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## **COVID-19 Lockdowns and Travel Restrictions: A Tale of Travelers' Plight on Nepal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China on 31 December 2019. Since then, death toll and the number of infected individuals continue to be reported all over the globe despite travel restrictions. Nepal, atop its nature as a land-locked country, was not exempted from travel bans. Albeit aviation restrictions have been partially eased on September 2020, Nepal still suffers a major setback since tourism contributes to about 8% of the country's GDP. This qualitative research conducted using online platforms aims to survey two facets of travel during COVID-19: seasonal travel patterns and the plight travelers had to face that depends on transport. Temporary limitation of peoples' movement across borders for the sole purpose of recreation may be of import but great is the plight of individuals who were locally stranded or those whose livelihood cannot proceed amidst travel bans. This paper seeks to assess how tourism and travel in lockdown fared in Nepal during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Lockdown, Travel, Restriction, Plight

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## INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infection brought about by SARS-CoV-2 virus. Although the original source by which the virus became infective to human remains unknown (Zhou *et al.*, 2020), it was suggested that the first outbreak started on the Huanan Seafood Market in Jiangnan District, Wuhan City, the capital of Hubei Province in Central China (Chen *et al.*, 2020). The disease has since spread like a wildfire, resulting in a pandemic (Hui *et al.*, 2020).

Wuhan Municipal Health Commission of China reported an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown origin on December 31, 2019. Bronchoalveolar lavages collected from a pneumonia patient were subjected to Real-time Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR). Analysis revealed the presence of pan-betacoronavirus with a 96% genetic resemblance to the bat SARS-like coronavirus strain BatCov RaTG13 (WHO, 2020).

The novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 by the WHO Director-General and the Emergency Committee after a tally of 7818 total confirmed global cases. With continuing spread and alarming “levels of inaction”, WHO finally recognized COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO, 2020).

First recorded case of COVID-19 outside China was reported in Thailand on January 13, 2020. COVID-19 reached Nepal on January 9, 2020 when a 31-year-old student returned to Kathmandu from Wuhan. He tested positive for COVID-19 on January 23, 2020 (Shrestha *et al.*, 2020). Local transmission of Covid-19 infection was first reported in Kailali district on April 4, 2020 and death toll began on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2020 (Poudel, 2020; Silwal *et al.*, 2020). As of writing, Ministry of Health and Population tallied 807,052 COVID-19 cases in Nepal– 784,155 of which have recovered while 11,318 have succumbed to the infection (MoHP, 2021).

Travel restrictions was imposed on Nepal from March 24 to July 21, 2020 (Pradhan, 2020). On-arrival visa service was temporarily halted on March 7 to 30, 2020 for individuals arriving from China, Japan, Italy, South Korea and Iran (Republica, 2020). Health certificates were required for people entering Nepal and the government advised against non-essential trips. On March 14 to April 30, 2020, Nepal suspended on-arrival tourist visa, restrictions for travel within land borders, and expeditions on Mount Everest (The Kathmandu Post, 2020).

Lockdown in Nepal meant suspension of all classes and examinations among secondary education students, government services, non-essential private sectors. Transport and tourism also suffered as non-essential long route transportations, international flights and domestic flights was halted. Qualitative research on the impacts of lockdowns on the travel patterns on Nepal has been hereby conducted. Research about Covid-19, effects and impacts of lockdown has been conducted in Nepal but the change in travel pattern for livelihood and impact of travel restriction due to Covid-19 induced lockdown is focused by this study. Threat and fear of Covid-19 has been felt by people but will the threat and fear stop people from stopping their mobile nature in Nepal when question is about life vs livelihood has been the aim of this study.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURES

Studies conducted have accentuated that understanding the influence of human behavior, mobility and its interaction with disease dynamics can be a key in controlling the spread of infectious diseases, especially in case of pandemics (Funk *et al.*, 2010; Belik *et al.*, 2011; Rizzo *et al.*, 2014; Yan *et al.*, 2018; Peixoto *et al.*, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2020). Thus, travel restrictions are implemented during pandemics (Peak *et al.*, 2018; Muley *et al.*, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2020). Past studies have referred to mobility style as mobility related component of lifestyle of an individual (Lanzendorf, 2002). Mobility styles which are usually resistant to change in normal circumstances, are tremendously affected by severe pandemics (Vij *et al.*, 2013; Shamsiripour *et al.*, 2020). Lockdown is considered to be an efficacious measure in curbing down the spread of coronavirus (Barkur *et al.*, 2020; Flaxman *et al.*, 2020; Paudel & Subedi, 2020).

