustainable way of not just protecting the fragile mountain eco system , but also a means to sustain and develop communities and to prevent potential conflict. Furthermore, women played an influential role in forest-based production when these forests—which comprise around 40% of the total area of the country—were under local control.

As a consequence of the shift of management of natural resources from communities to centralized structures, women's access to natural resources and assets got limited. Responsible for the collection of fire wood, water and fodder, women have greater difficulty getting access to these necessary materials when access to forest products is denied.

Today, after several decades of mismanagement of Nepalese forests, there is again a growing consensus that the best model for environment conservation is community management. Hence, women all over are again being sought for their leadership.

2.3. Preserving Indigenous Cultures

Indigenous folklore from mountain communities is abundant with tales that articulate the role of women, especially the elderly, in cultural preservation and maintenance of group stability and coherence. By playing a key role in maintaining indigenous cultures, women provide a sense of group identity for individuals and also provide a sense of belongingness for these individuals. The negative effect of centralization based on a unitary concept of nationalism was to not only disregard the culture and religion of the other, but in most cases such as shamanism and other folk religions, to out rightly label them with negative stereotypes. In other instances, centralization and nationalistic policies caused minority cultures to get absorbed into the dominant mainstream cultures resulting in dilution of minority cultures.

In several mountain and hill communities such as the Tamangs and Magars, women held respectable positions as shamans, considered keepers of indigenous knowledge and spiritual wisdom. However, over time and due to centralization policies these cultures went through a process of assimilation and the influence of women upon their own communities weakened as their own knowledge and wisdom got replaced by foreign cultures, alien to their identity.

In the context of mountain women, it is within the realm of their group identities that their struggle for social empowerment has to be sought. It is this unique nature of the struggle of mountain women that differentiates them from women from dominant cultures, and it is precisely this uniqueness that necessitates an alternative gender discourse based on the heterogeneity of the women folk in Nepal. Acknowledgement of mountain women as a unique group can thus be the first step to allow us to inquire about their condition and the factors that cause it. Also, as mentioned above, understanding the context of the struggle of mountain women as a group identity based on the ethnicity of these people will allow us to investigate the political, economical and social structures in which these groups are positioned and how these factors affect their level of empowerment and development.

3. Mountain Tourism

3.1. Mountain Tourism: A tool for Poverty Alleviation

Globally, tourism's potential for poverty alleviation has been recognized through its capacity to generate revenues for rural areas. Tourism's potential to reduce poverty arises from its capacity to include the most unskilled and disadvantaged people, for e.g. mountain communities, women and indigenous people.

The Government acknowledges tourism's potential to employ women and unskilled people and therefore sees it as a potential industry for poverty alleviation and women empowerment—two primary objectives of the Tenth Five Year Plan of the Nepal Government. Government's faith in the industry not just to alleviate poverty but to uplift the entire national economy can be validated by the following facts: (i) it is estimated that tourism in Nepal—a country with 23 million people, generates about 122,745 direct employments; (ii) tourism has the ability to create backward and forward linkages and it generates diversified employment opportunities in other sectors, such as craft production and other agro based industries; and (iii) tourism's impact in maintaining a sound balance of payments through foreign currency earnings cannot be underestimated as tourism's share in foreign exchange earnings peaked at 21.4% in 1996 and then declined to 7.0% respectively in 2005.

On the other hand, a primary feature of the industry is that the accumulation of income from tourism is higher at the center than in mountain areas, despite mountains being the highlighted tourism product. In Nepal, the center has more resources and location advantage to make greater profit out of the booming industry. The Government has been made aware of this growing trend of unequal exchange between the core and periphery regions. Consequently, the Government has come up with several provisions to recycle revenues back to rural areas. However, lack of effective implementation of these provisions has not allowed rural people to benefit from recycling of revenues.

In the above background, it is important to identify the impacts of tourism on mountain people—the primary producers of the industry. What is sustainable tourism? How does it work? Terms like these are used commonly among urban literates, but remain unknown among the poor in rural mountains. Familiarizing the rural populace, especially women, with these terms is important.

