

LEARNING AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES OF COMMUNITY  
HOMESTAY OPERATORS IN NEPAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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A Thesis

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AN ABSTRACT

of the thesis of *Chet Nath Kanel* for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy in Education (Development Studies)* presented on 31 December 2024 entitled *Learning and Capacity Development Practices of Community Homestay Operators in Nepal: An Ethnographic Study*.

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Homestay has been an important local culture-focused, community-based tourism enterprise in Nepal, covering almost all the districts of Nepal. However, Nepali homestay operators' capacity-building processes and learning practices are less known, acutely explored and nominally discussed, and limited empirical knowledge is available in educational and tourism-focused literature in Nepal.

This study, with an ethnographic case from one of the homestay destinations ("Mahabharat Hills") in Bagmati Province, Central Nepal, examined the learning practices of community homestay operators from three perspectives: a) How were they motivated to initiate cultural homestay and how do they feel about the homestay enterprising at present? b) What is traditionally learned and taught through different event-based interventions, and how does the overall learning happen in homestay teaching-learning and capacity development processes? And c) What were the key challenges faced and experienced by the community homestay operators, primarily the women operators? The qualitative exploration, with an interpretive paradigm, was focused on how "experiential learning theory" and the "capability approach-based principles" have worked in such learning and capacity enhancement processes and actions.

For this, based on a prolonged stay (more than twelve weeks), the researcher primarily observed the daily social worlds of seven homestay operators in the study area. *Bhalakusari*, a way of conversation, along with other important tools of

ethnography, was used. Field data were synthesized, highlighted the key information, categorized and analyzed, and accordingly, their meaning-taking and making process was adopted by aligning with appropriate themes/issues.

The study revealed that the homestay operators of the study area were motivated and supported by the projects and programs organized by various types of organizations. The support continued through small grants, orientation workshops, exposure visits, social mobilization, and technical and managerial skills development. They were attracted to homestay enterprises to earn additional income and learn many things, such as social contexts, cultural values, environmental concerns, and educational practices. They got opportunities to refine their traditional knowledge and skills; they also gained new knowledge, ideas, and skills through peer-learning practices in their groups and networks as an actual form of Community of Practice (CoP). They also learnt from the guests (tourists), as well as from their kids. Similarly, increasing information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the area have gradually been occupying spaces as an alternative approach to self and facilitated learning and information-sharing activities. Lately, reduced levels of facilitation from different organizations, as well as limited promotional and marketing activities, have challenged the smooth running of community homestays in the area. Instead, "hometels" (more commercialized homestays) are growing.

Thus, the research implies that the revitalization of community mobilization, more marketing activities, and local tradition and experience-based learning and capacity-building practices can be practical approaches to enhance homestay operators' overall capability for reviving authentic cultural homestays in the area. Equally, caring for local language, culture, tradition, environment, gender and inclusion issues, and enhanced intergenerational linkages can help revive the homestays of the site. In this vein, developing local technical facilitators through a community learning center (CLC) approach can be an alternative way to continuously enhance culturally-sensitive learning-facilitative processes in the area. More research on homestay's overall impacts, equity issues in learning and benefits-sharing, etc., are some of the important areas indicated by this exploratory study.

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## शोध-सार

विकास शिक्षाको विद्यावारिधिको लागि चेतनाथ कणेलको शोध प्रबन्धको शिर्षक " नेपालका सामुदायिक होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरूको सिकाइ तथा क्षमता विकासका अभ्यासहरू: एक इथ्नोग्राफिक अध्ययन " १६ पुस २०८१ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो ।

.....  
प्रा. लक्ष्मण ज्ञवाली, पिएचडी  
शोध निर्देशक

.....  
प्रा. प्रकाशचन्द्र भट्टराई, पिएचडी  
शोध निर्देशक

नेपालका सबैजसो जिल्लाहरू (७७ मध्ये ६८) मा फैलिएको होमस्टे (घरबास) पर्यटन समुदायमा आधारित उद्यम विकासको एक महत्वपूर्ण अवधारणा र अभ्यास हो । तर पनि अधिकांश होमस्टे गन्तव्यहरूले होमस्टेमा हुनुपर्ने मौलिक संस्कृतिसम्बन्धी मूल्य तथा मान्यताहरू, क्रमिक थालनीका प्रक्रिया तथा सहजीकरणका अभ्यासहरू, आवश्यक ज्ञान र सीप, उद्यमशीलतासम्बन्धी ज्ञान र प्रविधि, भौतिक पूर्वाधार आदिबारे गहिरो बुझाइ विकास गर्न बाँकी नै छ । त्यस्तै, नेपाली होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरूको क्षमता अभिवृद्धि प्रक्रिया र सिकाइ अभ्यासहरू अझै पनि कम बुझिएका, कम अनुसन्धान गरिएका र न्यून रूपमा बहस र छलफलमा आएका विषयहरू हुन् । विशेषतः शिक्षा तथा पर्यटन केन्द्रित लेख-रचना तथा प्रकाशनहरूमा पर्यटन विकाससम्बन्धी पहलहरू र सिकाइ प्रक्रियाहरूको अनुभवजन्य ज्ञान तथा छलफल सीमित मात्रामा उपलब्ध छन् । यस अध्ययनले नेपालको बागमती प्रदेशको 'महाभारत हिल्स' अनुसन्धान-संहिता अनुसार नाम परिवर्तन) नामक एक होमस्टे गन्तव्यको एथ्नोग्राफिक स्टडीको माध्यमबाट समुदायमा आधारित होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरूको सिकाइ अभ्यासलाई तीन मूल प्रश्नमा आधारित खोज तथा विश्लेषण गरिएको थियो: क) होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरू कसरी सांस्कृतिक होमस्टे प्रारम्भ गर्न उत्प्रेरित भए र हालको अवस्थामा होमस्टे व्यवसायप्रति उनीहरूको अनुभव तथा अनुभूति कस्तो छ ?, ख) परम्परागत रूपमा होमस्टेसम्बन्धी के के सिकिएको छ, के के कुरा विभिन्न कार्यक्रमका माध्यमबाट सिकाइन्छ, र त्यहाँ सिकाइ तथा क्षमता विकासका प्रक्रियाहरू समग्रमा कसरी हुने गरेका छन् ?, र ग) होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरू, मूलतः महिला सञ्चालकहरू, ले यो व्यवसाय सञ्चालन गर्नका लागि सामना गरेका प्रमुख चुनौतीहरू के-के थिए र तिनको अनुभव कस्तो रह्यो ?

अध्ययन गर्ने क्रममा ज्ञान निर्माणमुखी दृष्टिकोण (इन्टरप्रेटिभ प्याराडाइम) अपनाउँदै मूलतः दुई सिद्धान्तको कसीबाट समग्र सिकाइका प्रक्रिया र अनुभवहरू केलाउने प्रयास गरिएको थियो: क) अनुभवजन्य सिकाइ (एक्सपेरिन्सिएल लर्निङ) को सिद्धान्त, र, ख) क्षमता अभिवृद्धिमूलक दृष्टिकोण (क्यापाबिलिटी एप्रोच) । स्थलगत अध्ययनका लागि समग्रमा बाह्र हप्ताभन्दा बढी समय फिल्डमा नै बिताइएको थियो । यो लामो बसाइँका क्रममा विभिन्न होमस्टेको स्व-अनुभव लिइएको थियो । अध्ययनका लागि गन्तव्यका करिब एक दर्जन होमस्टेमध्ये विशेष मापदण्ड र सूचकहरूका आधारमा जम्मा सातवटा होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरूको दैनिक सामाजिक तथा सांस्कृतिक जीवनको प्रत्यक्ष अवलोकन गरियो । यस क्रममा भलाकुसारी शैलीका संवादहरू, लक्षित समूह

छलफल (एफजीडी), अनौपचारिक कुराकानी, अभिलेखात्मक सामग्री (आर्टिफ्याक्ट्स) अध्ययनजस्ता विभिन्न एथ्नोग्राफिक अध्ययनका विधि तथा तौरतरिकाहरू प्रयोग गरिएका थिए । सङ्कलित सूचना तथा तथ्यहरूलाई विभिन्न प्रकारका नोट्स र डेली डायरीको रूपमा तत्काल अभिलेख गरियो, र पछि क्रमशः कम्प्युटरीकृत गर्दै सूचना वर्गीकरण, मूल शब्द (की-वर्डिङ) पहिचान र हाइलाइटिङ, गुणात्मक संश्लेषण एवम् विश्लेषण गर्दै विभिन्न शीर्षक-विषयगत (थिम) निर्माणको माध्यमबाट माथि उल्लिखित तीनवटा प्रमुख अनुसन्धान-प्रश्नहरूका आधारमा उत्तर खोजी, तदनुरूप अर्थ तथा भाव र निष्कर्ष निर्माण गरियो ।

खोज-अध्ययनले देखाएका मूल कुराहरूमा, अध्ययन क्षेत्रमा रहेका होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरू विभिन्न संघ-संस्था तथा परियोजनाहरू (सरकारी, गैर-सरकारी, सहकारी आदि) बाट सञ्चालन गरिएका कार्यक्रमहरूमार्फत् प्रेरित भएको र सहयोग प्राप्त गरेको देखियो । यस्ता सहयोगहरूमा साना अनुदान, विविध प्रकारका अभिमुखीकरण कार्यशाला, अवलोकन भ्रमण, सामाजिक परिचालन, प्रविधि र व्यवस्थापन सम्बन्धी विभिन्न सीप विकास तालिम आदि थिए । होमस्टे सञ्चालकहरूले अतिरिक्त आमदानीको अपेक्षामा होमस्टे सञ्चालन गर्दै आएका छन्, साथै सामाजिक, सांस्कृतिक, वातावरणीय र शैक्षिक ज्ञान प्राप्त गर्ने अवसर पनि होमस्टेबाट पाउने गरेको देखिन्छ ।

उनीहरूले आफ्ना मौलिक ज्ञान तथा सीपहरूलाई अझ निखार्दै, सामूहिक अभ्यास ('कम्युनिटी अफ प्राक्टिस') का रूपमा साथीहरूसँगको साझा सिकाइ (पियर लर्निङ) प्रक्रियाबाट पनि नयाँ ज्ञान र सीप प्राप्त गर्दै आएको पाइयो । यस्तै, नयाँ नयाँ कुरा सिक्ने क्रममा होमस्टेमा आउने पर्यटकहरू र आफ्नै छोराछोरीहरूबाट पनि उनीहरूले भाषा तथा सूचना प्रविधिसम्बद्ध विविध कुराहरू सिक्ने गरेको देखियो । त्यसो त पछिल्लो समय बढ्दो सूचना तथा सञ्चार प्रविधिहरू (आईसीटी) ले पनि होमस्टे सम्बद्ध ज्ञान तथा सीप सिक्ने कार्यमा केही मद्दत पुगेको देखियो । यी सबै प्रकारका सिकाइ र क्षमता बढोत्तरीका क्रियाकलापहरूले उनीहरूको दैनिक जीवन सहजीकरण, समग्र क्षमता विकास अर्थात् 'सशक्तीकरण'लाई टेवा पुगेको पाइयो ।

तर पछिल्लो समय विभिन्न संघ-संस्थाहरूको सहजीकरण कमजोर हुँदै जानु, प्रवर्धन तथा बजार व्यवस्थापन गतिविधिको अभाव, र प्रभावकारी नेतृत्वको कमीले अध्ययन क्षेत्रका सामुदायिक होमस्टे उद्यमीमा चुनौतीहरू थपिँदै गएका छन् । होमस्टे विकास हुनुको सट्टामा, यहाँ अधिक व्यावसायिक (कमर्सियल) स्वभावका 'होमटेल' ('Homotel') हरू बढ्दै गएका छन् । यी 'होमटेल' मौलिक/स्थानीय सांस्कृतिक मूल्य र मान्यताभन्दा फरक ढंगले चल्ने गरेको देखियो ।

अतः यस खोजमूलक गुणात्मक अनुसन्धानले स्थानीय होमस्टेलाई पुनः जागृत गर्ने र चलायमान बनाउनका लागि सामुदायिक परिचालनलाई पुनर्जीवित गर्दै, प्रवर्धन तथा बजार क्रियाकलापहरू विस्तार गर्दै, स्थानीय परम्परा र अनुभवमा आधारित सिकाइ तथा क्षमता विकास अभ्यासहरूलाई अगाडि बढाउन सकिन्छ र यसबाट वास्तविक सांस्कृतिक होमस्टेको मान्यता कायम हुने देखिन्छ । साथै, स्थानीय भाषा, संस्कृति, परम्परा, वातावरण, लैंगिक तथा सामाजिक समावेशितासम्बन्धी संवेदनशीलता, र पुस्तान्तरणमुखी सम्बन्धहरूलाई मजबुत बनाउँदै समुदायले बढी लाभ लिनसक्ने देखिन्छ । यस सन्दर्भमा, स्थानीय चासोका आधारमा 'सामुदायिक सिकाइ केन्द्र' पद्धतिको अवलम्बन गर्ने, स्थानीय सीपयुक्त सहजकर्ता विकास तथा परिचालन गर्ने, परम्परागत संस्कार, संस्कृति र सीपमा आधारित महत्वपूर्ण सिकाइ अभ्यासलाई निरन्तरता दिएमा स्थानीय होमस्टेहरूले फस्टाउने मौका पाउने छन् । अन्ततः होमस्टे व्यवसायका समग्र प्रभावहरू, क्षमता अभिवृद्धि तथा पर्यटकीय लाभको

बाँडफाँडमा समताको सवाल आदि विषयमा थप अनुसन्धान आवश्यक रहेको यस खोजमूलक अध्ययन-  
अनुसन्धानले सङ्केत गरेको छ ।

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चेतनाथ कणेल

उपाधि उम्मेदवार

१६ पुस २०८१

This thesis entitled *Learning and Capacity Development Practices of Community Homestay Operators in Nepal: An Ethnographic Study*, presented by *Chet Nath Kanel* on 31 December 2024.

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I understand and agree that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of the Kathmandu University Library. My signature below authorizes releasing my thesis to any reader upon request for academic purposes.

..... 31 December 2024

Chet Nath Kanel  
Degree Candidate

2024

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any university.

.....  
Chet Nath Kanel  
Degree Candidate

31 December 2024

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my late father Tek Raj Kanel, late mother Manikarna Bhandari Kanel, wife Sita, sons Prasiddha (late) and Prabuddha, and my respected guardians Ananta Kandel and Dr. Keshav Raj Kanel.

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Chet Nath Kanel

Degree Candidate

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ACAP	Annapurna Conservation Area Project
BS	<i>Bikram Sambat</i> (Nepali Era)
CBT	Community-Based Tourism
CLC	Community Learning Center
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CTEVT	Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training
DCC	District Coordination Committee
DDC	District Development Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
DNPWC	Department of National Parks and Wildlife Reserves
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHT	Great Himalaya Trail
GHTDP	Great Himalaya Trail Development Program
GIZ	German Development Organization
GoN	Government of Nepal
HAN	Hotel Association of Nepal
HOFeN	Homestay Federation of Nepal
HOSAN	Homestay Association of Nepal
ICIMOD	International Center for Integrated Mountain Development
ICT	Information & Communications Technology
I/NGOs	International /Non-Government Organizations
ISc	Intermediate of Science
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
KEEP	Kathmandu Environment Education Project
LRP	Local Resource Person
MH	Mahabharat Hills
MoCTCA	Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology
MoF	Ministry of Finance
NATHM	Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management
NATO	Nepal Association of Tour Operators

NATTA	Nepal Association of Travel and Tour Agents
NCA	Nepal Chepang Association
NPC	National Planning Commission
NRN	Non-Resident Nepali
NRNA	Non-Resident Nepalese Association
NRs	Nepali Rupees
NTB	Nepal Tourism Board
PATA	Pacific Association of Travel Agents
PCDP	Praja Capacity Development Program
PDP	Praja Development Program
RP	Resource Person
SD	Sustainable Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEE	Secondary Education Examination
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SM	Social Mobilizer
SNV	Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers (Netherlands Development Organization)
SOTTO	Society of Travel and Tour Operators
STDP	Sustainable Tourism Development Project/Program
TAAN	Trekking Agents' Association of Nepal
TEAP	Tourism and Environmental Awareness Program
TGDB	Tara Gaon Development Board
TRPAP	Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organization/UN Tourism
US\$	United States Dollar
VITOF	Village Tourism Forum
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

## GLOSSARY OF LOCAL TERMS

<i>Atithi</i>	Guest, Tourist
<i>Adivasi</i>	Aboriginal, tribal
<i>Bari</i>	Unirrigated slopy land suitable mostly for maize/millet, etc.
<i>Bhajan</i>	A traditional religious song mostly sung by elders
<i>Bhaat</i>	Rice
<i>Chamero</i>	Bat(s)
<i>Chautari</i>	A common meeting place underneath a big tree
<i>Chiuri</i>	Butter tree ( <i>Basia</i> plant)
<i>Gharbaas</i>	Homestay
<i>Daal</i>	Soup of different beans, such as lentils, beans, etc.
<i>Dahi</i>	Curd/Yoghurt
<i>Dohori-geet</i>	Nepali folk song sung between two groups ( men and women)
<i>Dhyangro</i>	Special local musical instrument made of leather and wood
<i>Gaunpalika</i>	Rural Municipality
<i>Gharbaas</i>	Homestay
<i>Haat</i>	Local market
<i>Khaanaa</i>	Lunch/dinner (main dish)
<i>Khaadaa</i>	Special cloth-made spiritual garland-like offering
<i>Khaajaa</i>	Breakfast/snacks (light food)
<i>Khet</i>	Irrigated rice field
<i>Mahi</i>	A local drink made from curd/yoghurt
<i>Mudha</i>	Bamboo-made stool (furniture)
<i>Nachgan</i>	Singing and dancing, cultural event
<i>Nwagi</i>	A traditional annual food harvesting festival of Chepangs
<i>Pahunaa</i>	Guest
<i>Raksi</i>	Local alcohol- mostly made of millet, rice, maize, fruits, etc.
<i>Saag</i>	Green (leafy) vegetable
<i>Samiti</i>	Committee

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## CHAPTER I

### SETTING THE RESEARCH SCENE

Realizing the growing importance of tourism in the overall economy of Nepal, as well as the increasing roles of homestay tourism within the overall tourism development in the country, understanding the crux of local people's initiatives and their learning practices has been immensely felt in recent times. There are two types of homestays- community homestays and private homestays. How these homestay operators describe their experiences and how they learn and capacitate themselves to operate community homestays is less explored and acutely documented in Nepal.

In this thesis, I describe, interpret, and elaborate on the lived experiences of community homestay entrepreneurs in Nepal through an ethnographic study, which is qualitative and exploratory. In the inquiry process, I bring the stories of the homestay (also called *gharbaas* in Nepali) entrepreneurs about their initiation of homestay, the ways they learned, and the steps and procedures they followed while developing homestays—based on the overall learning in the Mahabharat Hills (MH) of the Bagmati province in Central Nepal. According to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), Nepal's homestay tourism is dominated by community homestay, and lately, its rapid expansions in Nepal have been greatly realized (MoCTCA, 2020). My inquiry on the learning practices of homestay operators is primarily focused on what they have learned and how they have grasped new knowledge and skills to run their homestays.

In my exploratory interpretations, I also bring my field-oriented reflections and insights on the subject matter and research processes that I adopted during the ethnographic inquiries using two theories, namely, Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) and Capability Approach (Sen, 2000). This thesis forwards the idea that many ways of learning practices within the informal, non-formal, and formal settings are being adopted by the homestay operators—who are mostly women, and, along with their traditional skills transfer mechanisms, different efforts are geared towards their overall capacity enhancement. Nevertheless, such efforts and actions are scattered, less coordinated, and less visionary from the overall capacity development point of view. In the facilitative learning and capacity development processes, local-level facilitation mechanisms seem to be less coordinated and less focused.

In this first chapter, I briefly introduce myself, my research topic, and the research context with the purpose of the study. Equally, I present the problem statement and the significance of the research, followed by key research questions (RQs) used in the whole inquiry process in the field. At the end of this chapter, I also present the major highlights of this thesis chapters. In this thesis, I have used entrepreneur, operator, and sometimes, the owner synonymously to denote the key person of the homestay enterprising in the study area.

### **Research Context**

As a professional in the community-based rural tourism field and a PhD student of the development education subject, I wanted to link these two subjects in the research study. Homestay enterprising, a part of indigenous cultural tourism (Kunwar, 2017), is assumed to be a traditional practice-based business, and some people also believe that no specific knowledge or skills are required for this traditional hospitality-oriented enterprise with lots of cultural blending (Kunwar, 2002). But, the reality is not like that. It is a blending business of traditional and modern/advanced knowledge, techniques, and technologies (Janjua, 2022), which, in the Nepali perspective (NTB, 2011), sees *atithi devo bhava* (अतिथि देवो भवः - the guest is equivalent to god, trans.) as a means of earning money from such "gods" and satisfying them with authentic local culture-based new tastes and experiences.

From an educational perspective, homestay's effective management procedures demand specific attitudes, knowledge and skills such as standard criteria for homestay opening, a clear understanding of the concept of community-based cultural homestay tourism enterprise, effective hospitality skills, demonstration of affinity, better cooking and serving practices, talking to and interacting with the guests, guiding for local tours/hiking activities, and touring/trekking; organic and *raithane* (traditional/local) food production, and many other interlinked skills (Bhatt, 2015; Kunwar, 2017; Pandey, 2011; Taragaon Development Board [TGDB], 2024). Thus, I chose a topic focusing on the learning and capacity development practices of homestay operators.

I have intensively explored the key stages and processes of homestay initiation in the study area, as well as the entrepreneurs' learning ways and learning practices, along with experienced challenges and issues in homestay enterprising in the research site, the Mahabharat Hills. Chepang ethnic people (Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994)

dominate the research site. Other ethnic groups residing in the area include Magar, Dashnami, and Brahmin-Chhetri (BC). I selected seven homestay operators representing all major ethnic backgrounds in the site but representing more from the Chepang community, visualizing the dominant cultural essences of the area. As an ethnographic inquirer, the study was carried out with a prolonged stay in the field as a domestic tourist and a research scholar. To capture the first-hand experience of the homestay entrepreneurs, I mostly used the *bhalakusari* (informal talks/*kurakani*) way of local conversations. Due to my extensive involvement in the tourism sector and special interest in community homestays in Nepal, this research is contextualized with the community practices and experiences gained in the last two decades or more, continuously since 2002.

Since Nepal is renowned for its tourism, and tourism is seen as a strong source of economic development as well, my long involvement in the tourism sector, especially in culture-based rural tourism development, has also inspired me to get engaged in research work directly related to the same field—linking education or learning process, and community-based tourism development. In the tourism field, I have been involved mostly in tourism education and training, people-centered heritage-based planning, participatory and appreciative evaluations, and monitoring. Additionally, my latest engagement as a team player in a co-education-based private sector secondary education management in the capital city of Kathmandu has also encouraged me to accomplish my doctorate in the education and development field. I have, thus, taken my study as a blending of education and tourism capacity development, which emerged gradually and automatically with the trajectory of my professional and educational journey.

I am convinced that Nepal's tourism experiences and learning are underexplored, untold, and under-written. My research findings and philosophies will guide my further journey in this arena, and I have made efforts to give shape to this thesis with much enthusiasm, effort, and aspiration.

