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Rural Tourism as a Catalyst of Change: Cultural and Livelihood Impacts on the Indigenous Communities of Kahibari Village of UNESCO World Heritage Site Manas National Park

Dhruba Jyoti Ramchiary[1], Dr. Santosh Kr Upadhyay[2*]

[1]Research Scholar, Assam down town University, Assam, India

Email: dhrubaramchiary@gmail.com

[2]Associate Professor, Faculty of Commerce & Management, Assam down town University, Assam, India

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Santosh Kr Upadhyay, Associate Professor, Faculty of Commerce & Management, Assam down town University, Assam, India

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impression of tourism-driven modernization on the indigenous Bodo community of Kahibari village (Baksa district, Assam), located adjacent to Manas National Park (MNP), a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a spike in the tourism sector with visitor numbers rising by 53,158 and increased revenue of 37% in 2022–23 the village has experienced significant economic and cultural changes.

Traditionally dependent upon agriculture, the 1,006 residents (147 households) have diversified livelihoods through tourism-related activities such as operating home stays, jungle safari guiding, handicrafts, ethnic cuisine kitchens, traditional cultural performances, and transportation services. Seasonal tourism (October–April) improves cash flow, reduces dependence on agriculture during lean period. Even self-help groups boost women's economic empowerment through various products like handicrafts, food items and traditional attires. Culturally, the Bodo community of the area (Christianity with a minority) following Bathou traditional religion continues major traditions, especially during the Bwisagu festival, where traditional dance, music, and cuisines are showcased to tourists generating pride and income. However, it has led to simplification of rituals and performances for tourist appeal. There has been increasingly adoption of urban fashion and multilingualism by the Youths influenced by tourists.

Community involvement in tourism has some households benefit directly (homestay owners, safari guides), while others participate indirectly (Business stalls, cultural dance, etc). It has brought economic stability and infrastructure improvements but remains seasonal due to lean period. The tourism linked to Manas National Park has transformed livelihood structures positively by empowering women, while keeping culture intact. Yet, it has also introduced adaptation of new trends and it has been seen impacted on traditions among youth. The study concludes that while new adaptation brings both challenges and opportunities, resulting with improved economic conditions and is an integral part of development for the Bodo community of Kahibari.

Keywords: Culture, Traditions, Livelihood diversification, Tourism impact, Bodo community, Manas National Park.

***Corresponding Author:**

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is an identity of an individual that differentiates him from other individuals. In beginning, the indigenous people of a region have been following their culture in the form of tradition. Culture and tradition have been going hand in hand since beginning of the human race. “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Tylor, 1889)[1].

UNESCO World Heritage site (Convention)[2] the Manas National Park covers an area of approximately 950 square kilometers and is one of the most important protected areas in the region. The park is known for its great biodiversity, including very rare and endangered species like the one-horned rhinoceros, Royal Bengal tigers, Asian elephants, and even the golden langurs. The park has mainly three ranges Bansbari range, Bhuyanpara range and Panbari range.

The relationship between Manas National Park and its village boundaries is complex and dynamic. While the park plays a vital role in conserving the region's biodiversity and providing ecological services for the well-being of the local communities, it also depends on the natural resources found in and around the MNP. Many villagers depend on the natural resources of the park for their day to day livelihoods. They usually rely on traditional practices like agriculture, animal husbandry, and collection of non-timber forest products. However, the MNP conservation regulations have limited some of these activities, leading to challenges in carrying out their traditional way of life. Despite the efforts to involve local communities in conservation, challenges remain, as some villagers may still view the park as a barrier to their livelihoods as compared to restricted resource use, or inadequate compensation for conservation efforts.

The park is surrounded by several peripheral villages inhabited by indigenous communities, mainly Bodo and Adivasi tribes. These communities have a deep connection with the resources and ecosystems of the area and have been coexisting hand in hand with the wildlife for generations. The Bodo people are a Tribal group in Assam, India. They mainly live in the northern part of the Brahmaputra River valley. The Bodo people used to be the main group in charge in Assam until around 1825. In the late 20th century, there were about 2.2 million people who spoke Bodo languages in India (Nirala, Witch Hunting in Bodo Community and its Legal Inadequacy, 2021)[3].