3.2. Engendered Tourism

“Is there a need to engender tourism, when men are also involved and affected?”

Of course, men are affected, but women are more vulnerable and susceptible, since they lack the shield of education, exposure and societal support. Tourism has different impacts on men and women and thus needs an engendered dimension.

Tourism has more effects on women's lives in destination communities. The lack of gender sensitivity in government tourism development strategies and socioeconomic inhibitions of women perpetuated by society have constrained women from more fully benefiting from opportunities availed by mountain tourism in Nepal (Lama, 2006). Nepalese women are treated as second class citizens, with limited rights. This predicament is further aggravated for mountain women as they have the lowest share of rights and benefits. Although mountain women share a relatively egalitarian relationship with their male counterparts, their struggles and contribution draw considerable attention. And while mountain women face many of the same challenges as women throughout the developing world, the work of women in mountain regions is intensified by altitude, difficult and rugged geographical terrain and isolation. In addition, many mountain people belong to indigenous groups that face numerous forms of discrimination and marginalization.

It is in this background that the impact of tourism on mountain women has to be studied to measure the capacity of this industry to not only uplift them and bring them to the forefront of development but to also help contribute to the economic development of the nation.

4. Impacts of Tourism on Mountain Women

4.1. Economic Opportunities

Large Involvement

With the advent of tourism in Nepal, mountain communities for the first time in history have had a real opportunity to uplift their economic and social conditions. Moreover, the capacity of the industry to employ the most unskilled, disadvantaged people and women makes tourism a very attractive industry for marginalized people. It is estimated that in Nepal around 1.5 million people benefit directly or indirectly from tourism and International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates show that women's

employment stands at 46% of the global tourism workforce. In Nepal, this percentage might most likely be around 50% or even more. Tourism creates opportunities ranging from large scale business to small cottage industries, in terms of employment generation.

Extension of household work

Nepal's mountain women have always been an active participant in economic activities. For example, even before the arrival of tourism, Sherpa women participated actively in economic and domestic work. They are highly regarded for their hospitality and their capacity in domestic work. With the arrival of tourism, several Sherpa women opened tea house lodges and restaurants. The hotel industry came naturally to these women since they were already adept in the hospitality business and they had the autonomy to involve in economic activities. Running tourism business was just an extension of household work for Sherpa women. Women's role as care takers of households and communities at large has developed them as the prime actors of tourism in the destination communities. In most of the mountain communities, women are found engaged in cooking, managing local hotels and lodges, operating tea shops, making of indigenous handicraft, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, fruit and vegetable production, bee keeping, etc.

Empowerment

The wave of male out migration brought in by tourism has increased women's dependence on tourism for their subsistence and economic development. Although out migration has increased its own set of social problems, such as a rise in polygamous relationships and divorce rates, the benefits from growth of tourism still outweighs its negative impacts.

Market comes to the Mountains

The impact of tourism on mountain communities was not just economic empowerment of mountain women but to also help mountain regions overcome the greatest obstacle towards economic growth—lack of infrastructure, which had an effect of limiting market access for any products developed in the mountain regions. The growth of tourism partially solved the dilemma caused by this impediment by bringing the market to the mountain regions. The growing number of tourists that visit mountains consume the products developed in the mountain regions.

The Tamang women in the north eastern part of Nepal, in Briddim village of Rasuwa never remain idle, with most of the time spent on cooking food for tourists, cleaning the home stays, vegetable farming, and during free time, make traditional caps, bags and shyama (robe) and handicraft This, however, does not ignore men's contribution, since men's engagement is seen more in hard core tourism services, with higher remuneration like trekking guides, mountaineering guides, communication services, etc. which involves more than frequent travel outside the village.

