

Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdown on Religious Tourism Business: A Study of Changunarayan, Bhaktapur

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received: 10 April 2025

Accepted: 12 July 2025

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Cite

Khadka, B. K. (2025). Impact of covid-19 and lockdown on religious tourism business: A study of Changunarayan, Bhaktapur. *GS WOW: Wisdom of Worthy Research Journal*, 4(1), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16359237>

ABSTRACT

Religious tourism is a significant contributor to Nepal's tourism industry, attracting large numbers of visitors each year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have severely impacted the livelihoods of those who depend on this sector, particularly small entrepreneurs, local residents, and business owners in the Changunarayan temple area. This study assessed how these disruptions affected small traders, general store owners, and hotel operators, using a mixed-methods approach that included both qualitative and quantitative data from selected stakeholders. The findings reveal that most respondents rely on business as their main source of income and that tourist spending has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, with more than half of small business owners and a majority of hotel owners reporting reduced sales. Although Nepal's tourism policies aim to improve living standards and diversify religious tourism, the study found these policies to be largely ineffective in addressing the specific needs of those whose livelihoods are closely tied to religious tourism. Overall, the research underscores the urgent need for more targeted and effective policy measures to support affected communities in the Changunarayan area.

Keywords: religious tourism, small traders and hotel owners, tourism policy, Changunarayan

Introduction

The tourism industry is an important service in Nepal. Tourism as an industry it includes all those industries and companies established to provide services to the visitors. Tourism is the industry of industries, so it includes other industries also, such as airlines, hotels, cargo, etc. Some of them are established for visitors, but also serve the locals. On the other hand, some industries are established for local visitors but serve the visitors.

Among the different kinds of tourism activities, religious tourism is one of them which are commonly found in Nepal. Nepal is famous for

the birthplace of Lord Gautam Buddha, birthplace of Sita (Janaki), Pashupatinath, Sambhunath, Baudhanath, Muktinath and other religious and holy places of different religions make Nepal a place for religious tourism. Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal is the city of temple endowed with abundant cultural heritage. Full of art, architecture and culture, the Kathmandu Valley is the prime destination for the tourists. As Nepal is a land of festivities and celebrations, visitors can experience how a culturally diverse and rich society of Nepal grows in harmony (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MoFA], 2022). On this basis, religious tourism has potential effects on the economic and cultural

development of destinations that exhibit some religious component (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2017).

Tourism can play a positive role in breaking through inertia and economic morbidity. As a catalyst, it can bring speedy socio-economic transformation of the society (Kaur, 1985). After the outbreak of COVID-19 from China, government of Nepal forced a lock down due to the risk of COVID-19 and pressure from WHO. Raj and Griffin (2020) argues that COVID-19 is devastating the religious tourism industry in terms of economic, social, food, employment and faith related impacts. Pilgrimages are being stopped, and mass gatherings are halted. During the lockdown period religious tourism sector of the country has also been adversely affected due to the coronavirus pandemic just like another sector. The global pandemic has had a major impact on the global travel and tourism economy which include religious tourism also, as well as devastating many countries' individual travel and tourism sectors. Many major religious holidays have been affected by travel restrictions, most notable was the cancellation of tourists visiting religious places (Mróz, 2021). Raj and Griffin (2020) argued that COVID-19 is devastating the religious tourism industry in terms of economic, social, food, employment and faith related impacts. Pilgrimages are being stopped, and mass gatherings are halted.

There have been few attempts to investigate the phenomena of religious tourism and of pilgrimage in the tourism context, despite the rapid evolution of the former into a postmodern form of contemporary pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner, 2016). There are spillover impacts of the pandemic on the socio-cultural structure, human psychology and global economic system where the tourism industry is no exception (Ulak, 2020). It is believed that reduction of religious tourism adversely affects the small entrepreneurs, local people who are normally dependent on religious tourism.

Since the early 1990s researchers have shown increasing interest in the emergence of religion-induced travel to Catholic pilgrimage shrines as

a tourism related movement. The recognition of such forms of tourism has prompted definitions of the religious tourism phenomenon as a particular type of tourism in which visitors are motivated partially or exclusively by religious premises. Several religious tourism case studies have been conducted in the Indian Himalayas, a prominent Hindu pilgrimage destination that dates back to ancient Indian religious traditions (Singh, 2006). The evolving phenomenon is viewed favorably because it brings apparent benefits to pilgrims, local communities, and society (Gupta, 1999).

Religious tourism is the second sector, after mountaineering, which welcomes a large number of tourists into the country. Indeed, some discussions were held on the impact of COVID-19 on religious tourism. It is believed that reduction of religious tourism adversely affects the small entrepreneurs, local people who normally depend on religious tourism. In this context the study explores the effect of COVID-19 on the livelihood of people who depend on religious tourism in Changunarayan area with the general objective to conduct the impact assessment of COVID-19 and lockdown on religious tourism business on different stakeholders (locals, small traders and visitors) with specific objectives to examine the socio-economic impact of lockdown on religious tourism business sites in Changunarayan and to analyze the effects on livelihood of small traders and locals who depend on religious tourism activities in Changunarayan area and to review the tourism policy regarding religious tourism in Nepal.

