

Pilgrimage, Livelihoods, and Informality: The Dual Employment System of Cross-Border Religious Tourism at Pashupatinath Temple, Nepal

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Abstract

This study highlights the concept of double employment that arises due to religious pilgrimage across the border between India and Pashupatinath Temple located in Kathmandu, Nepal. Although religious tourism is seen as a cultural and spiritual phenomenon, it can be overlooked that the economic benefit that comes from this phenomenon includes employment. This is because most of the activities offered at such sites are conducted informally by individuals who provide transport services, accommodation, ritual materials, food, guiding, and translation services to the pilgrims.

Full-time jobs are found in hotel establishments, travel agencies, transport firms, security organizations, banking, and site management, whereas informal activities are found among tea sellers, flower and garlands sellers, informal guides, porters, photographers, and temporary festival workers. Percentage analysis, comparative sector analysis, relative change analysis, employment linkage matrix, and a framework for measuring the intensity of employment opportunities are used.

Based on the above-mentioned data, it can be stated that the informal nature of the Nepalese labor market is extremely high. Specifically, informal employment accounts for 84.6 percent of total employment and even 90.5 percent of all women's employment in Nepal. Informality at the national level also characterizes the labor market associated with the development of pilgrimage tourism. In particular, many people engage in jobs that require low levels of qualifications, although this kind of work entails risks such as income instability, lack of legal recognition, and insufficient protection. In conclusion, inclusive approaches to formalization can become an effective solution instead of ignoring or criminalizing informal employment.

Keywords: pilgrimage tourism, informal employment, formal employment, Pashupatinath Temple, cross-border religious tourism, Nepal

Introduction

Religious pilgrimage is not just a spiritual journey; it is also an economic process that stimulates local labour markets and supports multiple layers of livelihood activities. This dual structure of employment is particularly crucial within the specific case of Nepal because informality dominates the labour force dynamic within the country. According to the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18 reported that 84.6 percent of total employment in Nepal was informal, while the proportion was still larger when it comes to women (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2019). As noted by the World Bank has observed that Nepal's economy has generated employment but has not successfully transformed them into formal, secure, and protected work (Irwin & Ibrahim, 2020). Hence, it would be incorrect to consider the economy of the tourism sector via data on registered firms, employment, and other indicators collected through the taxation system. Informal work may remain weakly represented in national accounts, yet it provides livelihood opportunities for households with limited access to capital, formal education, business registration, and stable wage employment (Chen, 2012; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018).

Religious tourism, therefore, becomes a connection between culture, mobility, livelihood, and urban micro-enterprise. At Pashupatinath, pilgrimage needs generate employment opportunities not only in organized tourism businesses but also in small-scale, low-capital, and personal interaction base Pilgrimage is not only religious but also an important economic process that stimulates local labor markets and supports multiple layers of livelihood activities. In South Asia, sacred mobility generates demand for transport, accommodation, food and beverages, ritual materials, guiding services, communication facilities, money exchange, and small retail businesses (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; UNWTO, 2018). These economic connections become more evident in pilgrimage locations where movements of visitors are large, periodic, and international. Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu represents such a case. Being one of the most sacred Hindu temples and a major cultural heritage site in the landscapes of the Kathmandu valley, Pashupatinath receives a huge flow of pilgrims from Nepal and India, especially during winter season and major religious festivals such as Maha Shivaratri (UNESCO, 2024; Awasthi, 2023).

Apart from providing income opportunities in tourism businesses, the significance of pilgrimage in economic terms at Pashupatinath includes benefits accrued by registered hotels, travel agencies, transport firms, restaurants, banking services, and security agencies. However, a significant part of the pilgrim in Pashupatinath involves the informal labor force which operates on selling items such as tea, flowers, garlands, rudraksha bead strings, ritual objects, SIM cards, warm clothing, and snacks about the temples. Similarly, there are other groups who serve as informal guides, porters, photographers, and temporary festival workers also provide essential services, particularly for elderly pilgrims, first-time visitors, low-budget travellers, and pilgrims unfamiliar with the site (Awasthi, 2023; Shinde, 2007). Thus, pilgrimage tourism creates both visible formal employment and less visible informal livelihoods.

d microservices. Formal jobs tend to be found within regulated institutions and registered businesses serving organized groups and relatively higher-spending visitors. In contrast, informal livelihoods are concentrated in ritual-support activities, street vending, local mobility, temporary festival work, and small retail services that directly serve individual pilgrims and day-trippers. These two employment channels are not distinct; rather they are complimentary to each other (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; ILO, 2018).

The primary argument presented in the paper is that the religious pilgrim movement in relation to Pashupatinath pilgrimage site is international in nature; it has given rise to a hierarchal form of employment system. The employment options offered within the formal sector are those where employment service provision is systematic in nature through hotels, tour operators, official transport companies, banking services, restaurant outlets, security firms, and pilgrimage management systems, while those in the informal sector include employment services for vendors, unofficial guides, porters, photographers, tea stall operators, flower sellers, and casual workers. In this regard, there is need for consideration of not only the numbers of people that have been employed but also issues regarding the quality of their employment, vulnerability, seasonal nature of work, and level of social protection offered during pilgrimage employment.

This study has three specific objectives. First, it examines how pilgrim demand creates employment opportunities across transport, hospitality, ritual services, retail trade, site management, and local mobility. Second, it compares the characteristics of formal and informal employment generated by pilgrimage tourism. Third, it proposes an employment opportunity intensity framework to identify which occupations require priority policy support because of high pilgrim contact, high labour intensity, low formalization potential, and high vulnerability.

The article is significant because religious tourism is often assessed in terms of visitor numbers, foreign exchange earnings, cultural identity, and heritage value, while its employment effects—particularly informal employment effects—remain weakly documented. By placing livelihoods at the centre of analysis, this article contributes to tourism studies, labour economics, and public policy. It also offers a practical framework for local governments, heritage-site managers, and tourism planners who seek to improve the pilgrimage economy without destroying the livelihoods of vulnerable workers. Inclusive formalization, rather than forced displacement of informal workers, is necessary for making pilgrimage tourism more equitable, productive, and socially protective (Chen, 2012; ILO, 2018; UNWTO, 2018).

Theoretical Perspectives

The phenomenon of pilgrimage tourism can be explained using the tourism-led local economic development theory. Under this theory, not only do tourists make a transition between locations based on spiritual considerations, but their ability to spend money leads to a sequence of economic exchanges in the new location where they find themselves. In visiting sacred sites, pilgrims directly require services of transportation, accommodation, meals, religious rituals, guide services, communication services, buying goods, and intra-destination mobility services. Such exchanges create jobs for service providers who come into direct contact with the pilgrims as well as other jobs for providers of inputs required by such service providers. Thus, tourism theory regards tourist spending as a means through which destinations may earn income, create jobs, and stimulate the creation of enterprises in the destination (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; UNWTO, 2018). In relation to the Pashupatinath Temple, such an interpretation is particularly applicable due to the dual requirement of religious and ordinary consumption services by the pilgrims.