Working from home, limiting community contacts, remote and online teaching, limitation of public meeting and social events and restricting international travel are effective mitigation strategies to flatten the Covid-19 curve (Jones *et al.*, 2020; Yilmazkuday, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2020). Travel behaviors are influenced by fear of disease transmission and perceived travel risk during outbreak, particularly for transit use, and this influence varies based on the subjective knowledge of infected area and socio-demographic factors (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Cahyanto *et al.*, 2016; Abdullah *et al.*, 2020).

Non-pharmaceutical interventions such as restriction on mass gatherings, closures of school and university, mobility restrictions on international and domestic travels and physical isolation, are effective in delaying and containing the spread of the virus, especially in countries with weaker health systems (Chinazzi *et al.*, 2020; Ferguson *et al.*, 2020; Tian *et al.*, 2020; Di Domenico *et al.*, 2020; Oliver *et al.*, 2020). Different levels of travel restrictions and ban imposed by different countries can also affect the travel behaviors of the general public (Abdullah *et al.*, 2020). These control measures focused on limiting human mobility target to decrease travel to/from the areas with disease outbreak to limit transmission in countries not yet affected by the epidemic (Bajardi *et al.*, 2020).

International travel restrictions were widely used by several countries to contain Covid-19 outbreak during early February, 2020. Travel restrictions were initially focused by countries with early outbreaks (such as China, Iran, and Italy), but the list of travel restricting countries has grown due to global spread of Covid-19. World Tourism Organization reports that by April 20<sup>th</sup> 2020, most extensive travel restrictions ever recorded in history had been imposed by many countries to limit Covid- 19 infection (UNWTO, 2020; Russell *et al.*, 2020).

Prohibition of public events and stimulating, imposing the decision of working from home and closure of the schools, shops, restaurants and bars are such measures that can all be labeled as “social distancing”, which are efficient for diseases and pandemic (such as COVID-19) which are transmitted by respiratory droplets and require a certain proximity of people (Wilder-Smith and Freedman, 2020; De Vos,

2020). Varying degrees of restrictions on human mobility was put forth by at least 186 countries with lockdowns implemented in 82 countries, to halt the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 and thwart the exhaustion of health systems (Han *et al.*, 2020).

Non pharmacologic interventions come at a heavy socio-economic burden as labor mobility, tourism, trade and transportation depends on travel. According to World Bank, Covid-19 recession induced by lockdown and restrictions, is deepest global recession after WW2 with millions of people falling into unemployment and poverty (World Bank, 2020). While lockdown can buy governmental institution much needed time to slow down Covid-19 transmission, it cannot be sustained for long term while hoping for development of effective treatment of Covid-19.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research has utilized qualitative research methodology to explore perceptions of Covid-19 and the impact of lockdown in Nepal focusing on seasonal travel patterns and the plight of the travelers that depend on transport. The research has also focused on discerning viewpoints of Nepalese experiences of travelling in lockdown, effect of travel restriction and lockdown and plights of travelers in Nepal along with Nepal's economy.

This study has been conducted via online survey through the usage of social media and email. The study used random sampling to select 48 respondents. Survey form has been designed using closed and open-ended questions. All the surveys have been conducted from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020 to 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020. Consent has been taken from respondents for filling the form. Pseudonyms has been given to the respondents in presenting their statements. Information of Covid-19 and lockdown has been collected from secondary sources such as research articles, newspapers, and websites of Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) focused in the pandemic era.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Respondent's Demographic Profile**

The number of respondents is 48. Among them 66.7% are male, 31.3% are female and 2% have preferred not to disclose gender. 45.8% of the respondents fall under the age group of 15-25 years, 47.9% under 26-35, 2.1% under 36-35 year, 2.1% under 46-60 and 2.1% under 60 above.

26 respondents live in Kathmandu, 5 in Bhaktapur, 5 in Lalitpur district and remaining respondents are temporary residents of Rupandehi, Jhapa, Mahottari, Saptari, Chitwan, Ramechhap and Rasuwa. 2 respondents currently reside in India and Australia. 13 respondents have listed their district of origin as Kathmandu and remaining respondents are natives of Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Kavreplanchowk, Parbat, Sunsari, Chitwan, Syangja, Bara, Rasuwa, Saptari, Dolkha, Surkhet, Kaski, Ramechhap, Dhanusha, Morang, Janakpur, Pyuthan, Jhapa, Kalikot, Dhulikhel,

Gulmi, Rautahat, and Mahottari. 4 of the respondents are students, 32 are working in various organizations, 11 are unemployed, while 1 is self-employed.