Problem Statement

Religious tourism plays a crucial role in Nepal's economy, supporting the livelihoods of many local communities and small entrepreneurs around pilgrimage sites. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have caused a sharp decline in tourist arrivals, severely affecting the income and employment of those dependent on this sector (Adhikari et al., 2024). Despite the socio-economic importance of religious tourism, existing policies and interventions have been inadequate in protecting vulnerable stakeholders such as small

traders, hotel owners, and local residents from the pandemic's adverse effects.

The sudden suspension of pilgrimage activities and closure of religious sites resulted in significant financial distress and increased unemployment among these groups. Although some safety protocols and economic measures were implemented during the pandemic, these efforts have not sufficiently addressed the challenges faced by informal and small-scale businesses, many of which lack formal support or financial relief (Mishra et al., 2023; Mishra et al., 2024). Moreover, current tourism policies have not been effectively tailored to ensure the resilience and recovery of livelihoods dependent on religious tourism, raising concerns about their overall efficacy (Chaudhary & Mishra, 2023).

Given these gaps, it is imperative to systematically assess the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and lockdowns on religious tourism business sites and to evaluate the effectiveness of tourism policies in supporting affected communities. This need is reinforced by recent sociological analyses highlighting the stratified impact of the pandemic on various livelihood groups in Nepal and emphasizing the importance of targeted, evidence-based policy interventions (Adhikari et al., 2024; Mishra et al., 2023b).

Research Objective

The study aims to examine the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on Religious Tourism Business on different stakeholders (locals, small traders and visitors) with reference to the livelihood of people who are mainly dependent on religious tourism business in Changuarayan. While examining the impact of COVID 19, the study focuses on the analysis of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on religious tourism business sites in the study area and review of the tourism policy regarding religious tourism business in Nepal.

Methodology

The study follows both descriptive as well as analytical research design. The study describes the

situation of local people, small traders and other stakeholders that are directly linked with temples so descriptive research design was used. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected focusing from multiple sources and analysis to meet the objectives of the study. Exploratory data analysis techniques were used for data analysis and presentation. In the study 20 small traders, 5 general store owners and 5 hotel owners who kept shop in temple sites were selected with non-probability sampling method. Individual people were considered as a sample unit in the study. A structured questionnaire was used for scheduled interview with sample households and check list was used for a key informant interview.

Results and Discussion

The impacts of COVID-19 and lockdown related to occupation, job loss of family members, decrease in income, saving and increase in income, conflict and stress are widely observed in the study area. There are several factors such as livelihood of the people, economic growth, business activities, and the behavior of people that are influenced because of the pandemic. After COVID-19, among the family whose main income is income from business 69.31 percent are engaged in small business and 15.38 percent are engaged in hotel business. Similarly, among the families who said that earning from service is the main income source, 2 (50%) are engaged in general store business and 25 percent each are involved in small business and hotel business respectively.

In addition, among the small business owners, 75 percent said that due to lockdown there was the loss of the job of the family members and only 25 percent said that there is not loss of job of the family member. Similarly, among the owner of general store, 60 percent said that their family did not loss the job after lockdown but 40 percent of the respondents said that there was loss of job of their family members. Among the hotel owners, 80% said that their family member loss the job and only 20 percent hotel owner family said that their family did not loss the job during lockdown.

Table 1*Flow of Tourist/visitors*

Immediately after lockdown	Respondents	Percent (%)
Yes	30	100
No	-	-
2 nd lockdown		
More than 1st lockdown	2	6.67
Continuously decrease	27	90
No change	1	3.33
Currently		
More than 2nd lockdown	-	-
Reached before lockdown	1	3.33
More than 1st lockdown	29	96.67

Note. Field Survey, 2022

In the study, 70 percent were aged between 26 to 30 years, 63.33 percent were female, 50 percent studied under SLC, 53.33 percent were living in a joint family and among the respondents who lived in nuclear families, and 57.14 percent run small businesses. Similarly, among the respondents who lived in nuclear families, the majority (75%) is engaged in small business and 18.75 percent are engaged in hotels. The study also found that 90 percent of respondents' main family income source is business and among the family whose main income is income from business 65.57 percent are engaged in small business and 18.52 percent are engaged in hotel business.

Similarly, after COVID-19, among the family whose main income is from business 69.31 percent are engaged in small business and 15.38 percent are engaged in hotel business. There is decrease in income after the lockdown. It is found that the tourists/visitors did not buy the products like before first lockdown. Meanwhile, among the small business person, 95 percent said that currently the flow of the local visitors was increase and 3 out of 5 (60%) respondents who run general store said that currently the flow of the local visitors increased.