Religion-based tourism differs from common leisure tourism in its own particular nature since it involves factors of faith, ritual, festival time, family traditions, and emotion toward the holy place. The pilgrim tourists may have lower sensitivity about their ordinary leisure interests due to the connection of the trip with worship, merit, identity, and belonging. In addition, pilgrimage tourism may be quite seasonal, especially in festivals like the Maha Shivaratri and specific winter pilgrimage times. This implies high labor demand over a very short period and allows flexible labor supply close to the holy site. As Shinde (2007) states, pilgrimage centers generate great stress upon the infrastructure and environment; however, the labor requirement is generated due to the concentration of visitors in this respect. Labor demand arises for people involved in vending, transport, food provision, guiding services, cleaning, security, and rituals in particular.

Even more support for this theory comes from the multiplier approach. When a pilgrim pays for his stay in the hotel, he also provides money that benefits the staff of the hotels, as well as those who deliver them food, provide laundry service, organize transport and wholesalers. When a pilgrim buys flowers, he creates income for flower growers, carriers, garland makers, and street vendors. If he drinks tea, the income goes to stall owners, suppliers of milk and fuel, as well as temporary workers. Thus, pilgrimage expenses go through several circles of the local economy. Leaks may reduce the multiplier effect, but in a poor city environment, any transaction matters since the daily income is important for many workers here. Hence, it would be wrong to assess the contribution of pilgrimage tourism to jobs in hotels and travel agencies alone.

The informal economy approach can be considered extremely relevant for Nepal. According to the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18, 84.6 percent of total employment in Nepal was informal, indicating that the phenomenon is not marginal but is prevalent within the country's labor market (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The gender component should also be taken into account since the same labor market structure indicates greater participation of women in informal labor. Similarly, the findings of the International Labor Organization on informal employment in Nepal suggest that informal workers usually have no social security, written contracts, occupational safety, and access to formal dispute resolution mechanisms (ILO, 2023). Thus, the religious tourism industry creates both formal and informal types of employment. The formal type includes employment in registered hotels, travel agencies, banks, security organizations, and management facilities. The informal type includes work by flower sellers, tea salespeople, sacred object sellers, informal tour guides, photographers, porters, and temporary assistants.

In this sense, informality cannot be seen purely as the problem of illegal and non-productive labor force. Many people engaged in the informal sector contribute greatly to providing essential goods and services that make pilgrimage possible for many pilgrims. It could include services such as flower arrangement, application of tika, offering of incense, supply of rudraksha beads, tea, clothes to keep warm, information regarding pilgrimage sites, means of transportation, and assistance in performing rituals. All of those people engage in entrepreneurial activity without having any formal registration and minimal capital. While being an important part of the economy, their contribution is largely unnoticed in terms of statistical representation. In this regard, the argument by de Soto (1989) that formal system tends to be expensive and exclusionary may apply to the Nepalese context, despite additional factors such as social stratification, gender roles, migration, and urban policies that need consideration as well.

Decent work offers another perspective on the topic. According to the International Labor Organization, decent work can be viewed through four dimensions: employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue (ILO, 1999, 2023). This perspective is relevant as the mere quantity of employment cannot tell us whether a certain development of tourism has an inclusive effect. An area of pilgrimage can offer numerous job opportunities, yet the people working there have irregular wages, unsafe working environment, and harassment; they are also left outside social protection and do not have their say in matters that concern them.

The decent work approach has value in analyzing Pashupatinath because the pilgrimage economy is one where both sacred values are apparent, and labor value is hidden. The tea sellers, the flower sellers, the informal guides, the porters, and the temporary festival workers can have substantial face-to-face interaction with the pilgrims, but their incomes can be seasonal and unpredictable. These people have neither a written agreement nor any accident insurance, pension contributions, or negotiation leverage. During peak seasons, they might be heavily engaged in their activities, whereas their incomes will drop dramatically in the off seasons. Decent work analysis shows that while there may be nothing wrong with the occupation, what the state policy makers must do is improve its value through various means.

A fourth theory which forms part of the theoretical underpinning of the research is the cross-border mobility theory. Both Nepal and India have an open border, extensive cultural interactions and religious connections between themselves. The Pashupatinath Temple is considered one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in South Asia for Hindu pilgrims who often travel to Kathmandu from India. According to cross-border mobility theory, border crossings are not just about movement; they are also based on family ties, religion, language, common history, and economic relationships (Kumar, 2013). This implies that migration from India to Nepal is likely to create jobs not only at the temple entrance but also on the migration path.

This transnational aspect adds to the difficulty in measuring and regulating the phenomenon. Pilgrims can make their trips through officially organized tours or by other means. Likewise, service providers could be official tour operators, or they could function on a seasonal basis and depending on demand. As per Khadka et al. (2020), there is an absence of a systematic recording system for estimating the number of pilgrim movements between Nepal and India. Therefore, while estimating the impact of pilgrimage on employment opportunities, tourism-related data would provide an understatement of the true impact of such pilgrimages. However, even these unregistered pilgrims continue to buy tea, flowers, foods, tickets, SIM cards, sacred items and guide services.

These theories are mutually supportive to this current article. First, tourism-driven development provides an explanation as to how expenditure by pilgrims results in both direct and indirect employment. Second, the informal economy theory provides an understanding of why many of these jobs are not within the realm of formal regulations. Third, decent work theory helps judge the quality and fragility of such employment. Finally, cross-border mobility theory is used in explaining why pilgrimage from India holds economic significance and yet remains unquantifiable.

Empirical Review

Empirical analysis reveals that sacred places have much more to do besides temple worship regarding their contribution to the economy. According to Timothy and Olsen (2006), religious tourism consists of both sacred and secular consumption as pilgrims require transportation, meals, lodging, information, shopping, and ritual items when working on their spiritual mission. It has been well proven by other studies on South Asian pilgrimage sites that religious destinations can also function as small enterprise centers where pilgrim flows generate numerous job opportunities. The findings by Shinde (2007) on the case of Tirumala-Tirupati pilgrimage center reveal that mass pilgrimage is highly burdening for the environment and infrastructure of such centers; however, at the same time, it generates many job opportunities for accommodation, transportation, vending, sanitation, and crowd management purposes.

Tourism and Local Development Studies show that employment impact of tourism is dependent on the economic structure of the destination. In the case where local producers are connected to tourist demand, it will have positive effects on the economy by benefiting agricultural and retail activities, transportation, crafts, and female entrepreneurship. In cases where there is reliance on enterprises controlled from outside the destination, the impact on local residents would not be high.

In the case of pilgrimage tourism, there is significant local linkage since most of the goods and services will be provided by micro-firms located in the vicinity of the religious site. These include flowers, incense, tea, local meals, ritual objects, porters, and informal guides. It should be noted that pilgrimage tourism is labor intensive.

