

# **ACCESSIBLE TOURISM: A NOVEL IDEA FOR PROMOTING TOURISM IN NEPAL**

**Authors:** *Pankaj Pradhananga and Suman Timsina*

## **Overview of International Tourism and Nepal**

Over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Modern tourism is closely linked to development and encompasses growing number of new dimension. These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic progress. Travel and Tourism has become a universal activity in contemporary society. International Tourists arrival crossed one billion mark in 2012. This global spread of tourism in industrialized and developed states has produced economic and employment benefits in many related sectors - from construction to agriculture or telecommunications.

Nepal is known as an exotic destination in the Himalayan region with fascinating natural and cultural attractions. The country was opened for International Tourists after the fall of autocratic Rana Regime in 1951. When Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa climbed Mount Everest in 1953, Nepal caught the attention of global travel market as a mystical and adventurous destination. Over 6 decades, Nepal has attracted tourists from across the globe; they come here to enjoy its natural beauty as well as centuries' old tangible and intangible cultural heritages. Over the years, it has made its presence felt in International outbound market attracting number of segments i.e. Trekkers, adventure seekers, mountaineers, pilgrims (Hindus and Buddhists), wildlife enthusiasts, holidaymakers, MICE etc.

The success story from the 1950s that endures is the growth of the tourism sector in Nepal.

Tourists' arrival to Nepal have continuously grown (since 1962 as recorded data) except few notable setbacks like the civil unrest for pro-democracy movement in 1990 and the civil unrest led by armed conflict (1996-2006). These events coincided with political instability, frequent demonstrations, *banda* (general strikes), political processions and growing labor unionism and disputes. Two major events of 2015 was a major setback on Nepal's economic development and they were earthquake in April and blockade in the south of the border with India.

### **What is Accessible Tourism?**

"Accessible Tourism is a form of Tourism that involves collaborative process between stakeholders that enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments " - *Dimitrios Buhalis & Simon Darcy*

This definition includes people living with permanent or temporary disabilities, senior citizens, obese and families with young children. Accessible tourism enables the persons with disabilities to explore the world switching from Fear to Freedom.

There has been increasing use of the term ' Inclusive Tourism' for ' Accessible Tourism'.

The concept of 'Inclusive Tourism is itself traveling around the world. It is leaving an infrastructure that will allow the pleasure of world discovery to generations to come. It enables generations present to do so through all stages of their lifespan. That's the vision of Universal Design applied to tourism -- Inclusive Tourism.

### **Why Accessible Tourism?**

Freedom of movement, mobility right, or the right to travel is considered as a human right as stated in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Every country should respect and encourage the right to travel for all. In other words, access to tourism is a right for everyone as assured by the UNCRPD. Although the convention has been signed by over 140 countries including EU and The USA, the accessible tourism still remains as a distant dream in many destinations.

The *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* adopted by the World Tourism Organization in 1999 states:

*"Tourism activities should respect the equality of men and women; they should promote human rights and, more particularly, the individual rights of the most vulnerable groups, notably children, the elderly, the handicapped, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples."*

Needless to say, accessible Tourism is a very new term in Nepal. There is no official record about the first International tourist with disability who made it to Nepal. However, the effort of opening up for accessible tourism has already begun though it is still in its infancy. A major challenge for Destination Nepal is lack of accessible infrastructure and absence of enforcing laws in Tourism operating sectors for coming up with accessible Tourism products. Given the

enormous economic and social benefits to be derived from this segment of Tourism, it is high time for the industry to understand and develop Inclusive tourism in the gateway to the Himalaya.

A few tourism enterprises have taken the leadership role in developing a new and important tourism market for Nepal, the accessible tourism market. It is pertinent to mention Four Season Travel & Tours, a tour operator based in Kathmandu that identified the potential of Inclusive Travel by hosting the trip of Dr. Scott Rains, fondly known as Rolling Rains ([www.rollingrains.com](http://www.rollingrains.com)), in May 2014.

Worldwide, there are over 1 billion people with some form of disability and with friends and families; there are over a third of world's populations directly affected by disability. The tourism industry must rise to the challenge of the changing demographic structure of the market and re-examine its product and service offerings. It is predicted that the accessible tourism market, although under-served, will account for 25% of total tourism spending by 2020. Looking forward just a few years, the proportion of people with disabilities will only continue to rise, given the general ageing of the population. The retiring Baby Boomer generation in western countries, in particular, will have a significant impact on the tourism market: they will control 50% of total tourism spending, 40% of them will have some form of disability, and by 2020, 25% of total worldwide tourism spending will be by travelers with a disability (McKinsey, 2007).

With the growing life expectancy worldwide, tourism industry will get more seniors/ elderly travelers with less mobility. By promoting inclusive tourism, Nepal can attract such travelers in a significant numbers.

