

The Pandemic in the Himalayan Country: Nepal

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating economic impact globally and Nepal is no exception. Tourism and migration abroad to work— two of the important sectors that have significantly contributed to the Nepali economy — have suffered tremendously in the face of lockdown and other restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, this paper aims to understand how COVID-19 impacted Nepalis while focusing on Nepal's tourism and migration sector. The paper is based on the review of secondary resources, including newspaper articles available in the public sphere. Data in this paper comes from the period prior to February 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation of Nepalis who were recovering from social and economic destruction caused by the global earthquake of 2015. The resulting lockdowns, the closing of land ports and airports, and the limitation of people's mobility have significantly affected Nepal's tourism sector. In addition, thousands of Nepali migrants lost their jobs and incomes in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, Malaysia, India, and other destination countries as the pandemic struck the global economy. However, Nepali people appear to remain resilient in the face of yet another disaster.

Keywords: COVID-19; Nepali Society; 2020 Pandemic; Nepal

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Introduction

Nestled between the Tibet autonomous region of China and India (Figure 1), Nepal is known for its diverse geography, topography, culture, and ethnicity. Geographically, the country presents itself in the Himalayan, mid-hill, and Tarai regions. Culturally, Hinduism is the dominant religion in Nepal, known until recently as the only Hindu kingdom, with a new constitution that espouses secularism. In addition to Buddhists, about 126 ethnic groups speak 123 languages nationwide.

Agriculture is the mainstay of Nepal's economy and Nepalis' livelihood. Tourism and hospitality

are also essential sources of income for millions of Nepalis. Nepal is an attractive destination for mountaineering, trekking, adventure, nature-based and religious tourism with its picturesque Himalayas, exhilarating rapids, diverse flora, and fauna, along with Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. However, in the last decade, large numbers of Nepali youths have been moving out of agriculture and going overseas for employment (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020). Consequently, remittance has become integral to Nepalis' income (Ratha et al., 2020a).



Figure 1: Map of Nepal

Source: Authors, the Map is Representative and is not to Scale

Nepal is highly susceptible to various natural disasters such as floods, landslides, earthquakes, windstorms, wildfires, and other hazards due to the country's topography and climatic conditions. Rain-induced disasters such as floods and landslides are an annual occurrence, killing and injuring hundreds of people and impacting thousands of families. The COVID-19 pandemic came at a time when Nepalis were recovering from the social and economic disruption caused by the earthquake in 2015 (Shneiderman, Baniya & Billon, 2020). First identified in Wuhan, China, the virus spread rapidly across the globe. On 24 January 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was

confirmed in Nepal, with the first local transmission case confirmed on 4 April 2020.

Consequently, the country adopted a nationwide lockdown on 24 March until 21 July 2020 to minimise its spread and lessen its impact, asking the public to stay where they were. National and international travel was prohibited, and schools, business houses, hotels and restaurants, factories, entertainment industries, and transportation were all paused. At the time of writing this paper, the lives of its citizens had eased since the lockdown was lifted, although the possibility of COVID-19 infection was still prevalent. Information about the

number of COVID-19 cases including active cases is presented in Table 1. Ensuring the safety step, hotels and restaurants were reopened and educational institutions too were partly opened. Besides, market and business houses, big supermarkets, and entertainment venues gradually opened for their everyday business. As a result, people began feeling some semblance of normalcy as they used the regular health interventions prior to COVID. In Kathmandu alone, safety measures such as using masks, washing hands, using sanitiser and maintaining physical distance were prevalent.

In this context, it is important to understand what COVID-19 has meant for the two important sectors of Nepal— tourism and migration. This paper aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism and migration sectors in Nepal. National and international publications including news reports were reviewed to gain an understanding of the situation, and impact of the disease in relation to tourism and migration abroad for employment.

Total Population	29,136,808
Area (in sq. km)	147,181
Total Number of Covid-19 Cases	271,289
Active Cases	2,400
Total Number of Recovered	265,859
Deaths	2030
Source: Prepared by Authors based on Data from Public Sources Cited in References.	