**Covid-19: Knowledge of Respondents**

43 respondents have knowledge of Covid-19 and remaining 3 respondents are not aware of Covid-19. 31 respondents think the reliable source of information of Covid-19 pandemic are World Health Organization (WHO) and Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) where data regarding the number of infections, mortality rate and measures being adopted for controlling Covid-19 infection are monitored. Social media platforms and online portals can also be a source of information for respondents. Temporary measures in limiting Covid-19 infection can be done through isolation of infected people and strictly following social distancing. The respondents believe that higher presence of Covid-19 in rural areas can be more devastating. Respondents believe that no specific vaccine is yet available to combat Covid-19. Fate, one of the respondents, who hails from medical field says,

“Covid, caused by virus from coronaviridae family, affects the respiratory system causing difficulty in breathing and fever”.

Tylaxya, another respondent says,

“People who show signs and symptoms of viral illness are being kept in isolation as a precautionary step since Covid-19 is highly contagious”.

43.8% of respondents think Nepal’s step to combat Covid-19 is satisfactory, 2.1% of respondents Covid-19 can be associated with scandal in Nepal, 43.8% of respondents think Nepal has not raised its best foot forward in combating Covid-19 and remaining respondents think Nepal is doing best to cope with Covid-19.

Till, 20th December, 2020, the infographics of Covid-19 is shown in table below:

**Table 1: Infographics of Covid-19 (until 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2020)**

S.No.	20 <sup>th</sup> December, 2020	Covid-19 Cases (Total)	Death by Covid-19 (Total)	Recovered (Total)
1.	<b>World</b>	7,67,45,892	16,94,300	5,38,66,169
2.	<b>Nepal</b>	2,53,772	1,788	2,43,664

1. World: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>
2. Nepal: <https://covid19.moHP.gov.np/>

### **Remembrance of Freedom: Pre-lockdown Memories**

It has been a year in December 31st, 2020 since Covid-19 became an invisible enemy bringing palpable fear of infection, atmosphere of uncertainty, travel restrictions and lockdown amidst soaring death counts. After lockdown was imposed in Nepal, people have recognized the significance of freedom with mobility. *Rato Machhindranath Jatra*, one of the longest running jatras in Nepal, pulled by thousands of devotees annually is one of the many cultural heritages affected as Covid-19 has grappled the Kathmandu. Respondents believe Covid Crisis has fundamentally changed the daily aspects of their life. With much of the government and private office adapting to online mode of work, people have become accustomed to a life of isolation. There has been continued alteration in mundane daily life activities like visits to relatives, travel and trips outside valleys, roaming around places, tea-chat (*Chiya-Guff*) meets with friends, sports, trekking and hiking, cycling, social gathering, food trips to restaurants, exercising in parks, and religious trips to temples has become a foreign concept. Respondents recollect memories of life before lockdown to find courage to go through isolated routine during pandemic.

### **Strike of Covid-19 in Nepal: Covid-19 Induced Travel Restrictions and Lockdown**

The first case of Covid-19 put a closure to Nepal China border on 28<sup>th</sup> January (The Himalayan Times, 2020), 175 Nepali students from Wuhan, China were evacuated in 15<sup>th</sup> February, on-arrival visas was suspended to citizens of South Korea, China, Iran, Japan and Italy till 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (Paudel, 2020) and Nepalese returning from countries affected by the Covid-19 and from third countries transiting via those countries had to undergo compulsory home quarantine (Prasain, 2020).

All on-arrival visas remained suspended until 30<sup>th</sup> April and all climbing expedition were canceled (Prasain, 2020). Long- haul transportation services inside Nepal were brought to complete halt from 23<sup>rd</sup> March and international flights were cancelled from 22<sup>nd</sup> March (OnlineKhabar, 2020). Nepal Tourism Board suspended issuance of TIMS card putting trekking expeditions to a halt from 20<sup>th</sup> March (Xinhua, 2020) and Nepal-India borders along with Nepal-China borders were closed from 23<sup>rd</sup> March (Pradhan, 2020).

All these travel restrictions as a public health measure to curb the Covid transmission, indicated the start of lockdown in Nepal. The nationwide lockdown of educational institutions, suspension of operation of entertainment and recreation industries, closure of nonessential businesses and entry ban of citizens from the novel coronavirus-affected countries was implemented on 19<sup>th</sup> March (My Republica, 2020). All exams were postponed including SEE exams due to fear of Covid-19 (The Rising Nepal, 2020). Cessation of governmental and private services except those deemed essentials services, suspension of National Assembly (My Republica, 2020) and temporary termination of non-essentials processing by Supreme court was announced in 20<sup>th</sup> March (The Himalayan Times, 2020).

