

Revitalizing the cultural heritage sites of the medieval town of Tansen for the sustainable tourism development.

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Abstract

Tansen is renowned for its natural settings, historic buildings and a living cultural heritage that have remained, from medieval period until now. By UNWTO statistics, internationally, cultural tourism comprises 39% of the total tourism arrivals. This reaffirms that offering greater access to the cultural and heritage assets would give Tansen a competitive edge over the other tourist destinations and increase its attractiveness as a top tourist destination in Nepal. This article is related to study of how the heritage sites could be revived to make the cultural heritage tourism sustainable and regain Tansen's economic vibrancy that has been depleting in the recent times. The purpose of the study is to examine the current state of the cultural heritage management in Tansen, to examine the prospect of revitalizing the cultural heritage assets and; to examine the role of the local communities in these aspects. The methods used in the study were site observations, a key informant interview of experts including the city Mayor, tourism entrepreneurs, site managers and opinion survey of tourists and the local community resident. The study shows that local population has a positive opinion and initial enthusiasm on the emerging tourist arrivals after the restoration of Rani Mahal, but their role is marginalized in the process. This is the key proposition to start an initiative for the local communities to actively participate in tourism development projects. 'Revitalizing the Rani Mahal heritage' launched through the Public Private Partnership with support from UNESCO could build the trust amongst the high end international as well as domestic tourist and attract more investments to conserve, protect and promote the heritage capital stocks for the Tansen tourism development.

Keywords: Cultural heritage tourism, Community participation, sustainable development, Tansen, Rani Mahal, Rishikesh Complex Ridi.

Introduction

Tansen is a hill station strategically located as a transit destination between the two most famous tourist cities of Nepal namely, Lumbini, and Pokhara. It is known for its

diverse and rich natural settings and beautiful climate. Its destiny as a historical, cultural and religious site is exemplary. Tansen municipality hosts two UNESCO World Heritage Tentatively Listed Sites namely the mediaeval town of Tansen (The medieval town of Tansen, 2008) and the Rishikesh complex of Ruru Kshetra including the medieval settlement of Ridi. (Rishikesh complex of Ruru Kshetra, 2008). It also possesses the amazingly beautiful baroque style Hellenic palace of Rani Mahal. These are just a few names of many more sites in Tansen. It assures an outstanding universal opportunity for the cultural heritage and pilgrimage tourism development in this area.

Tansen is enriched by high value cultural resources, despite its small area. Based on recognition of its outstanding universal value, UNESCO has listed two properties in its municipality as a World Heritage Tentative Site in the year 2008. Given the due priority, this destination with all its natural resources, sceneries, aesthetic assets and people, will persistently entice pilgrims, travellers and vacationers. It is right time to capture the immense tourism potential to revive its economy by taking advantage of the soon to be completed Regional International Gautam Buddha Airport at Bhairahawa and to allure the tourist as an transit destination between Lumbini, the birth place of Gautam Buddha and Pokhara, the most visited tourism destination of Nepal.

Cultural heritage attractions are by nature unique and fragile. Therefore, it is very crucial that Tansen authorities and tourism stakeholders study how best to develop these cultural heritage sites while protecting and preserving them for the long-term and to forestall measures to avoid irreparable and irreversible damage before it is too late. Kunwar & Chand (2016, p. 1) have reviewed on the complex and intricate linkages between heritage and tourism, highlighting the importance of the heritage industry and the vulnerability the industry can face when confronted with a natural disaster such as earthquake. The article assesses the earthquake's impact on tourism in Bhaktapur and finally sheds light upon the tourism recovery process that is undergoing along with the issues of heritage reconstruction with a comparison on what has been done and what has to be done for the overall purpose of tourism recovery

The Medieval Town of Tansen and the Rishikesh Complex of Ruru including the living heritage of the adjacent medieval town of Ridi, both belonging to Tansen municipality has been on the World Heritage Tentative List since 2008. Unfortunately there have been no serious plans or programs to protect and conserve these heritages including The Rani Mahal Palace, having such unique and outstanding universal values.