Research on Nepal-India pilgrimage mobility focuses on the significance of the border openness and common religious geography for tourism development. While Kumar (2013) stresses the socio-economic importance of cross-border interactions between India and Nepal, Khadka et al. (2020) note that the exact amount of pilgrimage mobility is hard to estimate due to the fact that most of those who travel between Nepal and India are not recorded as international tourists. The issue is relevant to the employment assessment as well since the failure to record pilgrim flow may mean that the demand that pilgrims generate for local services has not been properly assessed as well. Given that the income of informally employed individuals cannot be captured based on salary payments, tax collection, or business records, the employment role of pilgrimage should be assessed with other means, such as service linkage and occupational analysis.

Newly released tourism figures from the government reveal that religious tourism is still significant as part of the resurgence of Nepal's tourism industry. According to the "Nepal Tourism Statistics 2024," tourists traveling to Nepal for religious reasons constituted 15.3% of overall tourist numbers in 2024, up from 13.1% in 2023 (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation [MoCTCA], 2025). The increase reflects the fact that religious tourism is not a static niche, but a growing one in post-COVID tourism trends in Nepal. Yet, the figure mentioned is based on recorded data of arrivals and stated purpose of visit, and excludes those domestic pilgrims, border pilgrims not necessarily recorded, and the emerging religious tourism industry that forms an informal sector.

Documentary evidence from Pashupatinath supports this interpretation. Associated Press reporting on Indian pilgrims at Pashupatinath describes thousands of pilgrims arriving in buses, receiving hot tea from hawkers, buying SIM cards, warm clothes, and holy beads, and being supported by family members and tour guides during worship (Associated Press, 2024). This evidence is important because it identifies concrete employment linkages created by pilgrimage demand. Hot tea implies tea sellers, milk suppliers, cup sellers, and fuel use. SIM cards imply telecom retailers and informal sales agents. Holy beads and ritual items imply vendors, wholesalers, and suppliers. Tour guidance implies both formal tour guides and informal local guides. Thus, even one descriptive report can reveal how pilgrimage demand spreads across multiple employment categories.

Empirical studies on Nepal's labour market have revealed why these types of employment are mostly informal in nature. According to the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18, a large proportion of Nepal's working population engages in informal employment (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The ILO also reports that women are particularly prone to informality than men and that most of these informal workers are not covered by social protection measures or any other type of social security, nor do they have legal status or any kind of stability in their work (ILO, 2023). This trend in the whole country is relevant for the Pashupatinath economy too, since flower selling, tea selling, and selling of religious items are relatively inexpensive businesses and can be managed on a seasonal basis.

Similarly, the assessment made by the World Bank on the employment problems faced by Nepal indicates that although economic growth has been able to generate employment, the level of employment generation is still unable to provide formal and productive jobs (Irwin & Ibrahim, 2020). It is this observation that gives an insight into the reason why the growth in the number of tourists does not necessarily create decent work. Growth in visitors leads to an increase in labor demand; however, the lack of an enabling environment for registering, training, accessing finance, and protection can make such job creations remain informal. This phenomenon is more prevalent in religious tourism since many services are offered by informal workers working in public places where they conduct their transactions daily.

Informal sector research in tourism destinations in other developing countries offers comparable insights. Tourism tends to spur the development of street vending, informal transportation services, food service provision, the trading of souvenirs, and guiding since such forms of economic activity are adaptable and responsive to tourist demand (Bhowmik, 2005; Chen, 2012; Williams & Horodnic, 2017). However, the policy context often views informal vending as an issue of congestion rather than a feature of the local economy. It thus becomes difficult to reconcile cultural preservation, cleanliness, and tourist

satisfaction with economic livelihood issues. The Pashupatinath area similarly grapples with such policy challenges, where pilgrims require low-cost services in proximity to the temple, while informal vending can lead to crowding and waste.

Pilgrimage sites also reveal that employment patterns are differentiated according to factors such as gender, age, skills, and capital. In such cases, women are usually involved in low-capital vending, flower vending, food processing, and supportive labor within families. On the other hand, men might engage in transport, guiding, portering, and security activities. Older labor might involve themselves in low-intensity vending, while younger labor might take part in guiding, photography, mobile vending, or even festive season work. This issue is important since any form of policy support should recognize that not all informal labor can be considered alike. For instance, flower vendors require secure vending sites as well as storage space; informal guides might require training; tea sellers might require hygiene training and waste management; porters require safety measures; and seasonal workers might require contractual agreements and accident cover. The empirical literature also highlights the role played by seasonality. Demand increases greatly during festivals and lucky periods, leading to short-term peaks in demand. Seasonality is favorable to the workers as they earn much more on high-demand days, although the downside is that the same workers do not earn much on normal days. In the context of Pashupatinath, the big festival like the Maha Shivaratri causes an increase in demand for flower selling, food items, transportation, security, cleaning, crowd control, and rituals. Seasonality favors temporary workers, who therefore cannot be employed formally since their employer does not need too many employees all year long.

Another empirical concern is the under-reporting of employment in the religious tourism industry. Employment within the sector that takes place in hotels, travel agents, transportation firms, banks, security agencies, and the Pashupati Area Development Trust can be seen more easily since the work done is reflected in organizational records. However, informal employment within the sector is more difficult to see since it is self-employment, family-based, casual, and undocumented. Hence, there is a knowledge gap since the people who are most dependent on religious tourism tend to go unnoticed. In the current study, this concern will be tackled using the employment linkage matrix and the employment opportunity intensity method. While the latter cannot replace fieldwork, it helps systematize knowledge and identify specific job categories that are highly exposed to pilgrims, labor-intensive, formalization-resistant, and vulnerable.

Overall, the empirical review shows four major patterns. First, pilgrimage creates broad service demand that extends beyond temple rituals. Second, Nepal's labour market is highly informal, so many tourism-related livelihoods appear outside formal regulation. Third, cross-border pilgrimage from India is important but difficult to measure completely because the open border and informal travel practices reduce the accuracy of official statistics. Fourth, workers with the highest direct pilgrim contact often face the highest vulnerability. These patterns justify the need for a site-specific analysis of Pashupatinath Temple's dual employment system.

Research Gap

While the existing literature has provided a good understanding of religious tourism, cross-border movement, and informal labor market in Nepal, it appears that there is still a gap in research in this area. Previous works on pilgrimage tourism have mainly concentrated on aspects such as sacredness, pilgrim experiences, cultural heritage, or even environmental impact, yet they have not done much to analyze this topic in terms of the labor market. Research on the phenomenon of informality in Nepal have discussed country-wide data, but none of them analyzed how pilgrimage could contribute to both informal and formal employment in a particular destination. On the other hand, official tourism data discuss how pilgrims enter Nepal, yet they fail to describe how pilgrim expenditure affects job markets.