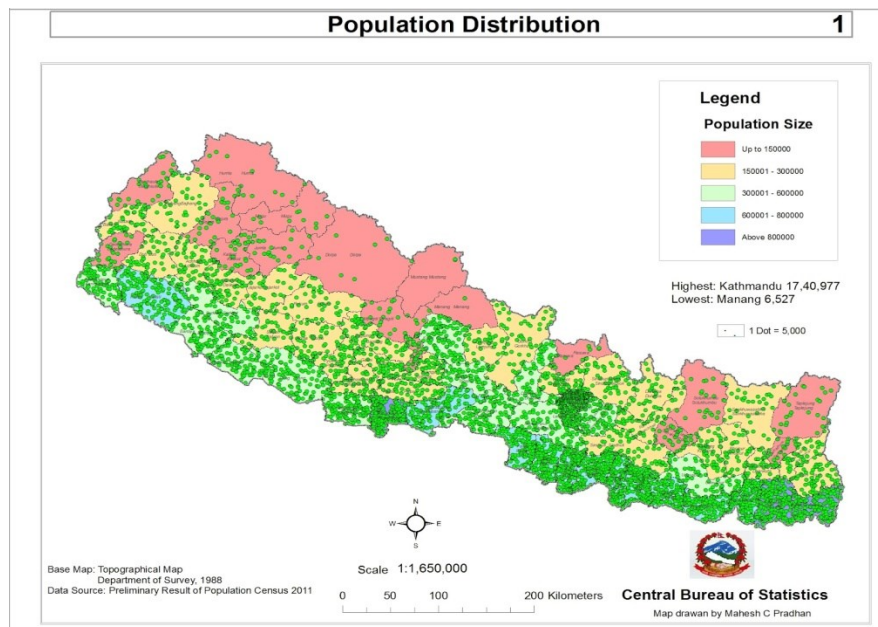
As Nepal is working hard to reposition its destination image after the 2015 earthquake, it is the right time to focus on inclusive tourism as well in the process of rebuilding the monuments and tourist facilities making it more accessible. Generally, tourists with disabilities travel on 'word of mouth' publicity and they tend to stay longer than the average length of stay. If persons with disabilities are told that the tourist destination is friendly for them, they have the tendency and eagerness to visit that place. They travel with companions or in small groups hence this would reward the destination with greater revenue.

### **Tourism and local Persons with Disabilities**

The April 2015 earthquake also left more than 4,000 Nepalese with physical disabilities. It is rather more important to build accessible infrastructure for the benefit of the locals as well the foreign tourists who travel to enjoy Natural and cultural beauty of Nepal.

Making the state and Tourism entrepreneurs understand the importance of inclusive tourism will not only benefit Tourism Industry, it will also connect the DPOs ( Disabled People Organizations) and Tourism operating sectors. It is important to mention that many tourism associations did not only come forward to help in relief drive after the EQ, a tourism community even organized excursion in Kathmandu valley to the group of wheelchair users as a relief in order to bring some cheers and help them getting out of the trauma in June 2015. This act of relief through tourism excursion was highly appreciated by Person with Disabilities.

## Accessible Tourism and Economic opportunities:



*Nepal census reports barely two percent (1.94%; 513,321) of the total population of Nepal having "some kind of disability".*

Nepal lacks organized effort to attract PWDs to travel Nepal. However, a number of organizations were successful to draw some attention from Nepal Tourism Board and other government entities through their customized programs on accessible tourism. A more organized effort with larger political WILL will not just open up a new market for national revenue and create new job but will also help Nepal gain new height in promoting tourism. There are many aspects and advantages of accessible tourism. Few of them are:

- a. It's a right thing to do.
- b. It will open up Nepal as a new destination for persons with disabilities, even for senior citizens and others.
- c. It will also create a new market for tour operators, hoteliers, software companies, printing (large print/braille etc.), construction, legislation etc.

- d. It will also create a social awareness to treat tourists with disabilities or special needs as any other tourists.

**To best of my knowledge, following programs are worth mentioning here to gain traction in the field of accessible tourism.**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Organized by</b>	<b>Supported by</b>
14-23 May, 2014	Familiarization trip for Dr. Scott Rains	Four Season Travel	Himalaya hotel/ Fulbari Resort/ Barahi Jungle Lodge / Hyatt Regency/ Soaltee hotel / Manaslu hotel / Handicap International /Buddha Air
22 Dec, 2014	A talk program by Mr. Ananta Ram Vaidya  'Challenges of Accessible Tourism in Nepal and the Role of hotel Industry'.	Four Season Travel	Hotel Radisson
14 June, 2015	An excursion to Godavari Botanical Garden for the local Friends with Disabilities - Independent Living center.	Passion To Travel community	Hotel Radisson, Four Season Travel, ICTP, eTN and PR foundation
27 July - 10 August	Poonhill Trek for Vagabondo Group from Italy travelling with a Blind traveler, Marco Olivieri	Four Season Travel	Nepal Trek House  PR Foundation
01 Dec, 2015	A Talk program on Accessibility Matters: Opportunities for Inclusive Tourism in Nepal	Four Season Travel in partnership with US embassy in Kathmandu & International Development	Hotel Radisson