Sustainability of heritage resources cannot be achieved without the direct involvement of the local community. The physical state of resources is directly connected to the local community participation; if heritage is respected, used and managed by locals, it has better chances to be restored and protected. Kumar, (2017, p. 56.) mentions that the

relationship between culture, heritage, the environment and tourism is very important. It is the culture and heritage that separate the people of the world. We need to create stronger links between historic sites and monuments, indigenous people in the host community. Culture and heritage sums up a community's beliefs and values—shared behavior acquired as the result of living within a group and a defined geographic area. Cultural heritage linked with tourism could be an important sustainability tool. There should be increased tourism development, with full participation, management and ownership of indigenous people and without having negative impacts on indigenous peoples and other local communities and ecosystems of which they are a part.

The Cultural Heritage Management (CHM) is “the systematic care taken to maintain the cultural values of cultural heritage assets for the enjoyment of present and future generation(s)”, (McKercher, Ho & Cros, 2005. p. 539).

The purpose of the study is to examine the current state of the cultural heritage management in Tansen; to examine the prospect of revitalizing the cultural heritage assets and outline the emerging tourism development potentials of the area and; to examine the role of the local communities in these aspects.

The protection and preservation of the cultural heritage in Tansen is in a short-lived phase. There are many problems in this area, especially connected to the extreme economic crisis and avoiding the responsibilities by the governmental institutions. There is a problem of lack of knowledge in management practices and alternative ways of financing and fund raising. Offering greater access to the heritage assets would increase Tansen's competitiveness as a top tourist destination in Nepal as it has not been able to live up to its potentials as a vibrant tourist destination. (Interview with Mayor Ashok Shahi, Tansen. 16 Jan. 2019).

One heritage resource that has not been well studied in the literature is heritage lodging, historic hotels and other such tourist accommodation. These are unique because they provide heritage experience accommodation simultaneously. The gratification the tourist experience is an important part of heritage preservation and promotion in any given destination, (Woojin & Chhabra, 2015, p. 103).

There has been no formal research carried out before concerning cultural heritage protection for tourism development process in Tansen. To fill up this gap the study relied on literature reviews on the concepts and theories of cultural heritage tourism for sustainable development linking with the local books and articles on the overall historical and cultural aspects of the study area.

The exploratory sequential mixed method model following the pragmatic philosophical worldview has been used to prepare this article. (Creswell, 2014, p. 35). The

research began with the qualitative research phase exploring the views of participants. The data has been analyzed and the information has been used to build into the second quantitative phase. Both primary and secondary source of data are used. The target population for the study was the local communities residing within the area, government representatives, village chief and elders, tourism entrepreneurs and the visitors who came to the sites. Research activities included site observations, the survey on public opinion of community residents. The face-to-face survey included respondents chosen among residents, local authorities including the city Mayor, tourism entrepreneurs and visitor of Tansen, Rani Mahal palace and Rishikesh Complex Ridi. The survey started with questions on general demographic characteristic of the respondents (place of origin, age, gender, educational level, income); the next section of the survey included questions regarding heritage in Tansen municipality (attractions of the cultural resources, current state of the heritage management and observed problems) and in the third section the respondents were asked to measure the residents' level of information and involvement in the tourism development process that is ongoing in the area. This study used quantitative data gained from survey on public opinions and qualitative data gained from focus group survey by obtaining professional opinions on sustainable cultural/heritage tourism development.

Results

The tourism and heritage development potentials in Tansen: The concentration of cultural resources in the Tansen region in Palpa district is a great potential for the development of product offerings in the sector of the cultural heritage tourism, (Shrestha, 1990, p. 38). The Medieval Town of Tansen and the Rishikesh Complex of Ruru including the living heritage of the adjacent medieval town of Ridi, belonging to Tansen municipality has been on the World Heritage Tentative List since 2008. Similarly, Rani Mahal, an amazing baroque style Hellenic palace, also adds to the heritage assets of Tansen to name the few. Unfortunately there has been no serious follow up on the heritage management and legislative process for the protection and development of the cultural heritage identities of this medieval town.