In the following sections, the paper discusses the socio-economic geography of Nepal and elaborates on the economy of Nepal. Following this, we explore the impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector amidst lockdowns and travel restrictions, and the increase of domestic tourism. This is followed by discussion on the impact of the disease on migrant workers, including the experiences of those workers attempting to return to their home country. We provide the context of Nepal's current and historic natural disasters, civil wars, and political challenges. Within this context, we bring attention to the coping mechanisms and resilience of Nepalis in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following this, we discuss vaccination efforts, the likely underreporting of cases due to lack of free testing, and the unhappiness of many Nepalis with the government's handling of the pandemic.

Nepal and Economy

Three main sectors sustain the economy of Nepal. The primary sector comprises agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining and quarrying, which contributed 27.1 per cent to the GDP of Nepal in

FY 2019/20 (Government of Nepal, 2020). Similarly, the contribution of the secondary sector (manufacturing, construction, electricity, gas and water) to GDP was 13.7 per cent, while the tertiary sector (service sector) contributed 58.1 per cent in 2019/20. However, Nepal's economy was expected to shrink due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Projections showed a grim economic outlook for Nepal's GDP growth rate in 2020 and 2021 (Asian Development Bank, 2020; World Bank, 2021). The substantial decline has been related to decreased remittances, agricultural output, and tourism due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Regarding the domestic sectors, the impact analysis from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic was expected to have the most impact on accommodation and food, arts, entertainment and recreation, and transport and storage (UNDP, 2020). In contrast, the pandemic was expected to have a moderate impact on manufacturing, construction, wholesale and retail trade, repairs of motor vehicles and motorcycles, and agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors. Hence, Nepalis employed in the tourism and hospitality sector,

daily wage earners, and those engaged in foreign employment were reported among those most to be affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

To Travel or Not to Travel: Tourism in Nepal

The ramifications of COVID-19 were strongly felt in the tourism sector in Nepal. According to the Department of Immigration, Nepal, 1,197,191 tourists arrived in Nepal via land and airports in 2019 (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2020). A tourist, on average, stayed in Nepal for 12.7 days. Travel and tourism contributed 6.7 per cent to Nepal's GDP in 2019 and provided employment to 1,034,000 (WTTC, 2020). Visitors spent USD 833.8 million during their stay in Nepal in 2019. However, the scenario was very different in 2020 as countries across the globe, including Nepal, grappled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal closed its land and airports to foreigners as well as their own citizens to combat the spread of the virus.

Furthermore, Nepal stopped issuing on-arrival visas starting 10 March 2020 to foreign nationals, ultimately suspended all domestic and international flights, and halted long-distance transport services beginning 22 and 23 March, respectively (Nepal, 2020). A national lockdown was implemented from 24 March 2020, leading to the closure of hotels, restaurants and non-essential travels (Pradhan, 2020). The government also cancelled all spring mountaineering expeditions. As a result, the tourism industry and people engaged in the tourism sector such as guides, porters, as well as hotel and restaurant employees and owners were significantly impacted. Former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Nepal Tourism Board estimated that Coronavirus affected 1.3 million people and caused a loss of NPR 160 billion (Sijapati, 2020). Similarly, around 20,000 tour, trekking, and mountain guides were expected to lose their employment with the cancellation of visas and mountaineering expeditions during the peak season, and staff were laid off or forced to take unpaid leave as hotels and restaurants were closed and ran out of occupancy (Mandal, 2020a). The President of the Hotel Association of Nepal and executive

director of Hotel Annapurna mentioned that the entire hospitality industry of Nepal was in deep depression due to the pandemic and many new hotels had huge loans to pay back and additionally were paying operating costs when there was no business (Sijapati, 2020).

The year 2020 was expected to be a big year for the Nepali tourism industry with the launch of one of the most ambitious campaigns of the Government of Nepal, 'Visit Nepal 2020' (Johnson, 2020). The campaign was in the plan since 2018 and was finally launched in January 2020, aiming to increase the number of tourists visiting Nepal in 2020 to 2 million (Johnson, 2020). The primary goal of the campaign was to utilise the revenue generated through tourism for socioeconomic development and recovery of Nepal, which had taken a significant hit due to the massive earthquake that impacted the economy of Nepal in 2015 (Johnson, 2020). Adding to this is the fact that transportation, hotels and restaurants, travel agencies, and other tourism stakeholders had invested heavily to upgrade their services after the campaign's announcement. And, with the COVID-19 pandemic these stakeholders were reported incurring more losses as the government had to postpone the program, and millions of people employed in the tourism sector lost their jobs.