Manas National park is surrounded by Bhutan to the North and Udalguri (BTR) and Chirang (BTR) towards East and West accordingly. There are villages surrounding the park to the south of the boundary and Kahibari is a village that shares its boundary with the park that is located at Bansbari Range of Manas National Park. It is also known as the EXIT gate of the park. Tourism has been a boost in this region and not only the wildlife tourism playing the part but the rural tourism in the area has been undergoing changes as both of them are dependent on each other.

Kahibari is populated with Bodo Tribes, the indigenous people of the region have been relying on the park since beginning. The population of Kahibari majorly follows Christianity and the only a few follow Hinduism. Kahibari village has been playing a crucial role in shaping the rural tourism of the area, by providing various services to the tourists like performing in community folk cultural dances, and even being employed in resorts and hotels. Bodo women of Kahibari used to solely rely on their husbands who were involved in dangerous illegal activities like poaching in the past. Now, during this era, the households have started earning their livelihood through various sources, there are even Self help groups (SHG) that have been employed with women of the village and providing livelihood.

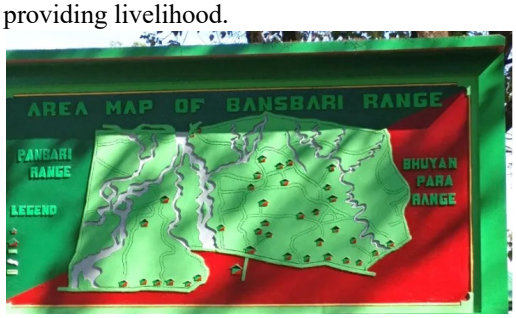


Fig: Area map of Bansbari Range, Manas National Park.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Making money from wildlife and nature-based tourism, it's important to also think about the culture of the people living in the nearby areas. There's an opportunity for cultural tourism, where visitors can learn about and experience the local traditions and way of life. To make this happen, we should encourage more people to offer homestay accommodations in their villages, so tourists can stay with local families and get a real taste of the culture. There is high need for formulation of need based tourism policy and tourism should grow in amore

planned manner (Bathou, Tourism Development And Potentialities A Case Study On Manas National Park, 2018)[4].

The global trends of globalization, privatization, and modernization have also left their mark on Indian agriculture, with both positive and negative consequences. The lives of those dependent on agriculture, including women, are rapidly changing, while government policies struggle to keep pace with these shifts. Small-marginal and women farmers, who form a substantial portion of the agricultural workforce, are particularly affected by the evolving agricultural landscape (Ghunnar, Interface of Marginality Lifeworld and Livelihoods, 2021)[5]. In the past, the community relied heavily on the forest for various needs, including firewood, kitchen items, furniture, and house construction materials. However, over time, their utilization of the forest has evolved to serve different purposes.

Deforestation has become common, primarily driven by activities such as horticulture development, construction work, and the commercialization of farming, particularly the cultivation of vegetables like cabbage, potato, and peas. These changes in the livelihood pattern of the tribes are having a profound impact on the forest resources in the study area, and this impact can be either positive or negative, depending on how these changes are managed and their long-term consequences on both the community and the environment (Sharma, Changing livelihood patterns and its impact on forest resources in Arunachal Pradesh, 2022)[6].

Most households rely on their main source of income, which can be farming, working in jobs like teaching or labour, running a business, and so on. Small-scale farmers often take on additional jobs like share-cropping, working for wages, or doing labour-intensive jobs to make extra money and increase their overall income. People whose primary jobs are in services or running businesses also engage in farming on their available land as a secondary source of income. This additional farming work helps them earn extra money alongside their main occupation.

Households without their own land often start small businesses or take up various activities like creating and selling homemade items, trying out new business ideas, and working part-time to earn a living (Bandyopadhyay, A Study on the Prospect of Sustainable Livelihood in the Fringe Villages of the Kaziranga National Park Assam, 2022)[7]. To achieve sustainability in different villages and wards, both the government and the local households need to work together. Each area is different, we can also use a similar approach to figure out what each village or ward needs to become sustainable. By understanding their unique challenges and requirements, we can come up with specific solutions tailored to their needs. This way, the government and the people in these areas can work hand in hand to overcome their problems and build a better, more sustainable future for everyone (Das, Livelihood Pattern and Sustainability among the Scheduled Tribes in Kamrup District Assam, 2023)[8].