In developing unique cultural tourism experience, heritage hotels can provide an opportunity for tourists who seek luxurious experiences and simultaneous exposure to history, art, culture, taste, traditions and sentiments of the local society. Developing Rani Mahal as a world-class heritage hotel could contribute to offer viable economic benefit to host communities.

Tourism attractions in Tansen: Tansen, the capital of Palpa district, is a typical traditional town of Western Nepal located at an altitude of 1372 meters on the southern slope of the Shreenagar hill. The history of Tansen started from around the 11th Century AD when the region was part of the *Bara Magarat*, the twelve territories administered by the *Magar* rulers. (Chettri, BS. 2063, p. 13) The town developed as a market center for the Newari traders and

artisans famous for their metal and *dhaka*(cloth) industry. Tansen is a testament to the living heritage and architecture of the Newari people.

Various ruins can be found from the Sen Period (15th to 18th Century). The compact settlement boasts numerous temples, monasteries and sculptures such as the *Bhairab Temple, the Purankot Durbar, the Srinagar Durbar* (Fort), the *BanshaGopal, the Mukundeshwar Mahadev, the Amar Narayan Temple, the Ran-Ujjeshwari Bhagawati Temple and the Tansen Durbar*, (World heritage tentative list, 2008). Its natural characteristics includes the Shreenagar Hills, on the top with perfumed cool breeze of Pine trees giving majestic views of a long range of ten snow capped mountains on the north, the mist that often carpets *Madi Mandabya* valley, locally known as the ‘White Lake’ on the south. The wide paddy field of Madi, which is often called the rice bowl of Tansen, presents majestic views with the changing counterpoint of mist and sunlight at different times. Shrinagar Hill provides excellent views of the Himalayas Annapurna, Dhaulagiri range and the surrounding valley. Tansen Bazaar to the summit of Shrinagar Hill is a short, pleasant hike across forest and passing through several Hindu sites.(Shrestha, BS. 2061, p. 85).

Palpa *Durbar* (Palace), a beautiful heritage property built and preserved by the Rana Governors (*Tainathwalas*) now housing the regional museum of province 5. A huge wooden gate called the *Baggi Dhoka*, probably the biggest in Nepal, lies on the north side of the palace as its main entrance. The famous Bhagwati temple symbolizing the victory over the Anglo Nepalese war over the British forces lies adjacent to the palace.(Baniya, B.S. 2053, p.2).

River Kaligandaki, one of the main tributaries of Gandaki, is regarded sacred by Hindus. The fountainhead of Kaligandaki is at Muktinath in Jomsom. From Muktinath it flows southwards creating the deepest gorge in the world between the famous mountains Dhaulagiri and Annapurna. Tourists can boat, raft in the river or trek along the shore enjoying beautiful landscapes. There are several holy and historical sites on the banks of Kaligandaki, including the well-known *Ranighat*. Other popular sites to visit are: Ridi where a historical Rishikesh temple built by the first Palpa King Mukund Sen situated; Ramdighat where religious Hindu ceremonies are held by people in the region; and Achammeshor where a deep gorge cut by River Kaligandaki separates Gulmi and Syangja districts.

The Rishikesh Complex of Ruru Kshetra including the settlement of Ridi embraces an intact medieval ensemble within an undisturbed landscape. The living heritage is well-preserved and most ancient practices and rituals have carried on over the ages. The Hindu pilgrimage and crematory centre mentioned in the mythological epics lies on the ancient route to Muktinath and Damodar Kunda. (Gyawali, BS. 2068, p. 17).The complex presents various forms of architecture; typical medieval temple complex, sculptures of the Sen Period (15th to 18th Century). The adjacent settlement of Ridi still retains its medieval character and architecture with its close linkage to the Rishikesh Complex. The living heritage of

Rishikesh of Ruru Kshetra is still preserved, with fairs and festivals being held regularly, ancient worship practices related to the propagation of Vedic rituals and culture and the practice of *Bhaktini Amas* (Female Mendicants), (World heritage tentative list, 2008).