Community and private homestays have been flourishing in Nepal in the past years. These homestays have been serving as a means for both domestic and foreign nationals to emerge into local culture and tradition. COVID-19 dealt a massive blow to these businesses. We read of the story of Dilli Maya Magar, who has been operating a homestay in Namje village in Dhankuta in the eastern region of Nepal (Shrestha, 2020). She has been excited about the Visit Nepal 2020 campaign, hoping that the program will boost her business. Along with hers, 13 community homestays operating in Namje were expecting around more than a thousand foreign and domestic guests between March until May 2020. However, in March, COVID-19 began to spread and in response, the government of Nepal implemented nationwide lockdown and travel bans and cancelled Visit

Nepal 2020. As a result, Magar did not have any business during the peak months. Purna Bahadur Gurung, who operates homestay in Sirubari village in Syangja in western Nepal, known for the culture, tradition and lifestyle of the Gurung community, also faced a similar impact of the pandemic. It is not only Gurung's homestay business affected by the pandemic and the subsequent restrictions; there is a spillover effect on organic vegetables, milk, and poultry farms within the village from where the homestays buy products to serve the tourists (Shrestha, 2020). Similar impacts of the pandemic were observed across the hospitality sector of Nepal.

The Government of Nepal reopened the tourism sector in mid-December 2020 to foreigners coming by air in mid-December and resumed mountaineering and trekking on 17 October 2020 with some restrictions (Shrestha & Prasain, 2020). However, the number of tourists arriving were few. Even as travel bans and lockdowns had been or were being lifted in many countries, including Nepal, it would take several months or even more than a year before international tourists start travelling to Nepal and before normalcy returns to the tourism industry of Nepal. The uncertainty was still prevalent as the increase in the number of infections and death due the virus in the USA and Europe and the identification of new strains of Coronavirus in the UK and other countries. This instilled more fear and forced these governments to reinstate lockdowns and travel bans affecting international travel and tourism in Nepal and worldwide.

Amidst these uncertainties, a light of hope for the collapsing tourism industry in Nepal came in the form of domestic tourists, which typically relies heavily on foreign tourists (Lama, 2020). This highlights the potential of domestic tourism which has increased in the last few years. Cities and towns like Chitwan, Pokhara and Bandipur have become popular destinations among internal tourists and activities such as mountaineering, trekking, rafting, bungee jumping, zip lining, and paragliding have attracted large numbers of Nepalis. After the

restrictions on mobility were lifted at the end of July 2020, the number of domestic tourists started increasing (Prasain, 2020). On 7 November 2020, Manahunkot hill in Tanahun district in western Nepal saw 10,000 Nepali visitors and two-wheelers and four-wheelers congested the approximately three kilometres of the road leading to the hilltop. The reaction was triggered by a TikTok video which later became viral. As Nepalis were stuck inside their homes for four long months following the lockdown and travel restrictions, many people started short and long-distance travelling to get out of their homes and to enjoy and refresh themselves after the restriction on travel was lifted. One such visitor who made a video of the beautiful scenery from the hilltop of Manahunkot became viral across social media and Nepalis visiting the place to make similar videos soared (Subedi, 2020). Travel has not only increased in Manahunkot; but also to other areas of Nepal in the last few months since restrictions have lifted.

The Crisis within a Crisis: COVID-19 and Labour Migration

Director of the ILO's Conditions of Work and Equality Department, Manuela Tomei, in June 2020, warned worker-sending countries to brace for 'migrant crisis within COVID-19 crisis' as millions of migrant workers globally were expected to suffer employment loss and were "expected to return home to countries that are already grappling with weak economies and rising unemployment" (Mandal, 2020b). Migration has become an integral part of South Asian countries, including Nepal, contributing significantly to the economy of the nation as well as the migrant's household. Every year thousands of Nepali men and women migrate overseas for employment and education, among other reasons. Migration for employment (labour migration) overseas has increased significantly in the last three decades. Pushed by poverty and lack of employment opportunities domestically and pulled by the prospect of colossal salary abroad, Nepalis are travelling across the border for work while often incurring huge loans to finance their migration. The Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE)