Among the different types of tourism in Nepal, homestay tourism occupies significant space, providing not only accommodation facilities to tourists but also lots of opportunities to exchange and promote cultural assets and beauties through the direct engagement of local people/stakeholders (Lama, 2014). According to TGDB (2016), its popularity in Nepal is increasing due to multifaceted contributions,

including economic, social, cultural, educational, infrastructural, and so on. The homestay entrepreneurs or operators (the hosts) are the backbones of homestay tourism.

The expansion and extension of such endeavors depend on the overall capacity of the entrepreneurs as well as other stakeholders in the destinations. There are many issues linked to the learning and capacity development of community homestay operators. Due to this, the expected quality growth of Nepal's homestay has also been a challenge (Sharma, 2019). The total stay of tourists and the expansion of homestay businesses are directly associated because, in each destination, tourists' stay at such homestays depends on the quality of the available services, as well as hospitality and affinity skills and attitudes of the homestay operators (Janjua et al., 2021; Lama, 2014; Pandey, 2014). Accordingly, hospitality services in hotels and homestays depend on the available human resources and their quality because trained persons can provide better services than non-trained persons (Kunwar, 2002, Kunwar, 2017). In the homestays, guests can enjoy practising all types of rural traditions, heritages, cultures, foods, and costumes (NRB, 2015; TGDB, 2016). These trends have instigated locals to open homestays in many destinations like Sirubari (Syangja); Ghalegaun, Ghanpokhara, Bhujung, Kaulepani, and others in Lamjung; Hattibang (Chitwan), Amaltari (Nawalpur), Briddhim (Rasuwa), Shree Antu (Ilam), Bandipur and Tanahunsur in Tanahun; Namje (Dhankuta), Gabhar Valley (Banke), Dallagaun (Bardiya), Bhada (Kailali), and so on (Nepal Tourism Board [NTB], 2022; Sedai, 2018; Woli, 2022). These are just some of the renowned homestay sites in Nepal, and among them, Sirubari is the first organized community homestay village in Nepal, which formally began in 1997 (Kandel, 2011; NTB, 2022). It started working as a "homestay's live school" for many new homestay communities in Nepal.

Nepal's tourism is enhancing national/international connections and ties. Tourism is one of the sectors with the most potential for growth in the Nepali economy, and due to tourism and its limitless resources, Nepal is famous in the world (Bhattarai, 2022; Sharma, 2012) stated that Nepal's tourism officially opened to international tourists in the early 1950s (after the dawn of democracy in Nepal in 1951) (Gurung, 2007; MoCTCA, 2016; Sharma, 2004). Before the dawn of democracy in Nepal, it was almost closed to international tourists. Tourism affects employment generation (Kanel, 2019c), foreign exchange earnings, and gross

domestic product (GDP) growth (NPC, 2024); at the same time, it has helped build the national image (Pandey, 2014, p.71). Consequently, according to MoCTCA (2020), in the year 2019, the tourism industry in Nepal earned about NRs 75 billion (about 70 million US dollars), and it contributed about 3% to the national GDP (notably, the NPC (2024) hopes to make it 7% by the year 2029/30). The MoCTCA's Tourism Statistics data (2020) reveals that the Nepali tourism sector provides direct employment to approximately 0.5 million (5 lakhs) people in Nepal. However, these figures differ from one source to another. For instance, a report published by the International Labor Organization [ILO] (2017) claims that the tourism sector alone has created about one million jobs directly or indirectly.

Likewise, regarding the total income per tourist, MoCTCA data (2020) indicates that each foreign tourist in the year 2019- on average- spent US\$ 680 in Nepal, which came to be US\$ 54 per day per tourist. It is clear that the larger the number of tourists in any destination, the higher the possibility of expanding economic and social benefits and opportunities to the locals (Kunwar, 2017). According to MoCTCA (2020; 2021) and NTB (2020), from a tourism perspective, the year 2019 was very good, as this year, for the first time in Nepal, witnessed a total of 1197,191 foreign tourists. India, Myanmar, Thailand, China, and the USA were the top five source countries.

Among total tourists in 2019, 65% came for holiday/pleasure, 16.5% for trekking and mountaineering, 14.4% for pilgrimage, and the remaining visited for different purposes such as business, official, conventions, and others (not specified). On average, international tourists spend 12 to 14 days in Nepal (MoCTCA, 2021). Highlighting the key events and achievements of Nepal's tourism industry, Poudel (2019) presents an abstractive tourism development trajectory for Nepal. The key message of this trajectory is that the tourism sector began in Nepal in the 1950s, and gradually, it has been taking momentum with several ups and downs. The narrative is also that Nepal's tourism sector has not been able to reap the benefits as expected or as it deserves the potential (Bhattarai, 2022; Dangi, 2016; Kunwar, 2017; Poudel, 2019). There are more than 100 rural and urban tourist destinations in Nepal, where different types of tourists enjoy their trips (NTB, 2023). Most destinations have some sort of uniqueness (Uprety & Upadhyaya, 2013). Thus, tourism development in Nepal has always shown great hopes and aspirations among the general people and

concerned stakeholders. Like hotels, homestay facilities have also increased in Nepal in the last few years (Woli, 2022). NPC (2024), in its 16th Plan, has targeted to receive 2.5 million foreign tourists, and it has also expected per tourist to spend an average of US\$ 85 daily by FY 2029/30 (Hada, 2024). The Plan also envisages expanding the average stay of foreign tourists from 13.1 days (FY 2021/22) to 15 days by 2029/30. According to TGBD (2024), in all these aspirations and plans, homestay tourism's roles are also greatly recognized and anticipated.

After the first community homestay in Sirubari, other sites gradually developed. They are competing with each other to be the model site with different types of ethnic specialities, such as Ghandruk and many rural settlements of Annapurna region, Ghalegaun, Shree Antu, Briddhim, Chitwan Chepang Hills and Madi Valley (Chitwan), Amaltari; Bastola Gaun/Nagarkot (Bhaktapur), Patlekhet (Kavre), Gabhar Valley (Banke), Dallagaun (Bardiya), Bhadagaun (Kailali), and so forth. These sites are also learning from each other to initiate and improve Nepal's cultural heritage-based homestay tourism (Woli, 2022). From learning and capacity development perspectives, there are different issues associated with it. Since homestays are run mostly by adults and older people, another assumption is that they fuse newly learned and traditional knowledge, refined through experiential, transformative, and situated learning processes (Kolb, 1984; Kunwar & Ulak, 2024; Mezirow, 1991). These processes help to refine the skills, attitudes, and behavior (TGDB, 2016) for running homestay businesses with better caution and deliberations.

Despite this fact, field experiences have shown gaps between available and required skills (NRB, 2015; Kanel et al., 2025; Pandey, 2011; Sedai, 2018; TGDB, 2016; TGDB, 2024). Irrespective of these notions and knowledge, in many destinations, a deeper understanding of the issues, problems, and challenges is limited (Adhikari, 2024; Sedai, 2018). Homestay's real essence is taken as a "cultural stay" (Agrawal & Mehra, 2020), or "home away from home" or "homestay- my second home" for both domestic and international tourists (MoCTCA, 2010). Some homestay promoters also say that "home is where the heart is"; nevertheless, realistically, meeting those expectations and understanding by the tourists (guests) and the locals (hosts) is a challenging task (Sharma, 2019). According to Douglas (1991), a home goes beyond the physical to encompass emotional, psychological, and symbolic meanings. Thus, homestays are not just "houses" to accommodate the guests but to

provide emotional attachment too. In this line, however, Blunt and Dowling's (2006) ideas about home are also worth noting since they claim that there are geographic and feminist perspectives on home. They say that space, power, and identity intersect in the concept of "home" across different cultures and socio-political contexts.

Understanding these perspectives is also crucial when talking about authentic homestays. Considering these realities of homestay tourism and also associated educational, learning and capacity-related issues and challenges (Bhutia et al., 2022; Kanel et al., 2025), a more comprehensive and fostered understanding is crucial and essential in the context of rural Nepal.

### **My Academic and Professional Journey and Engagement with Homestay Issues**

After completing my first Master's degree in Resource Management (Natural and Human Resources) from the United Kingdom in 1997, I also accomplished an additional Master's in Public Administration (MPA) in 2007 with a special focus on rural development, training management, and project planning. Both degrees continued during my professional (job-oriented) life, which began in 1986 from a government district forest office to non-governmental and bilateral projects and offices outside the Kathmandu Valley and within the Valley. During these periods, I worked as a forest administrator, forestry trainer, agro-forestry researcher, participatory development networker, tourism training facilitator, and human resources development planner in rural/community-based tourism development, promotion, and marketing.

Supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and implemented by the MoCTCA, the five-year (2002-2007) rural tourism project called Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP)— in which I completed a full cycle of the project period. It was the main source of my learning and inspiration to continuously engage in community-based participatory tourism development works in Nepal and beyond (e.g. Vietnam; Kanel, 2011). Among the different components of TRPAP, community homestay development in the target districts (six) and homestay operators' overall capacity development and learning processes were my prime concerns and interests. In this regard, I also took the lead in some facilitative learning activities and their capacity enhancement programs under the project endeavors.

However, I never thought about those concerns and actions from the research point of view since I had to focus on the developmental facilitation and

implementation parts. The TRPAP project ended in 2007, and I also left the UNDP job. Then, I started seeking other opportunities for my higher professional engagement. I continued working as a freelancer consultant and provided professional services to various government organizations (GOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and Nepali non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nepal. Additionally, by a unique chance, I worked as an International Consultant in Hanoi, Vietnam, from 2010 to 2012 (on an intermittent basis) for a three-year Sustainable Tourism Development Project (STDP), where I had to provide technical input to the project, and specifically design a Training and Capacity Development Plan for various provinces. This was the project jointly implemented by the Vietnam Government and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). That STDP was an instrumental milestone for me to continually engage in tourism capacity-building initiatives, development, and research.

Also, although my PhD dream was not new, the Vietnam job put extra pressure on me to pursue a PhD as early as possible since I was heading towards international jobs since the year 2010. Also, I met many PhD-holder friends in Vietnam as co-workers/sub-ordinates, who also inspired me to accomplish a new academic degree by research so that my international/national as well as academic and professional horizons would be enlarged with new scopes and opportunities. The international job in Vietnam also widened my thinking horizon and created many rays of hope in my professional and academic fields. Even in Vietnam, I had some chances to experience community-based homestays, where I had to taste the cultural essences of those homestays, provide feedback for further improvements or scaling-up, and reflect on their concerns in the overall "Training and Capacity Development Plan" of the STDP. After returning from Vietnam, I continued my freelancing consultancy works in Nepal, and, as an experienced professional development practitioner, I also decided to continue my PhD study at Kathmandu University- School of Education (KUSOED). I was confident that, with my two Master's level degrees as a basic rule of the KUSOED, I would be accepted as a candidate for my PhD candidacy. Here, I found a suitable and appropriate venue for pursuing my doctorate-level study. My experience, educational background, and several other factors inspired me to join KUSOED for my subject area, "Education/Development Studies," which links tourism as my research subject.

As I mentioned earlier, my long involvement in education and training fields, as well as my extensive engagement in the developmental sector and tourism training/capacity development interventions, provided me with a good platform for my further academic and research career. My special interest in quality education, participatory tourism development, training, capacity enhancement, and people-centered community-focused research and investigation approaches have given me a good opportunity to engage in research activity that deals with community homestay tourism, particularly emphasizing capability enhancement and learning practices of homestay operators.

### **Rationale of the Research**

Participant-focused educational and training initiatives are believed to make bigger impacts and play prominent roles in continuing and sustaining developmental efforts (Janjua, 2022; Pasa, 2021; TGDB, 2014). Nevertheless, in most cases, participant-focused training curricula, methods and approaches are also inadequate (Pandey, 2011). Knowing the strategies, styles, and practices adopted by the local practitioners of any enterprise or endeavor is crucial for professionals and academia. There are always wide ranges of audiences for any research (Janjua et al., 2021). As Starks and Brown-Trinidad (2007) suggest to define and signify the audience of the research, I am clear that the importance of this research is mostly connected to the homestay entrepreneurs, rural tourism practitioners, government and non-governmental facilitators at local as well as provincial levels; homestay promoters; researchers and academia; policy-makers, and implementing bodies at the Federal, Provincial and Local levels.

Studying homestay entrepreneurs' learning practices with prominent theoretical lenses of "Experiential Learning Theory" and "Capability Approach" will further ease us having a comprehensive understanding of "knowing" the homestay initiation, establishment, operations, and management and also "being" the homestay operators with enhanced capabilities and confidence valuing local/traditional culture. Moreover, the importance of the research is further rationalized from the perspectives of women operators, who are the main players in homestay enterprising (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Bhutia et al., 2022; Chapagain & Rai, 2018; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). Their cases as main learners and players have been the key focus of the study. Normally, homestays are in rural and remote parts of Nepal, where locals have

abundant experiences, but they have minimal formal/school education and also get less chance for training and functional literacy opportunities.

The rural populace, marginalized and without any formal education, is lagging in the development process, and they are also deprived of many opportunities (Chepang, 2016; Gurung, 2016). Similarly, inadequate exposure and skill orientation to the needy and targeted people have also caused them to have less confidence in running cultural homestays and other rural tourism-related enterprises, especially in rural sites (Taragaon Development Board [TGDB], 2013). Homestay is primarily a women-led enterprise (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Lama, 2013); thus, understanding the opportunities and challenges from the educational and capacity development approaches and experiential learning perspectives is very important from the sustainable, "cultural enterprising" (Odunga et al., 2024) point of view. Moreover, although homestay businesses have been in practice for more than two decades in Nepal, as indicated above, limited empirical research focusing on community-oriented educational and learning practices is felt. Likewise, deep observations of the daily life of homestay learners and entrepreneurs in community-based tourism have rarely happened. Thus, my main aim for the academic research was to gain a deeper understanding of the learning practices and homestay operators' behavioral performances in their day-to-day lives and contexts. According to Sahoo (2011), it has been well established that "context and meaning have a profound effect on performance" (p. 162). This research also embraces the value as prominent research since the in-depth inquiries on homestay operators' learning experiences are less focused and less documented in Nepal.

Such local experiences of capacity development processes teach us better about proper insights and understanding, effective planning, and realistic execution. In education and training, some implementation and methodological limitations have also been reported in the tourism sector (Bhatt, 2015). In addition, these experiences of the actual practitioners of homestay tourism become instrumental in generating new knowledge for homestay practitioners, academia, and other developmental actors. The research could significantly contribute to policy, practices, and further research endeavors.

### **Problem Statement**

Education contributes to tourism, and tourism also contributes to education (Kunwar & Ulak, 2024); thus, there is a close nexus. In this context, education and learning actions guide us toward effective activities and performances (Mezirow, 1991). As a multidisciplinary enterprise and multifaceted foundation for sustainable local development, tourism can contribute to economic, educational, cultural, and infrastructural development (Gurung, 2007; NTB, 2023; Shakya, 2012; Shrestha, 2010). Thus, within the broad spectrum of community-based rural tourism, homestay tourism has also widened its spatial and temporal spaces in the last few years (MoCTCA, 2021; TGDB, 2016; TGDB, 2023). Tourism experts straightforwardly claim that the efforts to develop the capacity of the tourism actors are limited in Nepal (Poudel, 2019; Sedai, 2018), ultimately limiting the benefits of such endeavors. Nevertheless, Nepal's tourism will continuously grow, considering its fast-growing nature, and the services rendered to tourists depend on the quality of the human resources involved in those service sectors (NTB, 2022). For homestay entrepreneurs to perform better, effective education and learning processes are required (TGDB, 2016). Nepal's tourism sector has also been shaped through continuous learning for the last seven decades. In reality, despite long involvement in tourism since the 1950s, Nepal has not been able to reap the benefits expected from the tourism sector (Bhattarai, 2022; Bist, 2009; Hada, 2024; Lamichhane, 2022; MoCTCA, 2022). According to such literature, the low level of tourist arrival (inbound) in the country is the main cause of low economic benefits from tourism/homestay as compared to other similar destinations/countries. Tourists' "satisfaction level" (Andreck & Nyaupane, 2011) also primarily determines the duration of their stay and the level of expenditures from each tourist.

Ultimately, the quality of personnel relies on the educational and training activities associated with tourism entrepreneurs or homestay operators. In such processes, local indigenous knowledge and techniques play important roles (Quiroz, 1999). Nonetheless, in the Nepali context, there is a dearth of empirical knowledge in this field. Deeper insights and understanding of such realities, their nexus, and cruxes need to be essentially understood. While exploring the key concerns of homestay learning, major questions come into our minds, such as: How do these homestay operators use their traditional knowledge or experience-based knowledge in learning,

initiating, and in practice? How do they get information and learn new things? How do the homestay operators develop knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward welcoming the guests to their villages/homes? How do they connect with the outside world when inviting guests? What techniques and technologies (including ICTs) are being used to develop overall capabilities and confidence? There are several such concerns. Nevertheless, available literature has rarely brought such field research-based findings on homestay enterprising and learning.

Due to the limited availability of research-based information on homestay/rural tourism, proper planning and implementation of activities are always hampered (TGDB, 2024; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). Homestay learning processes and practices are far less linked with pedagogical, andragogical (adult), and life-long learning processes. Mezirow (1991) suggests that creating an ideal learning environment is crucial, and assisting the learner in defining his/her learning needs is also important in the adult learning process. These perspectives, however, are isolated in many teaching-learning processes. Furthermore, coordinated and concerted efforts are limited on this front. Additionally, due to limited research-based evidence, proper planning of training and educational programs, designing need-based curricula/modules giving priority to indigenous knowledge and skills (Macedo, 1999), and producing appropriate supporting materials—even resource books/manuals—are also deficient in Nepal. Pandey (2011), criticizing the limitations in the training sector, particularly focusing on tourism training and capacity development programs, also indicates that, in Nepal, empirical research-based new knowledge is hardly created.

With these realizations, the prime focus of my study has been to understand the initiations of homestay operators in setting up, explore their learning ways and processes/practices, and also understand associated challenges and key issues of community homestay operators in rural parts of Nepal. The key local actors only focus on "what" and "how much/many" matters but not much on "why" and "how" aspects of such capacity enhancement endeavors. My thorough exploration and deeper understanding of the above contexts bring new knowledge to this field. Usually, capacity development efforts have been ritualistic, and different courses are mostly run ad-hoc. Such limitations are mostly attributed to less appropriate and insufficient policy and inadequate developmental efforts. For example, before 2008,

there was no proper policy for developing tourism activities in rural parts, especially in poverty-stricken areas (Bhattarai, 2019; MoCTCA, 2008). Owing to this, tourism benefits could not reach the needy and marginalized people of Nepal's rural areas (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Bhatt, 2015; Bhattarai, 2019; Pandey, 2014). The involvement of local inhabitants in the tourism sector was not realized, considered, or recognized. Nepal has achieved very little in the last seven decades (MoCTCA, 2016) compared to neighbouring countries.

In Nepal's tourism industry, durability or sustainability aspects are also getting less attention, which demands inclusive tourism development, pro-environment initiatives, and pro-community planning and management, among others (Bhatt, 2015; Bhattarai, 2021; MoCTCA, 2016). It applies to most donor-funded developmental projects in Nepal (Dahal, 2014a). In addition, Pandey (2011) indicates that local practice-based and experiential learning-based findings and associated reflections from the field to the academic sector rarely come forward. There are limited studies; thus, there are lots of gaps in knowledge about various stakeholders and their learning practices and capacities. The studies by Acharya and Halpenny (2013), Pandey (2011), and Sedai (2018) are some of the exploratory studies on tourism training and capacity development programs. They have mostly focused their reflections on utilizing training and workshop programs. Still, they have not touched upon the local /traditional knowledge transfer practices, learning and capability enhancement styles, the ways the homestay entrepreneurs are adopting, and the associated challenges that are also not noticed evidently.

The exploration of homestay learning, inception, and operational experiences is a new initiative in Nepal, through which "what", "why", and "how" perspectives are unearthed in detail because, in the empirical research I reviewed, homestay learning is an underrepresented subject and context. Therefore, I carried out this study to understand the nexus and crux of community homestay development in the rural parts, its facilitative procedures, self-initiated development and learning efforts, and traditional and innovative local practices of knowledge-strengthening and human capacity building, along with associated challenges and concerns.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of my research study was to understand and describe community homestay operators' initiations in setting up homestay enterprises and

their learning strategies for operating the homestays. More specifically, the research aimed to explore self-initiated/experiential and facilitative learning approaches and practices adopted at the research site and associated challenges in the overall learning and capacity development practices and processes.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the research purpose, I developed the following three central research questions to obtain a deeper understanding of homestay learning and capability enhancement practices in the study area:

- i. How do the community homestay operators describe their initiatives of establishing and managing community homestay enterprises?
- ii. What and how do they learn and develop their capacities for operating the homestays?
- iii. What challenges do the community homestay operators experience in the learning and capacity development practices in establishing, running, and developing community homestays?

### **Delimitations of the Study**

This study focuses on the learning practices and capacity development processes of community homestay operators in Nepal. Thus, the research excludes private homestay operators and focuses solely on community homestay enterprises. The study is delimited to understand the initiation, learning, and operational experiences of homestay operators. The focus is on exploring how these (selected 7) entrepreneurs acquire, adapt, and apply both indigenous/traditional and modern knowledge in establishing and running their homestay enterprises, with an emphasis on capturing the dominant cultural essences. Similarly, within the qualitative approaches, the study adopts an ethnographic exploration approach, utilizing various qualitative methods and tools such as informal conversations (*bhalakusari/kurakani*) to gain first-hand insights.

Theoretically, the study employs the Experiential Learning Theory and the Capability Approach. Furthermore, the study is contextualized within the last two decades, reflecting on practices and trends since the early 2000s, particularly in the context of Nepal's growing tourism sector. Likewise, it does not evaluate the economic impacts of homestays or their broader role in tourism policy beyond the scope of capacity development and learning practices. By defining these boundaries

and delimitations, the study ensures a focused and in-depth exploration of the subject-matter while acknowledging areas beyond its scope for future research.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis is divided into eight chapters. This first chapter elaborated on how and why I chose the homestay subject for my educational research, the key research problem, and how my research can contribute to various spectrums linking both-education/learning and community homestay enterprising in Nepal. In the second chapter, I first review relevant national and international thematic literature focusing on homestay tourism, community homestay enterprising, homestay teaching-learning practices, and interlinked issues. Likewise, two prominent theories, the "Experiential Learning Theory" and the "Capability Approach", are discussed, followed by a review of homestay-related policies in Nepal and some empirical research works on homestay tourism in Nepal and the international arena, including an indication of the research gaps from learning and capacity development perspectives. Likewise, chapter three presents detailed descriptions of my research methodology—ethnography—and ethical perspectives. The chapter also emphasizes how the *bhalakusari* way of ethnographic conversations was exercised for in-depth exploration, along with observations and other prominent tools, including *kurakani*, focus group discussions, and others. In the same manner, chapters four, five, and six are the main chapters of the research findings (my insights), in which exploratory elaborations on the three key research questions—as depicted in the first chapter—are made. In this context, the fourth chapter brings the field perspectives on how the locals of Mahabharat Hills have initiated community homestay enterprising. The fifth chapter elaborates on how those entrepreneurs, especially female operators of the homestays, learned and transferred different knowledge, skills and attitudes in the process of developing and managing their homestay enterprises. Equally, the sixth chapter discusses the key issues and challenges faced by homestay operators in the learning and capacity development practices/processes. In the seventh chapter, I have put forward my insightful discussions based on the key findings as depicted in Chapters IV through VI. Finally, in the eighth chapter, I have presented the conclusion and some implications, along with my concluding reflective voices, experiences, and feelings on the overall PhD journey.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I present a review of relevant literature, focusing mainly on community homestay tourism in Nepal, its developmental processes, and associated learning practices. I also present the major essences of two main theoretical lenses I have used in this research, including the "Experiential Learning Theory" and the "Capability Approach". Likewise, in the later part of this chapter, I also present major gaps in learning and capacity development-related research in community homestay tourism.