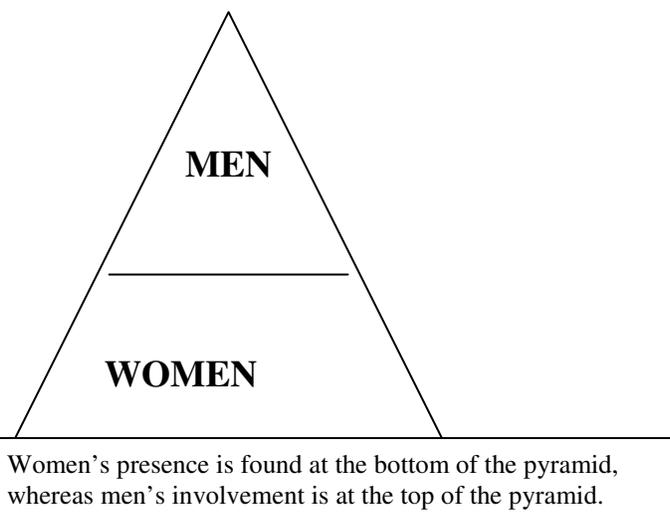
4.2. Challenges for Tourism

Tourism Pyramid

Women in patriarchal societies are expected to be shy and soft spoken, introvert and good in domestic work. Society's expectation is limited to household chores and thus does not encourage women's advancement and empowerment. Therefore, even in tourism destinations, women are found more in the care economy, with high concentration in low wage, low skill menial jobs. Although, women have

a high rate of contribution and involvement in tourism, they still remain behind in terms of access to resources and benefit.

Like any other sector, tourism is mainly dominated by men in decision making and controlling resources. The top positions in the tourism industry are mainly occupied by men, in travel agencies, mountaineering, trekking, rafting companies, airlines, accommodations and communication services, with better remuneration and involving more than frequent travel outside the village. Women are often found in the lower (paid) positions. Women are often a neglected stakeholder of tourism development because of the different gender obstacles that exist for a visible participation in tourism.



Out migration of men

With the arrival of tourism, men from hill and mountain communities such as Sherpas, Tamangs and Magars migrated to cities to seek for jobs as mountain guides. The out migration of men from their villages and separation from their families has (i) increased the work load of women, (ii) increased vulnerability to HIV and AIDS, (iii) increased trafficking of women, and (iv) increased polygamous relationships among mountain people.

Commodification of women

The growing sex industry and commodification of women can also be understood as a phenomena resulting from the rising influx of tourists. The real economy in Nepal has been growing at a very slow pace to provide adequate employment opportunities for both men and women. Rising poverty and lack of employment opportunities compel Nepalese women to take up jobs as commercial sex workers, as the only option available for their livelihood.

Loss of indigenous culture

Influx of tourists has had a negative effect through loss of indigenous culture. As discussed earlier, in most mountain communities' women are the keepers of indigenous knowledge and spiritual wisdom. A loss of indigenous culture due to increasing contact with foreign cultures not only means the loss of group identity and hence a sense of self and its position in society, but also has a weakening influence of women in their communities.

Environmental Management

The above sections have already discussed the paramount importance of natural resources for mountain women. In that context, it is also important to note that the mountain environment is a fragile ecology and its environment has been sustained over the years, primarily through women leadership. Tourism can have a negative effect on mountain ecology. A lack of environment awareness can cause an increased consumption of firewood and other natural resources to fulfill the consumption necessity of the increasing tourist population that have both higher consumption capacity and habit.

Effects of Crisis

Tourism as an industry is prone to crisis that can be generated by a range of factors such as political unrest, negative media coverage, deteriorating condition of national heritages etc. Similarly, several domestic and international events can generate crisis for the tourism industry. As per Adhikari's account, in recent years, the following events have had a negative impact on tourism: (i) hijacking of one Indian Airlines flight, (ii) attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, resulting in the decline of American and European tourists travel, (iii) the Gulf war and the war in Afghanistan, (iv) the recent global economic slowdown, (v) natural catastrophe such as the Tsunami, (vi) the Bali bombings of 2002, and (vii) the outbreak of SARs in South East Asian countries. Since mountain women primarily depend on tourism, their lives get overwhelmingly affected from unpredictable upheavals and crisis.