Arghali is considered the Banares of Nepal. This is where Rana Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher spent the last days of his life. The remains of the palace can still be seen in Arghali. Other nearby places to visit is *Rishikesh, Gayatri and Devasthan*, the popular temples of Arghali. A village of mountains, forests and farmlands, Arghali is situated close to the rivers Kaligandaki and Ridi. It is 38 Kilometers from Tansen.

Chilangdi a typical *Magar* village offers cultural taste of the area. The people of Chilangdi are simple and have a charming lifestyle. Singing and dancing are the main part their lives. They speak Tibeto-Burman language. Chilangdi is situated at the southern lap of Shrinagar Hills.

Madan Pokhara is a highly prosperous village near Tansen. This beautiful valley is also culturally rich and has many temples that pilgrims can visit. The popular temples are *Kalanki Devi, Devasthan and Mandabya*.

Plentiful other Hindu Temples, Buddhist Bihars, Masjids and Churches bless the people of Tansen. Amar Nath Temple, Bhagawati Temple, including lakes, rivers and caves of utmost religious importance attract thousands of devotees to this medieval town.

Tansen is also very well known for its abundant intangible cultural heritage and numerous ethnic *jatras*, (festivals) throughout the year, as it is a homeland of different tribes, ethnic groups and religions. Religious tolerance is widely prevalent in Palpa district, which is further epitomized by the fact that even the Muslims venerate the cows during the “*GaiTihar*” (Cow festival). (Our Tansen, Quaterly Bulletin Vol. 3 p. 27)

Facts, myths and legends of Rani Mahal: *Ranighat* is adorned by a marvelous building on the banks of River Kaligandaki, built by the -then Rana governor of Palpa, Khadga Shumsher, in memory of his wife Tej Kumari. The 7-kilometer trail from Tansen to *Ranighat* is a steady slope passing through a narrow gorge. There are bird-watching and fishing opportunities on the trekking trail from Tansen to Ranighat.

In the power struggle in Rana regime in Nepalese history, General Khadga Shumsher masterminded the assassination of Maharajah Ranauddip to bring in Bir Shamshere to be crowned as the Maharajah of Kaski and Lamjung and the prime minister of Nepal. Khadga had then risen up to hold the second most powerful post in the Rana regime the Commander-in-Chief of Nepal and the next in the line of succession,(Rana, BS. 2065. p. 285). But, within a very short period Khadga was suspected to have plotted against the Prime Minister and as a punishment he was banished to a place called Thada in Gulmi. He was later given limited

powers as the Governor General and the Western commander in chief (Tainathi) of Palpa in 1888. Khadga Shumsher later built the Rani Mahal (Queen's Palace) the British architect designed beautiful Hellenic palace as a symbol of love, in the loving memory of his youngest wife Tej Kumari Bhavani Devi's last wish to make Rani Ghat a place of pilgrim, and build a palace in her name at the holy site. (Shrestha, BS. 2073, p. 126) Khadga Shamshere had commissioned the four army platoons stationed in Palpa along with the local villagers, for the construction of this exquisite Ranimahal palace. The palace is a two storied building, about 56 feet high that was completed within five years. In an interview with Mr. Sagar Mani Pandey (2019 Jan. 15), a local resident senior citizen (84 Years), said that legend has it that the community people were summoned by order of the Rana Governor through the *Katwal*(the authorized messenger of the Government). Upon the call, (*Hak Parne, Jhara Jhari, Sitthe Jhari*) sometimes part of the family members and at other times the entire village had to be present and render free labor. A special caste of the community residents known as *Agri*, (experts in the art of breaking the hard rock) were used to build the road and the palace hanging on the tree tops to break the hard rocks along the way.