Even before the nationwide lockdown was imposed, Kailali enforced curfew for indefinite time and Argakhanchi imposed lockdown from 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2020 (The

Rising Nepal, 2020). On 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, Nepal government ordered nationwide lockdown (The Kathmandu Post, 2020). The lockdown was imposed in Nepal after 2<sup>nd</sup> case of Covid-19 infection was recorded and number of Covid-19 induced deaths was zero. The ambitious campaign “Visit Nepal 2020” was even postponed by the Government of Nepal. A surge in new cases of Covid-19 was seen after 120 days lockdown was lifted on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2020 (Awale, 2020). After 3 weeks of lifting lockdown, districts with more than 200 active cases decided to bring back travel restriction and lockdown in necessity (Prasain and Pradhan, 2020).

Restriction on long route transportations except essential services, closure of international flights and domestic flights, travel bans, closure of Governmental and Private offices except essentials service providers, postponement of exams, closures of education service providers and closure of maximum industries, halting of non-urgent cases by Supreme Court, categorization of Covid-19 hospitals were adopted by the decision of the Government before imposing lockdown. The change in travel pattern and travel behavior of human beings is surely to be seen

### **Tourism, a Dream: Travel Restriction as a Public Health Measure**

50% of the respondents travel plan has been canceled due to Covid-19 while 16.7% of the respondent managed to stick to their travel plan amidst Covid-19 and 33.3% of the respondents had not made any plan. The respondents whose travel plans were affected, wanted to visit *Tilicho Lake of Manang, Rara lake, Mardi Himal Trek, Bardiya, Palpa, Suklaphat Wildlife Reserve, Narayanthan, Gosaikunda, Pokhara, Nepalgunj, Chitwan, Western Nepal, Langtang, Dolpo, Kulekhani, Dolakha, Banepa and Biratnagar* which are known tourist attraction of Nepal.

Mridul, one of the respondents says,

“I have already traveled 35 districts of Nepal and I want to go to all districts of Nepal.”

Another respondent’s field work sites are *Nuwakot*, a historically significant district and *Rasuwa*, famous for Langtang National Park and *Gosaikunda*, known for being the purest holy lake for Hindus. Some respondents had plans of traveling to China, Malaysia, Thailand and South India for educational and recreational purposes. One respondent’s dreams of traveling to scenic Upper *Dolpo* region of Nepal known among tourists for its hidden valleys, pristine waters of Lake *Phoksundo* and ancient shrines like *Shey Gompa*, was canceled due to lockdown. Sadly, Covid-19 has brought an unprecedented halt to tourism and respondents are eagerly waiting for upliftment of travel bans and restrictions for moving forth with their abandoned plans.

As per respondents, the lockdown has created implications in psychological, social, economic, travel and tourism sectors in Nepalese society. Fear of infection, restrictions in medical care and death can bring about anxiousness among tourists towards travelling in pandemics. With restrictions in social and mass gatherings, Nepalese society, a culmination of its religions, ethnicity, heritage, values, and beliefs, has seen only few festivities since the Covid outbreak. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the vulnerability of the cultural tourism industry which

rely on intangible cultural heritage practices, cultural activities and ethnic communities. As per the respondents, tourism industry has crashed with travel restrictions and shows little chance of recovery on its own.

Saru, one respondent says,

“Tourism is being handicapped due to pandemic. It will take a long time to go back to being normal pre-covid era.”

Kriti, one respondent living in Australia opined that,

“There are many changes, especially in tourism sector. Now, we international tourists, seem to have fear of travelling due to Covid-19. The tourism sector is facing negative growth. Furthermore, culture is also being vulnerable. To sum up, this pandemic has affected social, economic, educational and cultural sector as a whole.”

The venue-based sectors such as festivities, live music, museums, performing arts, cinema, etc. have also been hit hard by social distancing measures. However, one respondent considers that the impact of the COVID-19 on the cultural sector is minimal with the crash in international tourism being more devastating. 54.2% of the respondents have plans to travel after end of lockdown, 10.4% will not travel, 31.3% may travel and remaining will travel at a later date.

### **Effects of Covid-19 and Lockdown in Nepal: Perception of Nepalese**

The respondents have different perception of Covid-19 as a pandemic and lockdown as a measure to pull down the infection rate of Covid-19. The respondents were afraid during the beginning of the pandemic as the cases of infection were increasing at an alarming rate. The general Nepalese population show a significant commitment to the implementation of the recommended preventive health measurements; however, there is existence of fear of infection and death despite the adoption of precautionary steps. The first ever nationwide lockdown where limited essential services were only run, restricted socioeconomic activities all over the country.

The novel Coronavirus has received extensive coverage from newspaper portals, radio and TV programs to internet platforms. Social media platforms are supersaturated with Covid-19 information, some of which may be misleading. People have become used to following an isolated routine. The mundane daily life activities of people from have significantly changed.