issued more than 4 million labour permits to Nepalis wanting to go abroad (primarily to Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] countries, Malaysia, and excluding India) for employment in the past decade from 2009/10 to 2018/19 (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020). More than two million Nepalis were in India in 2017/18 for work, education, or as a dependent (Baniya et al., 2020). Nepali migrant workers are engaged in low-wage work in informal sectors, such as domestic workers, labourers, cleaner, etc (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2020). The remittance sent by these migrant workers to their families back home is extremely important to Nepal's economy and migrant workers' households. Nepalis abroad remitted USD 8.1 billion in 2019, accounting for 27.3 per cent of the nation's GDP (Ratha et al., 2020a). Furthermore, 24 per cent of households in Nepal depend on remittance income to access food, education, health, and other basic necessities (Takenaka et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent economic recession has had severe impact on Nepali migrant workers and was expected to impact the remittance flow in Nepal (Ratha et al., 2020a, 2020b; Takenaka et al., 2020). Thousands of Nepali migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Malaysia, India, and other destination countries were terminated from their jobs, forced to take unpaid leave or reduced wages, and were not paid their due salaries and benefits and ultimately had to return to Nepal (Baniya et al., 2020). Nepalis were stranded in their destination countries for several months in the early stages of the pandemic due to temporary lockdowns and travel bans imposed by the governments of Nepal and destination countries and were without proper access to food and accommodation before they were able to return. Migrant workers have faced various perils in Gulf countries that host millions of migrant workers and which are the primary destinations of Nepali labour migrants (Amnesty International, 2020a). The COVID-19 crisis increased their vulnerability. Twenty Nepali men were arrested and detained by Qatari police in April 2020 using COVID-19 as a ruse and expelled

from the country. A Nepali man speaking with Amnesty International mentioned that they were kept in an overcrowded jail and were given just one piece of bread each day which were placed on and had to be snatched from plastic on the floor (Amnesty International, 2020b). As reported by the COVID-19 Crisis Management Centre (CCMC), between June 2020 and 21 January 2021, 233,978 Nepalis returned to Nepal from overseas, including migrant workers (COVID-19 Crisis Management Centre, 2020). Hundreds of thousands of Nepalis returned from India via land.

At the beginning of the pandemic, after losing jobs and income and the country-wide lockdown placed by the Government of India and Nepal, thousands of migrant workers working in India travelled a long way in the hope of returning to Nepal. But they had a long wait at the India-Nepal border as the Government of Nepal did not allow admission of Nepalis migrant workers to Nepal. In doing so, thousands of them were compelled to be on the border without proper food and shelter for days. As a result, some Nepalis resorted to dangerous means to cross the border. On 13 April 2020, 11 migrant workers swam across the Mahakali river to get back to their country and once caught, they were paraded by the security personnel and kept in quarantine (Basnyat, 2020). In March, as the Coronavirus was rapidly spreading in India, a 48-year-old male who was working in a neighbouring country tried returning to Nepal but could not due to the closure of the Indo-Nepal border. After staying four days in an Indian town near the border and not having any other option, he used dangerous means by crossing the Mahakali river to come to Nepal (Dahal & Sapkota, 2020). On the other hand, authorities failed to manage quarantine facilities, turning them into the hub of virus breeding space (Poudel, 2021). But most important is that these migrant workers returning from their destination, many after being stranded in the destination country for several months, were welcomed with a lack of support, limited employment opportunities, and debts.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent economic recession were expected to impact the remittance flow in Nepal, resulting in an estimating decline of 12 per cent and, in the worst-case scenario, by 28 per cent (Ratha et al., 2020a, Takenaka et al., 2020). However, despite the grim projections, the data from Nepal Rastra Bank showed that the remittance in FY 2019/20 decreased by 0.5 per cent, from NPR 879.27 billion in 2018/19 to NPR 875.03 billion in 2019/20, compared to a 16.5 per cent increase in the inflow that was observed in the fiscal year 2018/19 (Nepal Rastra Bank, 2019, 2020). While the remittance decreased sharply in April 2020, the consecutive months saw a slow increase in remittance inflow. Regardless of the global economic slowdown and employment loss, Nepalis continued sending their families money to cope with the crisis. Past experience has also shown that remittance has been a lifeline for migrant households and Nepal’s economy during a crisis. After a massive earthquake devastated Nepal in April and May 2015, one of the greatest responses came from the remittance. Remittance income rose by 20.9 per cent in 2015 compared to 3.2 per cent in 2014 (Ratha et al., 2016).