#### **Homestay Tourism, Learning, and Capacity Development: An Overview**

Homestay is a popular term globally as it provides accommodation services for domestic as well as international tourists with special flavors and tastes of local culture/sub-cultures (Janjua et al., 2021; TGDB, 2016). It emphasizes promoting local traditions, rituals, customs, attires, songs, music, arts and crafts, and so on. More importantly, homestay tourism provides unique opportunities for earning, learning, empowering, and developing community infrastructural services (International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], 2015; Lama, 2013; TGDB, 2024). Nepal Rastra Bank [NRB] (2015) also asserts that a homestay is an alternative form of tourism accommodation and a source of economic returns in rural and urban areas. In the following section, I present how homestay tourism emerged and how it is growing in Nepal.

#### **Emergence and Growth of Homestay Tourism in Nepal**

Nepal's tourism has greatly contributed to earning foreign currencies; for example, in the year 2019 alone, the tourism sector contributed around US\$ 0.75 billion as revenues (GoN, 2021; MoCTCA, 2020). Local community engagement is crucial for developing participatory tourism destinations. Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), for example, brought some new concepts of participatory conservation and tourism development in the Gandaki and Dhaulagiri regions with the branding of "Annapurna Circuit".

Nepal's tourism was/is dominantly led by the hotel accommodation system. Hotels, resorts, inns, motels, lodges/guest-houses (locally known as *pahunaa-ghar*)/tea-houses, and camp-sites/camp-grounds are the common types of

accommodation services in Nepal and elsewhere (Bist, 2009). Lately, the globe is experiencing new (although some are not new) features of accommodation with growing trends—targeted for different types of travelers—including homestay, B&B (bed and breakfast), holiday-home, villas, cottages, Airbnb/apartments (also called "apart-hotel"), hostel, tent-stay, caravan-stay, cruise-stay, private room, *machan* (in park/wildlife reserve areas), etc. In addition to these, farm stay/*goth-stay* (yak herders make-shift shed stay) are also gradually becoming popular in Nepal. It is interesting to note that the rapid innovation of the tourism accommodation system is ongoing throughout the world. As a reliable accommodation facility, homestay can provide multiple types of benefits to the guests and hosts (Bhattarai, 2022; Sedai, 2018). In this context, illustrating Peru's case, Back et al. (2022) also presented a journal article on a similar theme. Their findings illuminate that homestays can play a positive role in educator development by providing linguistic and cultural scaffolds, as well as increased empathy for language learners.

In India's Himachal Pradesh, Agrawal and Mehra (2020) found a significant increase in educational (higher studies) attainment due to homestay/rural tourism efforts. There are both "community" and "private" homestays in most low-income countries. From the Nepali perspective, in my further discussions, I mostly talk about community-based homestays and elaborate on such homestays' multifaceted roles, contributions, and perspectives. Community-based homestays are expected to support the preservation of local culture, traditions, and natural landscapes, as well as the overall capacity development of the locality and the local populace (Gurung, 2007; MoCTCA, 2010; Pasa, 2021; Sedai, 2018; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007) and it has been a prominent tourism product in Nepal's tourism sector (NTB, 2019; TGDB, 2024). In Nepal, about 85% of homestays are in rural areas, and the remaining 15% are in urban areas (TGDB, 2016). This indicates that rural-area-based homestays are common in Nepal, although some are in urban/city areas.

The industry is spread throughout Nepal (Gurung, 2007; MoCTCA, 2022) and can be established, developed, and promoted even with little effort and investment (NPC, 2021; Poudel, 2019). As the government prioritizes agriculture, tourism and hydroelectricity (energy) as three major pillars of Nepal's development processes, the community homestays are directly linked to these pillars, utilizing multiple resources and potentials. Community homestays in Nepal are intended to provide not only

accommodation, food, and drinks but also local "authentic cultural tastes" (Kunwar, 2017) and essences to tourists (MoCTCA, 2010; TGDB, 2020). Many tourists, domestic or foreign, coming to homestay undeniably have a special interest in local culture/sub-cultures (Ghimire, 2015; Reisinger, 2009; Sharma, 2019). Dube and Sharma (2012) prefer to call such special interest tourists "typical homestay travelers". The rural community-based homestay product is an element of the larger hospitality industry, having the special aspects of inseparability, variability, and intangibility (Janjua, 2022). Acharya and Halpenny (2013) have also claimed that homestays can also serve as an alternative tourism product for sustainable community development and as a means of women's empowerment.

However, criticisms are there that the tourism efforts in low-income countries have not been able to derive anticipated benefits for reducing gender inequality (Mitra et al., 2023). In the Indian Himalayan region, a study by Thakur et al. (2023) found that homestay tourism has been able to increase women's roles in tourism and economic sectors and promote, among others, local food habits (fresh, local, nutritious, etc.). In Nepal, Uprety (2018), citing an example from Chitwan Hills, advocates for opportunities to promote local traditional foods, ensuring women's and children's nutritional and health conditions.

Homestay, relatively, is a new phenomenon in Nepal's tourism management practices, but now it is rapidly growing (MoCTCA, 2022; Sedai, 2018) (A trajectory of homestay development in Nepal has been presented in Appendix 1). MoCTCA (2022) and TGDB (2024) data reveal that there are more than 1,500 homestay units in Nepal; homestay tourism has spread into all seven provinces and 68 districts out of 77. Homestay in Nepal has primarily flourished in ethnic communities such as Lepcha, Limbu, Rai, Sherpa, Dhimal, Rajbanshi, Jirel, Tamang, Danuwar, Gurung, Magar, Newar, Thakali, Tharu, etc. Very few homestays are run by Brahmin, Chhetri, Dasnami, Dalit, Muslim, and Madhesi communities in Nepal. Some efforts have been made to include Dalits in homestay tourism, such as at Ghalegaun (Lamjung), Aampswara (Tanahun), etc. The Aampswara Dalit Homestay (Tanahun district, Gandaki Province), established in 2015, is the first Dalit homestay in Nepal (Bhadgaunle, 2022). There are twelve Dalit homestays at present, where 36 beds are available with different activities like cultural programs, local foods and cuisines, scenic and Himalayan views from different points, visiting old and new temples,

nature walks, hiking, and so forth. In Nepal, homestay tourism spread not only from the east to the west but also from an ecological viewpoint, and it has spread from Terai to the Himalayan region. It has been a popular enterprise, mostly in rural areas.

From a commercial point of view, it formally began in Nepal in 1997 in Sirubari village of Syangja district (Budhathoki, 2013; MoCTCA, 2010; Subedi, 2016; TGDB, 2018). It was initiated through a community approach, thus called community homestay (Kanel, 2018a). With homestay development, the local community's enhanced engagement in the tourism sector has been a new phenomenon in Nepal. UNDP/TRPAP (2007) claims that the procedural, distributive, and recognition types of equity were also considered through active participation in the local group formation process; local guidelines and "code of ethics" or "codes of conduct" development process; sharing different benefits equally or on equity (proportional) basis. Similarly, the local poor and marginalized were recognized through various quota systems, encouragement, and motivation with extra and special training to ensure better equity because community-based rural tourism's main challenge is to maintain equity or increase benefits for those who are not directly engaged.

One of Nepal's major rural tourism destinations, the Bandipur Village in Tanahun district, where homestay tourism has also flourished recently (Dhakal, 2021). It has demonstrated more than a dozen good practices or "achievements". Those good practices may include the conservation of natural and "socio-cultural resources like medieval buildings" (Dhakal, 2021; Sigdel, 2014; Singh et al., 2020), trails, and stone-made water taps; pasting of stones as a traditional approach to protecting houses; farming of goat, orange, and silk-worm for self-sufficiency; the campaign to convert it a free zone of open defecations; establishment of quality hotels, resorts, and restaurants; establishment of tourism information center to keep proper records of tourists and also provide information to tourists; establishment of communication center; availability of well-trained local guides; running of a diploma-level Bandipur campus; a well-facilitated community hospital; well maintained Martyr's Memorial Park; large and well-maintained ground for multipurpose uses; regular and safe water supply system; and, the establishment of English boarding high-school with good facilities and well-trained teachers.

The gist of those best practices revolve around these key five aspects- i) conservation and cultural preservation, ii) integrated local infrastructural development, iii) enterprising, employment creations, iv) human resources/local capacity development, and v) education, health, and sanitational programs (Dhakal, 2021; Sigdel, 2014; Sing et al., 2020). These are good examples of community-oriented actions through participatory homestay tourism development and management in any specific site(s). Bandipur Tourism, a popular "Hill Station" (*pahad ki raani*/Queen of the Hill), is also considering its sustainability aspects, which could be worth learning for other rural destinations. The gist of the above literature is that a multitude of positive impacts could be realized from community homestay/rural tourism in Bandipur despite some emerging challenges. In my observations, too, due to increasing mass tourism, especially after developing new infrastructures and attractions such as Bandipur Cable Car, Bandipur Great Wall, etc., might put extra pressure on the local environment and culture. In rural tourism, "mass tourism always poses threats" (Bhatt, 2015; Kunwar, 2017), and local actors need to be cautious before such threats are realized.

In the same respect, a study conducted by GIZ Nepal (Sedai, 2018) also emphasized homestay's economic and socio-cultural aspects, stating that homestay operators' household expenses are supported by homestay incomes. Equally, the homestay system has contributed to preserving cultural assets and social ties. All family members are directly or indirectly involved in homestay management. According to the report, some women-headed homestays earned approximately 70 thousand rupees annually from the homestay business, although inter-household incomes differ. Likewise, Ghimire and Neupane (2022) reported that, among various homestay villages in Lamjung, Ghalegaun earns the highest from homestay enterprising. According to them, each household involved in the homestay business can earn a sum of Rs. 45,000/- per month. This was a worth-noting case among various homestay destinations in Nepal.

Kanel (2019b) and Sedai (2018) also indicate that despite a local intention to develop equity-based asset development, the incomes of directly and indirectly engaged families have differed vastly. Despite this, however, all rural tourism destinations may not be able to get such levels of benefits and privileges as Bandipur village has now because it was the former district headquarters and a very good trade

center before the headquarters was shifted from Bandipur to Damauli (Vyas Municipality). Nevertheless, it is a "regained" tourism village after many efforts of local leaders, NGOs, and INGOs/donor agencies. This was a good example of how old cultures and "dead towns" can also be revived through community-based tourism. Similar cases, for example, have been reported by Deng et al. (2021) in the case of China; Goutou and Karachalis (2024) in the case of Greece; Ferwati et al. (2021) in the case of Qatar; and Sari et al. (2018) in the case of Indonesia (Sleman, Yogyakarta). These authors have highlighted how tourism interventions, such as community-based approaches, private funding and strategic planning, can play a crucial role in reviving abandoned towns and villages by fostering economic growth, preserving cultural heritage, and improving local livelihoods.

In relation to learning and capacity building, ACAP's initiative to create a teaching-learning environment in the target area is gradually being adopted and spread out in other parts of Nepal, where community-based tourism development activities were initiated. In rural area-based tourism, the community learning processes mainly focus on contents like tourism and environment awareness programs (TEAP), learning green development through conservations and plantations, cultural heritage preservation and effective performance, waste management, hospitality management, cooking, baking, local guiding, local resources management, community museum establishment, and development, etc. According to Lama (2014) and UNDP/TRPAP (2007), various organizations and projects in Nepal gradually developed and adopted the contents for formal training and workshop events. However, limited efforts were made to reflect local (indigenous) knowledge and practices in the contents and courses. Dhakal (2021) also reports that social awareness initiatives among the local stakeholders and actors, even in famous destinations (e.g. Bandipur), are limited. Ghimire (2024), in his latest Nepali book entitled "Community Socialism", blames the development institutions for not being able to enhance and encourage local knowledge, resources and practices.

Based on research in the Chitwan district, Pradhanang (2002) indicates that tourist villages or village tourism leads to dynamism in the tourism industry since it relates to all villages of Nepal. He further states that if appropriately developed, village tourism can create more tourism-related business activities through forward and backward linkages, and such rural area-based industries like livestock, vegetable,

dairy products, and so forth can significantly contribute to the local economy. Generally, rural tourism starts from homestay (or tea-house) accommodation (Ghimire, 2023). In this manner, homestay/village tourism development has spread rapidly in many places around the globe, especially in low-income countries (Janjua, 2022). Poverty alleviation and local capacity development are the main focus of rural/homestay tourism, being one of the key drivers (Gurung, 2007; Khatri, 2019; Lamichhane, 2022). Despite the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, after a big hitch in the industry (Gautam & Khatri, 2021; Sao Joao, 2021; Sharma, 2022), it has again started reviving in most parts of the globe (Pandey, 2020; Prasain, 2023; UNWTO, 2022). Official figures of the UNWTO (2020) showed that in 2019, global tourism arrivals and receipts incomes remained at the top in history.

According to UNWTO (2022), all regions saw a rise in international arrivals in 2019, and there were more than 1.5 billion tourist arrivals globally in 2019, just 664 million 20 years back in 1999. In 2019 alone, global tourism generated US\$ 1.37 trillion. In this connection, UNWTO (2022) also claims that tourism has been one of the most thriving economic activities of the 21st century, with increasing roles of the private sector (Hart et al., 2021; MoCTCA, 2016; NTB, 2019; Sharma, 2018; Shrestha, 2022). Vogel (2001) also states that the private sector's entry into tourism businesses largely depends on four crucial factors: capital, know-how, regulations, and price competition. The critical issue is whether the governments recognize these private sectors' roles. Also, according to the above literature, indigenous tourism, with some special beauty, occupies good space worldwide. Indigenous tourism spurs cultural interaction and revival, "bolsters local employment" (Kanel, 2019c), alleviates poverty (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007), helps curbing rural migration, and also empowers local communities—especially women and youth- if managed properly, responsibly, and sustainably.

Additionally, such initiatives could encourage the locals and concerned stakeholders to diversify tourism products and explore new tourism spots. It also allows people to retain their relationship with the land and nurtures a sense of pride (Vogel, 2001). Tourism, being a fast-growing industry, involves many economic and social sectors utilizing the visual tourist gaze, making it an excellent development sector, reducing the out-migration as labor, enhancing local production systems with various value-chains, and so on (Chandra, 2010; Dangol, 2007; Fanelli, 2022;

Franklin, 2003; Sedai, 2014; Seth, 1997). It is emphasized that rural tourism is both a need and a right-based concept. Thus, such enterprising within the rural tourism development system can be a boon to the rural communities if systematically developed to address the needs of local people as well as their developmental rights such as roads, electricity, drinking water, telecommunications, health treatment, rescue operation, and so forth. In the same manner, Sen (2000) also elaborates that these developmental inputs and resources are the key to the overall capability enhancement of the local community.

Thus, the homestay program enhances tourist-related services and "satisfaction" (Tan et al., 2015) with higher capacities in the tourism development processes. For quality tourism and effective guiding services, Tan et al. (2015) discuss the "servicescape" concept, in which tourists' satisfactions are given high importance through an improved "servicescape", including good physical conditions in natural settings and good guiding services for high satisfaction of the visitors. Linking capacity development with such interventions, Sen (2009) mentions that such enhanced capacities can contribute to a person's more choices of freedom and secure social justice, who sees freedom as a significant aspect- making people more accountable.

Nevertheless, in the homestay context, Sedai (2018) reports limitations of efforts in delivering systematically developed training and capacity development packages that meet the above objectives. As highlighted above, many authors have discussed and agreed that homestay not only provides food and shelter to visitors but also enriches the value of cultural and heritage tourism in the locality. It is also well discussed that rural and homestay tourism provides several seen and unseen opportunities for the villagers- both directly and indirectly engaged. Irrespective of the many benefits of homestay tourism, there are some critical and challenging issues, too, which are discussed in the sections that follow.

### **The Emergence of Capacity Building for Effective Homestay Operations**

Homestay learning, which is based on a dynamic process, is also a part of the overall capacity building of local stakeholders who are directly or indirectly involved in local tourism management and related endeavors. The outcomes of the initiatives are well thought-off from the beginning so that learning activities are understood and guided accordingly. Crow and Crow (2008, p. 225) state that "learning is an active

process that needs to be stimulated and guided toward desirable outcomes". According to them, learning helps to know and to do; however, to know is not synonymous with to do because knowing and doing are related but different things. The reality is that all learning activities might not be applied in actual work or field.

Now, I present some ideas regarding community homestays' contributions to local-level learning, capacity building, and related issues. The homestay development process starts with the capacity-building process. Homestay interventions often play crucial roles in enhancing the operators' capacities, covering a wider spectrum of personal development, household management, and community development activities. Rural dwellers are also gradually learning how tourists can be attracted to their villages/communities.

Pyakurel (2013) emphasized the need to provide different types of training to the locals for rural tourism/homestay development. In the newly established homestay sites, the IUCN advocates for training and promotional efforts (2015). Since homestays are intended to develop multiple capital and capacities, including social, economic, human, physical, etc., homestay enterprises are run by family members, mostly women (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; GoN, 2019; NRB, 2015; Pasa, 2021). Pasa (2021), based on research in Sirubari, Syangja district, indicated that there are close ties between education (informal learning as well) and tourism development in the rural areas of Nepal, where women become important actors as homestay operators. In addition, Lama (2013) also claims that women's leadership and confidence development through tourism is much appreciated and highlighted, which helps create social capital, including three main dimensions: social trust, engaged citizenship, and strong reciprocity. Consequently, the human capital developers—with the intention of overall capability enhancement or empowerment—always emphasize different strategies, including learning management, competency development, process involvement, organizational integration, system enhancement, and performance evaluation. Sen (2009) further states that mutual benefit, based on symmetry and reciprocity, is not the only foundation for thinking about reasonable behavior towards others. Again, Sen (2009) believes in mutually beneficial cooperation. In the same context, Telser (2005) says that cooperation strengthens mutual understanding and trust as well.

Homestay operators' capacity development and empowerment issues encompass various concerns, such as the nature and extent of the empowerment-related activities, the empowerment process, and the local stakeholders' experiences in those capability enhancement and empowerment efforts (Kandel, 2016; KC, 2013; NTB, 2011; Rijal, 2013; TGDB, 2024). Different types of packages are available for homestay training. Such homestay training packages include, among others, homestay management, food preparations, health and hygiene, waste management, tour package development, proposal development and budgeting, menu (tariff) development, code of conduct development, etc. TRPAP's experiences showed that little effort could make big changes in disadvantaged and marginalized households through these packages/training (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). Local-level institutional development, minor infrastructures, different types of training, and capacity development initiatives were instrumental in uplifting the status and dignity of these grassroots people. It is, therefore, that the actors urgently realize sustainable supporting mechanisms and local capacity development efforts. As advocated by Blanchard et al. (2012), applying cost-effective methods in such training and workshops becomes vital, ensuring sustainability and ownership of the locals. This equally relates to homestay learning and enterprising as well.

### **Learning Enterprising and Entrepreneurship in Community Homestay**

The term "entrepreneurship" was coined in the early 1900s to refer to the "actions conducted by the entrepreneur" (Subedi, 2017, p. 223). Similarly, entrepreneurship is generally understood as a process, and it is taken for a successful business (Sapkota et al., 2024). Still, entrepreneurs might value it differently, such as innovative activities, vision creation and commitment, selfless attitude, dedication, holistic thinking, collective brainstorming, contextual mind-mapping and dreaming, and translating it into action. Hopson and Scally (1981) also emphasize an effective and collective brainstorming session of participants for extracting many great ideas, which also enforces learning and capability-building processes of the small and micro-entrepreneurs (SMEs), like homestay enterprising. In this respect, Ghimire (2024) has given special emphasis on enhancing local capacities based on the local resources and opportunities first, then trapping and mobilizing other sources with active initiation of local communities.

Emphasizing enterprising and entrepreneurship, Rai (2019) admits that, from the perspective of social practice, entrepreneurship is a way of life that is socially constructed and related to economic activities that are fundamental to human living. In this vein, Subedi (2017) also asserts that cultural construct is associated with local entrepreneurship. Tourism culture and business culture are closely associated and enhanced knowledge through self-practice, education and training and can be achieved effectively, for which adequate (basic) infrastructural support is equally important (Sapkota et al., 2024; Subedi, 2019). Here, proper use of education and training is advocated for the process. In the case of SMEs, it is further claimed that the formal educational qualifications provide only general literacy and numeracy support to entrepreneurs, and the training packages directly help them start and continue their enterprises (Rai, 2019). In a homestay, enterprising, especially for adults, starts with knowing about the homestay and going through the registration process, report submission, renewal, and getting other support from the government, entities, and concerned parties.

In adult learning or andragogical processes, the concept of transformative learning occupies significant space. In transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) and Fleming, (2018) emphasize three primary perspectives: psychological, convictional, and behavioral. According to them, the psychological perspective involves changes in understanding oneself, including shifts in self-concept and personal identity, and it focuses on the learner's inner transformation, such as developing greater self-awareness and redefining their sense of self through reflective practices. Similarly, the convictional perspective refers to changes in one's belief systems or convictions, and, in this process, learners put questions and potentially transform their core beliefs, values, and moral viewpoints, leading to a more inclusive and critically aware worldview.

Lastly, the behavioral perspective involves changes in lifestyle and actions. These transformative learning processes lead to adopting new behaviors that align with one's revised beliefs and self-understanding, often resulting in a more autonomous and socially responsible approach to life. In this context, Kunwar and Ulak (2024) have made an effort to link transformative learning in tourism contexts. According to them, highlighting Mezirow's (1991) key principle and applicability, travel experiences can lead to profound personal growth and self-discovery by

challenging travelers' existing worldviews and encouraging critical reflection. Furthermore, the authors have identified major factors that facilitate transformative experiences during travel, including novelty seeking, escapism, freedom, self-efficacy, and "authenticity" (Kunwar, 2017). It has also been examined that in the process of shaping "transformative tourism experiences", there are pertinent roles of various elements like tourism motivation, "destination image" (Pandey, 2014), marketing, and satisfaction. Their study emphasizes the importance of understanding these mechanisms to design travel experiences that promote personal development and well-being.

Similarly, in a context, Chandra (2010) and Seth (1997) highlight that tourism could be a good tool to change the image and brand of the place. A labor-exporting country can become a beautiful country. Equally, Wagle (2018) also draws attention to the fact that the nation is not based only on the "remittance-dependent economy" for which tourism can play crucial roles in diversifying economic sources. Transformation in the local livelihoods has been possible through tourism (Tham-Min, 2022). Dhakal (2021) also provides ideas for sustainable tourism development practices to achieve sustainable rural development in the country. If tourism is vibrant from multiple perspectives, it can build a new image, including a boom in competitive local enterprising and a boom in local business groups with enhanced capacities and new concepts/products in enterprising (Franklin, 2003). In such efforts, local government's roles become vital to supporting community endeavors.