Many young individuals are choosing to migrate to urban areas in pursuit of job opportunities, primarily due to the limited employment prospects within the region. Unfortunately, the study reveals that most seasonal migrant workers lack the necessary skills training and educational qualifications, which often confines them to unorganized sectors and exposes them to various workplace challenges. This situation underscores the pressing need for initiatives that can provide better training and educational support to these migrants, enabling them to secure more stable and fulfilling employment opportunities (NEWME, Livelihood Patterns And Adaptive Strategies A Study Of Zeme Naga Tribe In Tamenglong District Of Manipur, 2021)[9].

OBJECTIVES

The study has been categorised into three points:

- To investigate the present livelihood structure and traditions of the people of Kahibari village.
- To understand the level of community involvement in the tourism related activities of MNP.
- To identify the changing trend in the culture, livelihood structure due to exposure.

The main purpose of the study is to understand how the residents of Kahibari village maintain their daily livelihood through various economic and cultural activities. This includes both primary and secondary income sources, like farming, livestock management, handicrafts, and daily-wages. It aims to note the traditional practices, festivals and social norms that shape the community's cultural identity. By studying livelihood strategies and cultural practices, showcases how the community functions within its natural and social conflicts.

This study further aims to measure how actively and meaningfully the local community

participates in tourism initiatives in and around Kahibari village. It includes looking at how involved residents are in tourism jobs like guiding, running home stays, providing transportation services, performing cultural activities, and participating in conservation efforts. It also examines the community's role in planning, decision-making, and managing tourism resources. The goal is to find out if tourism is driven by the community, whether locals control the benefits of tourism, and how tourism helps their socio-economic development.

This study also aims to understand how tourism has influenced or changed the cultural and economic aspects of the community. It looks at shifts in traditional practices, values, and social behaviour that may have happened due to interactions with tourists or the demand for tourism. On the livelihood side, it examines how tourism has changed income patterns, job opportunities, resource use, and lifestyles. The goal is to identify both positive impacts, such as increased income, cultural promotion, or better infrastructure, and negative impacts, like cultural dilution, dependency on tourism, or conflicts over resources. This helps evaluate the overall sustainability of tourism development in the village.

RESEARCH METHODS

Type of Research: The study is a Descriptive Research.

Study Area: Kahibari Village, Bansbari range, Manas National Park, Baksa, BTR, Assam.

Respondents: Households (Main respondent is the head of the family).

Population & Sample Size: The population size is 1006 which consists of 147 households and the sample size is 107 households.

Sampling methods: The sampling method is simple random sampling.

Data collection: The data collection technique used is questionnaire method, consisting of open and closed ended questions.

Data analysis : Descriptive Data Analysis.

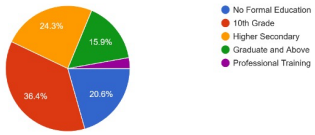
The study will be undertaken on the village households on how they earn their living out of the national park. The village women are engaged in household works in their day-to-day life, but now in the recent days, see women capable enough in earning bread for the family.

The study was carried out at Kahibari village of Manas National Park, it is descriptive research and the study was carried out with primary data collected through questionnaire method containing open and closed ended questions. The study is carried out on per household in the village. The population of village is 1006 and contains 147 households, Dr. Sachindra Kr Das, (Joint Director of Health and services)[10], Baksa, BTR, Assam **as on 01-04-2025**.

The sample size of the study is 107 households are calculated from the population of 147 households. The people here have a well literacy background and some of them have professional courses and trainings on professional tourism services like Jungle guides, Gypsy Safari drivers, Hotel and Resort service providers.

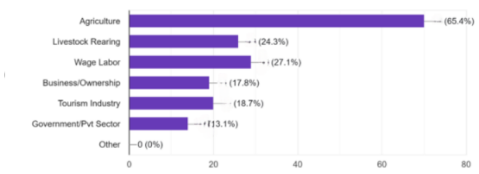
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

Education Qualification of the population of Kahibari Village:



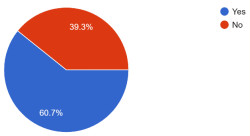
The above figure indicates the Education Levels of the people of the village. More numbers of the population are literates and the education level is somewhat good which has a positive impact on the society. The respondents have also attained professional training like Gypsy Drivers, Hotel/Homestays service providers, etc mostly engaged in tourism service sectors. The education level plays an important role in the village of Kahibari as it has been a help for the population to learn and excel better than their past generations. Although education has a positive impact, there are also negative impacts, the population of Kahibari are exposed to new trends and impacts but modernisation has also brought negative impacts on the cultural livelihood of the people. Modernisation means new trends in attires and even the way of communications, which we can conclude that the old traditions are being disappearing with due time. Many organisations like SHGs and NGOs are taking a strong hold of the traditional methods by establishing themselves as the primary learning and development centres with par with upliftment of livelihood.