The remains of such a beautiful piece of heritage exists now as just the painted fascia over a hollow shell of the building. The visitors can imagine what it might have been like with the exquisite imported Italian marble, chandeliers from Murano, Edwardian furniture and Persian carpets. If immediately attention is not given by the concerned authorities it is bound to be as Plog, (1972. p. 17) mentioned, that many 'of the most attractive and interesting areas in the world are doomed to become tourist relics if they are not conserved and preserved for the future generations'.

The status of Heritage management in Tansen: The protection and preservation of the cultural heritage in Tansen is in a short-lived phase. There are many problems in this area, especially connected to the extreme economic crisis and avoiding the responsibilities of the governmental institutions. There was also a problem referring to lack of knowledge in management practices and alternative ways of financing and fund raising. The isolation of heritage sites from larger settlements as in the case of Rani Mahal has been the cause of the uncontrolled demolitions, excavations and daylight thievery. The lack of governmental and public care turned the beautiful site into a deserted and unappealing haunted house.

The First City Assembly (September 10-13, 2017) has outlined strategic priority for tourism development. The following few major program on Heritage tourism development were declared by the City Mayor Mr. Ashok Shahi:

- To protect, preserve, present and promote Rani Mahal as a major tourism destination of Tansen and to commence the construction project of the cliff balcony up to Boughagumha.
- To construct a Magar cultural museum (*Kudule Ghar*) in Boughagumha.

- To develop Gufa Chaur as a religious pilgrimage destination.
- To develop a master plan for the Bhagwati temple and the Ruru Rishikesh pilgrimage area.
- To develop the infrastructure for a multifunctional children park at Ban Devi.
- To bring a special program to develop the Mandabya Sarobar and Surya Kunda.
- To preserve the cultural heritage sites, temples, monasteries, churches and *masjids* having historical and religious importance.
- These plans and programs if implemented seriously could certainly improve conservation of the cultural heritage capital stock of Tansen municipality.

Discussions/ conclusion:

Current sate and the potentials for cultural heritage tourism development in Tansen:

If we consider the overall attractiveness of the municipality included in the research, as place of living and tourist destination, most respondents gave positive response, similar results were obtained for the question on attractiveness of the heritage sites in the Tansen region where majority of the respondents gave positive answers. The Tansen municipality is considered to be attractive for tourism development and perceived as great potential for creating attractive tourist products on the international level. This is concluded from the fact that this area has a number of high quality historical, natural and cultural heritage attractions, accessibility by roads and the International Gautam Buddha Airport at Bhairahawa, which is in near completion.

Emerging tourism development potential of revitalizing the cultural heritage assets:

Immediate restoration and revitalization of the Rani Mahal Palace as a world class heritage hotel bringing it back into existence with its original vision restored, the old function outlined, and used for the economic benefit of the community and the contemporary society is the pressing need. This also becomes the key precondition to start an initiative for the local communities to actively participate in tourism development projects to ensure the continuity of their original traditions. Rani Mahal palace is in immense need of restoration and repair. Without a constant source of income, maintaining the sprawling palaces becomes nearly impossible and with the condition worsening by the day it will soon turn into a tourist relic.

Restoring an ancient palace is a daunting task. The funds involved are enormous and resources are limited. In a small town like Tansen finding the right labor, artisans, material and every other thing becomes a great challenge. However, the process of converting palaces to hotels is already in vogue all around the world, and only revenue from tourism could help retain and restore the glory of this beautiful palace and bring it back to life and contribute to the economic growth of community at large and help conserve the country's rich heritage and culture. The conversion of heritage properties into hotels strikes a perfect balance

between commercial gains and the conservation of heritage. It is not just the property and the culture that is conserved in the process but the entire local community, guests and the local authorities all benefit from such projects in a holistic manner.(Woojin & Chhabra, 2015, p. 105).