Saryas, one of the respondents felt new form of behavior. She admits that this pandemic has given her much needed space and taught to show care from distance and it is easier and becoming more acceptable.

Mhrsiti, another respondent confessed that economy has been, indeed a great despair these few months. Social distancing has cautioned people to group even in few numbers. And culture, tourism or travel is not possible without socialization. The effect of Covid-19 may be invincible.



Nepal, with its juxtaposition of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Mongolian influences, offers wide arrays of fantastic cultural experiences, from temples and museums to monasteries. Covid-19 has widened the socio-emotional gap and psychological stress among travelers as the tourism industry's contribution to Nepalese economy is of significance. One of the respondents has been raised to appreciate Nepal's unique blend of culture and values and is wary of western influence but she fondly remembers how *Newar* community had the provision of quarantine when people used to travel for business decades ago. Nepalese had not ever gripped by blockade as great as Covid pandemic and one respondent implores,

“With the case of Covid-19 infection, everything stopped.”

Nepal has limited experience with several past viral outbreaks apart from some seasonal influenza, avian influenza and swine flu. With Covid-19 pandemic, Nepal has adopted response driven non-pharmacologic strategies to decrease the risk. Aside from economic downfall, Covid lockdown is having a profound mental health consequence among Nepalese population. Difficulty in management of daily needs for life, psychosocial problems faced by people in lockdown, rise in unemployment and food insecurity has severely affected emotional well-being of the population. Suicide's trend was seen on rise during Covid lockdown. A total of 2,218 persons took their lives in the COVID-19 lockdown from March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020 to July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020 across the country. 1,828 were found to have hanged themselves, while 346 consumed poisons, 19 fell off cliff, 12 drowned, eight used weapons, four committed suicides by burning themselves and one electrocuted (Khabarhub, 2020). Lockdown has affected people's freedom, farmers, industries, education sector, tourism sector and mental health of people. One respondent feels that the effect of lockdown is more among poor and vulnerable population who depend on daily-wage work. Freedom is affected as a whole due to restriction however, the severity of the Covid pandemic has risen to emergency level which could justify restrictions on right to freedom, such as those that result from the imposition of lockdown and entry bans. Covid has impacted life of families far beyond those it directly infects as per one respondent.

Raju, one respondent says,

“The movement of people has been restricted, many people depending upon daily wages are the ones most affected. Economic activities are affected, this will have adverse effect on the economic growth of the country, many will be unemployed, it will have serious impact in all aspect of our daily life.”

Bhivu, one respondent confesses,

“The social gap has narrowed to certain level; not so everywhere. Economy has been negatively impacted; severely. The low-income generating population have been impacted greatly and government has not been able to manage the situation properly. Staying inside the house has made people creative, and at the

same time unproductive. The lockdown has made the lives of people harder with strict rules.”

Binu laments,

“Government policies do not consider the poor people; they have fears of dying ahead of hunger rather than covid infection. They do not have other choice than to move from hometown to cities looking for opportunities.”

Gyanu, one respondent voices,

“People has been feeling anxious with the news and being caged inside their home. It has mostly affected extremely lower-class people, agriculture, tourism and business entrepreneur. It is certain that economic crisis and extreme inflation is inevitable. Many people from foreign will be returning to homeland and the unemployment will steadily rise.”

### **Journey on Foot in Lockdown, a Reality: Heart is Where Home is**

When the Nepalese government announced lockdown late on March 24, no one perceived that they would be confined to their homes for such a long time. But the pandemic was cruel to people who did not have a roof over their heads and who relied on daily-wage works. There was a surge of Nepalese migrant worker returning home through *Gauriphanta* border point in *Kailali* district of Nepal as Covid cases increased in India. Thousands of Nepalese who travelled long distances on foot found themselves stranded on the Nepal-India border due to the travel restrictions placed by the government. Many people including students decided to leave Kathmandu Valley due to lack of food and daily essentials. In the wake of the lockdown, most of the people opted for arduous journeys to their villages in interiors of Nepal on foot. The photo stories, videos along with memories of nostalgic travelers making more than 500 km- walk on the roads without food, water, or a place to spend the night from Kathmandu to their villages made headlines in news media.

Food insecurity, uncertainty in future and harsher lockdown rules, lack of money for survival and unemployment are many of the reasons that might have driven migrant workers to take a risk of journeying on foot as per respondents. The respondents acknowledge that the security blanket of home, perception of lesser Covid infection risk in villages and hardship caused by lockdown factored in favor of the journey on foot on countless days.

Yuvraj remarks,

“Even in the past, during the civil war and epidemic, people have been avoiding system order due to fear of hunger. If government cannot provide enough food and protection to people then, going home is the only last option. Lockdown disobedience is not good but, we cannot force them to stay where they are unless their problem will be addressed.”