Family Occupation of the population of Kahibari Village:



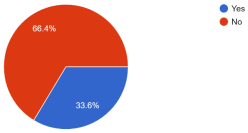
The above figure indicates the respondents are not only engaged into one source of occupation but multiple occupations depending on the multiple sources of livelihood earnings. Here most of the populations are engaged in Agriculture, Livestock rearing and even Wage labour but only a few of the population are engaged in Business, Tourism services, Govt sector jobs, etc. The former generations of the families of Kahibari have always been dependent on Agriculture and it has been past down to future generations as the land they cultivate on are ancestral grounds and as the area comes under a Forest soil, the lands are good for agriculture. Although in the past generations, the agriculture used to be carried out with old techniques but now it has been changed to tractors, modern ploughing techniques due to modernisations. Literacy levels have also helped the villagers to understand about the various ways of earning livelihoods. Some of the villagers have transformed their lands into stunning resorts, villas catering to the Tourism services as the area is attached to the MNP, which adds as a secondary form of livelihood earning.

New Livelihood sources added:



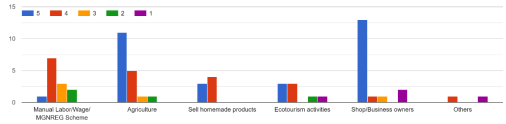
In the above figure, it is shown that most of the population have started adding new livelihood sources to their existing livelihood sources and all of this have been impacted by the MNP and remaining population have not yet gotten the opportunity to add new livelihood sources to their livelihood structure. The MNP has directly or indirectly have created lots of opportunities for the population of Kahibari Village and more than half of the population have been benefitted from it. Not only the MNP, but also the literacy rates and with the new trends in the market, the villagers have got the opportunity to start a new livelihood source. The main occupation of the villagers has always been agriculture and now, it has been shifted from one source to multiple sources, making them adapt to various livelihood sources. The lands can't be cultivated throughout the year as the area receives a lot of rain during the monsoon season and also is a lean period for the MNP. The tourism services don't operate during the lean period, i.e. May to October. Here, the new sources of livelihood come into existence and the villagers have to adapt to the changes.

Lean period of the population of Kahibari Village:



In the above figure it clearly states that most of the population are not affected by the lean period of the Manas National park. The lean period generally starts during the May to the mid of October which at the time is a monsoon season and the park is closed due to the monsoons thus, giving a break in the earnings of the villagers. The remaining population are the ones who are involved directly or indirectly by the MNP. In the recent years, the population suffering the lean period has increased and this is a positive sign that MNP has been directly or indirectly helping the population in earning their livelihood. The villagers have started in finding new sources of livelihoods and which is also a good indications that villagers are adapting to new changes and are following the new trends in the market. Here also, Literacy levels come in a great help for the villagers.

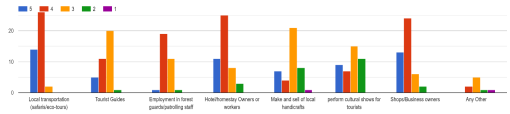
Alternate source of livelihood during the Lean period:



In the above figure, it has been shown that population of Kahibari village are more engaged into Shop/Business sectors during the lean period with Agriculture and daily wages. During the Lean period, most of the population are engaged into agricultural works (all season vegetables) or daily wages and small business setup. Although, agriculture and business runs throughout the year, but the population are mostly engaged in daily wages during the lean period. The people with less literacy rates tends more to work as daily wagers and

villagers with a good literacy will always find new sources for the livelihood earnings. Modernisations have also played a big role in the choice of alternate source of livelihood. New trends in the market have influenced the villagers in adapting to new source of livelihoods. There are people employed in the Forest service like Elephant Mahout and even forest cleaner (trimming of the jungle), etc, these type of work are mainly job responsibility which runs throughout the year irrespective of lean period.