It is notable that the Nepal government, with the introduction of the federal system in 2015, has been trying to federalize tourism efforts as well (MoCTCA, 2016; NPC, 2018; NTB, 2022; Sharma, 2022). However, Nepal's tourism branding is too old ("*Naturally Nepal- Once is Not Enough.*") to adequately display the notion of being "one of the most tourist-friendly countries in the world" (Bhattarai, 2021; Lamichhane, 2022) and also "the country of Mt. Everest" (Chimariya, 2014); and "Mecca for trekkers and mountaineers" of the world (Nyaupane and Chhetri, 2009). As a result, now there are more than 53,000 hotel beds in Nepal (including both the star hotels (173) and tourist standard hotels (1,228), as of December 2022 (MoCTCA, 2023). The expansion of accommodation services in Nepal is accelerating even during COVID-19 (Kanel, 2021a; Kanel, 2021b) and other financial crises/unexpected price hikes due to the Ukraine-Russia conflicts.

Generally, tourists visiting Nepal are confined to six main purposes: holiday/pleasure, pilgrimage, trekking and mountaineering, official, business, and conference/convention (MoCTCA, 2023). It is believed that mountain tourism in Nepal has high potential in multiple contexts (Regmi et al., 2023). For example, roughly one-fourth of all international tourists' visits occur in mountain destinations, where the combination of ecotourism and tourism, "second homes", and amenity migration have fueled the economy of many mountain regions (Nepal, 2010; MoCTCA, 2022; MoCTCA, 2023). Highlighting the essence of mountain tourism and referring to the GHT, Choegy (2011) also points out some suggestions for boosting the pro-poor economic opportunities in these areas to develop local communities and building the images of local products, including increasing pro-poor investment, pro-poor employment opportunities, and linking Nepali tourism business-persons with the international tour operators for effective marketing. Similarly, she suggests considering local measures for expanding small and micro-enterprises, e.g., tea houses, lodges, camp-sites, visitor centers/cultural museum operations, local produce, handicrafts, porter and guide services, etc. These all are easy solutions that the locals can easily adopt.

Even local cultural museums or visitor centers can be created as local tourism resource centers in all major destinations where community tourism is in priority. Many enterprises are associated with these purposes, too. Foreign tourists mostly come to Nepal from September to December and March to May (MoCTCA, 2021; NTB, 2022). These are directly associated with the homestay seasons as well. Field experiences show even domestic tourists prefer those six months the most to make trips to various parts of the country, although some variances in some locations/destinations could be observed. Thus, seasonality is also associated with tourist arrivals and business boom/plunge, which is also associated with tourism/homestay entrepreneurs' incomes, livelihoods, and daily lifestyles.

Similarly, linking the enterprising in local contexts, entrepreneurship and enterprising start from the concept of saving and credit schemes through a group approach, in which group-learning activities also continue. For this, in most of the facilitative cases, locals are encouraged to form a group/committee or organization, start monthly or weekly savings, learn to do enterprise of own interest and suitability, and take small loans and/or grants from the group/supporting organization(s).

Through such initiatives, enterprising endeavors gradually take shape. In the homestay destinations, generally, at that particular locality, homestay households and other households jointly form saving and credit groups, and accordingly, the enterprise development initiatives commence from there (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). Gradually, such groups are converted into cooperatives, which are mostly "multipurpose cooperatives". Local governments and NGOs facilitate the smooth operation of cooperatives and other private businesses with more CSR roles. Homestay, agriculture, poultry, milk production, handicrafts, retail shops, knitting, embroidery, etc., are major enterprises initiated by local cooperatives and groups, with enhanced involvement of women (Bhatt, 2015; Rai & Joshi, 2020; Sedai, 2018; TGDB, 2024). Handicraft enterprising within the tourism/homestay system also plays major roles in many parts. It is emphasized that there is a close connection between homestay and the local traditional skills-based handicraft items (Gosai, 2022). These are associated with both tangible and intangible heritages.

This is a global trend and issue, a unique experience in each homestay destination. For example, I got a case from Lao PDR to depict here. Ban Na village of Lao PDR demonstrated that the nexus was close between homestay businesses and local handicraft entrepreneurs (Park et al., 2019). The handicraft producers are encouraged to design and create their handicrafts and are also financially supported to attend the annual national handicraft festival and exhibition, where they meet potential buyers and make other important business contacts (Park et al., 2019).

Homestay tourism and local handicraft production systems are closely associated. In Nepal also, as reported by Bhatt (2015), Kandel (2016), Sedai (2018), and UNDP/TRPAP (2007), there are numerous cases of homestay/rural tourism destinations and embedded handicrafts/artwork promotions. In such handicraft-related initiatives, traditionally, mostly women are involved, such as cloth-making, *mudha* (bamboo stool)-making, *dunaa-tapari* (leaf-plate)-making, *batti kaatne* (sacred lamp thread-making), etc. In this area, woollen or cotton-based cloth-making traditions do not exist now. However, reportedly, in the Mahabharat Hills, bamboo-based *mudha*-making has been a new enterprise for women for which some NGOs have also provided, particularly focusing on women participants.

### **Community Homestay Enterprising and Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer**

There is also a growing concern about age and ageing issues in homestays. How to transfer traditional knowledge and skills to the new generation of youths, or active citizens—who are considered instruments of social change—has been a great challenge in most of the rural parts of Nepal and elsewhere, including India (Kalam & Pillai, 2013; Patel et al., 2013). This issue needs to be well facilitated and addressed. Their economic activism and continuation of traditional skills and businesses are the needs of the hour. From a learning perspective, intergenerational and ageing concerns also need to be deliberately considered while establishing homestays so as not to miss the opportunity for plurality, inclusivity, mutuality, and sustainability (Kanel, Bhattarai, & Gnawali, 2023). Experiences in homestay tourism in Ghalegaun and Sirubari have indicated that cultural performances in the village also bring unity, solidarity, harmony and social order to the village. In the same vein, a study in Sikkim (Lama, 2013) also found that such programs also develop "feelings of pride" among the villagers. Likewise, in the Malaysian case (Inversini et al., 2022), it was noted that the homestay initiatives are helping instil mindfulness regarding preserving the cultural legacy.

As far as community capacity enhancement and empowerment issues are dominantly concerned, for example, in MH, women have numerous impediments; they face several problems, including food insecurity and malnutrition. It is perceived that women are the key sufferers of any insufficiencies, disorders and disasters, endemic or pandemics, famines, and so on (Uprety, 2014; as cited in Das, 2014). Likewise, ageing perspectives and inter-generational representations in homestay businesses can be vital for sustainable tourism and holistic/integrated community development efforts with community-based assets development and management.

Community homestay ideas have made it possible to incorporate the ideas of local participation in tourism development processes, which have been increasing in recent years (Pandey, 2014; Yaza et al., 2022). Also, the asset-based community development (ABCD) approach has further fueled the CBT initiatives (Dolezal & Burns, 2015). Dolezal and Burns (2015) have highlighted the value of ABCD in the context of CBT, urging that the ABCD approach emphasizes people and their potential more than focusing only on needs-driven development, ultimately promoting inclusive development. In this vein, it is also emphasized that even small support for

infrastructural development and "seed money" as token funds as revolving funds for facilitating micro and small businesses encourage locals to get involved in local production systems and enhance their assets in diverse fields.

Tourism, being an interactive, multi-stakeholder-based, and participatory business, has many implications on the level and efficiency of local participation (Bhatt, 2015; Burgos & Mertens, 2017; Hada, 2024). Local governments and provincial governments have also initiated various activities to sustain the tourism sector (Shrestha, 2024), including plan preparation, product refinement, grant support, etc. Nevertheless, a critical observation is that the area lags despite several efforts and energies. Likewise, the involvement of the local community is a crucial factor in developing, performing, and sustaining tourism activities in any destination (Kandel, 2011). Also, the nature and extent of such involvement largely depend on the potential and economic gains achieved through different ventures (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). As such, participatory processes help to promote intergenerational as well as gender-based participation in such community rural tourism initiatives.

Nevertheless, Rai (2017) raises the issue that, due to poor functional literacy and backwardness, for instance, women's participation in Nepal is seriously hampered, and they are "less confident in participating in different events led by men and elite women of their societies" (p. 15). Also, in many parts, the participation of marginalized women and having no formal education has been a challenge in rural tourism/homestay destinations. Several stakeholders of rural/community-based destinations in Nepal have engaged themselves in tourism development initiatives for the last two decades or more, particularly after celebrating the "Visit Nepal Year (VNY)- 1998", which celebration was a grand function for the first time in Nepal (Bhatt, 2015; Poudel, 2019). After the VNY 1998, several new initiatives were taken for Nepal's tourism development, and owing to this, local interests in tourism were also raised.

Equally, the formation of the Sustainable Tourism Network (STN), Village Tourism Forum (VITOF), Homestay Operators' Association of Nepal (HOSAN, which has now been converted into the Homestay Federation of Nepal- HOFeN), and other networks for rural/homestay tourism promotions are a few of the good examples under these VNY-2011 initiatives (NTB, 2011a; NTB, 2022; TGDB, 2016). Citizen participation was realized after those events and endeavors. However, the crux of

participation, in reality, revolves around the issue of whether needy and disadvantaged people's participation is ensured on such occasions and opportunities (Devkota, 2021; Dhakal, 2021). For instance, Devkota et al. (2021) raise the issue of youth participation; lately, intergenerational representation has also been a matter of concern, although issues of inclusive and participatory tourism have widely escalated in recent times. After the concepts of federalism, such issues are further in context.

### **Learning the Issues of Quality Service, Profitability, and Host-Guest Behaviors**

Among different modes of accommodation services and also new interventions in cultural tourism, homestay tourism has become a prime product in the tourism sector (Baral, 2024; TGDB, 2016), and homestays are expected to provide good and unique services to tourists as they come to the place for new (ideal) cultural experiences. Thus, homestay operators are expected to provide quality services having considered the overall "servicescape" (Tan et al., 2015) with natural settings to all types of tourists, be they domestic or international, be they volume-based or value-based, or be they from emerging markets or old markets. Pyakurel (2013) emphasizes that quality improvement in homestay tourism is daunting.

The use (performance) of local culture in the overall homestay package is also a crucial factor for enhancing the "authenticity" (Kunwar, 2017) and quality of homestay tourism (TGDB, 2016). The quality issues are linked to the proper implementation of the "Homestay Directive", the use of local and organic food items (a concept of "from farm to finger") and other materials, health and hygiene, the safety of the hosts and guests, and so on. Regmi et al. (2023) emphasise the safety of tourists while visiting Nepal, especially in the mountain areas. Likewise, touristic infrastructures, participation of local stakeholders, proper recording of visitors, and adequate training for the hosts and "local guides" (Tan et al., 2015) for homestay operators are important for widening the servicescape and overall satisfaction of the visitors. It is also important that tourists' negative or unwanted behaviors, in some cases, also bring depressing conditions for the hosts (*Baahrakhari*, 2019). There are several examples of such drawbacks and negative behaviors by tourists globally (Suzuki, 2011). Major negative impacts are human trafficking, drug use, prostitution, child abuse, gambling, over-alcohol use, monetary fraud, change of religion, illegal stay, trekking and mountaineering in negligence or forced visits in the restricted areas, quarrelling and over-negotiation of price, and sometimes stealing the things

(*Baahrakhari*, 2019; Huang, 2013, Suzuki, 2011; Wall et al., 2023; NTB & KEEP, 2023). The local price hike is another challenge.

A study of homestay villages in the Philippines by Achten (2014) found that local prices have sharply risen due to tourism activities, which are burdens to the locals who are not participating in tourism development and management activities. Likewise, the latest case study on Kenya's rural tourism (Odunga et al., 2024) reveals increasing price hikes and sporadic crimes in the rural tourism destinations as negative perceptions of the locals, despite several positive benefits from such culturally rich rural tourism destinations and "cultural entrepreneurship". Similarly, a study conducted in Spain and Lithuania by Vilkaite-Vaitone (2025) indicated that cultural dimensions, particularly collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, significantly shape tourists' perceptions of sustainable accommodation value, emphasizing the need for culturally tailored sustainability strategies in the hospitality sector. These are the global phenomena of tourism development and management processes that need to be cautiously addressed from the beginning of the destination development process. The homestay program is more concerned with such issues. Addressing the challenges of negative aspects that could be brought about by homestay development processes remains a prime concern of homestay operators.

### **Learning to Promote, Brand, and Market the Homestay Products and Services**

Although there has been a rapid increase in homestay tourism (TGDB, 2016; Sedai, 2018), various important issues need further discussion and attention. The issues are mainly associated with the promotion, special branding, and marketing as per the "interest, context and types of tourists" (Baumul & Blinder, 2011, p. 23) along with maximizing the economic gains and benefit distributions, cultural preservation, inclusion and participation, environmental, social, etc. Many authors have blamed Nepal's tourism marketing policies and practices for not having matched for a long time (Bhattarai, 2021; Lamichhane, 2022; Pandey, 2020). In the same context, based on his empirical research, Shrestha (2000) also emphasized integrated and joint promotion and marketing mechanisms from both the governments and the private sector.

Lamichhane (2022) also asserts that international and domestic tourists could also be big market sources for many destinations in Nepal—from popularity and sustainability perspectives. Nepali homestays' prime guests are domestic ones rather

than foreigners. For instance, Kandel (2011), in his study in Sirubari, found that only 5% of visitors were international. Later, in 2016, Subedi's research found that in the years 2013, 2014 and 2015 (earthquake year), the percentages of international visitors were respectively 10.6%, 9.3%, and 3.0% (Subedi, 2016). Likewise, in the homestay destination Ghalegaun, researchers Baral (2024) and Ghimire and Neupane (2022) reported that almost 88% of the visitors were domestic visitors and 12% were foreigners.

One of the reasons for the low number of international tourists was the limited marketing efforts (Basnet, 2010) in the international arena. In the same survey in Ghalegaun, by age, Baral (2024) found that the youths (21-40 years) dominate the market, being 60% of the total. There were 30% of visitors aged below 20 years, and the remaining 10% were above 40. These figures, however, may differ from place to place. Both in international and national markets, homestay promotion, branding, and marketing efforts are deficient in Nepal (Sedai, 2018; TGDB, 2011; TGDB, 2016). Although several local strategies are being adopted to ease the promotion and marketing process, not all the areas have succeeded as anticipated.

Some strategies are working well, and some are not. For instance, Sirubari, a Pokhara-based company, has been primarily responsible for promoting and marketing "Sirubari Community Homestay" with a simple branding as the first community homestay in Nepal established in 1997 (Subedi, 2016). However, in other destinations, instead of a sole promoter like in Sirubari, multiple marketing channels and efforts—albeit little—are in practice, and no dominant marketing companies exist there to promote the homestay with sole responsibility. To elaborate on the Sirubari homestay marketing model, the locals or homestay operators, through the homestay management committee, provide services to tourists as per the advice from that company, and the company offers special commissions (discounts) for those services. In another sense, profits are shared among the company and the local homestay operators. Despite those efforts, those individual homestay operators are less aware of giving a brand to their product and subsequently opening their websites/social media pages, initiating online booking systems, etc.

Furthermore, many homestay sites in Nepal have poor communication systems (internet, mobiles, etc.), hampering local initiatives for appropriate promotions and marketing. Sedai (2018) has raised such issues and emphasized aggressive marketing

and suitable branding of rural area-based community tourism products, including homestays. Each destination has its image, but it needs to be brought to the tourists (Pandey, 2014) for a more "experiential tourism image" (Choi & Cai, 2022).

According to Tsaur et al. (2010), understanding tourists' knowledge and skills, as well as their nature and behavior—along with their safety concerns—are also important to create a friendly travel environment, enhancing travel convenience, elevating the travel industry's actual economic contribution to the country, and establish a positive image. Adhikari (2024) also elaborates on the key features of tourism, with due importance on awareness and capacity building and positive attitudes for the overall development of tourism in any destination. The KEEP (2023), which emphasizes "minimal impacts tourism" (MIT) practices, states that various tourist destinations worldwide are facing negative images due to their negligence in management, promotion, branding, and marketing efforts. It is common and iteratively pronounced in the tourism sector that "marketing begins with the product". Nevertheless, this nexus is poorly understood, and proper promotion and marketing sequences are not appropriately implemented in Nepal (Basnet, 2010). Here, marketing and promotions sometimes begin without fine-tuned or refined tourism products and services. Based on a study in Kapilvastu, for example, IUCN (2015) also hinted at an elevated marketing effort of local tourism products abundantly located in the area.

Every country is making quests to innovate, develop, and promote new types of tourism products, activities, and services with attractive promotional and marketing brands (Basnet, 2010). Also, lately, several countries are investing large amounts of their budgets in branding processes and promotion and marketing efforts. Globally, focuses are made to reach key customers or potential tourists through different national and international mass media, including widely accepted social media. Social media platforms are good sources of promoting user-generated content in tourism destinations (NTB, 2022). Generally, tourism promotion and marketing efforts are focused on the proper market based on the purpose of the visit to Nepal/inside destinations (Basnet, 2010). Holiday/pleasure tourists, cultural tourists, and study (formal and non-formal) tourists are the main markets of homestay tourism. Notably, adventure tourists, shopping and business tourists, and other types of tourists usually do not prefer to stay in homestays. Homestay operators, hence, need to understand this perspective and reality (Rijal, 2013). Shrestha (2000) claims that marketing

efforts in Nepal suffer mainly due to four reasons: inability to reach the market, poor access, limited or no connections, and reliance on others. Singh (2011), in the same vein, emphasizes that effective marketing strategies are crucial for promoting any travel destination, which must be focused, based on market segments (customer types), and, in his words, those segments may include: demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, behavioral, and psychographic attributes.

Linked to the same context, Shrestha (2000) also highlights that Nepal's tourism industry sector (e.g., Nepal Association of Travel Agents- NATTA; Nepal Association of Tour Operators- NATO; Society of Travel and Tour Operators- SOTTO, PATA, etc.), including the NTB, have given emphasis mainly on four types of marketing efforts: sales mission/promotion campaign; familiarization tours or fam-trips; development of sales/promotional aids; and, publications/brochures. According to NTB (2022), in recent times, other means and media have also been developed, such as social media, software applications, the approach of tourism ambassadors, and so forth. Nepal government (GoN, 2020) has also tried to analyze such market segments regularly.

However, tourism stakeholders comment that while designing promotional and marketing programs, the market segment is not getting focused attention or deliberations. NTB also tried to promote Nepal's tourism through world-famous media (e.g. CNN, BBC, National Geographic, etc.) before COVID-19 (Tourism Board, 2016); and lately, it has been realized to re-boost the same message in the post-COVID-19 situation, even with several new opportunities (Dhamala, 2020; Gautam & Khatri, 2021; Sharma, 2022). In Nepal's rural tourism destinations, the interests of non-resident Nepalis (NRNs) and diasporic civil society stakeholders have also increased in recent years.

In other countries, such stakeholders' concerns are incorporated into the national development process (Devkota et al., 2021). Experiences show that the NRNs also provide different concerns for developing tourism products and resources effectively with aggressive promotions with suitable branding (Role in Tourism Development, 2023). The NRNs often prefer to visit Nepal's destinations as tourists as well as become contributors or philanthropists (Diaspora-support). Also, while visiting Nepal, they want to take different tastes of cultural tourism and homestay

tourism in Nepal. For example, a Gurung NRN from Lamjung wants to visit Tanahun and stay in the Magar Homestay.

Similarly, a Rai NRN from the Dharan area wants to visit Lamjung's Gurung homestays to take different cultural tastes within Nepal. NRN Association (NRNA) also emphasizes extending diaspora support, including in the tourism sector. This practice happens in other countries, too, with multiple levels of support. For instance, Ramtohul (2021) asserts that, in Mauritius, the diaspora contributes through various means such as: "remittance, investments, creating jobs, stimulating innovation, and fostering networks" (p. 829). Diaspora also brings new knowledge, skills, and technological ideas to the country (Wagle, 2018) and literary contributions (Role in Tourism Dvelopment, 2023). The individual traveler's satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a travel purchase largely depends on the destination image and the experiential tourism image (Choi & Cai, 2022). Every destination has the main motto of satisfying tourists globally (Achten, 2014). In this vein, Rahman (2013) also claims that destination image, traveler motivation, and service quality correlate positively with tourists' satisfaction in any area or any destination. Nonetheless, tourists' satisfaction and positive/negative experiences play prominent roles in any destination. In this context, Pandey (2014) also emphasizes that only satisfied tourists tend to promote the images of visited destinations through "words of mouth" (WOM) or their reviews.

There is a world-famous saying- "Travel broadens the mind". Thus, keeping the intent of this view in mind, every traveler wants to take a new destination experience and make a new image of that particular destination based on her/his experience or satisfaction/dissatisfaction. There is a general trend that potential tourists always review destination information/experiences of previous tourists, either through different means or from word of mouth. Renowned travel agents and tourism promotion companies (such as Lonely Planet, TripAdvisor, hotel.com, homestay.com, Travel-no-limit, Intrepid Travel, TrevelTriangle, Booking.com, Wilderness Travel, Holidify, and so on) also advise potential tourists to check the reviews provided by previous customers on different sites; NTB is also trying to mainstream this process in its marketing efforts as highlighted in "*NTB In Focus*" published different years (NTB, 2020; 2022; 2023). Learning and practising these key essences are fundamentals for homestay enterprise development, promotion, and marketing to provide a holistic tourist experience.

### **Learning the Sustainable Concepts and Practices in Homestay Tourism**

Community homestays are supposed to be the main part of sustainable rural tourism because homestay tourism is a key element of community-based tourism, particularly in rural settlements (Janjua, 2022). In the homestay training-learning processes as well, such issues are emphasized more pertinently from the beginning (NTB, 2011). Locals themselves also devise different ways for learning, capacity development, and sustainable development practices related to tourism/homestay in their areas. Generally, among the main components of sustainability, or the sustainable rural tourism (SRT) model (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007), in most nations, environmental or ecological (green) concerns are prioritized. Bhatt (2015) also suggests that SRT needs to consider the four key aspects or "4 pillars" of sustainability: economic, ecological, cultural, and environmental. In this context, Upadhyay (2022) further emphasizes an eco-feminism perspective that mostly cares about women and disadvantaged groups within the premise of sustainable development. Similarly, Sharma (2012) suggests a new perspective that tourism has to be sensitive to the measures needed to mitigate and adapt to the changing global environment and climate change. Dangi (2016) also highlights four major drivers of SRT at the local level—community development, community survival, conservation of the local commons, and local responses to climate change (e.g., in terms of adaptation). Basnyat (2013) and MoCTCA (2018) emphasize attracting not only tourists but also human capital (entrepreneurs) and international franchises to market and develop local attractions.

Brahm (2014), Neupane (2019), NTB (2019; 2023), and Shrestha (2022) also mention that Nepal's more than 125 ethnicities, 123 languages, thousands of villages, and historical city areas must be preserved and developed for tourism purposes without distorting their originality and core values since there is a deep nexus among the cultural assets (soul) and tourism development. Accordingly, enhanced local participation is also encouraged to further facilitate the initiative, for which the government is being suggested not to emphasize only "3P" (public-private partnership: "PPP") (NPC, 2019; 2024; Shrestha, 2024) but also "4P" (public-private-people partnership: "PPPP") approaches. Shrestha (2024) also suggests effective mobilization of donor/partner organizations for sustainable tourism development and management.