Some respondents feared about people carrying Covid-19 infection along with them and thought traveling by feet was wrong. A respondent suggested that the quarantine rules are similar for any form of travel.

Sabit, one respondent showed fear of travelling in lockdown. He says,

“Whereas, most of the people had problem for the food and shelter during lockdown, there were people who just travelled to break the monotony of lockdown existence. It could bring negative consequences in the future.”

Pari, one respondent says,

“There are difficult circumstances for livelihood in the Valley and we cannot blame people for journeying on foot if they can be with their family back in their villages, town.”

Bhawana observes,

“They are worried about themselves as well as their family. They are not getting their basic needs fulfilled. So, I think government should manage their travel and let them go their home safely.”

Abhi, one respondent says,

“Their family wants to be together to be safe. They may have a difficult time here. Since they cannot get or go to jobs that are not online in nature”.

Aakriti opined that it is the love of family and fear of Covid-19 that drove the people to journey on foot.

Uma, one respondent states,

“It's been nearly 1 and half month of lockdown work has been stopped and many people living in Kathmandu do not own house and to fulfill their every basic need, they have to work. So, due to this reason people are going home town.”

Neelu believes,

“Hunger kills faster than COVID 19, Fear of dying from hunger is a strong motivation to do so.”

Nidan, one respondent says,

“Yeah, people need to go to their home. They will be more secure in their homes. They will get food to eat and can work in field to grow and sustain their life rather than staying here in fear and waiting for someone to just come and provide relief, no one knows how long the lockdown will last. In order to survive, this was the best option they could consider at that moment.”

### **Travel Inside Nepal: Plight of Nepalese inside Nepal longing to go home**

Over 2 million people left the Kathmandu Valley before first lockdown was announced on 24<sup>th</sup> March (Shrestha & Regmi, 2020). Daily wage workers, students, stranded travelers have decided flock out of Kathmandu valley on travel plan that may take up to 20 days before they reach home either on bare foot or in sandals, packing little fits in backpack, sacks or in plastic as long-haul transportation services have been put on halt due to lockdown (Shrestha & Regmi, 2020). The government’s “pick and choose” response and its ideas of “who belongs” as citizens” might be the cause of the mass exodus out of Kathmandu including pregnant women and lactating mothers with small children and people on foot (Basnyat & Tamang, 2020). With the inevitability of extension of lockdown and government’s inability to provide options for people wanting to go home, people started leaving in nights in trucks carrying essential goods as per Traffic Police in Kathmandu (Ojha, 2020).

A migrant worker, thirty-eight-year-old Hom Bahadur Rana Magar, a resident of the rural municipality of *Jwalamukhi* in Dhading returning home on foot has died after falling off a bridge linking *Dhading* and *Gorkha* as he was trying to cross the *Budhigandaki* River by crawling over the railing of a bridge that had been shut in order to prevent the cross-district movement of people. The first death of citizen in Covid-19 pandemic was recorded due to lockdown but not through infection (The Record, 2020).

After the public’s pressure and strong willpower of people longing to go home, elected ruling party politicians have violated their own government’s lockdown rules to send thousands of constituent home from Kathmandu in buses. It was not surprising to note that people were rather afraid of dying by hunger than Covid infection (Nepali Times, 2020).

Government authorities, particularly the District COVID Crisis Management Committee, had been shouldering the duty of managing the bodies of COVID patients as per Dead Body Management Protocol. However, the protocol has been changed and family members will be the one to cremate the dead bodies but the information should be given to local representatives and police. (Kamat, 2020). This is particularly alarming as risk of infection might increase if families were forced to manage bodies. Women soldiers has been given responsibility to lift the Covid-19 dead bodies and hand over to cremation sites as Nepal’s army is responsible for managing the bodies of coronavirus victims across the nation (AljaZeera, 2020), but

it is not common practice to cremate the dead bodies by women as per the culture of the Nepal.

### **Travel to Nepal: Plight of Nepalese in Nepal-India Border longing to come home by foot**

International Remittance flow significantly contributes to national GDP with millions of Nepalese working in countries such as India, Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The global recession brought about by Covid has increased unemployment (Acharya, 2020) which has led to the return of migrants to Nepal seeking protection and employment opportunities. Since the beginning of lockdown, large numbers of immigrant workers fleeing several Indian cities especially Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have been stranded in the Raxaul–Birgunj border between India and Nepal, the largest Indo-Nepal gate, desperate to go back to their homeland.

The Supreme Court issued an interim order on 16<sup>th</sup> April directing the government to rescue migrant workers stranded in Nepal- India border vulnerable conditions infection (The Kathmandu Post, 2020) and to ensure proper arrangements of food, shelter and treatment of Nepalese citizens who are not in a position to return to Nepal, in coordination with Indian Government (Pradhan, 2020).