There is also a gap in policy prioritization. Informal sector workers often tend to form one homogeneous category, yet individual professions are at varying degrees of vulnerability and have distinct prospects for improvement. Not all tea vendors, flower vendors, informal guides, porters, temporary workers for festivals, and ritual goods vendors face the same threats or have equal chances for improvement. While some professions can become more regulated through the granting of licenses and certificates, others will require softer measures like the issuance of identity cards, demarcated vending zones, co-operatives, basic insurance, and municipality support. The current article aims to fill this gap by introducing an employment linkage matrix and employment opportunity intensity measure.

Consequently, the above literature highlights the relevance of an empirical study on Pashupatinath Temple as a pilgrimage-based employment system. An empirical study will demonstrate how the mobility of religion across borders can contribute to formal and informal employment opportunities, what makes these opportunities secure or insecure, and why a strategy of formal inclusion, rather than either ignoring the informal sector or excluding informal workers from sacred sites, would be a better course. The broadened literature suggests that the phenomenon of religious tourism be examined not only from the cultural point of view but also as an employment strategy.

Data and Methodology

This research is based on a descriptive and analytical methodology design approach. It can be considered a descriptive study as it describes and defines the different types of employment that have been created by pilgrimage tourism in Pashupatinath Temple. At the same time, this research can be classified as an analytical study as it evaluates formal and informal employment channels, interprets the labor market indicators, and creates a model for measuring employment intensity and vulnerability. This paper uses only secondary data, which allows for future article development.

Major sources of data and documents include the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18, statistics provided by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, documentation regarding the flow of pilgrimages to Pashupatinath, literature concerning mobility between Nepal and India, and information from institutions involved in the management of the tourism site. These data help create a structural basis for understanding informality and define the demand channels and the employment types they produce.

The analysis uses four tools. Percentage analysis is employed to analyze national indicators of the informal economy. Comparative sector analysis is employed to differentiate between formal and informal employment on the basis of registration, security, social protection, seasonality, and required skills. Relative change analysis is employed to demonstrate the relative change in religious tourists' share among total official tourism numbers, if available. Finally, an employment opportunities intensity framework is employed to categorize the jobs based on their nature in relation to pilgrims' contacts, labor intensity, formalization possibilities, and vulnerability.

Due to reliance on secondary sources for data collection, one should not treat the results as actual enumeration of all jobs available in Pashupatinath. The framework developed is to serve future empirical research. This framework can be validated with vendor surveys, interviews of managers, employment observations during festivals, and data available from local government and PADT administration.

Table 1

Data Sources and Their Use in the Study

Data/document source	Main information used	Purpose in analysis
Nepal Labour Force Survey 2017/18	Formal and informal employment shares by sex and employment status	To establish the national labour-market context
Nepal Tourism Statistics 2024	Tourist arrivals by purpose of visit and religious tourism share	To assess the importance of religious-purpose travel
Documentary evidence on Pashupatinath pilgrimage	Description of pilgrim services, vendors, and seasonal demand	To identify employment channels around the temple
PADT and tourism institutions	Site management, heritage governance, and formal service arrangements	To identify formal employment and management functions

Published academic literature	Pilgrimage mobility, informal economy, and tourism employment concepts	To support theory, interpretation, and framework development
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Note. Prepared by the author for article development based on secondary sources.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Conceptual Framework starts with cross-border pilgrim flow. Indian and local pilgrims visit Pashupatinath for worship, performing rituals, experiencing culture, and earning religious merit. Visits result in service needs in transport services, accommodation, food and drinks, ritual needs, guiding, communication, local transportation, sanitization, security, banking, and shopping.

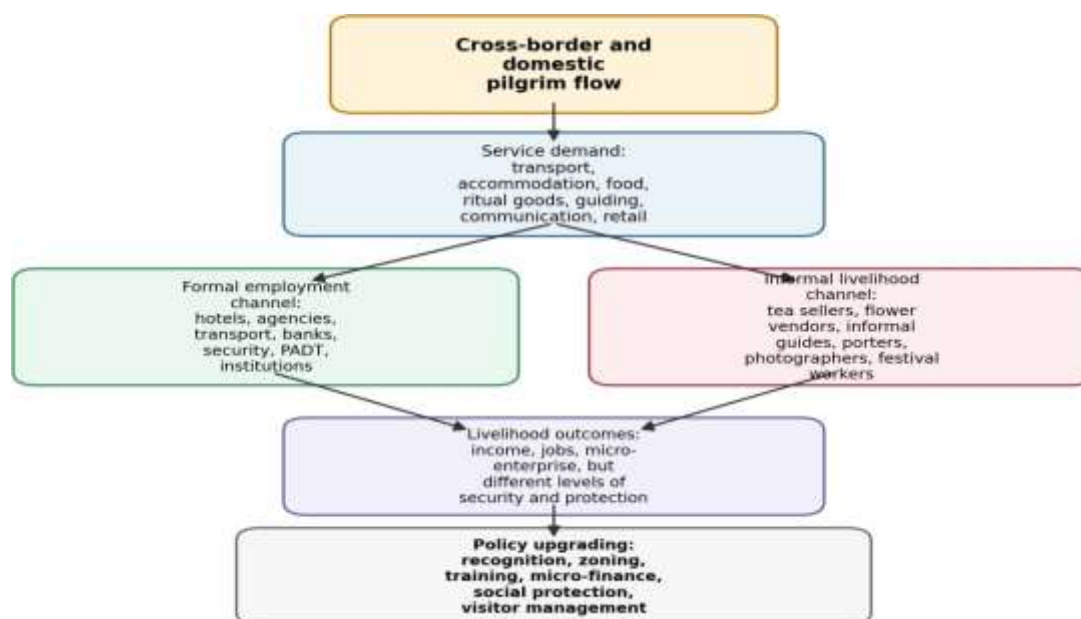
Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of the relationship among pilgrim flow, service needs, employment channels, livelihood results, and policy improvement all within one chain.

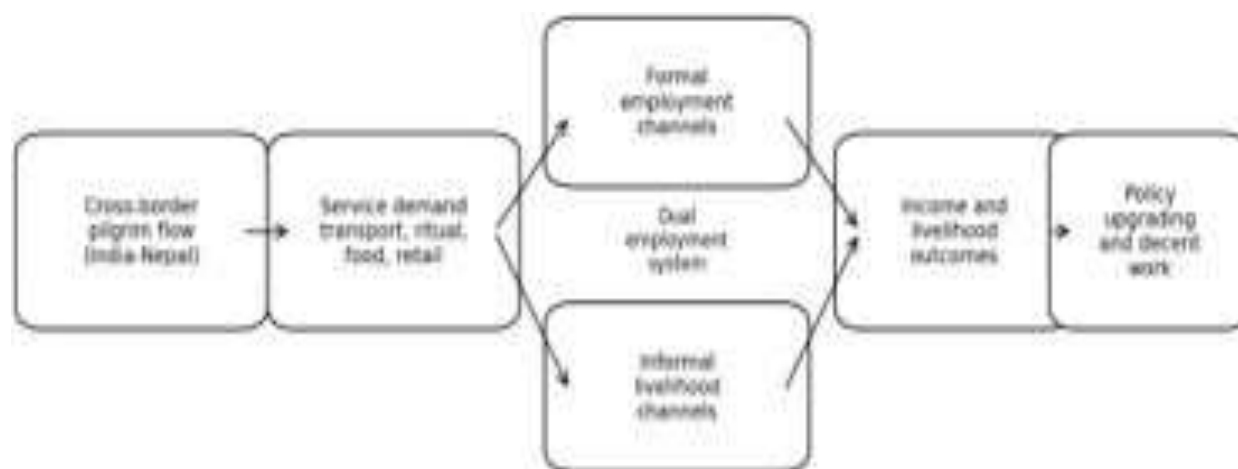
Such demand generates jobs through two parallel yet interrelated streams. The first stream consists of registered hotels, travel agents, restaurants, transport operators, banks, security services, official tourism bodies, and PADT site management functions. The second stream consists of tea vendors, flower and garland vendors, street food vendors, rudraksha and souvenir vendors, informal guides, porters, camera persons, and temporary festival employment.