Importantly, the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022), now UN Tourism, emphasizes considering ecological factors for tourism's continuity and sustainability. It also formed The UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO) in 2004. This is because ecological impacts may arise at any step of the tourism development process or the cycle of tourism development (Butler, 1980; Sahli, 2020). Butler (1980, 1985) suggests different stages for systematic tourism development processes. These steps may apply equally to the homestay development process, which we will discuss in other chapters. UNWTO (2022), Khatri (2019), Gautam (2022), and Poudel (2019) have also discussed the key constituents and ways of sustainable tourism development work. For example, Gautam (Kantiur National Daily, 2022) warns against effective garbage management in the Himalayas and high mountains. Poudel (2019), citing an example from Amaltari Homestay in Nawalpur, Terai area of Nepal, reports that the homestays provide integrated services to the guests; those services cover a wide range of activities such as elephant safari, boat-ride, nature walks, fishing, jeep safari, cultural program, etc. According to Gurung (2024), such efforts are geared towards sustainable management of tourism and local nature and culture, and tourists are also taught to pay due attention to such practices.

Overall, in Nepal, pioneer homestay destinations like Ghandruk, Sirubari, Shree Antu, and Amaltari show good examples of such concerns. Amaltari (except COVID-19 times) has shown encouraging examples of promoting eco-based homestay in the region; tourist arrivals have also increased (Kanel, 2021a; Rijal, 2013). For example, from 2014 to 2019, Amaltari Homestay received more than 42,000 tourists, including domestic and foreign tourists. According to locals, among the total visitors, 95 per cent visitors are domestic, and only 5 per cent are foreigners. Here, the community members are always busy with farming, wood carving, handicraft-making, poultry, vegetable farming, and so on, which helps bring "social transformation and sustainable development" (Ghimire, 2015) to the community. Why do people visit these places? Subedi (2019) examines six crucial factors for tourists' attraction and motivation to a homestay village, such as extra culture, good climate/weather, sightseeing, facilities, local biodiversity, and natural biodiversity. Sedai (2018) also found similar patterns in his study in Mid- and Far-Western Nepal. However, he also suggests that homestay villages can serve as a "gateway" to other

famous destination(s). For example, he recommends in the context of Banke district's (Terai) homestay destination (Gabhar Valley Homestay), stating that it should be developed as a "gateway destination to Rara Lake and other mountain destinations" ( p. 75). This will be a new opportunity for the homestay village to diversify tourists and also the activities with new possibilities of more employment opportunities.

However, more activities and more tourists may put extra pressure on any destination. The consideration of eco-concerns and the overcrowding of tourists in the future are also pertinent to sustaining the local tourism industry. For example, Lama and Job (2014) warn that infrastructural—mostly rural road construction—activities are putting extra pressure on sustaining ecological balance and green tourism in Nepal due to ad-hoc and unplanned infrastructure development processes. In recent times, famous destinations such as Megghauli, Thakurdwara, Ghandruk, Manaslu area Gorkha, etc., have experienced disturbances from roads; and also owing to these new road networks, the phenomena of over-crowding and over-concretization as well as over-commercialization/profit maximization) leaving less space for green and environment-friendly activities and continuing those important traditional architectures, leaving the real value of leisure and social sanctions (Bergin, 2021; Bhandari, 2012; Devkota et al., 2021; Khatri, 2019; Lama, 2013; SDG National Network Nepal, 2020). Lately, not only haphazard road construction but also climatic changes have directly/indirectly affected Nepal's tourism, creating a dilemma (Khatri, 2019). Due to such hindrances, sustainable business and livelihood development have been a challenge.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

In my research, I used two theories: the "Experiential Learning Theory" and the "Capability Approach". Thus, in this section, I first present the main essences of both theories; then, I try to put the nexus and crux of these theories concerning learning and capacity development associated with homestay teaching-learning practices.

#### **The Experiential Learning Theory**

Learning is the major process of human adaptation, where knowledge is created through experience transformation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2014). Similarly, Coombs and Ahmed (1974) state that there are primarily three approaches/methods of learning: formal, informal, and non-formal (as cited in Tight, 1996). According to

them, generally, informal education and self-learning are unorganized, unsystematic, and even unintentional at times. The concept of learning is considerably broader than that commonly associated with the school classroom. Kolb (1984) further asserts that "learning occurs in all human settings, from schools to the workplace, from the research laboratory to the management board room, in personal relationships and the aisles of the local grocery" (p. 32). Yet, it accounts for much of any person's lifetime learning—including that of a highly schooled person. Kolb (2014) further adds that the education system not merely focuses on a subjective experience but also helps link the concepts and actions that fit into day-to-day activities. Such day-to-day activities enforce self-learning practices.

Different learning styles exist for such transformations since all learners do not learn the same way. In learning discourses, several principles are connected with the learning process, styles, and types of learners. These principles apply to pedagogical and andragogical processes (Bell, 2009; Siemens, 2004). Likewise, according to Cranton (1989), in experiential learning, the participant is truly involved in performing tasks. Kolb (1984) emphasizes the experiences and experimentations of the learners as a continuous process. Kolb's learning theory embodies four main principles that need to be considered. First, focus on the trainee (e.g., considering the reality that every individual is different; they have different abilities to grasp KSAs and different learning styles (Pritchard, 2009), and motivation issues must be addressed. Second, focus on training design (e.g., after reviewing different learning theories, arrive at the rules, policies, and procedures to guide the training development and facilitate learning). Third, focus on transfer (e.g., appropriate use of whole/part practice, maximized similarity, varied situations, and general principles to maximize transferability from the classroom). Fourth, alternative training methods (e.g., identify the methods most suited to achieving training objectives, how constraints can be reduced, etc.). Similarly, Bell (2009) adds that learning style is defined as a particular way in which an individual learns.

There are various types of learners, approaches, and styles in any teaching/training program or learning process. In this connection, Fleming and Mills (1992; as cited in Seyal, 2015) also state that learners can be categorized into four major types, namely: the "Visual" learners, the "Auditory" learners, the "Reading/Writing" learners, and the "Kinaesthetic" learners ("VARK"). Again,

Pritchard (2009) classifies learners as extroverts, introverts, sensors, intuitors, thinkers, feelers, judges, and perceivers. He further clarifies that kinaesthetic learners prefer to learn by doing or experimenting, and "these types of learners enjoy physical activity, field trips, manipulating objects and other practical, first-hand experience" (p. 46). Likewise, Alam (2013) emphasizes that the efficiency of knowledge transfer determines the learner's proficiency and further actions. In this case, Coombs and Ahmed (1974; as cited in Tight, 1996) provided a clear picture regarding life-long learning and informal processes. They claim that the life-long process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, and attitudes develops insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment- at home, at work, and at play, too. These all are possible through varying ways and sources, such as the examples and attitudes of family and friends, from travel, by reading newspapers and books, or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television, etc. This idea also supports the view that there could be dozens of methods and techniques for having new knowledge and ideas informally, self-initiated, or situated (Fleming, 2018; Illeris, 2007). These parts of day-to-day learning can also be a natural process. Thus, educators, trainers, or facilitators are expected to know these realities while initiating adult education (andragogy) and training/learning activities since adults mostly prefer to learn through experiential learning or learning by doing. And, when learning is conceived as a holistic, adaptive process, it provides conceptual bridges across life situations such as school and work, or in the words of Kolb (1984), "portraying learning as a continuous, life-long process" (p. 33). In this line, underlying the importance of technology-mediated learning, Sharma (2019) suggests that information and communications technologies (ICTs) in education and ICT education can boost such innovations in teaching-learning processes as well.

Further, ICTs also help to bridge the gender gap in the empowerment of rural households (Adeyeye, 2021). The innovative ICT usage for sustainability tourism marketing creates a competitive destination advantage, leading to economic benefits for rural homestays operating in these tourist destinations (Gretzel et al., 2020; Janjua, 2022). Equally, Adeyeye (2021) further claims that ICTs have also helped to boost self and experiential learning. Gretzel et al. (2020) advocated for e-focused transformative tourism (e-tourism) in the context of the post-COVID situation and also suggested research scholars adopt a 6-pillar approach in the research process:

historicity, reflexivity, equity, transparency, plurality, and creativity. Kunwar and Ulak (2024) further discuss the roles and nexus of transformative learning with transformative tourism. In this context, NTB's (2011) advocacy for making tourism a viable vehicle for community prosperity is yet to be realized due to several ups and downs in the Nepali tourism sector.

Now, let's discuss more on experiential learning. Emphasizing the importance of experiential learning, Dheram (2010) highlights that "experiences contribute to development when the individual learns from it" (p. 83). Like ICTs, basic functional literacy and experiential learning levels are also associated. Literacy is bound up with our identity and our practices; the shaping of our literacy practices takes place in different domains, such as at home, school, and the workplace (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Park, 2015). According to them, identity is never a static construct, as it evolves and continuously develops through our social practices. Social interactions, personal development through literacy and education (Illeris, 2007), and exposure to various social worlds play vital roles. In this vein, Sahoo (2011) mentions that no developmental change or behavior is ever performed, neither in genes nor the structure of environments; because, he claims, "it always arises from interactions in the developmental system" (p. 19). In addition, from a human interaction point of view, face-to-face and virtual interactions are important in the modern age. Kolb's (1984) "Learning Style Model" defines two continuous dimensions of the learner: how he/she takes in information and how he/she internalizes that information. These two dimensions are the concrete experience mode, the abstract conceptualization mode and the active experimentation mode or the reflective observation mode. Kolb (1984), recognizing and critiquing the previous contributions by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, provides a model of experiential learning highlighting the above types and styles of learners.

Again, according to Kolb (1984), experiential learning involves four steps, and it is a continuous process of learning which runs like a cycle; thus, it is also called the "Experiential Learning Cycle". The four steps are concrete experience, active experimentation, abstract conceptualization, and reflective observation. Later, Pritchard (2009) added four major dimensions to the experiential learning cycle: the accommodating learning dimension in between concrete experiencing and active experimentation; the converging learning- dimension in between active

experimentation; and abstract conceptualizing, assimilating learning in between abstract conceptualizing and reflective observation; and finally, the diverging learning dimension in between reflective observation and concrete experiencing. The experiential learning cycle model with four learning dimensions developed by Pritchard (2009) is presented in *Appendix 2*.

As highlighted above, according to Kolb (1984), almost every individual uses all learning modes to some extent. However, despite that fact, each person has a preferred learning style and has different knowledge and experience. These are influenced by one's knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, behavior, and world views; and are reflected in acquiring, enriching, or modifying such learning. Kolb further suggests that knowledge is continuously derived from and tested in the learner's experience. These new knowledge and capacities develop power, and such power to grow depends upon the need for others and plasticity since "plasticity or the power to learn from experience means the formation of habits" (Dewey, 2004; p. 57). Dewey further states that active habits involve thought, invention, and initiative in applying capacities to new aims, and such habits take the form of habituation, or a general and persistent balance of organic activities with the surrounding, and of active capacities to re-adjust activity to meet new conditions.

In this connection, for example, Illeris (2007) and Pearson (2012) propose that an experienced or habituated (good) teacher or trainer can have different approaches and processes in the overall teaching-learning processes, which include listening, observing, reading, group work, paired work, discussion work, active learning, teacher/trainer-centered activities, participant-centered activities, question and answer session, hot-seating, role play, and also through playing different games. However, the usability of these processes and methods depends on the interests and capacities of the trainers/teachers, as well as the learners. In different cases, group learning and reaction activities provide a better chance for better capacities. Hopson and Scally (1981) also indicated that group work is better for promoting strong reactions among the participants.

Equally, the local environment, availability of resources, and the interests and activeness of the participants also play important roles in the learning and teaching processes. Similarly, according to Dheram (2010), time is a dominant factor for an effective education/training program. For example, according to him, when role play

and other types of participatory methods are applied, they demand much time and effort from the instructors or facilitators. Chomsky (1959) also mentions that, despite different hurdles, all instructors, facilitators, teachers, and trainers are expected to entertain different types of participant-centered activities in the classroom or training hall to enhance the learning environment and efficiency of the deliveries. These considerations ultimately help raise the effectiveness of the program. He also mentions that effective hall/room management with adequate lighting, appropriate season/timing, and a learning environment is vital for increasing the quality of the training and learning events. Interestingly, in this respect, Jensen (2000) further argues that lighting influences our vision, in turn, affects our learning. Accordingly, season can also impact our learning process because the length and brightness of daylight directly affect our mental and physical systems. Jang et al. (2018), viewing Nepal's women's case, also highlight that mental tensions and trauma created by disasters and other factors seriously affect living conditions, social support and coping mechanisms, which discourage learning engagements and creativity. In such cases, trainers or facilitators also feel difficulty in engaging or re-engaging them in the learning and sharing system.

Likewise, in Nepal's context, Bhurtel and Bhattarai (2023) conclude that training instructors' own external and internal challenges are also there to systematically and effectively transfer the KSA to the participants. In the same manner, according to Kolb (1984), in the experiential learning process, there are three major traditions of learning with key characteristics. First, learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcome. Second, learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Third, the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Further, the experiential learning concept describes the central process of human adaptation to the social and physical environment. Again, in this context, Kolb (1984) provides three important statements regarding learning. First, learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Second, learning involves transactions between the person and the environment. Third, learning is the process of creating knowledge.

Thus, linking this knowledge, being a traditional skills-based enterprise, homestay learning activities happen daily. Sometimes, these happen knowingly and sometimes unknowingly as well. People (demography) and places (geography) have

specific traditional or indigenous knowledge and skills (Quiroz, 1999), and they need to be understood from decolonization (non-western) perspectives, too (Macedo, 1999). Koirala (2024) also suggests promoting local indigenous technologies in the overall learning processes. To bring an example, Gosai (2022) provides a clear picture of Bhaktapur Nepal—the "World Heritage Site"—where many types of indigenous handicraft-based enterprises have continued for centuries, and it has become a place to study how such traditional and indigenous skills are transferred to the new generations through experience-based learning. It can also be said that learning is not only for jobs or profits but is also a valuable ornament of human life. In any society, it also plays a dominant role in making an image of the person. In Eastern culture, it is considered that a person without knowledge is like a dead-wood. That is why every adult, no matter how old he/she is, makes a continual effort to learn new knowledge and skills in his/her everyday life.

Thus, we can be clear that homestay learning processes and experiences continue even in the absence of guests at home since homestay operators' everyday life also continues with almost the same sorts of actions and practices within the household chores/management. Realizing this fact, Tight (1996) also highlights that learning, like breathing, is something everyone does all of the time. He also says that we are never too old to learn—even if we do not realize that we are doing it; because it is a fundamental human process. There are different philosophical perspectives associated with adult learning and lifelong learning (Evans, 2003). Life-long learning and experiential learning become essential parts of human life. According to Chambers (2008), practices, principles, and theory are believed to intertwine and co-evolve. Theory can exist as an intellectual abstraction without practice, but practice cannot exist without implicit theory. It is also claimed that one party may exert more influence when theory and practice co-evolve (Chambers, 2008). In the same connection, Kempfer (2009) states that a large cluster of developmental tasks centers on human relations in the family and other intimate groups. He also asserts that life-long learning would help ensure that all age groups would have appropriate purposes in their learning.

Thus, according to Mohanty (2007), it is equally important that lifelong learning is largely the responsibility of the individual. Sahu and Das (2014) also emphasize that both education and training are parts of the process of human

resources (HRs), and these must be integrated with life and work, each enriching the other and helping for growth (Jhingan, 2010). Whereas Sahu and Das (2014) further clarify that education must impart philosophical values through percept by practitioners to take care of "Head and Heart", training must fit man/woman in exciting/short-term work—"take care of basically "Hand and also Head" so that we feel confident" (p. 52). It is essential to see the learning worlds of homestay enterprising.

Homestay learning generally includes learning-related activities that are focused on getting new orientations on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) from multiple contents- and contextual perspectives, including tourism and tourists, knowing tourists' behavior, welcoming the guests, preparing foods, serving food and drinks, conversations/interpreting, house-keeping, cleaning, maintaining hygienic and sanitation situations, billing and costing, etc. Most of the learning comes as a part of the life-long learning process. For example, among various factors and skills, hygiene and sanitation are essential in tourism and household management as life skills (TGDB, 2024). Hopson and Scally (1981) also emphasize that life skills' requirements are to be appraised from the current skill levels and also the areas that the participants wish to develop following certain steps, such as stock-taking of skills and getting feedback, identifying skills each participant wishes to develop; and, organizing training or workshop to acquire/fulfil those skills.

Learning is also influenced by external factors (environmental) and internal factors like genetics (Cranton, 1989; Smith and Dunworth, 2003). In this context, Chaube (2013) also claims that "an individual's personal abilities, interests, physique, and personality play important roles in his/her learning and vocational development" (p. 360). Physical factors, such as the geographical location of the home, the physical conditions prevailing therein, and the health of various members of the family, may, at times, also have an important effect on vocational/skills development. All these internal and external factors need to be considered while designing learning programs, events, and practicalities (Cranton, 1989). The key message from Cranston's scholarship could be drawn as there are different ways of conducting educational and training sessions; however, the trainer or educator consciousness helps ensure the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of such events and programs.

Additionally, Cranton (1989) and DeSimone and Werner (2012) further argue that rather than focusing on traditional and teacher- or instructor-centered methods, interactive as well as individualized approaches are better techniques to be followed as these techniques give higher priority to participants active engagement with escalated motivation. Overall, it can be highlighted that ensuring flexibility for adults' time commitment is very important to provide a suitable learning environment and to structure learning to build upon learners' prior knowledge, skills, and experiences. Equally, the active engagement of adult participants is crucial to developing learning tasks for better knowing, better experimenting/doing, and also for deliberately being and enthusiastically reflecting on life-long experiences.

### **The Capability Approach**

Running homestay enterprises efficiently and profitably demands special capacities, such as thinking and planning, investing and managing, and talking with and impressing tourists, among others. In this context, the theory of the "Capability Approach" by Amartya Sen (2000) is immensely linked. Notably, for capability enhancement, different types of formal, informal, and non-formal training and educational events might be required. All types of training can be given in normal work settings and outside of the normal work setting. In this context, the proponent of the Capability Approach, Sen, provokes that capability, freedom, and poverty are directly associated, and, for a greater level of freedom, "all types of deprivations are to be removed, including political liberty and basic civil rights" (Sen, 2000; p. 15). He argues that an integrated and fostered understanding of the respective roles of different actors plays a vital role in expanding people's freedom and choices to develop human capacities and human rights, including civil and political (Gasper, 2004; Sen, 2000). Relating to capabilities and supporting the ideas of Sen, Corrigan (2012) and Mayer (2010) emphasize that individuals know the cognitive processes and behaviors of the learners, which is very important in seeking different options for better learning and capacity-building.

All these endeavors demand quality and thoughtful educational and training programs to enhance overall capabilities from a new perspective. Cranton (1989), in this context, also suggests a number of effective procedural elements, which mainly entail the instructional method and the experiential method. It is commonly understood that interactive teaching is better than instructor-centered teaching. In this

process, class discussions are held, small discussion groups are formed, and peer-tracking is done with an emphasis on group-based project works (Cranton, 1989; Hopson & Scally, 1981). For all these, however, the class size must be small; much time may be required, and from these processes, a high level of cognitive learning is encouraged and ensured, and all participants remain active in such teaching-learning processes.

From both propositions, it can be argued that employing different approaches in any training or education programs/events can ensure more effective as well as long-lasting impacts in the capacity initiative. However, Dheram (2010) provokes participant centered methods and tools for any type of capacity development approach. There are always different types and different levels of participants in any learning event, which puts extra pressure on trainers, teachers, or facilitators to deal with those persons satisfactorily.

Additionally, the capability to do something and poverty/deprivation are deeply connected. These issues also become vital for developing training and capacity development programs and projects. However, for a poverty-focused capacity development initiative, Nepal has not been able to properly identify the "poor people" in a real sense (Kantipur National Daily, 2022), so needy peoples' needs and aspirations have remained unfulfilled. Those needs and aspirations are resource (material)-needs and knowledge (cognitive) needs. Knowledge needs also represent educational needs: formal, informal, and non-formal. Informal and non-formal educational and training endeavors mostly attract adults (or andragogical requirements).

Nevertheless, a one-time needs assessment cannot serve all the time. Such assessments are expected to be time-, context-, and spatial-specific. In this connection, Kempfer (2009) further states that the educational needs of adults cannot be identified once and for all time; this is because some learning needs are basic and remain relatively stable for given age groups, while others change greatly according to economic conditions, world tensions, the domestic situation, and the vicissitudes of our evolving civilization. However, as Pandey (2011) claims, many training or educational programs in Nepal that are focused on adults are mostly run without even a single assessment of the training needs, affecting the overall quality of such training

or capacity development programs. Adults' existing knowledge and skills are rarely recognized.

Such programs are mostly concerned with ritual programs and intended to target achievements, or we can say only the activities for target fulfilling purposes. With this perspective, Dor Bahadur Bist, a Nepali development philosopher, was very strong in pointing out such a weakness in the Nepali perspective. In his famous book *"Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization"* (1991), he writes that "education is not looked upon as an act of acquiring intellectual powers or technical skills but as another form of ritualistic behavior" (p. 78). In the same perspective, Abdullah and Stringer (1999) also note that adult education and learning styles common to mainstream educational institutions conflict with non-indigenous (aboriginal) approaches to learning and, therefore, threaten such cultures. Smith (2012), in this perspective, states that even the Westernized and colonial researchers and educators exploit and devalue local traditional and indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. To make such learning more localized and practical, Poudel (2024) advocates for job-oriented learning as a way of developing the capacity of youths and adults in Nepal. In this context, Sharma (2009) also emphasizes that job-oriented education and skills are not thought of only from an industry-focused or work perspective, but their concerns of ensuring and assuring the opportunities of higher studies need to be taken into consideration. However, in the same context, it is notable that the focus is only on intellectual attainment (Wagley & Lamichhane, 2009), and these rotting techniques must be changed from the primary to the university level. Nevertheless, concerned stakeholders' actions against such priorities are still minimal. Visualizing the case, NPC (2020) also claims that there has been important progress in the educational sector, but rapid improvements are needed to enhance the quality of education. It also claims that the emphasis is particularly concerning learning outcomes, the quality of teaching, the expansion of vocational education, and general literacy and numeracy. According to Olsen and Hergenhan (2009), learning occurs in small systematic steps rather than huge jumps. However, overall capacity development efforts depend on several factors such as effort, energy, environment, encouragement, usefulness, etc.

### *A Nexus of Experiential Learning and Capability Approach*

In the experiential learning and andragogical learning (adult teaching-learning) processes, certain parameters, such as needs, motivations, time-factor, circumstances, and so on, play significant roles. Malcolm Knowles (as cited in Tight, 1996) describes andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn. Thus, in the andragogical or adult learning process, social and cultural variables also have significant roles. Such variables may include age, gender, class, race, etc. (Tight, 1996). Thus, while designing and delivering formal courses, educators and trainers must learn such arts and scientific ways of effectively delivering and facilitating the learning processes. However, it is said that in the adult learning process, learners' de-learning is also important to learn new knowledge and skills along with changing the mindset where it applies because de-learning means making efforts to remove old (preoccupied) knowledge and practice, which needs to be replaced by new ones. The de-learning process is always very difficult for adults since already-learned things are difficult to replace. In such cases, our preconceived notions hinder acquiring new knowledge and skills.