Public health experts have advised against opening the borders and restarting international flights when loosening of lockdown was seen as possibility (Nepali Times, 2020). Nearly 500 Nepalese migrant workers are stuck at Nepal-India border are in dire circumstances without any shelter and food and are sleeping on the street while some are risking their lives with illegal attempt to cross the border. The government has expedited process to track down the estimated 4.5 million Nepalese currently living abroad as migrant workers (Lwagun, 2020). A 29-year-old male who swam across the *Mahakali* river in a desperate attempt to cross the border urges the government to save hundreds of migrants stranded across the river. (Shrestha, 2020). Ramesh Bista of *Darchula* and *Baitadi*'s Indra Khatri and Dhan Bahadur Dhami also swam across the Mahakali River, but they were arrested by Nepal's police and sent for quarantine (Kharel, 2020).

181 Nepalese who were successful in entering Nepal via several land border crossings at Jayaspur, Hirminiya, and Saigaun of Banke district were fortunate to able to quarantine in temporarily set up quarantine facility (Oli, 2020). 20 different crossings along the Nepal-India border have been designated for migrants returning from India but no clear plans have been made to help those stranded in various parts of India (Neupane, 2020; Baniya *et al.*, 2020). The lack of transportation facilities, restrictions on flights, and transportation fares in India predominantly work as the major push factor for such immigrants to disobey lockdown rules.

Birendra Rokaya, died 3 days after returning from Gujarat, India in *Surkhet* of Nepal as there was not provision for food, water or medical service in Nepal meanwhile, another 30-year-old man who returned from Surat, Gujarat died after 6 days. Provision of water, food and swift transfer to quarantine facilities for medical assistance has not been made available (Sejuwal & Tiwari, 2020). The immigrants

have expressed great disappointment at the incompetence of the government in providing such basic provisions. Quarantine facilities lack conducive gender friendly environment, hygiene, facilities, standards set by WHO and Government, but even social distancing was impossible. There has been news of women immigrants being raped by volunteers in quarantine in Kailali district of Nepal (Chhatyal, 2020) and a youth was arrested in charge of rape attempt of a woman in quarantine in Dhanusha district of Nepal (Khabarhub, 2020).

The second Covid-19 induced death in Nepal was of a 25- year-old man placed in quarantine in Banke, after suffering from fever and diarrhea in 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2020. A PCR test was performed on nasal and throat swabs on deceased and came back positive for Covid-19 (Poudel, 2020). There is no official data of Covid-19 induced death of Nepalese in India (Baniya *et al.*, 2020).

**Travel to Nepal: Plight of Nepalese in Foreign countries to come home by flight**

The Supreme Court of Nepal passed an order on 17<sup>th</sup> April mandating the government to repatriate vulnerable migrant workers overseas and to arrange free safe transportation for all citizens heading home with requirement that people suspected of having COVID-19 be quarantined before they return (Lwagun, 2020).

Hundreds of Nepalese were deported from Qatar under the ruse of pandemics and several hundred workers are still living in camps without jobs and proper shelter (Lwagun, 2020). The UAE planned to impose strict future restrictions on South Asian nations hesitant in repatriating their nationals (Khadka, 2020). Nepal has been accused of abandoning its workers in the fight against COVID-19, as it denied the right to return of its citizens by Human Rights Watch (Shrestha, 2020).

As per Nepal Government's preliminary estimation, nearly 280,000 Nepalese have already lost their jobs in Gulf Countries and Malaysia and at least 127,000 workers are in need of immediate repatriation (Mandal 2020; Bhattarai & Baniya, 2020:1). Qatar and Kuwait have expressed desire to support migrant worker's repatriation through their own flight (Mandal 2020). Around 1,500 labor permits of Nepali become invalid every day (Baniya *et. al.*, 2020) and approximately 90,000 migrant workers' visas have already expired (Bhattarai & Baniya, 2020:129) while Nepal government plans to repatriate only 500 workers every day.

A Nepali migrant worker has committed suicide in UAE due to harassment and ill treatment by co-workers after he received treatment for Covid infection In Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Maldives, distress are increasing among Nepalese who have lost their jobs, who are stranded and living outside the labor camps, pregnant women and domestic workers (Nepal *et al.*, 2020; Bhattarai & Baniya, 2020: 131-132).

Dead bodies of 165 migrants have been cremated overseas until 24<sup>th</sup> July, with consent of family members and 216 dead bodies that has been already repatriated, was handed over to the families while 94 dead bodies are still waiting to be repatriated (Foreign Employment Board 2020; Bhattarai & Baniya, 2020:130). The death rituals considered to be one of the pillars of life institution is to be meant to be conducted

with respect but has been affected by pandemic induced measure for controlling infection.