families became most difficult due to the COVID-19 restrictions (Lwagun, 2020). A group containing seven workers had come to Kathmandu in 2020 to work as construction labourers from the Rautahat district of Nepal, which is more than 200 kilometres away (Thakur, 2020). After house construction jobs stopped during the lockdown and the contractor himself returned home, leaving them stranded, the group of seven started travelling back home on foot. The group had been walking for four days and hoped to reach home by the evening. As Nepalis were instructed to stay inside during the lockdown, factories, construction work as well as non-essential private and public sectors were closed down, and daily wage workers lost their jobs and did not have money to buy food and pay rent. Many of them have travelled to different parts of the country, including big cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara, for work. However, the national lockdown and ban on domestic transportation (Figure 2) caused them to be stranded in those cities and towns. After the loss of jobs and being unable to pay for food and rent, many decided to return home and braved the long-distance home travelling on foot to reach their village.

No Work, No Food and Long Travel Home: Perils of Daily Wage Earners

The lives of daily wage workers and labourers engaged in informal occupation and their



Figure 2: Timelines of the Pandemic Management in Nepal
 Source: Authors

Coping Mechanism and Resilience

Nepalis are not new to hazards and crises. The devastating earthquake of 2015 killed about 9,000 people, injured around 22,000, and destroyed more than 700,000 homes, primarily in the country's central region. Every year hundreds of people lose their lives due to natural hazards such as floods and landslides. As Nepalis were grappling with the disruptions caused by the pandemic, their coping capacity and resilience was further challenged by other events such as locust invasion, flooding, and landslides.

Amidst the socio-economic and health impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, floods and landslides triggered by the onset of the monsoon season led to fatalities and damage in several parts of Nepal (DCA, 2020a). For example, in Sindhupalchowk district of Nepal, one of the hardest-hit districts by the devastating earthquake in 2015, the landmass has weakened due to the earthquake and the consecutive aftershocks making the area more prone to water-induced disasters (Dangal, 2020). In three months, between July and September 2020, 73 people were killed, 39 were missing, 40 were injured, and 127 houses were destroyed due to floods and landslides in this area. By 28 September 2020, 364 deaths had occurred, 317 people were injured, and 104 were missing, with 1,243 families being impacted as a result of the floods and landslides across Nepal (DCA, 2020a).

During the already disastrous COVID-19, Nepal also faced the swarm of eight-million locusts entering Nepal's border districts of Sarlahi, Bara and Rupandehi from India's state of Bihar on 27 June 2020 (Pokhrel, 2020). This incident caused serious concerns especially for the farmers, as the locust plague implied food shortage and portended of famine for the country already struggling with the pandemic (THT, 2020). The locusts destroyed hectares of farms, most of which were owned by farmers who had incurred heavy loans from different sources (Mandal, 2020c). However, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development (MoALD), stated that considering the size of swarms of locusts that

entered Nepal, that they barely caused any damage (myRepublica, 2020).

Nevertheless, insecurities and uncertainties of different forms are not new experiences, and it seems easier to cope with disasters for the Nepalis. As in the past, Nepalis dealt with the current pandemic "through a combination of creativity, perseverance, careful use of available resources and hard-earned income, with some state and international intervention" (Shneiderman, Baniya & Billon, 2020). Many migrant workers who returned in 2020 after losing or being terminated from jobs overseas were planning to return for foreign employment (Mandal, 2020d). The month of October, at the border between Nepal and India, usually sees a rush of Nepali migrant workers returning from India to celebrate Dashain and Tihar (Habib, 2019). Primarily in the western region of Nepal, from where the majority of Nepalis migrate to work in India, that time of the year sees hundreds of delighted and happy faces rushing to meet their families, carrying gifts and hope of taking a break from work, and celebrating the biggest festival of Nepal. However, in 2020, the scenario at these borders was exactly the opposite. After the Coronavirus devastated the economy in India, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis returned via the land border after losing their jobs. But poverty and hunger pushed them to return to India for work, defying restrictions and ahead of the onset of these festivals. In fact, since August 2020, more than 300,000 Nepalis had returned to India for work after not finding employment in Nepal and because of the pressure of financially supporting their families (Dahal & Sapkota, 2020). This happened just six months after hundreds of thousands of Nepalis working in India started returning after losing jobs due to the lockdown implemented by the Government of India.