Chandra (2003), in this connection, states that non-formal education has become an accepted alternative to learning. Likewise, it has been claimed that learning may differ from a gender perspective as well. Flick (2009)—from a sociocultural perspective—states that gender needs to be seen either as a structural category or as a social construct. Concerning this, Chandra (2003) also mentions that sometimes, women's learning efforts, styles, and achievements are supposedly linked to their family members. For example, citing an Indian experience, Chandra re-affirms that the attitude of women towards learning depends much upon the occupation of the head of their family. It is also said that the family's breadwinner guides other family members to manage and sustain their lives. Hence, in this case, I considered adult practitioners' knowledge, experiential learning, their styles and mechanisms, and reflections as crucial phenomena to intensely understanding homestay learning in Nepal.

These variables may equably apply to the formal educational process as well. Sharma (2019), based on his doctoral research findings, found that a student-friendly teaching-learning process can enhance the quality of education in schools, which always demands innovations. In the same context, Supe (2014) narrates that the rate

of adoption is the relative speed with which the members of a social system adopt an innovation, and it is measured by the length of time required for a certain percentage of members of a system to adopt an innovation. He further suggests that the normal progress rate might require 6 to 10 years between introducing the innovation and its adoption throughout the community.

***Cruxes of Adult Learning Processes and Homestay Enterprising Towards Capability Strengthening***

Most commonly, people learn through experiential, independent, and self-directed learning techniques, and the learning concepts and applicability may differ from person to person (Tight, 1996). Every human wants to be better and more transformative than others. In a similar vein, Mezirow (1991) also confirms that these transformations help the man/woman to critically reflect on his/her assumptions and beliefs so that he/she will be able to make conscious plans and define new paths in life. These capacities or educational/learning activities are achieved via formal, non-formal, and informal methods of learning. But, with the homestay development movement being relatively new in Nepal, in-depth studies have not happened as anticipated.

All kinds of education for adults- in school and out of school, formal and informal, full-time and part-time, for persons who no longer attend schools, as well as for those who never attended a school and so on, are called adult learners and, the process as "andragogy" (Mohanty, 2007). In this case, literacy becomes important because literacy and other skills help uplift the overall capacity of life. Mohanty (2007) also mentions that literacy is now seen as how adults use written information to function in society, and society has become more complex, and low-skill jobs are disappearing; in this context, teaching philosophy is important because it informs course contents and delivery. In this context, Koirala (2024) also emphasizes the use of local technology and skills-based education and capacity development practices with a due focus on the adults' preferences because attention is paid to not forgetting the adults' preferences, as they like problem-centered learning activities that actively engage them. In such cases, learning at different roles and rates and in different ways will be controlled.

In my research context, adult education and "lifelong learning" have been considered all types of education and training targeted at the adults involved in the

homestay enterprising. Tamla (2018) also stresses that lifelong learning, including literacy development, is the essential prerequisite for developing the capabilities of adults, promoting employment potential, and, ultimately, reducing the economic and non-economic poverty of the people in Nepal (NPC, 2020). From a tourism perspective, Acharya (2013) states that tourism is a labour-oriented service industry, where skilled and efficient labour (workforce) positively affects its promotion and development. Nonetheless, in practice, empirical shreds of evidence are limited.

To conclude this section, in my data generation and analysis process, I tried to link the major features of the capability approach with relation to homestay operators' overall capability enhancement initiatives and achievements, in which I have particularly focused on women operators' experiences in such learning processes.

### **Policy Review**

A policy perspective on tourism and homestay is also vital. The political process and development politics related to tourism development are very crucial for strategic directions of the sector considering various factors, including social, economic, educational, environmental, and so on (Bist, 2009; Dahal, 2023; TGDB, 2016, 2024). Thus, in this section, first, I illustrate a picture of Nepal's overall tourism policy landscape; then, I elaborate on the homestay's federal policies as well as the provincial and local-level policies, strategies, guidelines, and regulations and their major focus on the development of homestay tourism in the respective regions.

### **Institutionalization of Homestay Tourism Within the Overall Tourism in Nepal**

After the dawn of democracy in Nepal in 1951, the gradual development of tourism policy, acts, rules, and regulations encouraged and facilitated international tourists to visit Nepal (Bhandari, 2013; Gurung, 2007; NPC, 2024). The milestone was the opening of eased visa services for foreigners. Along with the soft policy of visa service, opening mountain areas for trekking, developing and managing national parks, improving the international airport, and providing loans for hotel and restaurant developments also played important roles in increasing tourists to Nepal (Smith, 1981; as cited in Poudel, 2019, p. 9). Based on these experiences, Nepal has developed further strategies, plans, visions, missions, and special campaigns to promote tourism (Bist, 2009; Dahal, 2023; MoCTCA, 2016). The ever-made Tourism Master Plan of 1972 was the first initiation to systematically develop Nepal's tourism sector. The Master Plan formulated long-term perspectives, with detailed actions till

1980 with phase-wise activities, the first phase being 1972-1975, and the second phase being 1976-1980. The Master Plan, for the first time, surveyed attractions of Nepal, both natural and cultural, and found great potential for tourism development. It also emphasized concentrating on Nepal's spatial tourism development activities in the major places from east to west. Nepal survived for a long time on that plan, and no additional or substitute plan was formulated, "which hampered many things" (Baskota, 2012) in the tourism development process in Nepal, primarily the infrastructure development.

Similarly, the GoN brought a new Tourism Policy in 2008 (2065 BS), emphasizing rural tourism development from a pro-poor perspective with the propositions of some legislative reforms (Ashley & Goodwin, 2007). The learning from the TRPAP project (2002-2007), which was run by MoCTCA and the UNDP in six districts of Nepal, was conceived and consolidated in this Policy (Bhatt, 2015; MoCTCA, 2016; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). It envisioned bringing tourism benefits to the poor communities", especially in the rural areas" (Bhandari, 2010; Ningdong & Mingqing, 2019; Rana, 2019; Shrestha, 2010); missed many things regarding inclusive growth (Rana, 2019) and net benefit to the poor and marginalized people (Harrison, 2008), along with climate-responsive development, and socialism-focused efforts as per the intent of Nepal's Constitution (2015). Likewise, Nepal's Tourism Vision 2009-2020 envisaged attracting two million tourists and providing jobs to one million people by 2020 (MoCTCA, 2014a). After the formulation of Tourism Vision 2020, efforts are made to translate this into action by preparing and implementing a 10-year National Tourism Strategy and Action Plan, 2016-2025 (MoCTCA, 2016) giving more emphasis on attracting Indian and Chinese tourists (Kanel, 2018); as Shakya (2012) notes that India and China could be the main markets of Nepal's tourism, for which Nepal needs to attract international hotel chains, operators, and service providers by providing an investor-friendly environment.

Equally important, Nepal's new Constitution (Constitution Assembly Secretariat [CAS], 2015), for the first time in history, under the "Directive Principles Policies and Obligations of the State" (Part 4), has inscribed the importance and roles of the tourism sector for the overall development and prosperity of the country. The Constitution under "Policies relating to tourism" states the important abstractive parts and intent of Nepal's Tourism Policy 2008., such as "developing eco-friendly tourism

industries as an important base" (p.32) of the national economy by way of identification protection promotion, and publicity of the historical, cultural, religious, archaeological and natural heritages of Nepal; and, equally, to make environment and policy required for the development of tourism culture, and to accord priority to local people in the distribution of benefits of tourism industries.

After the provisions in the new Constitution, the subsequent Local Government Operation Act of 2017 also provided tourism development and management responsibilities and rights to the local governments, including the District Council/District Coordination Council (DCC). The Act has also given importance to homestay development in the concerned municipalities' wards. The 10-year "Strategic Plan for Tourism Sector" (2016-2025) seeks huge investments from the government, private sectors, and international investors (MoCTCA, 2016), aiming to bring 2.5 million international tourists by 2025. Equally, the Plan prioritizes Indian and Chinese markets developing a 10-point strategy (*Spotlight Daily*, 2018). However, COVID-19 seriously hampered the efforts, and global tourism suffered an unprecedented setback (NTB, 2023; Sao Joao, 2021; Sharma, 2022). UN Tourism (2024) has shown new hope for tourism's speedy recovery globally in the years 2023 and 2024. Equally, the plan focuses on both tangible and intangible Nepalese heritage resources.

The 15th Development Plan of Nepal (2019/20-2023/24) was anchored on a long-term development vision reflected in the slogan "Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali". The vision is to graduate from "least developed country" status by 2022 (now has been revised to 2026 due to the COVID-19 pandemic), eradicate multidimensional poverty (Sharma, 2012), attain SDGs, reach the level of a middle-income country by 2030, and achieve all-round "prosperity and happiness" by 2043 (NPC, 2019, 2020, 2023, 2024). The Plan also tries to internalize and localize the SDG goals locally (NPC, 2021, 2023, 2024). Strategies for attaining prosperity and happiness have also been spelt out in the long-term vision (NPC, 2023, 2024). The 16th Plan (2024/25-2029/30) has also continued putting priority on sustainable development, green economy, and rural/CBT/ecotourism, including others (NPC, 2024). Giving emphasis on developing three pillars of key development in Nepal: agriculture, tourism, and energy (hydro-electricity) (Ministry of Finance [MoF], 2023); the 16th Plan has also emphasized good governance, anti-corruption, inter-

ministerial coordination and an integrated planning approach to achieve the goals of sustainable development, including green economy and tourism development- spreading the benefits, with equity, throughout the country- covering all provinces and districts.

### **Legal and Policy Provisions for Homestay Enterprising in Nepal**

For the first time, the Government of Nepal, led by MoCTCA, developed the "Homestay Operation Directive" in 2010 (MoCTCA, 2010). This Directive entails basic criteria for establishing a homestay, registration, and renewal procedures, types of homestays in Nepal, homestay management committee's formational and operational processes, reporting obligations and techniques, monitoring mechanisms, auditing processes, code of conduct (COC), etc. According to the Directive, homestay facilities can be operated in rural and urban areas. However, at present, most of the homestays are located in rural parts of Nepal.

Urban areas are rich with diverse accommodation facilities registered under various categories, such as star hotels, non-star hotels, guest houses, resorts, apartments, etc. (MoCTCA, 2021; Sedai, 2011). However, rural homestays mainly focus on two services: accommodation services and cultural exchange services. If rural homestays are viewed from accommodation perspectives only, that would be an incomplete definition of homestays (MoCTCA, 2010; TGDB, 2016). Thus, homestays are always expected to serve as "cultural homestays" (Kandel, 2011; Subedi, 2016). With the same purpose, the Homestay Operation Directive encompasses seven important objectives: first, encouraging a maximum number of domestic as well as international tourists to come to the destination; second, providing the best level of services, e.g., food, drinks, accommodation, hospitality, etc. to the guests; third, to create more alternative opportunities for additional incomes to the rural-dwellers/community people. The fourth objective is to maximize and prioritize local production systems and promote traditional species, varieties, items, etc.

Likewise, the fifth objective intends to protect local heritages and resources, develop their values, and use them for different purposes, including tourism, local festivals, exhibitions, and demonstrations (including museums). In the same manner, the sixth objective prioritizes protecting and promoting the local songs, dances, arts, artifacts, costumes, ornaments, historic antiques, language, religion, etc. The seventh objective emphasizes supporting local poor and marginalized people to empower

them and alleviate their poverty by introducing various types of tourism activities and interventions. The Directive has also provisioned a quota system to increase the representation and participation of women and other marginalized groups. For example, the local homestay management committees require at least 33 per cent of female members. After the formulation of the Directive in 2010, rural communities in tourism sites were encouraged to open their houses as homestay service providers, further expanding the tourism accommodation infrastructure in the destinations (MoCTCA, 2010; TGDB, 2016). There are federal, provincial, and local directives or guidelines for homestay opening and operations in Nepal. However, the proper implementation of such a directive has been a matter of criticism. The federal government is delegating the power and responsibilities to provincial and local level governments; however, without adequate human resources, appropriate training for existing staff, and obligational limitations, the intention or the system is negatively impacted.

Similarly, there has been less focus on sustainable concepts in homestay and local resources management; no special loans/grant support provision for the poor and marginalized communities of the section to get involved in homestay tourism services. In addition, the homestay registration process hasn't been prioritized; due to this, the provision of different support and grants is being missed or delayed. Another issue, based on the physical infrastructures and facilities, is that the classification of homestay (TGDB, 2013; 2016; 2024) is also not done, due to which best/better homestays and medium/poor homestays in the country have not been identified yet. This has also been a critical issue for homestay entrepreneurs. UN Tourism (2023) also globally encourages the development of such villages as "best villages," giving high importance to tourism, which cares about culture and traditions, celebrates diversity, provides opportunities, and safeguards biodiversity. The Homestay Federation of Nepal (HOFeN, formerly also known as HOSAN) has also raised this issue for a long time. HOFeN also suggests making a "one-point service provision" to facilitate homestays.

Another major concern raised by HOFeN is the infrastructure. Homestay services are continually criticized due to inadequate infrastructure or basic facilities. Different authors have also noted a low investment level in the tourism sector (e.g., Bhatt, 2015; IUCN, 2015; Sharma, 2018; TGDB, 2024; Uprety & Upadhyaya,

2013). Not only infrastructural limitations but also the value chain concept in homestays, including the overall local tourism system, has also not received adequate attention. The studies mentioned above indicate a need for proper analysis of the value chain from the initial stage of the product development process to the marketing stage to enhance rural socio-economic.

### ***Homestay Guidelines in the Provincial and Local-level Governments***

It is noteworthy that since the formulation of Nepal's New Constitution (2015), Nepal has been divided into seven provinces with clear rights, roles, and responsibilities in the Constitution. Accordingly, the provinces have the right to manage the tourism resources in the concerned province. With this provision, in the years 2017 and beyond (after the first election of the provinces), the provinces have drafted different Acts, Regulations, and Directive or Guidelines as provisioned and required by the Constitution. As noted earlier, the federal (central) government, for the first time, developed the "Homestay Operation Directive" in 2010, which guided homestay operators in following major guidelines as directed by the government. The HOFeN says that under the Tourism Act BS 2035, instead of the "Homestay Operation Directive", a separate "Homestay Regulation" (*Homestay Niyamawali*) would be better for efficiently regularizing, supporting, and sustainably developing homestay tourism in Nepal with more legal authority and responsibility. Despite continual advocacy from different fronts, following the central Directive, provincial and local governments have also tried developing guidelines or policies to promote community homestay tourism in the respective areas. All the legal provisions have emphasized the roles and responsibilities of the local management groups/committees.

The Directive has also been developed among several laws prepared by such provinces. So far, out of 7 provinces, most have released their Homestay Directives/Guidelines. Those legal documents have, seemingly, been developed based on the central-level Directive, which follows almost all the matters largely the same, except for very few changes in the regional/local contexts. Thus, from my exploration, I found that, even while developing such provincial and local level Homestay Directive, they copied (followed) the same "modular" Directive of the Central (Federal) government developed by MoCTCA (2010). For instance, I comprehensively reviewed the Homestay Directive of Gandaki province, released in 2019 (BS 2075). This province is considered comparatively ahead in Nepal's tourism

and homestay developmental efforts. Emphasis has been given to establishing and expanding homestay facilities and related developmental initiatives by abiding by the stipulated rules and directives as envisaged in the documents. The document also stresses the provision of grants and other technical support for homestays within the province.

Subsequently, after introducing the Provincial Directive and new policies, they have also started providing special grants and other materialistic support to the homestay operators of their own provinces/municipal areas. For instance, in Gandaki province, dozens of sites with homestay facilities have received such governmental grants. Following respective Directive, local destinations also develop certain rules or codes for effective management of community homestays. These "codes of conduct" (CoC/*aachaar-samhitaa*) are almost similar to every destination, municipality or province because centrally-developed (as placed in the appendices of the Directive, 2010) rules or codes heavily influence them.

Being guided by federal, provincial, and local directives, community homestay management committees have also developed such CoC. Community-based homestay codes are also common for almost all villages. For instance, according to Bhadgaunle (2022), Tanahun's "Aampswara Dalit Community Homestay Village" outlines various important codes like rotational distribution of guests, common menu (package) and price, no entertainment activities/or no noise after 10 pm, no special demands to be made by the tourists, respect to each other, emphasis on the pre-information system for the visitors, tourists' arrival in the village before the sun-set; respecting each others' religious practices and beliefs, caste, language, culture, dresses, etc.; no debate and discussions on religion, caste, and political differences/matters. Likewise, in the published promotional brochure of Aampswara Dalit Community Homestay, it is written that "... surprise gifts can be offered to the host family by the guests; and if liked, voluntary participation in the household chores are encouraged" (Bhadgaunle, 2022, p. 19). Whatever the case—published or unpublished—these types of CoC are available in every community-based homestay in Nepal. At least they write on flexes and put them on the walls of the homestay rooms or other common spaces. This system has helped maintain norms, standards, and disciplines in the community homestays.

Critiquing the case, despite robust inscriptions of roles, responsibilities, and rights in their statutory documents, the local homestay management committees have not properly utilized such provisions at the anticipated level (Sedai, 2018; TGDB, 2016). The main reasons, among others, are limited awareness and orientation, absence of proper facilitation, dearth of capable leadership, and limited exposure and capacity opportunities to apply and enjoy the rights and roles. To summarize, in community homestays, most groups have been able to develop the outlines of the CoC for their site (TGDB, 2016); however, the scenario is that those are not properly implemented (Bhadgaunle, 2022). Furthermore, the monitoring of implementation is also limited. It hints that the formulation of the homestay CoC in each site comes as a behavioral part of the development process. Nevertheless, there are limitations in the actual implementation of such codes in many instances. These facts and realities demand more coordinated and concerted efforts to effectively develop suitable norms, policies and guidelines and, subsequent executions.

#### ***Homestay Management Committees and Their Roles***

The "Homestay Operation Directive- 2010" has stated the following fifteen roles, responsibilities, and rights of the homestay management committee. The first role is to provide tourists with information about local tourism products and activities, as well as information about the CoC. Likewise, the second role is arranging welcome services and managing food and accommodation for the visitors. The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth roles, respectively, include maintaining the records of visitors, maintaining income and expenditure details, monitoring all the homestays regularly, developing local tourism packages, and promoting the destination. Equally, the seventh role is to conserve and preserve local nature, culture, traditions, good practices, and heritages. Similarly, the eighth role highlights "managing the shows of cultural programs to tourists and taking the measures to sustain them". The ninth role focuses on managing and coordinating visitors' health and safety and other resource-related work (if needed).

Likewise, the tenth role is to develop and display homestay signage, location maps, arrow-boards, etc., at appropriate/strategic places, and the eleventh role is expected to fix local prices of services and goods and develop a menu targeting the tourists. Consequently, the twelfth role is to "prepare an annual report of the committee, showing the total number of tourists visiting the area, major tourist

activities performed, along with incomes and expenditure details (need to be submitted to government body within 35 days after the completion of the fiscal year)". "Regularly communicating and coordinating with district-based homestay coordination committee and tourism ministry" is also a very important committee role mentioned in point number 13. Likewise, the fourteenth role focuses on "ensuring that each homestay has placed a detailed information board at the visible place of the house (the information board to include the CoC developed and agreed locally)". The 15th role reads like this: "Do other necessary works related to homestay tourism development, management, promotion, and marketing. The last point gives big roles as a responsible local organization to look after all the matters associated with better management of local community-based homestays in their areas.

Overall, from this policy review, it can be concluded that Nepal's tourism, especially the homestay development sector, has got popular attention, and all three levels of government are trying to develop new policies, programs, and activities to boost the courage of the homestay operators, giving more emphasis on women entrepreneurs (TGDB, 2024). The provincial and local governments are taking more particular initiatives to extend their administrative, managerial, and financial support to homestay entrepreneurs. However, priorities in policy matters and strategic actions for capacity development are still less focused and inadequate. The institutionalization process of Nepali homestay from the grassroots level to the top level is yet to get more attention from all three types of governments. This need is also further discussed in Chapter VIII (Implication section).

### **Empirical Review**

A number of empirical studies in Nepal and foreign countries have focused on homestay development processes, people's participation, women's concerns, and issues associated with the benefits or impacts of homestay tourism. Nevertheless, empirical research on the learning and capacity development aspects of community-based rural/homestay tourism and participatory co-learning-based homestay development initiatives is very limited. Many researchers have claimed that rural tourism and homestay tourism can be a boon for the rural populace creating multifaceted opportunities (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Achten, 2014; Bhattarai, 2019; Choegy, 2011; Kanel, 2011; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Lama, 2013; Patwal et al., 2023; Pradhanang, 2002; TGDB, 2016); and, according to them, in

Nepal, homestay tourism and village tourism are highly appreciated for multiple benefits for the rural inhabitants including economic, cultural, social, environmental, infrastructural and community empowerment—particularly of women. In the same manner, empirical studies (e.g., Baral, 2024; Pradhanang, 2002; Sedai, 2018; Sedai & Chapagain, 2010; VITOF Nepal, 2019; Woli, 2022) show that the tourism development process is expected to bring several opportunities for the local stakeholders for their overall benefits; otherwise, there would be no meaning of developing tourism or increasing the number of tourists. A study by Nepal Rastra Bank [NRB] (2015) in Far Western Nepal (Dallagaun) found that homestay development efforts are also capacitating locals to enhance their knowledge and skills, which have supported in bringing out the local stakeholders, more importantly, women entrepreneurs in the front of the local development process and ultimately have enhanced their empowerment and social status. Empowerment is a process that gives power to individuals to assert their rights responsibly (Ghale, 2012; Golchha, 2023; Harrison et al., 2021). NRB (2015) asserted that owing to such empowerment-related actions, the fascination of community people towards homestay, particularly women, has escalated in Nepal as a part of human and community capital development. These contribute to education, motivation, working skills, physical health, mental health, well-being, happiness, and human potential growth.

Based on empirical research, Dube and Sharma (2018) concluded that homestay host families could have a myriad of motivations ("drivers") for running the homestay enterprises despite different obvious de-motivating factors or "barriers". However, according to Qiu et al. (2021), based on a study in Jamaica, under their affinity-seeking strategies, homestay host families adopt different practical strategies to satisfy their guests, including- presenting personal attractiveness, showing friendly attitudes, facilitating enjoyment and social contact, and providing service and help. They believe that with these strategies, the benefits of homestay tourism could be enlarged. In the Philippines, Achten (2014) found that homestay tourism in Kiangan village has brought lots of direct and "trickle-down effects" in the local communities (p. 46). There are economic, social, cultural and many other impacts of homestay tourism in the Philippines. In the Malaysian case also, Patwal et al. (2023) state that while visiting homestays, many tourists share their culture (called "cultural interface") and "languages with the local host families" (Kunwar, 2003; Pradhanang, 2000).

Similarly, Lash and Austin (2003) also indicated that a "cultural bridge" (p. 70) would be required to achieve successful and sustainable ventures through collaboration, especially in conservation-focused tourism and development, which is also possible through such tourism activities. The author (Kanel, 2011) also witnessed several cases of Vietnamese homestays where local communities are attracted to promote cultural tourism with authentic homestay experiences.

Developing social and human capital within the communities is also very important in these scenarios to develop the overall capability of the community (Sen, 2009, 2010). Kandel (2011), MoCTCA (2010), and Subedi (2016) also emphasized that homestays could be a good means of cultural exchange and traditional culture preservation. The main beauty of homestay tourism is that tourists there pay good money and leave a good memory to the host family. Such re-affirmed findings have been revealed by many authors in the case of Thailand, India and Malaysia too, such as—respectively—by Kontogeogropoulos et al. (2015), Patwal et al. (2023), and Goh (2015).