The income generated and lives affected by both streams are different in their quality. Formal sector employees tend to earn more secure wages, formal contracts, legal status, and protection through social security mechanisms. Informal sector workers benefit from easier entry into the market and easier access to pilgrim demand but suffer from unstable incomes, poor negotiation power, less legal protection, and little protection from ill-health, aging, and accidents. The model, thus, culminates with upgrading of policies through recognition, training, zoning, micro-finance, social security, sanitation, visitor control, and formalization.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Pilgrimage-Based Employment Generation





Note. The figure shows how cross-border pilgrim flow creates service demand, which generates formal and informal employment channels and leads to livelihood outcomes requiring policy upgrading.

Empirical Results and Discussion

National informality and relevance for pilgrimage employment

The national labor market environment matters because the pilgrimage industry is not operating in isolation. The employment landscape in Nepal is highly informal, where people earn livelihoods through processes that may not be properly documented, contracted, and taxed. This trend affects the employment dynamics around the Pashupatinath shrine. With the increasing number of pilgrims coming to visit the site, the first solution is normally provided by informal micro-enterprises, which require minimal investment in resources.

Table 2 presents key indicators relevant to the study. The national informal employment share of 84.6 percent suggests that formal jobs represent only a small part of Nepal's total employment structure. The female informal employment share of 90.5 percent is especially important because women are often visible in vending, flower selling, household-based food preparation, and other low-capital services around religious sites. The informal-to-formal ratio of 5.48 indicates that informal workers far outnumber formal workers in the broader economy. This ratio helps explain why the pilgrimage economy is likely to produce more informal livelihoods than formal jobs.

Figure 2 further presents these indicators graphically, making the scale of informal employment and the importance of religious-purpose tourism easier to compare.

Table 2

Selected Labour-Market Indicators Relevant to Pilgrimage Employment in Nepal

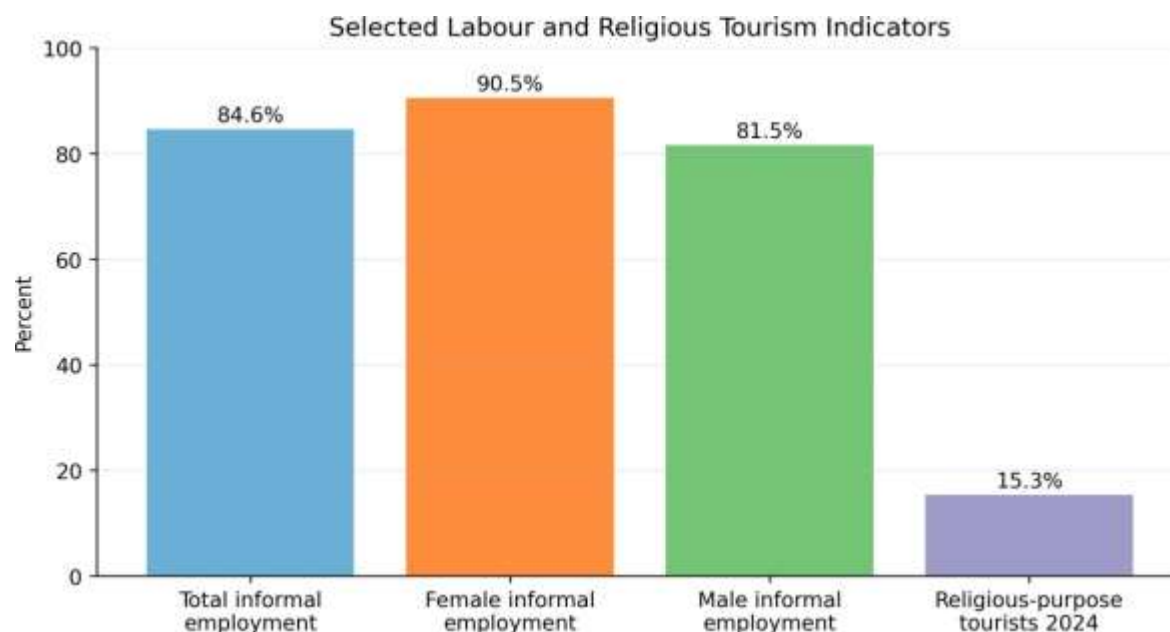
Indicator	Value	Interpretation for pilgrimage economy
Total informal employment share	84.6 percent	Most tourism-linked jobs are likely to occur outside formal contracts.
Female informal employment share	90.5 percent	Women workers in vending and ritual-related services need targeted support.
Male informal employment share	81.5 percent	Informality affects both male and female workers but is higher among women.

Informal-to-formal employment ratio	5.48:1 percent	Informal workers substantially outnumber formal workers in the labour market.
Religious-purpose tourist share, 2024	15.3 percent	Religious travel is a meaningful segment of Nepal's tourism demand.

Note. Values are presented for analytical discussion from available secondary sources cited in the manuscript.

Figure 2

Selected Labour-Market and Religious Tourism Indicators



Note. The figure summarizes the key percentage indicators used to connect Nepal's informal labour-market structure with the religious tourism segment.

Employment-linkage matrix of pilgrim demand

The actions of the pilgrims create several sources of employment at one and the same time. The pilgrim coming from India to Kathmandu will have the option of using a formal bus company or taking part in a formal tourism program; on the other hand, he can also choose to drink tea bought from an informal seller or buy flowers from another informal seller. This indicates that the impact of employment can only be evaluated depending on categories of demand.

Table 3 displays the demand categories along with their possible linkages. This table proves that both formal and informal employment are interrelated. Informal vendors profit from the flow of visitors created by formal transportation and marketing of the destination, whereas formal hotels and travel agencies rely upon the appealing character of the pilgrimage site. Thus, policymakers should not regard informal employment as an obstacle for tourism development; rather, it is an integral part of the destination services industry.