Family benefitted from MNP:



In the above figure, it shows the population of Kahibari village are being benefited in many ways from the MNP. The people are more engaged in Gypsy safari and tour guide jobs, whereas people are also involved in Accommodation works like Hotels and Resort workers, making of local handicrafts and even performing cultural shows for the tourists in the Resorts and Homestays. With the population working on the various fields of the tourism sectors, it has helped a lot in earning a alternative livelihood. Jobs like Elephant Mahout are throughout the year jobs and are employed in the forest service and their families have been directly benefitted from the MNP. Earlier, in the past, mostly all the male members of the households were engaged in Poaching of wild animals but now, as the Poaching is a crime and in the past, there was a treaty to provide employment opportunities to the male members if they vanquished Poaching and thus were awarded jobs in the Forest service leading to family benefitted from MNP. These Poachers have now turned into Forest guards, Forest guides, Elephant Mahouts.

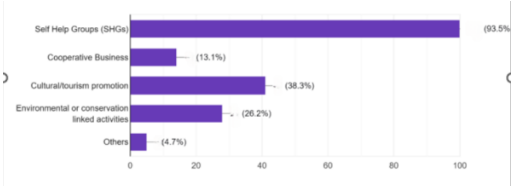


Fig: Awareness of Community led activities.

In the above figure, it shows that there are Self Help Groups in the area. These are mostly run by the women of the village working together and producing products like Jelly, Jam, Pickles, local handicrafts, etc. These SHGs are the ones that have been uplifting the economic power of the village. There are at least 2 women in the family those have been engaged in SHGs of the village and are earning an alternative source of livelihood.

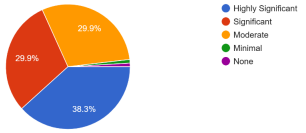


Fig: Economic Growth of the Village.

In the above figure, it is clearly understood that these SHGs, that are local community groups are being the top contributor to the economic growth of the village. The Himalaya VC is a Village council that runs the SHGs. It has 17 SHGs under its area and Maidangshri is one the SHGs that is run by the women of KAHIBARI village.

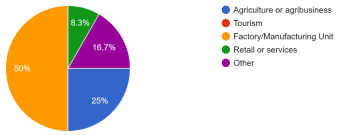


Fig: Contributions of Private sectors in the growth of the village.

In the above figure, it has been clearly stated that half of the population accepts that the private companies invest more on Factory/Manufacturing unit and a few of the population accepts that the companies invest in Agribusiness or agriculture. Some population of the village are engaged in the tea estate and are daily wagers and thus has the idea of the investments in the Factory unit and thus helps the population in upliftment of the livelihood support.

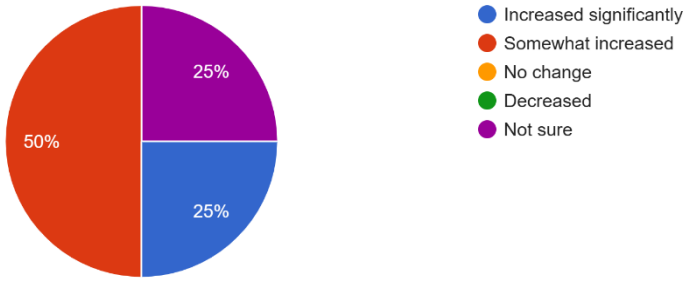


Fig: Income levels affected due to private firms.

In the above figure, it has been shown that income levels of the population have been uplifted due to the contribution of private firms and it has subsequently helped them in earning livelihood and uplifting their livelihood. These firms invest in the factory unit and agribusiness and helping the population out who are engaged in agriculture based sectors.

LIMITATION OF STUDY:

The study was taken out on 107 households and there were many limitations of study like:

- Time limitation: The research was conducted within a short duration, limiting opportunities for seasonal comparisons on lean period and Tourist seasons.
- Response Biasness: Some respondents may have provided desirable answers to avoid sharing financial or personal livelihood details. Most of the respondents feared that the details will be shared to the Government portals and thus changing bits and tweaks in the responses.
- Secondary Data: There was very limited availability of updated records from Govt portals or Tourism sector data and many villages economic reports were not shared from the Gaon bura (Gaon panchayat) which has led me to follow the collection of primary data.
- Language and cultural Barriers: The limitation on this point is that there were many differences in the local dialect and interpretation of questions may have affected the reliability of responses.
- Cross Sectional Nature of study: The study has been conducted only once and not for a long period of time and somehow it cannot fully represent the long-term livelihood changes and its trend.