In Nepal, reflecting on the research experience from Chitwan Terai, which can be applicable to similar areas of Bagmati province, including the Mahabharat Hills, Pradhanang (2002) also suggested developing various village-tourism products linked with conservation sites, taking into consideration various factors. Such factors include the provision of short-term and long-term tourism development strategies, viewing local development from ecological perspectives, and seeking active participation of local stakeholders through user groups, functional groups, and management committees. Equally, other important factors he suggests are: consideration of local ethnicity and culture, understanding human and wildlife behavior; enhancing interrelationships and chain reactions in the local economy, thinking about the multiplier effects of local tourism enterprises, and prioritizing rural-urban (village-city) linkages.

These points are crucial for rural tourism development in any part of Nepal and also any part of the world. In the same scenario, in the Philippines, Achten (2014) provokes intensive capacity development for hosts and guests to increase the positive impacts of local culture ("*Ifugaos*") and to counterbalance the negative effects of such tourism activities. In such cases, Smith (2017) also provokes that guests and hosts are not only buyers and sellers, but they are mutual learners as well. A study conducted

by Kunwar and Pandey (2014) in Rasuwa district's Gatlang village, a key destination of the Tamang Heritage Trail, reveals that this trekking route has high potential to promote cultural tourism and contribute to the socio-economic development of the Tamang community. The paper also highlights the rich cultural heritage of the Tamang people, including their unique traditions, architecture, and lifestyle. It assesses the challenges and opportunities associated with tourism development in the region, emphasizing the need for sustainable practices. The research provides insights into how "cultural tourism" (Kunwar, 2017) can be used as a tool for community empowerment and conservation in remote areas of Nepal. The "Community guest house" approach was adopted here to initiate rural tourism development in the area.

Similarly, a study in the eastern side of Nepal, Barachhetra, Sunsari, by Prasai (2023) also reveals that if proper education and training are given and business environments are created, local people can profoundly change their economic status and tourism business capacities through an enhanced employment opportunity with greater confidence. VITOF Nepal (2019)'s continued studies on homestay and rural tourism have concluded that some of the urban-based homestays, mostly private, have also demonstrated that multiple opportunities can be created if they are properly linked with existing tourism systems, like in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, Patan, Palpa, etc. TGDB (2024) claims that homestay operators' enhanced exposure and awareness activities in those areas have worked better (than in other rural and remote areas).

Similarly, based on a research survey in Mid- and Far-Western Nepal, Sedai (2018) found that local stakeholders of homestay tourism have limited (proper) skills and knowledge to manage their homestays and homestay-focused other relevant developmental activities. Also, he noted that proper facilitation at the local level is missing, although homestays' fame, reputation, and popularity are increasing day by day in Nepal. The study also found that women play dominant roles in homestay management, although men are also engaged in most of the decision-making level activities associated with homestay management. Equally, the study highlighted that the practice of the learning-by-doing (experiential learning) method in the overall learning process could easily be felt in homestay destinations. However, this study did not bring the perspectives of those dominant role-players in the overall learning of homestay enterprising. The study also concluded that ecologically, culturally, and

from the societal point of view, homestay has been a viable option to enhance rural incomes, particularly among middle-income-class people.

Likewise, Acharya and Halpenny (2013), after doing research in the Annapurna region of Nepal, concluded that the homestay enterprising focuses on women's capacity development and empowerment. According to them, the activities have helped increase understanding, and owing to this, the empowerment process is gaining momentum, creating many opportunities for dignity and prosperity. However, like other researchers, they also did not bring in-depth perspectives on what type of capacities and types of contents and methods play dominant roles in the learning and empowerment processes being practised by the homestay entrepreneurs in the region.

In a similar vein, Pandey (2011), based on research on human resources issues in Nepal's tourism, illustrates four major gaps experienced in the community-oriented tourism training and workshop programs or capacity development endeavors in the fields. These are making the local communities more resourceful and unsuccessful, managing appropriate/local trainers/resource persons, making the availability of suitable training manuals and resource books, and enhancing coordination and collaboration. His study also indicates that existing training and resource manuals do not cover emerging issues such as social inclusion, responsible tourism products and services, and product standardization. Timely updates and periodic revisions, as well as improvised curricula and reading materials for bettering training programs and enhancing their effectiveness, are the suggestions provided by Pandey (2011). Likewise, research by Bhandari (2013) concludes that homestay's main contributions are economic, followed by social, infrastructural, cultural, and environmental concerns (Dahal et al., 2020), educational, etc. because local tourism can provide bundles of benefits to local communities; and homestay's multifaceted roles are acknowledged and recognized widely.

Equally, the WWF (2022) also informs that many eco-tourism destinations exist in national parks, wildlife reserves, hunting reserves, and surrounding eco-areas, due to which many homestay entrepreneurs have emerged as homestay operators in these sites. Homestay tourism has also helped expand and diversify local household incomes, which has raised hopes for a better future for the locals. For example, in his study in Ghalegaun, Budhathoki (2013) found that at least 23% of the total income of the residents was occupied by tourism activities, which is gradually increasing.

Although not very significant, Woli's (2022) study in Dallagaun Bardiya also showed positive indications of homestay enterprising, including economic and socio-cultural, with lots of hopes for the future. Likewise, a quantitative study by Ghimire (2023) in the same destination with 244 respondents found that, due to homestay tourism, the village has been able to demonstrate itself as a "model village of Asia".

Likewise, a field study carried out by Bista (2012) in the famous tourism district- Myagdi in the high hills of Nepal also found that behavioral practices (small doable actions) in the communities have noticeably improved, especially in areas like kitchen and hygiene practices; knowledge of water purification; human excreta discharging place; hand-washing practice with soap; personal cleanliness; waste management practice; household cleanliness; and, "menstruation hygiene" (Uprety, as cited in Das, 2014) and oral rehydration. Women—the key actors in homestay enterprising in Nepal—also consider their menstruation hygiene to be an important part of their lives.

These types of hygienic sensitizations are increasing in rural areas as well due to growing orientation programs and media effects. Further, in tourism, more inclusive and participatory approaches are required to ensure effective gender and social inclusion (GESI) mainstreaming in all developmental interventions and, more importantly, in homestay enterprising with an enhanced and well-designed course, event and program to change the participants' skills and behavior. In this context, Rai (2019) also emphasizes making the local people skilled with more social responsibilities. Nonetheless, he criticizes that, in most cases, they are low-paid, less motivated, and less supported, and thereby, they always seek new opportunities to find "green pastures" (Rai, 2019). Such concerns are also associated with homestay enterprising (Chapagain & Rai, 2018), which can provide self-employment and better-earning opportunities if properly and extensively run.

In the same context, Subedi and Chapagain (2010) found positive impacts of community-based tourism (CBT) in the Annapurna region, where, for example, in Manang, most of the households are engaged in tourism businesses (mostly hotel/tea-house), and they don't allow any outsider to enter as "hotel operator" (p. 62). This is definitely due to realizing the multiple benefits of tourism/homestay enterprising. They claim that various community development activities from the contributions of local tourism are accomplished, but providing direct incomes in the hands of those

people is a crucial issue to enhance the concept of profitability and equity in local tourism. This fact is also supported by the research of Shreckenberget al. (2016), who state that local tourism's growth and stages of the tourism life cycle also affect the success and failures of equitable and inclusive tourism concepts. Butler's (1980; 1985) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model also emphasizes that tourist destinations go through a series of stages from exploration to stagnation or rejuvenation (in this context, more discussions are presented in the next chapter). Every stage of the development process is directly connected to local participation and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Butler further states that in the "rejuvenation/decline" stage, the destination puts efforts into investing for possible renewal through diversification and more developmental activities, or the site declines from a tourism destination when it loses appeal. In such cases, more analytical studies are required.

In this context, Bhatta and Kotru (2011) and Bhattacharai (2019) also assert that these aspects of equity and enhanced equitable access with proper benefit-sharing mechanisms are particularly important for disadvantaged and marginalized groups of people who are lagging in making their voices heard; and who are facing hardships due to inequality, even in the USA—where "average per capita income is always in a debate" (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 27). Nepal is also no exception. The rural poor, especially the ultra-poor, have been poorer and have less purchasing power than a few decades ago. Pradhanang (2002) also advocated for proper benefit-sharing in rural destinations to make them equitable, profitable, respectable, hospitable, and sustainable. Harrison (2008), on the same line, states that pro-poor tourism, as a new concept, is expected to provide net benefits to poor people; however, he also mentions that the approach is not out of critique. Access to training/capacity-building opportunities and micro-credit are crucial issues related to pro-poor initiatives.

Likewise, in India, Nigam (2002), carrying out research in the Garhwal region, reports that local tourism greatly supports creating new employment through the tourism sector, mainly in businesses such as hotels and holiday resorts, guest houses, river rafting, and water sports complexes, skiing resorts, wildlife sanctuaries, pilgrim places; and, transport and tour agencies. Similarly, another research in India's famous tourism destination, Sikkim State, carried out by Lama (2014), concludes that homestays have become integral to rural/eco-tourism developing local capacities. In Bhutan, Chapagain and Rai (2018) have also reported similar trends in homestay

development and its contributions to the economy, society, culture, education, and so on. They carried out the research at Bhutan's famous Gangtey Valley Village. However, these research findings have not indicated how the locals are being capacitated and how they are transferring knowledge and experience from one to another.

Visualizing the same perspective from a capability point of view, Lama (2013) found that homestay operators', mostly women's capacity development and empowerment are visible in the homestay sites, where tourism-related businesses are gaining momentum. Thus, she further claims that Nepal's tourism endeavors must be viewed more from inclusive and equity perspectives. In the same context, it is reflected that the government has emphasized inclusive and participatory tourism development; however, Bhasin (2003) suggests considering inclusion from gender, caste/ethnicity, geography, and age perspectives. Not only in tourism but in other sectors of development, limited links are maintained. For example, in education, there are several gaps from a gender perspective (Acharya, 2009; Dhungel, 2013; Poudyal, 2013, 2015). The close nexus between education and tourism is vital in this context (Kanel et al., 2025). Generally, it is expected that community-based/rural tourism will benefit all the members or actors of the society. However, several studies (e.g. Kanel et al., 2024; Kandel, 2016; Lama, 2013; Sedai, 2018) have proven that inclusive participation and equitable distribution of tourism shares have been daunting in many parts of Nepal. Amongst the actors, women's issues are more critical.

In this vein, Lama (2013) further elaborates that women's engagement in the homestay businesses has been a good inspiring source to uplift not only the economic and entrepreneurship status of the concerned households but also a major contributor to the educational, social, and ecological, and cultural awareness and actions in rural parts of Nepal. In the same manner, Kandel (2011), researching Sirubari Homestay from a cultural capability perspective, found that local tourism activities have positively contributed to preserving and promoting local Gurung ethnic songs and dances, which have been transferred to the new generations from the old-aged parents through every day cultural-shows. Similarly, Baral (2024) also found that Ghalegaun village has been able to preserve and promote local culture through homestay tourism. He also reported that almost 16% of tourists prefer to visit the area for the (Gurung ethnicity-based) cultural significance of the area. Ghalegaun is also considered one of

the best homestay villages in Nepal, and it is also recognized as the SAARC (South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation) Village (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022).

However, in these research studies, there are also limited elaborations on teaching-learning and capacity enhancement aspects, including cultural knowledge and skills transfer. Overall, it seems that most researchers have focused their empirical studies on homestays' multiple contributions and challenges in developing local products and capacities; however, research works focused on community learning and capacity development practices/processes, challenges, and associated issues are extremely limited.

### **Research Gap**

My reviews highlighted that homestay enterprising has been a focus in Nepal for the last two and a half decades to encourage local participation, particularly in rural area-based culture-focused community tourism development initiatives. The empirical reviews also suggest that there is limited knowledge of what and how rural area-based community homestay operators, especially women entrepreneurs, learn and capacitate themselves to run homestay enterprises. Despite the huge potential and apprehended importance of homestay tourism development, the capacity development needs of homestay operators have been less provoked in different literature (e.g., Devkota et al., 2021; MoCTCA, 2016; Pandey, 2011; Pasa, 2021; Sedai, 2018, etc.); although there have been a number of studies focusing on various issues directly or indirectly associated with homestay capacity enhancement (e.g., Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Devkota et al., 2021; Kandel, 2021; Lama, 2013; NRB, 2015; Pandey, 2011; Pasa, 2021; Sedai, 2018; Sharma, 2019). These studies have also indicated that proper education and training efforts have been limited in the tourism sector, particularly in community-focused capacity development initiatives. In the same manner, the reviews have provided a sense that the learning capacities and styles of the homestay operators have not been described and elaborated.

Equally important is that the above studies have not talked much about the local/indigenous practices of learning how they are being applied and adopted and also being transferred from generation to generation. Here, I understood that various traditional/indigenous knowledge transfer and learning practices also exist in homestay and rural tourism destinations. Nevertheless, there is limited literature on empirical information and knowledge on that part. Thus, some research gaps have

been felt, especially in areas such as what types of traditional and intergenerational learning practices exist in the homestay sites, how the local men and women, including their children, learn new things, what effects of (formal) educational attainment are there on the overall learning, what extent the ICTs have helped in the local adults' or the homestay operators' learning processes; how the homestay entrepreneurs have utilized the experience-based (experiential learning) and peer-learning approaches in their day-to-day practices; and, how capacity development programs and practices have helped boost their overall capability to scale-up the business, benefits and professional life.

More clearly, Pandey (2011), depicting the overall picture of Nepal, also noted specific gaps in the tourism-related capacity development programs or packages, including the absence of proper identification of training needs, dearth of standard modular course/manuals and materials/equipment; limited focus on new materials, methods, and also a deficient of timely updates in the curriculum and packages. Equally, organizers' focused concentrations are only in urban and towns, forgetting the real needs of such rural/remote areas. Similarly, he further indicates that limited expertise, experience, and low levels of confidence in trainers result in limited awareness and capacities among participants and other stakeholders.

In this context, Kothari (2004) also emphasized that linking and revealing the research findings with the local contexts to enhance the value and importance of the research endeavor(s) would be critical. Likewise, he also indicated that there are fewer linkages, coordination, and networking between the interdisciplinary training institutes and job providers; limited availability of trained human resources, practical approaches, and laboratories; less focus on monitoring and follow-up; limited exposure to the trainers to real-world/new destinations; and, a problem with training course standardization/skill testing and certification prevailed. These challenges are obstructing streamlining and strengthening Nepal's tourism-focused training and capacity development efforts.

Overall, in the homestay tourism development system, the learning and capacity development-related gaps and challenges can be noted as training curricula, delivery, management, and effectiveness-related challenges, and training manuals/guidelines development, execution, and follow-up related. Thus, critical exploration and reflections from the field and appropriate analysis and interpretations

are important from overall learning and capacity development perspectives. Likewise, the learning difficulties and challenges of homestay operators in the homestay literature have not been unearthed and discussed in detail. This gap also exists for further research and exploration focusing on community homestay operators, particularly women's lived experiences in homestay learning and capacity-building-related initiatives, and. challenges in the Mahabharat Hills of Central Nepal.

### **Chapter Essence**

In this literature review chapter, I presented the overall scenario of homestay enterprising and its development in Nepal, with a number of relevant examples from other countries. Likewise, associating with two theories, namely "Experiential Learning Theory" and "Capability Approach", I tried to connect the learning and capacity development situations and emergence from gender and andragogical perspectives.

Likewise, I depicted a brief picture of Nepal's homestay-related policies, strategies, and programs, indicating that Nepal's homestay tourism is a relatively new business focusing on local community mobilization and multiple capacity development, having realized many opportunities, including rural women's empowerment. Despite so many ups and downs, it has not lost hope and is thriving to expand continuously, in which learning and capacity development processes are in focus. The pool of literature I reviewed also suggests that the "how" aspects of homestay operators' learning and capacity development practices are less explored and less documented, showing more research opportunities.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND PROCESSES

In this chapter, I describe my research approaches and processes, highlighting my philosophical paradigms, epistemology, ontology, and axiology. I also present why I chose the ethnographic approach to my inquiry. I also elaborate on the research steps and processes focusing on gatekeeper mobilization in the context of the ethnographic exploration approach; and, in the same manner, I comprehensively illustrate how I observed the homestay operators' day-to-day social world and how I held conversations (*bhalakusari/kurakani*) with them in the data collection process. *Bhalakusari* is a relatively new perspective in an ethnographic inquiry; thus, I have elaborated on this part in the concerned section. Lastly, the chapter discusses the data analysis processes for interpretations and meaning-making and elaborates on essential parts of the ethical and quality standards of the thesis. I was much more interested in meaning-making rather than in "meaning made" (Park, 2010). Such meaning-taking and meaning-making processes have helped me generate new knowledge in the world of community homestay.

#### **Philosophical Stands for My Research**

After studying advanced research methods in my PhD course, I became aware of the research philosophy that guides the research journey by providing direction for the researcher to adopt appropriate research methods (Creswell, 2018) and conduct them. It guided me to know the nature of reality and the ways of knowing from my research site/participants. My research ontology, epistemology, and axiology also guided my research philosophy, which will be briefly described below. I must mention that my philosophical paths also led me to design my research study and choose suitable methods within the overall research design.

#### **Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology**

I am guided by the philosophy that each person and each community has different experiences, methods, opportunities, abilities, perceptions, and capabilities. Ontology is concerned with articulating the nature and formation of a society with multiple realities (Willis, 2007). Thus, the ontology of my research is based on multiple realities with subjectivism (the "subject" are the homestay operators of the study area). In Nepal, there are different ethnic-group-based cultural homestays in

different parts (TGDB, 2024). These diverse homestay operators have different experiences, perceptions, and feelings according to their indigeneity (Timperley, 2020) and cultural practices (Kunwar, 2017). According to Timperley (2020), indigeneity is about the deep-rooted connections that people or communities have with specific lands, shaped by their distinct cultural, social, and historical traditions. It reflects their traditional ways of living and their relationship with the land over time, which will have many implications for local culture and culture-based tourism endeavors.

In this context, Vlasov et al. (2024) also argue that cultural change is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including technological advancements, social and economic dynamics, interactions with other cultures, geographic conditions, and ethnic identities. These elements collectively shape and transform cultural practices and societal structures, which are also key parts of the local tourism system, ultimately requiring these multiple realities for furthering knowledge and skills-strengthening processes. Knowing the reality that every person has different interests and different styles of learning and doing things and also knowing that overall capacities are shaped by their knowledge and skills, the research ontologically requires multiple realities to find the conclusion. According to Jensen (2000), such knowledge and skills also depend on the grasping power of an individual.

Those different abilities, powers and styles influence new learning and practices, and every individual develops his/her worldviews, perceptions, experiences, and reflections. There are always debates on paradigms of different research perspectives (Corby, 2012; Creswell, 2018; Saldana, 2009). As a qualitative researcher or an ethnographer (Dawson, 2013; Silverman, 2012), I must rely on multiple views and experiences, understanding that ethnography is highly subjective. Ontologically, as I was prepared, those differences in the field were the grounds for germinating experiences, opinions, and perception-based multiple realities of the field. In this connection, I was also aware that—due to our personal nature, attitudes, and perceptions, the same setting could be visited differently, the same thing could be viewed and observed differently, and the same thing could be perceived differently.

I followed the key experiences of previous researchers and tried to practice myself for better data, quality information, and confidence. I also realize that the ethnographic field notes could also be recorded differently (Silverman, 2012). To

understand actual experiences, I practised different types of field notes. Following this reality, I collected the views and opinions of the homestay entrepreneurs who have different backgrounds and experiences, considering subjectivism. Their varied socio-cultural and "behavioral experiences" (Bordens & Abbott, 2011) have been the ground for this ethnographic research.

Thus, epistemologically, which is "the theory of knowledge" (Kvale, 1996) as well as "the study of knowledge" (Hawkesworth, 2006), and the "researcher is the key research instrument" in any qualitative research project (Crabtree, 2019); I was convinced that the homestay practitioners were the main centers of my new knowledge. It is also clear that there are always differences in epistemological viewpoints- how different people understand the "nature of knowledge-generating activities" (Gough et al., 2012). They also claim that epistemological arguments go to the heart of how people make sense of the world they see and thus raise issues that have occupied philosophers for centuries. They argue that knowledge is incomplete and situated in time and place.

Thus, from the epistemological perspective, as far as my subject is concerned, I believe that individuals involved and in practice can accumulate first-hand knowledge and experience. Homestay operators or entrepreneurs can gain a wealth of knowledge in the homestay field. From the perspective of an epistemological position, I have considered constructionism and inductivism through an interpretive paradigm since interpretivistic thinking partly helps explain the perspectives and meanings associated with the lived experiences of the actors (Taylor & Medina, 2011). In this context, the knowledge sources of my research exist within the operators of the community homestays in the research site. The participants demonstrated their actions (homestay operation), explained their "social system" (Bordens & Abbott, 2011), shared their experiences and feelings, and ultimately I constructed the new knowledge through an ethnographic research design.

From an axiological perspective, this research was value-laden. Thus, I gave value to my research participants, their experiences, feelings, actions, behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, and reflections as core phenomena of the research. The experiential demonstrations of the participants or the "subjects" research have provided real value to my research. I have valued their activities, sensitivities and inquisitiveness. As suggested by Creswell (2009, 2018), I am also concerned with the

value of educational research, as he states that conducting educational research is more than engaging in the major steps in the research process rather than just producing outputs (results).

### **Interpretivism: My Research Paradigm**

While designing this qualitative research, I have followed the ideas of Bogdan and Biklen (2011), Bryman (2008), Dawson (2013), Patel (2015), etc. According to them, the research design is a framework for collecting and analyzing data, and a choice of research design reflects the priority given to a range of dimensions of the research process (Bryman, 2008). Based on such research processes, I constructed new knowledge (Dawson, 2013), which can be adaptable to the local environment (Bryman, 2008). I believe that the construction of such knowledge helps with survival, an ongoing process that happens on a biological, psychological, and social level.

As per Dawson (2013), meaning and knowledge are human constructions, and the theoretical perspective within this position includes interpretivism. In this research, I have adopted an interpretive paradigm. According to Creswell (2018), among different paradigms, the interpretive paradigm was chosen by researchers who adopted the qualitative approach. Van Manen (2007) further emphasizes that human science and quantitative sciences are different because human science operates with its criteria for precision, exactness, and rigour; nonetheless, the quantitative sciences' precision and exactness are usually seen to be indications of refinement of measurement and perfection of research design.

There is a general scholarly understanding that research methods are conventionally divided into quantitative, qualitative, and participatory research methods with differing underlying approaches, tools, and techniques. Bogdan and Biklen (2011) and Patel (2015) also mention that a paradigm is a loose collection of logically related assumptions, concepts, or propositions people have about what is important and what makes the world work. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2012) define the term paradigm as "the framework for scholarly inquiry" (p. 375). Accordingly, they elaborate the interpretive paradigm as the one concerned primarily with generating a context-based understanding of people's thoughts, beliefs, values, and associated social actions. From a learning perspective as well, Fleming (2018) notes that social

actions and social movements are crucial for overall community development to achieve the intended goals of the adult learning and engagement processes.