Regional political stability, the continuous investment in tourism infrastructure, superstructure, and the maintenance of an acceptable cost of living

index, are some of the variables that are holding down tourism advance in the region. (Ladki, et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in this study, it is also found that currently the flow of the international tourists has been increasing as per the 93.33 percent of the respondents. The owner of small business, general store and hotel all said that there was increase in income after the lockdown was over.

The study also found that among the small business owner; they adjusted according to their changed income while 90 percent used their past savings and 85 percent got help from the local authorities. Among the owners of hotel, all the respondents said that they adjusted according to their income, used past savings and 80 percent of the respondents said that they got some help from the government. Moreover, the small business persons and owner of general store had managed their income without selling their property to meet the daily expenses during lockdown. Meanwhile, to some extents their family cooperated for the cutting off unnecessary family expenditure and among the general store owner. Among the hotel owners, 40 percent said that to some extent their family cooperated for cutting off unnecessary family expenditure and 60 percent said that their family completely cooperated for cutting off unnecessary family expenditure.

There was increase in conflict among the family members during lockdown and among the owner of general store. Among the hotel owners, 60 percent said that there was increase in conflict among the family members during lockdown. 83.33 percent of the respondents said that there was increase in conflict among the family member during lockdown. Similarly, the small business person and owner of hotel were stress on them about occupation and income during lockdown.

The National Tourism Strategy Plan for Nepal (2014 – 2023) was the tourism related strategies focusing on Trekking, Rafting, Adventure tourism, Religious tourism, Sports tourism, Cinema tourism, Education tourism, Health tourism, Argo-tourism and also focus on Development of air services, Role of the Government and the private sector, Human resources development, Environmental conservation and sustainable use, Use of information technology and statistics, Safety of tourists and crisis management, Concessions and facilities, Harmonious relation between entrepreneurs and workers, Legal, administrative, institutional and managerial reform and Coordination, monitoring and evaluation (Nepal Tourism Board, [NTB], 2013). The study found that tourism policies which mostly focused on uplifting the living standard of people depending on religious tourism, providing employment opportunities and even alleviating poverty as well as bringing changes to diversify the religious tourism potentials yet the current policies and practices revealed to be ineffectual and inefficient as the livelihood of the people who are totally dependent on the religious tourism business are not clearly focused.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent nationwide lockdowns had a profound and multifaceted impact on tourism activities, particularly in culturally significant sites such as the Changunarayan temple. The enforced restrictions led to a dramatic decline in the inflow of both domestic and international tourists, which directly disrupted the local economy dependent

on tourism-related activities. Small-scale traders, general store owners, and hotel operators at the temple site experienced a severe contraction in their income streams, resulting in heightened economic uncertainty and jeopardizing their occupational futures.

Following the lifting of the first lockdown, although there was a gradual resurgence in tourist arrivals, consumer behavior had notably shifted. Visitors exhibited more cautious spending patterns, purchasing fewer goods and services compared to the pre-pandemic period. This behavioral change further constrained the revenue generation capacity of local businesses, prolonging their financial instability. The subsequent second lockdown exacerbated these challenges, reinforcing the vulnerability of small business operators who rely heavily on consistent tourist patronage.

In response to these economic hardships, affected business owners were compelled to implement various adaptive strategies to sustain their livelihoods. These included stringent adjustments to household and business expenditures, utilization of personal savings, and seeking assistance from local authorities. While a minority resorted to liquidating assets, the majority managed to avoid such drastic measures. Crucially, family members played a supportive role by curtailing non-essential expenses, thereby alleviating some of the financial burdens and enabling a degree of economic resilience during the crisis.

Overall, the pandemic underscored the fragility of tourism-dependent economies and highlighted the critical need for diversified income sources and enhanced social safety nets for small-scale entrepreneurs. The experience of the Changunarayan temple community illustrates the broader socio-economic repercussions of global health emergencies on local economies and emphasizes the importance of coordinated policy interventions to support vulnerable populations in times of crisis. Future recovery efforts must prioritize sustainable tourism development, capacity building for small businesses, and

community-based resilience strategies to mitigate the impact of similar disruptions in the future.

Recommendations and Further Research

As per the study, it is necessary to diversify their business to reduce the risk because depending highly on tourist creates high risk among the small business owners and hotel owners. They also need help of family members and support because due to low income generation, increase in family expenditure the people may face depression, stress and loneliness. The government of Nepal must support for fulfillment of basic needs during pandemic periods because only locally authorized support is not enough to provide full support. The I/NGOs also should support and help for reestablishment of their shops. The marketing and promotional work must be carried by Nepal Government, Guthi, local authorities and I/NGOs to increase the inflow of tourists/visitors to Changunarayan.

The marketing related issues, value added are the other vital topics which are ignored in the study. So, there are also the attractive topics for future research. The impact of lock down from local and tourist prospective are also excluded in the study. Thus, the study may conduct in these areas also. The problems faced by visitors, trend of tourist inflow, marketing mix and so on are other area for the future study.

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