5. Steps to Be Taken

An important theme on which all tourism specialists seem to have agreed upon is the need to make tourism sustainable. Environmental degradation that could result from the growth in tourism needs to be checked. Sustainability of the industry is dependent on the sustainability of the mountain ecology and the following measures should be taken to implement sustainable tourism: (i) prohibit degradation or modification of the existing environment, (ii) increase access to clean energy, (iii) protect the forest environment, (iv) maintain ecological balance, (v) conserve national heritage, and (vi) promote responsible and value based tourism.

Another approach that can be taken to decrease the negative impacts of tourism is social mobilization to sensitize local communities on the need to preserve national heritages, environment and indigenous cultures. Social mobilization can also be used as a tool for gender sensitization and to increase community's overall level of awareness on the role played by mountain women in rural tourism.

The Government should involve private sector, community based organizations, national and international government organizations in sustainable tourism development initiatives. There is a strong need to create strong linkages vertically between the central National Tourism Authority, local government and grassroots tourism functional groups; as well as horizontally through the creation of collective village committees, women's groups and savings and investment co-operatives.

Thus, through this measure sustainable development of tourism can be institutionalized. Also, both public and private sectors could join hands in providing training and promoting women related indigenous skills. Both public and private sector should prioritize mountain tourism and emphasize on its gender perspective and women should be prioritized for receipt of loans to support tourism related micro enterprises such as home stays, tea shops, local lodges, handicraft sales etc.

Finally, the Government should take steps to annul all discriminatory laws against women, prioritize women empowerment and rural tourism, provide sufficient access and control over productive assets, recognize the role of women in natural resource management, provide proportional representation for women and minorities in the Government and other state mechanisms and annul all laws that discriminate on the basis of language, culture, region and religion.

6. Conclusion

The potential of tourism to economically uplift not just mountain women, but to also assist in national income generation is unequivocal. Tourism's contribution to foreign exchange earnings has increased the significance of mountain regions. Thus, the Government has acknowledged the need to provide basic services to mountain communities and accommodate mountain people in the political and development mainstream. The overwhelming involvement of mountain women in tourism and their historical role in natural resource management and other aspects that lead to the sustainable development of mountain societies also need to be duly acknowledged and policies and programs to sustain such practices need to be evolved to not just protect the fragile mountain environment but to also enhance the sustainability of mountain communities.

This paper has attempted to analyze the economic background of mountain communities and their gradual evolution and subsequent adoption of tourism as a primary industry for sustenance and growth. Furthermore, it attempts to highlight the role of mountain women in tourism and the ease with which mountain women have been able to transform their responsibilities from herding, trading and domestic work into leading entrepreneurs in tourism.

A sociological analysis of women in Nepal shows that mainstream discourses on gender are uniform based on the narratives of orthodox, upper caste Hindu women--whereas gender in Nepal is heterogeneous. Also, the issues related to mountain women cannot be alienated from issues related to indigenous societies concerning language, regional backwardness, religion and culture and the empowerment of mountain women is directly related to the sustainability of their cultures. Moreover, alienation of mountain cultures and their lack of access to basic services and their poor level of human development have to be assessed within the context of marginalization of mountain communities within the political and economic sphere. It is in this context, that the paper highlights tourism as an industry that has the potential to uplift mountain women and communities from their deplorable political, social and economical conditions.

While tourism like any other industry can have potential negative and positive impacts on mountain women and communities, the negative impacts can be addressed by bringing together stakeholders through social mobilization. Capacity enhancement, skills training and providing access to credit to mountain women are some ways through which the role of mountain women in tourism can be optimized. Above all, the leading role of mountain women in natural resource management and their roles as preservers of culture and indigenous wisdom have to be acknowledged and the Government ought to take appropriate proactive steps if it is actually committed to protecting and enhancing one of the leading industries of Nepal.

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