		Institute - DC. ( IDI)	
March 2016	Talk program to boost Inclusive Tourism	Four Season Travel, IDI, Soarway Foundation	i-Hub / FNCCI
March	Asia Try	Govt of Nepal and Independent Living Cener	Four Season Travel / hotel Marshyangdi
22 Sep - 08 Oct , 2016	Wounded Heroes Trek to Nepal ( Amputees&PTDS veterans from the USA)	IDI, Four Season Travel & Tours, Soarway Foundation, Operations Namaste	Nepal Tourism Board, Etihad Air, Sur-Sudha,
05 Dec, 2016	An inclusive Excursion to Gokarna Forest for Friends with Disabilities	Four Season Travel &Gokarna Forest Resort	IDI, eTN, ICTP

*Source: Four Season Travel &Tours(P) Ltd*

One of the worth mentioning organized effort is a collective work by Washington, DC based International Development Institute and Kathmandu based Four Seasons Travel and Tours. In October 2014, in an informal meeting in Kathmnadu, agreed to start quarterly workshop/awareness sessions on accessible tourism. In Dec 2015, decided to organize a wounded heroes trek to Nepal. The effort added 2 additional US based partners and they were Operation Namaste and Soarway Foundation. The effort was able to engage number of hotels, major airlines (Etihad), Clintonville outfitters and others.

Number of tourists with prosthetics came to trek in Annapurna Circuit with nurse, prosthesis and a physician. They observed UNWTO recognized world



tourism day in Kathmandu. The program also received an endorsement by Nepal Tourism Board and many other disability advocacy groups. This unique group of wounded heroes visited President of Nepal, US Ambassador and Nepal's Supreme Court Judges and other legal community, Inspector General of Police and others to create momentum. The participants brought number of extra prosthetics and donated to number of recipients. Their heroic effort was unique in its own way and touched life of many villagers, hoteliers, businesses etc. At the end, Nepal Tourism Board took an extra step to sign a memorandum of understanding to organize such tours of Wounded Heroes each year.

## **Conclusion**

The initiative for Accessible Tourism in Nepal has already kicked off. The challenge of the hour is to give it a meaningful momentum towards the right direction. Tourism industry needs innovation in product development and service delivery. Failing to do so will have no other outcome but the stagnation.

Accessible Tourism is not an easy thing to do but a right thing to do. It is indeed a daunting task for the destination. However, a deliberate and properly planned focus on accessible tourism will help the destination in repositioning and gaining the glory as a Responsible Tourism destination. Joining hands with International organizations like European Network of Accessible Tourism(ENAT), ICTP, UNWTO and engaging local organizations like NFD-N, HAN, NATTA, NATO and NTB for accessible tourism will ensure a sustainable development of Tourism in Nepal.

The coalition of the willing is bound to open a gateway for many tourists with disabilities from all over the world who otherwise thought visiting Nepal was only a distant dream.

## **Background of the Article**

This article has been produced by the authors as the extended and detail version of the working paper presented on the issues of Accessible Tourism in the National Human Rights Summit of Persons with Disabilities organized by National Federation of the Disabled Nepal in Kathmandu on December 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> 2016. The article has been written on the basis of the long and proven working experiences and knowledge of the authors in tourism sectors and their involvement for promoting accessible tourism in Nepal for few years back. The article has also incorporated the valuable feedback, sharing of experiences, conclusion and recommendation from the floor of the National Human Rights Summit.

## **About the Author**

### **Pankaj Pradhananga**

Pankaj is a Director of Four Season Travel & Tours. He comes with an experience of more than 2 decades in Tourism industry with the focus on Responsible / Inclusive Tour operations in Himalayan region. He has been leading the initiatives to develop accessible Tourism in Nepal.

His areas of interest are public speaking, photography and learning new things. He is an active member of Everest Toastmasters Club and also an adjunct faculty of Ace Institute of Management in Kathmandu. He is associated with Hawaii based ICTP (International Coalition of Tourism Partners). He lives in Kathmandu and is originally from Bhadrapur(Jhapa).

### **Mr. Suman R. Timsina**

Mr. Timsina is an Executive Director, Business Development at Washington, DC based International Development Institute. He led a team of 23 wounded

heroes trek to Nepal to observe World Tourism Day in 2016 in collaboration with Four Seasons Travel and Tours, Soarway Foundation and Operation Namaste. His areas of interest have been innovation, entrepreneurship, mentoring, diaspora study, community development, education and health care. He has numerous policy papers on these issues. He lives in Virginia (USA) and is originally from Biratnagar (Nepal). He is also a Past President of NRN USA.

### **Reference:**

- i. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>
- ii. <http://ethics.unwto.org/en/content/global-code-ethics-tourism>
- iii. [http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/economic\\_studies/serving\\_aging\\_baby\\_boomers](http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/economic_studies/serving_aging_baby_boomers)
- iv. <http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/>
- v. Accessible Tourism: Concepts and Issues edited by Dimitrios Buhalis, Simon Darcy
- vi. nefport ( [www.nepaleconomicforum.org](http://www.nepaleconomicforum.org))
- vii. Travelability.com
- i. Source: <http://www.destinationsforall2014.com/en/framing-the-summit#.VBiAVZRdWK8>