Figure 3 visualizes the same linkage logic by showing how major demand categories simultaneously support formal and informal employment.

Table 3

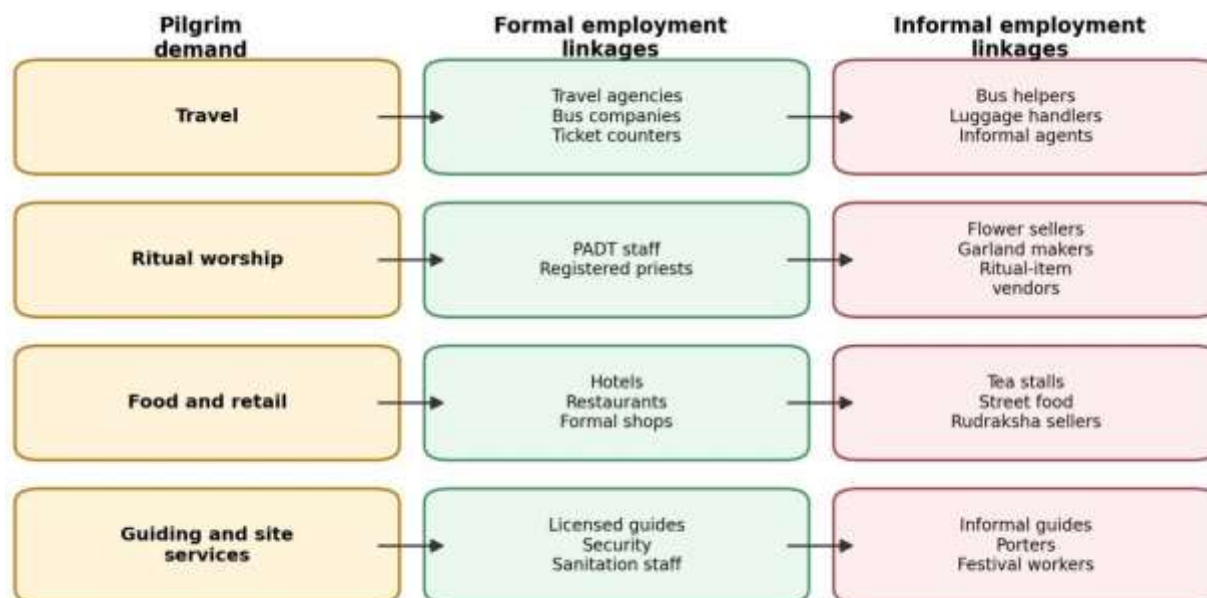
Employment-Linkage Matrix of Pilgrim Demand at Pashupatinath

Pilgrim demand category	Formal employment linkages	Informal employment linkages	Employment effect
Long-distance travel	Travel agencies, bus companies, ticket counters	Bus helpers, luggage handlers, informal agents	Creates transport and coordination jobs
Accommodation	Registered hotels, guest houses, lodges	Unregistered rooms, family-based lodging support	Supports hospitality and cleaning work
Ritual worship	PADT staff, priests through registered institutions	Flower sellers, garland makers, ritual item vendors	Generates ritual-economy livelihoods
Food and beverage	Restaurants, hotel kitchens, formal cafes	Tea stalls, street food sellers, seasonal vendors	Creates high-contact service jobs
Guiding and information	Licensed guides, tour operators	Informal guides, local interpreters, helpers	Supports visitor navigation and cultural interpretation
Retail and souvenirs	Registered shops, handicraft outlets	Rudraksha sellers, mobile vendors, souvenir stalls	Expands micro-retail opportunities
Crowd and site management	Police, PADT security, sanitation workers	Temporary festival workers, volunteer helpers	Increases seasonal labour demand

Note. The matrix is an analytical classification developed from the manuscript and secondary evidence.

Figure 3

Pilgrim Demand and Formal-Informal Employment Linkages



Note. The figure converts the employment-linkage matrix into a visual flow showing how each demand category creates both formal and informal work.

Formal and informal employment structures

Formal employment near the temple of Pashupatinath is mainly found in organizations and registered firms. PADT employs workers for administrative work, security, maintenance, sanitation, and crowd management. Hotel firms hire employees for managerial positions, receptionists, chefs, cleaners, waiters, and accountants. Tour operators hire employees such as coordinators, guides, ticket counters, and chauffeurs. Bank and electronic payment firms provide financial assistance to the tourism industry by hiring employees involved in financial matters in and around the tourism area.

The category of informal employment is wider, more elastic, and closer related to the phenomenon of pilgrimage. Tea stalls, flower stalls, garland making, small scale food sellers, souvenirs, porters, photography stalls, informal guides, and temporary employment during the fest are all carried out near the temple and in direct interaction with pilgrims. The occupation requires little investment and is fast growing during the time of festivals. But the problem is that the income is unpredictable, the work environment is hard, and social protection is low.

Table 4 compares the two employment structures. The comparison shows that formal jobs provide stronger protection but lower absorption capacity, while informal jobs provide livelihood access but weak security. This is why inclusive formalization is necessary. The aim should not be to eliminate informal work, because doing so would damage livelihoods and weaken the pilgrim service system. Instead, the aim should be to improve the quality, safety, recognition, and productivity of informal work.

Table 4

Comparison of Formal and Informal Employment in the Pashupatinath Pilgrimage Economy

Dimension	Formal employment	Informal employment
Registration status	Registered institutions and businesses	Mostly unregistered or self-employed
Income security	Relatively predictable wages or salaries	Daily, seasonal, and uncertain earnings
Entry requirement	Education, skills, license, or organizational access	Low capital, family labour, local knowledge
Social protection	Higher possibility of contracts and benefits	Limited or no access to social security
Seasonality	Moderate, depending on business type	High, especially during festivals
Policy need	Skills, productivity, and destination management	Recognition, zoning, training, finance, and protection

Note. Prepared by the author for analytical comparison.

Employment opportunity intensity framework

The employment opportunity intensity approach defines the occupational category on the basis of the following four aspects: Pilgrim contact, labour intensity, formalization potential, and vulnerability. The pilgrim contact determines the degree of interaction between the pilgrims and the individual. Labour intensity refers to the nature of physical efforts involved in performing the task. Formalization potential means the possibility of upgrading the profession via the issuance of license, registration, or certification.

The framework places emphasis on tea vendors, flower vendors, informal tour guides, porters, and people employed during festivals as highly vulnerable groups. The work done by these groups is critical to pilgrimage tourism but does not enjoy

formalization in terms of space, security, saving abilities, and institutional protection. Hoteliers and employees working at registered travel companies and PADT offices can be easily integrated into institutions and hence are relatively less vulnerable compared to other groups.

Figure 4 presents these occupations in a priority map, highlighting the groups that require urgent recognition, protection, training, and livelihood upgrading.