### **Tale of two travel: difference in arrangements for travel by airlines and travel by foot**

More than 4 million labor permits have been issued in the last decade and remittance reached 8.79 billion accounting for 28 percent of GDP in fiscal year 2018/2019 proving labor migration is the key features of Nepali economy (MOLESS, 2020; ILO, 2020: 2). There is no official record for number of Nepali migrant workers residing in India for employment (CBS & ILO, 2019) with majority engaged in informal and seasonal work (MOLESS, 2020).

For Nepali migrants returning from India, municipal and local units have been unable to create quarantine facilities per WHO standard as instructed by federal government and 20 holding centers has been prepared for immigrants repatriated via flights (Shivakoti, 2020). Nepalese immigrants are expected to quarantine in camps set by local authorities in their home districts for 14 days amongst discrimination from local population due to ongoing xenophobia directed towards people responsible for bringing Covid (Hashim, 2020).

The Government has repatriated a total of 51,963 Nepalese since they started operating repatriation flights starting 10<sup>th</sup> June (My Republica, 2020). Around 60 hotels including tourist-standard and star hotels are available as quarantine facilities in Kathmandu Valley as per their willingness to stay in hotel. While, the quarantine facilities at Nepal- Indian are not up to standard with no proper water, food and medical assistance (Hashim, 2020).

Repatriation flights and assistance are prioritized for pregnant women, people who have overstayed, unemployed people, people with health issues and people who have lost a family member back home, (Mandal, 2020).

### **Tourism Post Lockdown**

The Nepalese government planned to permit opening of venue-based sector including hotels, restaurants and other tourism-based activities from 30<sup>th</sup> July. Long distance transportation along with international and national flight restrictions was planned to resume following strict safety protocols with all the passenger wearing masks and maintaining safe distance (The Himalayan Times, 2020). As per Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, the international flight was scheduled to resume from 20<sup>th</sup> August, 2020, however, with rising trajectory of Covid infections, the government decided to resume chartered and regular tourist flights from 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2020 only. On-arrival visas are still suspended and foreign nationals are not allowed to arrive in Nepal until further notice. The magnitude of Covid-19 impacts and nation-wide lockdown impact on tourism sector yet remains to be seen.

## **DISCUSSION**

Travelling is human nature and this study has evaluated the impact on travel by Covid-19 as widespread and Covid actuated lockdown. The tourism industry has been halted in Nepal but the travel-induced by dignity, starvation, shortage of basic needs, monetary emergency and impact of the pandemic was not ceased by travel restriction and lockdown. The lockdown was violated by individuals living in Nepal through travel by foot and through the utilization of trucks that conveyed essentials. This study had shown travel depends on human life and livelihood ventures depends upon the transport but it won't halt with the confinements and nation's-imposed lockdown. As Prasain (2020), says, "Fear of disease and death and longing for the comfort of their families filled the minds of workers, who suddenly dropped what they were doing and started walking".

The Covid-19 indeed visualized the nation's delicate nature in overseeing the citizen's needs, security, security and did not play part of gatekeeper for the citizen. Tourism has been ceased but the travel due to repatriation was not halted. The news was rife with stories of migrants trying to enter Nepal despite the lockdown and of the police using violent methods to control them (Chakravartty & Khadka, 2020) which visualized the travel of Nepalese working in neighboring countries was not halted too. Lockdown-induced travel has appeared the predicaments of Nepalese working in the Nepal, in neighboring nations and in outside Nepal which were fueled up by the distinction within the course of action of the Government of Nepal. The administration of economy by migrant's pay called 'remittance' isn't flawed but the failure of administration of isolate, confinement and transportation for security on migrant's return may be an address to be raised.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects in different strata of life, including; food insecurity, global economy recession, psychological impacts, decreased quality life, health crisis and global relations amongst others. Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted vulnerability of the tourism industry which rely on natural heritage sites, cultural practices, religious activities and ethnic communities. The immigrants whose income make up one-third GDP of nation face the threat of fragile system more than pandemic. Nepali who are living in the country have to face the war of dignity against the strike of pandemic. The social, mental, economic and political wellbeing of Nepalese are affected which sums up the effect of lockdown and pandemic meanwhile, Government's preparation has shown the plights of traveling Nepalese for security against hunger, scarcity, pandemic and death. The Government without well-being of the citizen cannot guarantee the rights assured in the Constitution and poses threat to security of citizen. Though Nepal, has to face



huge challenges in the management, but it is a learning for the management of forthcoming disaster induced by disease.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

There is no conflict of interest.

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