Serving in these properties generates employment for locals, for guests staying at these heritage properties, it is a completely new and overwhelming experience living a fairy tale life. There will be a sprawling economic vibrancy created for all by various creative and innovative experiences to add new layers of opportunities to attract even more visitors to the heritage site.

A classic example would be the palaces of the Maharaja's of India, which has been leased and operated as grand heritage hotels of the world and generating huge cultural and economic benefits to the society. Another example would be the Victoria's Fairmont Empress Hotel, which is an iconic chateau-style heritage hotel, built in 1908. For over a century, the 477-room Grand Dame of Hotels has attracted a wide spectrum of visitors. The Empress, as the local community fondly refers her to, offers excellent quality, exquisite service, and all the amenities expected of a 5-star Fairmont property. Friends of the Empress are invited to participate in activities throughout the year. This is a great way for The Empress to expand its customer base and engage with the community's cultural heritage.(Destination British Columbia Corp. 2014, p. 36).

Similarly Palpa *Durbar* (Palace) could be developed as a first-rate museum of the State Government. Likewise aggressive promotion of Rishikesh complex could be a selling point to attract the pilgrimage tourists to visit the other heritage properties of Tansen. The medieval town of Tansen along with the Rishikesh Complex could be further developed in the municipality master plan for the enlistment process as required by the World heritage Council to be inscribed as the world heritage site.

Tansen could be developed as a sports destination as well with the emerging possibility of having a world-class golf course in the serene Shreenagar hills, another natural heritage capital stock of Tansen municipality, which could create a very high demand from the people visiting Lumbini who are fascinated with the game of golf.

These activities will build up the trust amongst the high end international as well as domestic tourist and attract more investments to upgrade the standard of the Tansen tourism development. The local government must provide the funds and initiate the investment partnering with foreign Multinational companies and the domestic tourism entrepreneurs including the local community.

Potential of cultural tourism development and the level of awareness and involvement of the local community from residents' perspective: The populations of Tansen were found to be open-minded considering the possibilities for the development of tourism. Generally, they think that the creation of the cultural tourism products is a proper way for the revitalization of cultural heritage and creation of tourist attraction in the Tansen and they support that tourism development projects must be initiated, in order to promote the cultural/heritage tourism in this region. In order to determine the current situation of the heritage sites and tourist resources, the survey analysis singled out the following indicators: the lack of conservation and management, the low quality of infrastructure, the low quality of accommodation and tourist services, the lack of on-site interpretation and animation, the lack of tourist offers and marketing and the number of cultural events. The respondents singled out several factors as the main reasons for this situation: the lack of finances, the lack of governmental and public care, the non-existence of management plans, the lack of experts, the lack of consciousness and care by the local communities. Most of the locals were not aware of development projects within their municipalities; some of them were partly informed about these projects. Only a few of the respondents who were direct beneficiaries in the project were well informed.

In general, responses included suggestions such as reparation and restoration of the roads, heritage buildings, lightening the area, cleaning the area, placing benches and trash-cans, placing the information tables and signs, creating a parking space, opening shops and workshops, organizing cultural events, etc.

The study shows that the lack of inter-sector cooperation and distance from responsibility of different stakeholders which are a direct consequence of ambiguity and inconsistency which leads to deficiencies in the area of cultural heritage preservation and problems. Hence, the attention should be directed to communication strategies between the concerned local authorities and the local community members. Destinations and attractions used and respected by residents, local authorities and tourists are the ultimate goal of the sustainable tourism development. Key stakeholders from the governing body and the community should be identified early in the process of tourism development in terms of their interest and potential influence over the process to ensure the long-term competitiveness and sustainability of the tourism. Tansen has a sufficient number of high value cultural resources. Based on recognition of its outstanding universal value by the state and endorsed by UNESCO, this destination with all its cultural heritage resources, sceneries, religious assets and friendly people; will continue to profusely entice travellers, vacationers and pilgrimages.

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