Table 5

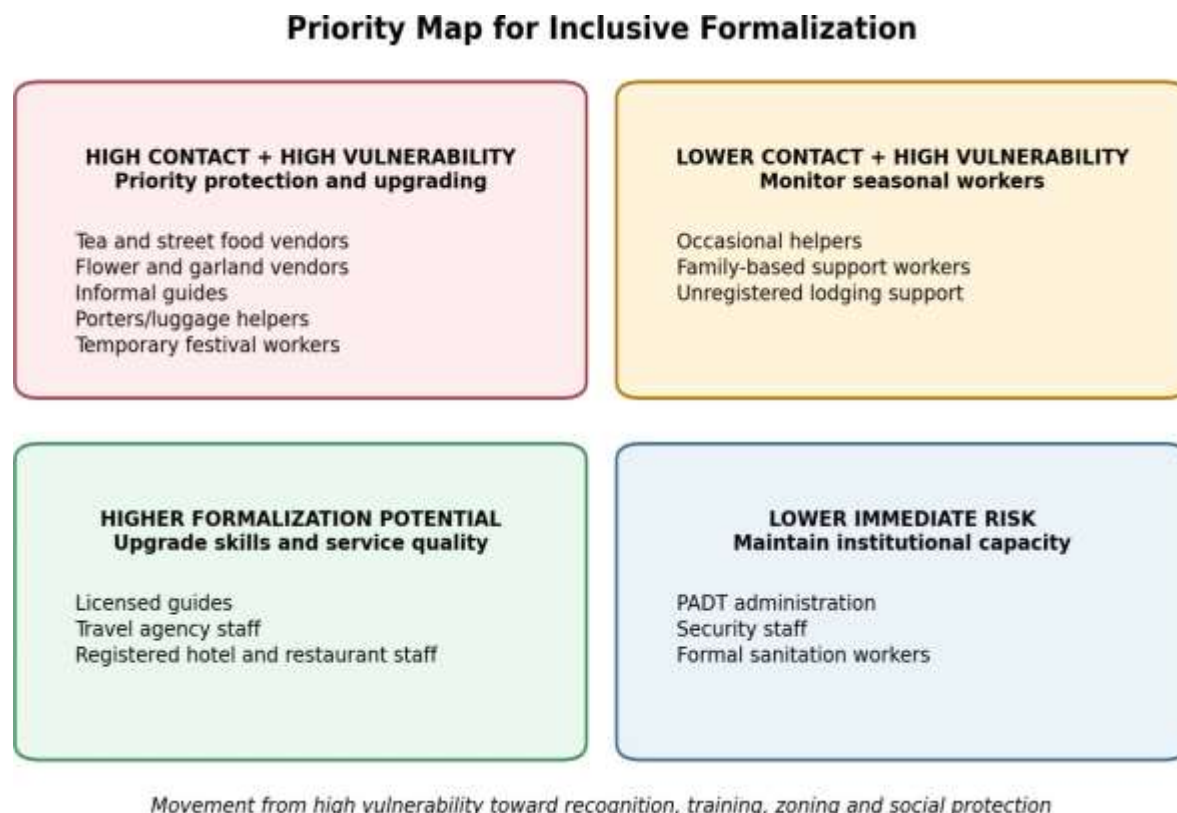
Qualitative Employment Opportunity Intensity Framework

Job category	Direct contact pilgrim	Labour intensity	Formalization potential	Vulnerability
Tea sellers and street food vendors	High	High	Low to medium	High
Flower and garland vendors	High	Medium to high	Low to medium	High
Informal guides	High	Medium	Medium to high	High
Porters and luggage helpers	Medium to high	High	Low	High
Temporary festival workers	Medium	High	Low to medium	High
Registered hotel and restaurant staff	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
Travel agency and licensed guide staff	Medium to high	Medium	High	Low to medium
PADT administration and security	Low to medium	Low to medium	High	Low

Note. This is a qualitative analytical framework, not a direct survey result.

Figure 4

Priority Map for Inclusive Formalization of Pilgrimage Workers



Note. The priority map translates the qualitative employment opportunity intensity framework into an upgrading focus for vulnerable high-contact occupations.

Policy implications and pathways to inclusive formalization

These results show that there is a need for the upgrading of pilgrimage-based informal work, not for its elimination. The first thing that needs to be done is the process of recognition. The local government and PADT can create a list of registered traders, guides, porters, and even festival employees on a temporary basis. This will have to be an easy procedure, inexpensive, and accompanied by incentives such as identity cards and waste management areas.

The second pathway is vendor zoning and basic infrastructure. Informal vending becomes a problem when it creates congestion, waste, or conflict over public space. These problems can be managed through properly designed vending areas, queue systems, drinking water, toilets, waste bins, storage facilities, and shelter. Such infrastructure would improve the pilgrim experience while protecting the livelihoods of workers who depend on high visitor contact.

The third pathway is training and certification. Informal guides, photographers, and ritual-support workers can improve their income and credibility through short training in temple history, visitor communication, basic English or Hindi, first aid, ethical guiding, digital payment use, and cultural heritage rules. A simple certification system could allow experienced informal guides to gradually enter the formal tourism system without losing their local knowledge and social networks.

The fourth pathway is social protection. Informal pilgrimage workers face illness, accident, income shocks, and old-age insecurity. A contributory micro-insurance or social security scheme designed for seasonal workers could reduce vulnerability. Contributions could be small and flexible, with support from local government, PADT, cooperatives, or donor-

funded livelihood programs. Women vendors and elderly workers should receive special attention because they are often more exposed to livelihood insecurity.

The fifth pathway is micro-enterprise support. Small loans, savings groups, cooperative purchasing, digital payment training, and bookkeeping support can help informal workers stabilize and expand their businesses. For example, flower vendors could organize cooperative supply arrangements to reduce input costs, while tea sellers could improve hygiene and packaging through small equipment support. These interventions are more realistic than forcing all workers into conventional business registration immediately.

The cross-border character of Pashupatinath pilgrimage also requires coordination between Nepal and India. Information desks, multilingual signage, transparent pricing, complaint-handling systems, and safe transport coordination can reduce exploitation of pilgrims and improve service quality. Better visitor management would benefit both formal businesses and informal workers because satisfied pilgrims are more likely to spend, return, and recommend the destination.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The present study provides a structured analysis of pilgrimage-based employment opportunities around Pashupatinath Temple, with particular attention to the coexistence of formal and informal employment. Although the study offers useful insights into religious tourism, livelihood generation, and informal work, certain methodological and contextual limitations remain. These limitations also provide important directions for future research.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitations of the study are presented topic-wise below.

Dependence on Secondary Data

The study is primarily grounded on secondary data sources and documentary analysis. This study relies on official figures, previously conducted research, newspaper reports, and other media-based data to analyze pilgrimage employment. In that way, the study cannot present the true figure of pilgrims employed in the area around Pashupatinath Temple directly through a field-based survey. The results of the study should be taken as an analytical estimate of employment.