Nepal has a massive percentage of young population, with 40.8 per cent of the total population between the ages of 16 and 40. During the pandemic, all businesses faced various challenges; however, young entrepreneurs demonstrated exceptional capabilities of resilience to sustain their business

activities during the COVID-19 crisis through innovative means. One of the main ways they continued their business was using zoom meetings and using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and even using the down time to build business models to accommodate their business in any kind of crisis situations (CDKN, 2020).

Nepal is a mountainous country and is famous as the home of Mount Everest that is one of the places tourists have on their bucket lists. However, not many think of Nepal as a country that has been facing disaster after disaster—the civil war, the massacre of the royal family, the earthquakes and the Indian blockade. In recent times Nepal has also added Kalapani to their official map creating a stir internationally while having implications for Indo-Nepal relations (Ethirajan, 2020). The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) started a civil war from 1996 to 2006 to overthrow the monarchy and establish a communist government (The Asia Foundation, 2017). In 2001, ten royal families were massacred in the royal palace, throwing the country into chaos (The Asia Foundation, 2017). An intense earthquake hit Nepal in April 2015, leading to thousands of Nepalis' deaths and affecting the country's historical, social, cultural and economic aspects (Sijapati et al., 2015; Ministry of Population & Environment et al., 2016). In 2015, a blockade on the southern border of Nepal with India as a part of a protest by ethnic Madhesi political parties in opposition to Nepal's new constitution led to a shortage of petrol, cooking oil and other daily essentials (Pattison, 2015).

While all these events were happening, Nepal also faced the monsoon disasters such as landslides and flooding that occur yearly. To add to the woes, there was and is constant political turmoil in Nepal, leading to forced strikes, riots, and curfews. While the wounds of some of these incidents have only started to heal, COVID-19 came as a pandemic. However, with all the experiences with disasters in the past, one can ask if Nepali people have become more resilient to such events. Although COVID-19 has compounded all the earlier catastrophes,

Nepalis have developed a hardiness towards such events and seem to have quickly bounced back from the impacts. While COVID-19 is different as the virus dictates the impact on people, Nepalis had already moved on. They had resumed all their daily activities, with precautions such as masks and hand sanitisers. It also seemed like there was no other choice but to take the risk and continue their daily activities. Not working means many people have no food for themselves and their families. Low-income families had also plunged into the vicious cycle of no employment, no income, incurring heavy loans, working overtime to clear up loans, no savings, no food, and so on. This cycle also has long-term implications for children's futures. Instead of going to school, they too had to work or take care of their siblings, plunging them into the same economic depression that their parents had to deal with their entire lives (The Lutheran World Federation, 2020).

A Long Wait for Vaccine?

Regarding COVID-19 vaccines, there have been various developments in Nepal. According to the Ministry of Health and Population, the Government of Nepal planned to provide a COVID-19 vaccine to 72 per cent of the total population except for children (DCA, 2020b). In August 2020, the Department of Drug Management of the Government of Nepal gave permission to three private companies to buy the drug 'Remdesivir,' an antiviral injection for coronavirus treatment (DCA, 2020c). However, an investigation from officials of the Ministry of Health and Population found the medication being sold at exorbitant prices, almost eight times the normal price (DCA, 2020d). Later, the Government of Nepal granted conditional permission to use the AstraZeneca Covishield vaccine, manufactured in India, for emergency use (THT Online, 2021). Nepal received one million doses of the aforementioned vaccine from India as a gift on 21 January 2021 (Gurubacharya, 2021). It has been reported that the COVID-19 vaccination started being administered on 27 January 2021. In the first phase, 430,000 Nepalis who were at high risk of the infection, primarily frontline workers

including health workers, security personnel, ambulance drivers, and waste management and sanitation workers, were reported to receive the vaccine (Republica, 2021).