RECOMMENDATION/SUGGESTIONS

1. Focus on Community-Led Tourist

There should be greater community involvement for tourism development in the village of Kahibari, with greater involvement than is currently possible among households directly involved with tourism. The village committee, SHG, or youth associations should then be brought on board for tourism decision-making and sharing of benefits. There should be greater equity in sharing benefits of tourism activities.

2. Skill Development & Capacity Building

Though there are alternative livelihoods generated through tourism, it has also served only a small fraction of the population in professional training specifically in the tourism industry. Regular training in areas like guide training, hospitality management, and design in handicrafts, digital marketing, and teaching of different languages can be incorporated with the help of the tourism departments and non-governmental organizations.

3. Enhance and Develop Self-Help Groups for Women

The SHGs have also proven to be one of the key sources of economic empowerment of women in Kahibari village. The SHGs would require improved access to microfinance, brand development, packaging support, as well as access to the market, particularly accessibility of the SHG products to the touristic markets as well as to cyber space.

4. Make Tourism Livelihoods Less Seasonal

The existence of tourism here is heavily dependent on seasons, as monsoons cause closings of national parks. In this regard, alternative means for livelihood such as agro-based industries, food processing units, handicrafts, or eco-friendly cottage industries should be developed to sustain livelihoods here based on tourism.

5. Preservation of Culture as Tourism is Promoted

While the cultural performances and festivals like Manas Festival increased the visibility of their culture, the co modification of culture cannot be ruled out. Cultural documentation, community-controlled performances, and

awareness programs must be encouraged to maintain authenticity and concurrently enable income generation through cultural expression.

6. Enhancement of Access to Education and Professional Training

The study indicates that a majority of the villagers studied up to secondary school level and thus can only look for non-skilled jobs; therefore, higher income opportunities remain very elusive. The long-term livelihoods sustainability would be revised upwards with vocational training centres, offering courses on tourism, conservation, agriculture, and entrepreneurship.

7. Improvement in Government–Community–Private Sector Coordination

Although private firms have created positive income growth, there is an urgent need for better coordination between the government agencies and the investor community with the local communities. Transparent partnerships will provide a suitable opportunity to ensure that investments are made to meet the needs of the community, goals on environmental conservation, and principles of sustainable tourism.

8. Promoting Eco-Tourism and Conservation

Tourism programs must incorporate greater interaction of both tourists and locals with environmental education and conservation awareness. This will ensure greater support of the community in conservation programs and that the growth of livelihoods succeeds without disrupting the eco-system of Manas National Park.

CONCLUSION

The above research study concludes that the MNP has brought a subsequent challenge in the Livelihood pattern of the population of Kahibari Village but it has also led them to earn alternative livelihood and has also helped them in adding new livelihood sources to their existing livelihood pattern. The population of the village have adapted to the MNP environment and have a deep understanding on nature. Many households have more than one source of income and have enhanced their economic stability through increased services to tourism-related activities, conservation efforts, and diversified livelihood programs.

The study also shows a positive bonding of the external sources that are being involved in growth of the MNP and have showed continued support by helping the population of kahibari with skill development and empowering them for long term diversified livelihood opportunities. We can also conclude that the livelihood of the population affected by the MNP can be flourished when there is subsequent development in the conservation and community development.

The MNP also ensures to give an opportunity to the local community in the form of MANAS FESTIVAL, a cultural event that is being held every year in the month of JANUARY, on 25th to 30th.

The main Purpose is to boost tourism, showcasing the park's biodiversity and the rich cultural heritage of local communities. It also aims to put up MNP on the global tourism society while ensuring local participation in tourism-related livelihoods. (Today)[11].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The research process was done independently and objectively without any kind of financial support, sponsorship, and funding by commercial organizations, private organizations, or any governmental bodies that would influence the research process or its results. There are no personal, professional, or institution-related relationships to disclose which could influence the design of the work, the collection, analysis, interpretation of the work, or the writing of the manuscript.

The results and conclusions obtained within this present study are purely and solely based on evidence and analysis, ensuring that neutrality, objectivity, and honesty are observed throughout the research process itself.

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