Lack of Primary Field Survey

The study lacks the primary collection of data from the vendors, guides, porters, hotel employees, transport employees, pilgrims, and people employed by Pashupati Area Development Trust through a field survey. This limitation meant that the study could not ascertain the level of income of the workers, working hours of the workers, time in employment, education level, gender distribution, migration experience, and reliance on earnings from the pilgrimages.

Qualitative Nature of the Employment Opportunity Intensity Framework

The employment opportunity intensity model applied in this study is a qualitative model. This employment model classifies employment types based on interaction with pilgrims, labor intensity, formalization, and vulnerability. This model has not yet undergone statistical testing using primary data. Consequently, it can be viewed as an analytic model that requires further empirical validation.

Seasonal and Fluid Nature of Informal Employment

Informal work around Pashupatinath is highly seasonal, flexible, and changeable. The number and types of workers may vary across ordinary days, weekends, winter pilgrimage periods, and major festivals such as Maha Shivaratri, Teej, and Bala Chaturdashi. Therefore, the employment situation described in the study may not fully represent all seasonal variations of pilgrimage-based work.

Limited Study Area

The study is limited to the Pashupatinath Temple area of Kathmandu, Nepal. Pashupatinath is one of the most significant religious tourism destinations in Nepal, but the employment pattern found here may differ from other pilgrimage destinations.

Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all pilgrimage sites without conducting additional research in other locations.

Difficulty in Measuring Informal Work

Many workers involved in pilgrimage tourism are not formally registered. Tea sellers, flower vendors, informal guides, temporary helpers, street vendors, and small ritual-service providers often operate outside official records. Due to this, it is difficult to measure their exact contribution to employment, income generation, local revenue, and household livelihood security.

Limited Availability of Site-Specific Employment Data

Official tourism and labour statistics generally provide national-level information, but they rarely provide detailed site-specific employment data for religious destinations. Because of this limitation, the study had to rely on broader labour market statistics and documentary evidence to interpret the employment situation around Pashupatinath.

Absence of Econometric Estimation

The study does not apply econometric models to measure the exact relationship between pilgrim flow, visitor expenditure, employment generation, and household income. Therefore, the study explains employment linkages conceptually and descriptively rather than estimating causal effects statistically.

Scope for Future Research

Future researchers may extend this study in several important directions. The following areas are recommended for further investigation.

Primary Survey-Based Research

Future studies should conduct primary surveys among different groups of workers involved in pilgrimage tourism. These groups may include flower vendors, tea sellers, informal guides, porters, hotel workers, transport workers, shopkeepers, PADT staff, and pilgrims. Such surveys would help generate accurate field-based evidence on employment size, livelihood patterns, and working conditions.

Measurement of Income and Employment Conditions

Future research should measure workers' income, working hours, employment duration, seasonal income variation, saving patterns, and household dependency on pilgrimage-related earnings. This type of research would help identify the actual livelihood contribution of pilgrimage tourism to local workers and their families.

Gender-Based Employment Analysis

Further studies should examine the role of women in pilgrimage-based employment. Women are often involved in flower selling, food services, small retail activities, family-based vending, and other informal occupations. A gender-based study would help identify women's employment opportunities, income security, work-related challenges, and access to social protection.

Migration and Cross-Border Employment Study

Since Pashupatinath attracts many Indian pilgrims and some workers may also be seasonal or mobile, future research should examine the role of migration and cross-border mobility in pilgrimage employment. Such research would help explain how Nepal-India religious mobility supports both formal and informal livelihoods.

Study on Formalization of Informal Workers

Future studies should investigate the willingness of informal workers to formalize their activities. Researchers may examine workers' interest in registration, licensing, identity cards, training, social security schemes, tax participation, and access to finance. This would help design practical policies for inclusive formalization without harming existing livelihoods.

Qualitative Interviews with Workers

Qualitative interviews would help understand the lived experiences of informal workers. Such interviews may explore problems related to regulation, harassment, competition, eviction risk, income uncertainty, lack of credit, lack of insurance, and absence of social protection. These insights would strengthen the human side of pilgrimage employment research.

Comparative Study with Other Pilgrimage Sites

Future researchers may compare Pashupatinath with other pilgrimage destinations such as Janakpur, Muktinath, Lumbini, Manakamana, and Indian pilgrimage centres like Varanasi, Ayodhya, Haridwar, and Tirupati. Comparative studies would help identify similarities and differences in pilgrimage-based employment systems across different religious and geographical settings.

Festival-Based Employment Analysis

Major religious festivals generate temporary and seasonal employment opportunities. Future studies should separately analyze employment during Maha Shivaratri, Teej, Bala Chaturdashi, and other religious festivals. This would help estimate the seasonal employment multiplier effect of pilgrimage tourism.

Policy-Oriented Research

Future research should focus on practical policy measures for improving the livelihood security of informal workers. Possible areas include vendor zoning, training programmes, worker identity cards, micro-credit support, social insurance, sanitation facilities, digital payment access, emergency health support, and visitor management systems.

Quantitative Model-Based Research

Future studies may apply statistical and econometric tools to measure the relationship between pilgrim flow, visitor expenditure, employment generation, and household income. Regression analysis, input-output analysis, tourism multiplier analysis, and structural equation modeling may be used to produce stronger empirical findings.

Longitudinal Study of Pilgrimage Employment

Future researchers may conduct longitudinal studies to observe how employment around Pashupatinath changes over time. Such studies can compare employment conditions before, during, and after major festivals or across different years. This would help identify long-term trends in pilgrimage-related livelihoods.

Social Protection and Decent Work Research

Further research should examine whether workers involved in pilgrimage tourism have access to social security, health insurance, legal protection, safe working spaces, and fair income opportunities. This would help connect pilgrimage employment studies with the broader decent work agenda.

Conclusion

This article has shown that cross-border pilgrimage to Pashupatinath Temple generates a dual employment system in which formal and informal livelihoods coexist. Formal jobs are found in registered hotels, travel agencies, transport companies, banks, site management, and security services. Informal livelihoods are visible among tea sellers, flower vendors, informal guides, porters, photographers, souvenir sellers, and temporary festival workers. Both channels are created by the same pilgrim demand, and both are necessary for the functioning of the pilgrimage economy.

This shows that informal employment must not be seen as a mere coincidental outcome of religion-based tourism. When the country's labor market is mostly informal, pilgrimage offers the workers the chance to earn a living through work that may otherwise not be easy to access under formal conditions. At the same time, these same workers are vulnerable to numerous challenges such as instability of income, limited legal recognition, absence of social security, and eviction or persecution.

The key contributions of the paper include the creation of an employment-linkage matrix and an employment opportunity intensity approach. Such techniques aid in determining the effects of pilgrimage demand in terms of job creation, as well as the key occupations to provide assistance for. The paper argues that inclusive formalization, which includes recognition,

training, vendor zones, social protection, microenterprises, and visitor management, would be the best strategy to enhance the role of employment generation through pilgrimage tourism in Pashupatinath.

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