In late September 2020, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) reported that it would supply the Russian Sputnik V vaccine through Trinity Pharmaceuticals based in Nepal (THT Online, 2020). The vaccines, as RDIF claimed, were to be available for 90 per cent of Nepal's population. However, the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) had no official information on the agreement prior to importing any drugs or vaccines, and permission needed to be obtained from the Department of Drug Management (Sapkota, 2020). Nepal was also reported to be receiving vaccines from the World Health Organization under the COVAX program of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (Poudel, 2020). Of the 72 per cent of the total Nepali population who needed COVID-19 vaccines, 20 per cent were to be vaccinated through the COVAX program. As per World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 dashboard, a total of 59,118,206 vaccine doses have been administered by 22 October 2022 (WHO, 2022).

The Government of Nepal announced a COVID-19 relief package in March 2020 (Nepali Times, 2020). The package included a discount of 25% on electricity for consumers who use more than 150 units of electricity every month, no penalty till mid-April 2020 on delays in payments of utility bills and tax as well as a 10% discount for daily wage workers on rice, flour, dal, salt, sugar, and oil supplies bought from Nepal food Corporation and Salt Trading Corporation.

The Nepali people, especially the working-class population, had been furious with the inability of the government of Nepal to handle the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, hundreds of youths in Nepal who were not affiliated with any political parties protested by fasting without food and water as they demanded the expansion of PCR testing, transparency and accountability in the procurement of medical kits, protection of the frontline health workers, repatriation and rehabilitation of vulnerable migrant workers

with dignity, relief to the affected vulnerable marginalised communities of people, and cease of RDT tests (DCA, 2020e). However, the protests also served in COVID-19 spread as mass gatherings are one of the potential means in spreading the virus.

The reports from the Ministry of Health show that the total number of deaths due to COVID-19 was around 2030, as of 2 February 2021. The number of infections was decreasing daily, with the number of active cases at the aforementioned date being 2400. But the question is if this was true. At a time when the numbers were increasing in many countries and as new strains of the virus were being identified and spreading across the countries, including its neighbour India, the decreasing number of infections really put a question on the authenticity of the reports in Nepal. The decline in the number of COVID-19 infections could be a result of recent government actions. The government stopped providing free tests to asymptomatic people (Poudel, 2021). As a result, Nepalis were only seeking tests and treatment in case they fell seriously ill. Similarly, compared to other countries, the number of Coronavirus tests in the population in Nepal has remained low, and contact tracing has also been completely stopped. Consequently, the number of COVID-19 tests each day has decreased.

In a surprising turn of events, the President of Nepal, Bidya Devi Bhandari, based on cabinet recommendation, dissolved the Parliament on 20 December 2020 to be followed by a fresh election. This was reported to be a result of the tug-of-war politics during the COVID-19 pandemic (DCA, 2020d). Protests flowed into the streets of the country's capital, Kathmandu. In fact, the ruling government and other political leaders conducted mass gatherings since the dissolution of the Parliament in December 2020; the government defended its decision and the latter opposed the decision. Gatherings that saw hundreds of people defying COVID-19 social distancing protocols were obviously adding to the nightmare of the future. The risk of the virus was still in the air.

Conclusion

Nepal, situated on the lap of the Himalayas, relies primarily on agriculture to maintain its economy. The contribution of tourism and migration abroad to work has emerged in the last decade, as important sectors that have significantly contributed to the Nepali economy. Nepal has continuously gone through various woeful circumstances that have ravaged the already struggling economy over the past two decades. However, after the social and economic destruction caused by the global earthquake of 2015, the new COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation. This paper employed a review of secondary resources, including publications and news reports, to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector and migrant workers. Restrictions such as full and partial lockdowns, and suspension of domestic and international flights, among others, were implemented to contain the virus's spread and significantly affected Nepal's tourism sector. The Nepali migrant workers abroad were also among the hardest hit by the pandemic. As a result of the decline in the global economy, thousands of Nepali migrants lost their jobs and incomes in various destination countries, including GCC countries, Malaysia, and India, and ultimately returned home. As the lockdown was lifted, Nepalis began to fly, boosting domestic tourism as people could get out of their homes. In the case of migrants who returned after the pandemic, they were again driven to follow the same path internationally to support their family obligations; thousands returned to India, although the pandemic was looming in India too.

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Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Dr Venkat Pulla developed the study concept, abstract and direction. Sadikshya Bhattarai, Binay Jung Thapa and Sukrita Rai contributed to the review of secondary data and Bhattarai and Thapa drafted the manuscript mentored by Pulla.

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