As a qualitative researcher or ethnographer, I have adopted the interpretive paradigm with a reflective approach. Interpretivism enables us to seek the meaning of the "social world" (Altheide & Johnson, 2011; Dooley, 2008; Park, 2010). Bogdan and Biklen (2011) also emphasize that the interpretive paradigm is also considered an epistemology of social constructivism, which leads the researcher's unfolding subjectivity in shaping the inquiry process, especially the act of interpreting the other's meaning perspective. Since, in academic research, different paradigms are considered to make the research initiative more focused and credible, it studies the meanings of human behavior and deals with people's experiences (subjectivity). Corby (2012) also illustrates different types of paradigms used in social research: interpretivism, positivism, post-positivism, etc. Armbruster et al. (2019) emphasize reflecting on the local contexts and integrating the experiences of both men and women—looking through gender lenses—to broaden the research horizon through critical and adaptive management. Considering such criteria in my mind, I finally chose the subjective and inductive approaches in this qualitative research, which I found most suitable for my topic, based on my interest, confidence and capacity.

### **Ethnography: My Way of Inquiry**

In this exploratory study, I used an ethnographic method of investigation. Working in tourism enables an ethnographer to "study tourism from the inside" (Andrews et al., 2019). Dooley (2008), Gullion (2016), Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), and Kahn (2011) highlight that ethnographers observe, participate, interact, analyze, reflect, write, rethink, and describe cultures, their members, and their involvement with them. I realized that the ethnographic method of exploration would best fit for bringing lived field experiences with my insights, focusing on community homestays in the Mahabharat Hills.

For the study, I adopted various criteria—as suggested by different researchers such as Bordens and Abbott (2011), Creswell (2018), Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), Madden (2010), Mayoux (2006), and Van Manen (2007)—to choose an appropriate method for the research, such as the relevancy of the information to be inquired, credibility of the information and analysis; the ethical considerations in

both means and ends of research; and, considerably some managerial parts like my existing skills, resources, time, etcetera.

I also realized that an ethnographic study is an ethical commitment from the start to each research step and writing step, for which I was ready to take a challenge, as stated by Baker (1999), Flick (2009), and Mayoux (2006). I was motivated by the fact that qualitative research becomes a "continuous process of constructing versions of reality" (Yin, 2009, p. 19), and thus I carried out the study by observing and interacting with the participants, the "social units" (Baker, 1999, p. 497). My main purpose was to observe my research participants and the homestay operators and find their perspectives on learning, initiating, and managing homestay enterprises through in-depth descriptions. My focus was to dig out the stories of homestays and their deeper perspectives on who, what, how, when, why, etc., about their lived experiences with the homestay enterprises. My attempt was also to reflect on their feelings to make sense (Gullion, 2016) of their learning and homestay management experiences in the MH.

According to Bordens and Abbott (2011), Flick (2009) and Yin (2009), ethnography is a time-tested research strategy which combines different methods based on participation, observation, and writing about a field under study. The overall image of details from this participation, observation, and interviewing is unfolded in a written text about the field. Research can be visualized and perceived as painstaking methodological efforts to examine, investigate, and restructure the realities, theories, and applications (Jamshed, 2014). Similarly, as Kahn (2011) elaborated, I also did my ethnographic study by spending comprehensive time (more than 12 weeks) in the culture I studied, interacting with the homestay entrepreneurs, their family members, neighbors and other stakeholders in the vicinity, watching and learning from how they act and talk, participating in their activities, and talking with them about how they understand their groups and their lives or "day-to-day social worlds".

The study of local artifacts also played a crucial role in gathering qualitative and quality information. I was convinced that, from ethnography, intimate knowledge can be generated based on the happenings in their everyday life, and new meanings or senses can be (re)constructed or explained (Ejimabo, 2015; Van Manen, 2007). In this research, as articulated by Kahn (2011) and Hammersley & Atkinson (2019), to study the social unit, I tried to become an active observer and sometimes a participant in

their day-to-day chores for better insights, better friendships, and deeper understanding.

### **Research Site, Dominant Cultural Features, and Research Participants**

I chose one of the homestay sites in the Bagmati province, Central Nepal, named "Mahabharat Hills (MH) Homestay" (original name changed for anonymity). Here, homestay tourism development efforts have been going on for almost two decades. The area is culturally rich, with mixed communities. The homestay village is a beautiful place with a hilltop about 2,000 meters above sea level in the MH. Naturally, the hilltop is surrounded by dense green forests and hard rocks from which spectacular views of snow-capped Himalayas, mesmerizing scenes of green hills, and unique valleys



(Sketch of the research site, © Author)

can be viewed with splendid sunrise and sunset scenes. Those major Himalayan views (e.g. Gaurishankar, Langtang, Jugal, Dorje Lhakpa, Ganesh Himal, Manaslu, Buddha, Shringi, Lamjung, Gangapurna, Machhapuchchhre, Annapurna, Dhaulagiri, Nilgiri, and others from east to west in 180 degrees), and vistas of sunrise from the hill-top attract tourists, especially in the morning times. The area has been promoted as a new rural tourism product, where homestay has been considered an attractive product and a community-led cultural accommodation service in the MH as a new option of cultural enterprise.

Both Chepang- and non-Chepang households have engaged in the initiative. There are, at present, about a dozen homestays in this location. New sites are also gradually opening such homestays in the area (MH) with the hope of bringing more tourists in post-COVID situations (Kanel, 2021a; NTB. 2023) as the country shows good signs of tourism recovery in the years 2022, 2023, and 2024. Despite tourism activities for the last two decades, the area has not been able to reap many economic benefits; thus, still, the whole area is recognized as a "poverty-stricken area" or, in the words of Yunus (2008), this area has also been a "school of poverty" (p. 130) for the

researchers and development practitioners. Rai (2015) also reports that the Chepangs are poor in economic terms; they are disadvantaged in multiple ways, and they are marginalized from the traditional (or modern) governance system, but they are rich in culture and traditional skills and knowledge, including tackling from difficult circumstances, e.g. disaster, hunger, etc. (Dhungana et al., 2022). In the same manner, Gurung (2016) also reports a low literacy rate in this area— just 23 per cent of Chepangs. Nevertheless, their rich knowledge transferred from generation to generation has been neglected.

According to Rai (2015), it is true that only four per cent of Chepang households have food sufficiency, and owing to this, labor is a strong livelihood option in Chepang's life (Khanal, 2014). However, many studies have failed to report what types of skills and knowledge they are selling/using to be laborers in the localities or outside the world. Further, due to fewer opportunities in the economic world, Chepangs are compelled to face several challenges and impediments in the local development and capacity enhancement processes (Khanal, 2014; Rai & Chepang, 2018). Lately, it has been observed that the growing trend of changing religions (Hinduism and Naturalism to Christianity) has been a common phenomenon in the area (Rai & Chepang, 2018). This will have some implications for local cultural tourism (Bhatt, 2015; Kunwar, 2002; Kunwar, 2017). Sharma (2014) also puts his critical comments on this matter.

So, why is all this happening in the Chepang area of the Mahabharat Hills? Why are they less educated? Why are they less involved in tourism? Why have their traditional knowledge, skills and experiences got less value and recognition in society? Why have they changed their social/cultural and religious practices in recent times? The questions are easy ones, but the answers are far from simple paths. Despite such difficulties and challenges, they reside there for a long time or from their ancestors. They are now well adapted in the MH. In this context, Hunt and Colander (2014) also state that "When people live in a given region over a long period, they become adjusted to local conditions of geography and climate" (p. 76). Parajuli et al. (2019) also mention that owing to modern governing structures dominated by state-formed policies and elite-based power dynamics sideline local power structures and traditional practices in many ethnic communities. Understanding this reality could be a valuable asset for cultural tourism.

Irrespective of difficult life conditions, Chepangs' unique lifestyle, traditional cultures, and geographical landscapes are great assets/resources for CBT development/ promotion in the MH. Although all castes and ethnic groups in the area celebrate the big festivals of Nepal like *Rakshabandhan* (sacred thread festival), *Teej* (dance festival), *Dashain* (10-day special celebrations with *tika* and *jamara* (sprouted barley), *Tihar* (sister-brother's tika program), *Maghe Sankranti* (1<sup>st</sup> day of Magh month/Feb.), *Baishakhe Sankranti* (1<sup>st</sup> day of 1<sup>st</sup> month of Nepali calendar/normally on 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> April), etc.; additionally, the Chepangs have a special festival of "Nwagi" (new crop harvesting annual community ritual; which is also called "Chhonam").

Each year, the Nwagi falls on 22 Bhadra (between 6-8 September) (*Republica*, 2023). In such festivals and other religious/cultural formalities, the "Pande", as a main community cultural leader, leads and guides the group and performs as the main actor in all such activities. He (always a man), or his team, during the occasions, uses different types of traditional and local musical instruments such as *ghanti ko maala* (traditional garlands of small bells or *ghungrus*), *dhyangro* (a type of locally made drum), etc. The Pande wears typical Chepang costumes like *kamij* (shirt), white *kachhaad* (like a multi-folded skirt) or *suruwaal* (trouser), *aaskot* (Eastcoat), *patukaa* (white belt-like special long white cloth on the waist), *phetaa* (white cloth on the head), or typical black Nepali *topi*.

Other Chepangs, in general, wear normal dresses as other people do, e.g. for men: shirts, tee-shirts, sweaters, trousers, pants, half-pants, *lungi/dhoti*, *aaskot* or coat/jacket, cap or *topi*, *galbandi* (muffler), etc. Likewise, for women: *dhoti/saree/lungi*, *choli/blouse*, shawl/*mujetro/pachhyouri*, *kurtha-suruwal*, etc. Some "modern" girls and women even wear shirts/T-shirts, pants, trousers, etc., as men do. Nowadays, the traditional dresses of different castes or ethnicities have become only the "festival dresses" or "dresses of special occasions". For example, the Magar women wear *dhoti/saree*, *choli/blouse*, shawl, and *ghalek*, along with different ornaments. However, the Magar men wear shirts or vests, *kachhads*, special *ghalek*, cloth-belt, and *topi*. Sometimes, the Magar men also put *khukuri* (big knife) on the waist.

Likewise, on special occasions, Dasnami and Brahmin/Chhetri people wear *daura-suruwal*, coat/east-coat, and *topi* (*Dhakatopi* or *Bhadgaunle* black *topi*).

Occasionally, they also wear mufflers, especially for adults and older men. There is an assumption that if alternative incomes or livelihoods such as "agro-forestry" (Mukul & Byg, 2020) and tourism enterprises, based on the SRT model (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007; Rai & Chepang, 2018) are sought, Chepang people's lives could be different in a short period with multitude opportunities. Those assumptions and thoughts also guided tourism-oriented actions, although it would take a long time to make tourism a mainstay or a viable source of income in the area. In the beginning, the SRT-led efforts promoted MH-based cultural tourism products (e.g., the mix of Chepangs, Magars, Giri/Puri, Brahmin/Chhetris, etc.).

According to the locals of MH, different tourism and livelihoods projects and regular government programs supported the endeavor in the initial stage with heavy inputs like training, financial grants, exposure visits, planning, and local infrastructure development, including women and poverty-stricken households' social and economic empowerment-related activities. The activities were accomplished through comprehensive social mobilization processes, including the provision of micro-finance grants. In these initiations, the project and institutions involved were: Praja Community Development Programme/SNV Nepal, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)-supported TRPAP through the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MOCTCA), Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), then District Development Committee (DDC), the then Village Development Committees (VDCs), etc.

Their support helped develop and promote homestay-focused rural tourism in the area with the pro-poor tourism (PPT) concept (Harrison, 2008; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). The site has also been promoted with its branding "Mahabharat Hills (actual branding is not presented here due to ethical reasons). Different village-focused trails for trekking, hiking, and cultural preservation activities were emphasized. As a unique mixed cultural heritage in the area, Chepangs were given additional priority (Bhatt, 2015; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). The Bagmati province is the epicenter of Chepangs' inhabitation in Nepal (CBS, 2011; Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994; Uranw, 2013). Chitwan, Makawanpur, Dhading, and Gorkha districts are famous for Chepang-dominant communities in this province (Dhungana et al., 2022). Chepangs have their language (but no separate script), rituals, foods, and costumes. These all are valuable assets for culture-focused tourism development in the area. All initiatives here have been geared towards developing hill tourism, like "hill-station tourism", based on

community homestay initiatives. This area is one of the famous rural tourist destinations in Nepal, which has rich cultural and natural beauty.

In addition to cultural richness and diversity, this area is also rich in natural attractiveness. According to the locals, the tourism developmental efforts focused on enhancing rural incomes and helping reduce poverty with an integrated approach following ecotourism practices as well (Bhatt, 2015). The homestay site, in particular, is also a mixed site of different castes and ethnicities, as outlined above. Chepangs are also involved in tourism development activities with priority. However, tourism has not been able to contribute significantly to the life of Chepangs. Owing to this, they are still not disengaged with slash-and-burn or swidden/shifting-cultivation practices (Mukul & Byg, 2020). Due to these practices, they always suffer from land-use competitions and government objections, and, with these realities, in homestay enterprising, very few Chepangs are involved (Kanel et al., 2023), leaving them mostly for labor-intensive jobs.

### **Demography of the Research Participants**

Considering the nature of my inquiry, I designed the research to adopt a purposive sampling technique to find the natural and actual social worlds where first-hand experiences do naturally and explicitly exist. Thus, as mentioned above, in such subjectivist inductive studies (Creswell, 2018), the research participants were the homestay operators of the MH. In this study, I chose seven homestays as my "research units" (Dawson, 2013). Families having homestay experience and being able to provide such services at present were the main basis for selecting as research participants. Both male and female participants were observed in their day-to-day life activities, particularly focusing on homestay operational works and other cultural activities. However, as key research participants, seven women operators representing those seven households dominated the epistemology of my research.

Now, I would like to discuss the number of research participants selected. The number of participants is a concern in qualitative (Qual) research. In quantitative (Quan) research, there are well-established guidelines about how many samples/respondents and how those respondents are selected for the research work. Nonetheless, qualitative research experts argue that there is no straightforward answer to "how many" samples (or research participants) are required. For example, according to Campbell and Lassiter (2015), Creswell (2018), Dawson (2013), Denzin

and Lincoln (2018), Flick (2011), Hammersley and Atkinson (2005, 2019), and Smith et al. (2009)—for a qualitative, and particularly for an ethnographic study—number of samples does not matter much if the desired phenomena, patterns or features are genuinely represented from the purposively selected research participants. Generally, as those scholars suggest, 6 to 10 units (of research participants) are acceptable for an information-saturation ethnographic study, representing the desired dominant features or characters (Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In particular, relating to the number of participants, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) also suggest that a small number of participants are suitable for qualitative research, particularly in ethnographic inquiry. Thus, in this research, detailed ethnographic accounts through prolonged close observations and interactions covered only seven homestays (ethnically 3 Chepangs, 2 Magars, 1 Dasnami [Giri/Puri/Sanyasi], and 1 Brahmin-Chhetri [B-C]).

In the study, for anonymity or ethical reasons, their changed names (re-naming) have been used in this way: i) Aaita Kumari, ii) Som Maya, iii) Mangala Devi, iv) Buddhi Maya, v) Bihi Devi, vi) Shukrikala, and vii) Shanishchara. Now, let me introduce all (seven) research participants very briefly:

Research participant #1 is *Aaita Kumari*:

She represents the Magar community. She is in her 40s, and from a formal education point of view, she is just literate. She started homestay from the very beginning.

Research participant #2 is *Som Maya*:

She is in her 30s, with some basic education (grade 5), and her family started the homestay business recently, or just five years ago.

Research participant #3 is *Mangala Devi*:

She is in her 40s, and she is also just literate. Her family has been engaging in homestay from the beginning.

Research participant #4, *Buddhi Maya*:

She is from the *Dasnami* (Bharati) community. She is in her 40s, and she has a very basic level of education (grade 3). She also engaged in the homestay business from

the very beginning.

Research participant #5 is *Bihi Devi*:

She is Chepang, in her 50s. She cannot read and write (she never attended school education). She also joined the homestay group from the very beginning.

Research participant #6 is *Shukrikala*:

She represents the Magar community. Now she is in her 50s and just literate. She also started homestay from the beginning.

Research participant #7, *Shanishchara*:

She represents the Brahman-Chhetri (BC) community. Among my key research participants, she is the oldest, now in her 60s. She also started homestay enterprising from the very beginning. She also cannot read and write.

While choosing those participants, I was adequately flexible as suggested by Uprety (2007), since he—based on the learning from an ethnographic study of a traditional irrigation system (*Sorah Chhattis Maujaa*) in Rupandehi district—suggests that while finalizing the selection of the study area and participants we need to avoid the rigidity right from the beginning; a flexible mind always helps to open the better avenues for the research to be undertaken more comprehensively and gain the trust of the larger research community. In addition to the main views, actions, experiences, and reflections of the above seven key participants, field data related to community opinions, perceptions, and experiences were collected from other male and female respondents as well through various types of *kurakani* and other informal observations.

### **Research Period**

I conducted my field research from 2019 to 2021, spending some twelve weeks intermittently. Most of the visits were made in 2019, and very few were made in 2020 (before COVID-19) and in 2021 (after the new normal or the new present time). Nonetheless, tourism activities were almost zero during those COVID periods in the area, especially in 2020 and 2021. There was a big hitch in the MH area, Nepal, and the whole world (NTB, 2021; 2022). During COVID-19, I was in Kathmandu (at

home) purifying, reviewing the field notes, and doing further readings for the thesis drafting processes.

Later, in the year 2024 also (before the final defense of the thesis), I made a short (3-day) observational visit to the research site, which was, I say, a post-script reflective visit after my two defenses (Departmental, and Preliminary/Public Vivas). Some new experiences and insights brought from the field have been added to the relevant texts within various chapters.

### **Data Collection Tools and Procedure**

While gathering ethnographic data, I focused on understanding the sociological, anthropological, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects of community homestay enterprising in the rural setting of the MH. As Holliday (2002) suggests, I was also conscious about the research setting, which would guide my data collection process. Considering the purpose and nature of my qualitative study, I carefully used the prolonged observation method to study the key participants' everyday lives, actions, expressions, and emotions (Dawson, 2013). In the beginning, I also encouraged the research participants' hesitance to express their experiences, feelings, opinions, and hidden talents (songs, poems, jokes, role-plays, etc.) as well. In this context, McGregor (2006) also emphasizes that the mix of different methods/sub-methods enables the different techniques and their results to be compared against each other, allowing judgments to be made as to which method (or combinations of methods) is the most appropriate for any particular purpose. I proceeded accordingly.

I implemented different ethnographic techniques and tools for data collection, including observations, *bhalakusari/kurakani*, and focus group discussions (FGD). Additionally, I used the local artifacts/materials— where possible, entrepreneurs' notes and diaries, as well as—to some extent—homestay documentation and audio recordings from the concerned households. Only selected *bhalakusari* were recorded since my participants were found a bit hesitant to talk to me when asking for recording visually or in audio forms. They were further supplemented by additional observations, FGDs (3), and other means of conversation, such as informal *kurakani* while working/walking/standing. Thus, in my study, homestay operators' observed behaviors, experiences, and reflections have been the main data of the research (Bryman, 2008). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2017), in ethnography, all information collected from the field is data. My observational stories and cases are

the foundations or primary information for exploring and meaning-making processes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Park, 2010). I was entirely committed not to bringing my agenda or priority to the field; rather, local actions and activities were the prime focus of a greater and deeper understanding of the major phenomena of homestay learning and practice in the area.

The scratch notes (rough notes), field notes (elaborative notes from those rough notes), conversational interview records (audio) and transcripts, photographs (with their prior approval), local artifacts, and key participants' diaries/copies, as well as the homestay management records, were the main sources of my data. In addition to those separate field notes, I often maintained field diary/journal writing, which was like a mirror to reflect my day-to-day life in the field-data generation process. In ethnographic language, this process is also a type of pre-writing (Kahn, 2011). I always tried to catch the "*aha* moment" in the field to note in my diaries. In this context, Carpenter (2019) states that an *aha* moment is a sudden, conscious change in a person's representation of a stimulus, situation, event, or problem. But, getting *aha* moment every day was not possible.

I did not have many field notes from the first visit; however, from the second visit, which was held almost a week later, I attentively started keeping and maintaining the notes of field observations and conversations. From the second visit, I extended my stay too. I made a total of eight visits, making the total stay for about twelve weeks. Some visits were for about two weeks, and some were shorter ones. I progressed more in the third, fourth, and subsequent visits. My observations continued with various seasonal effects on the local activities and the local area's tourism system. Below, I describe each tool and technique and the processes I adopted, with some relevant examples.

### ***Participant Observation***

I visited the research site with lots of enthusiasm, excitement, and instinct for my study. While in the field, I was busy observing my participants, the homestay operators, both women and men and also the kids. I was the "researcher guest" for the homestays in the area. It is said that participant observation is one of the major methods in qualitative studies, especially in ethnography (Corby, 2012; Ejimo, 2015). I stayed there with them; I experienced homestay hospitality and closely observed them continuously. Various scholars (e.g. Dawson, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018;

Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Kahn, 2011) believe that observations help understand behaviors; because behaviors are more consistent than attitudes, opinions, and perceptions.

While experiencing and observing homestay activities, I also realized that observing practice was a very important method of research for quality data generation. On my first visit—as well as in subsequent visits—I was alone, but one of my friends in Kathmandu (Mr Bhagawan, the name changed), who—long ago—used to work in the area as a tourism professional, had helped me find a "gatekeeper" (Mr Ishwar, the name changed) in my research process "to enter the site and talk to the research participants" (Begley, 2007 as cited in Bhattarai, 2015, p. 201; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; McEntire & Williams, 2013; Silverman, 2012) observe and experience the homestay activities and research participants' culture (Clifford, 1988), values, ethical awareness, and behaviors.

The gatekeeper, in his 40s, was a professional tourist guide serving for the last two decades. He was provided training and exposure visits from the tourism project working in this area, as well as refreshments from NTB and other facilitative organizations. After getting introduced to him, my field study began, but on the first visit, I made it just an introductory and confidence-building exposure visit because the process started with high enthusiasm and aspiration for my deeper understanding and insights. The spring days were so sunny, and my rays of hope were also becoming brighter and brighter. The help I received from my friend, the gatekeeper, and the local participants encouraged me to engage in the community or the homestay world of the MH more committedly.

I spent five days on that first visit, where I visited and observed the main tourist attractions (natural and cultural), *basti* and *ghar-goth* (main settlements, houses- and animal sheds), etc. It was for my initial acquaintance with the locals and the locality. I made brief informal visits to the homestays in the area with my gatekeeper, although some of the homestays had not been functional for the last few years. I could not even see any signboard there. The gatekeeper helped me to get introduced to those homestay owners or the operators. I stayed in different homestays, turn by turn, to maintain equal relations with the key participants.

In this context, Dawson (2013), with more focus, also states that participant observation can be viewed as a research method or methodology, which is subjective,

and "it is used to study a group of people within a particular social and cultural environment" (p. 110). It is also time-consuming and often hard to arrange because of concerns raised about the use of participant observation. Major concerns are that the observer, being present, may affect the dynamics of the situation, and being a subjective observation also depends on the views (eyes) of the researcher. Both objections have validity but can be overcome by the skill of the observer in "becoming a fly on the wall" and "transparency in reporting how the observations were conducted" and what the researchers were looking at or for (Corby, 2012, p. 147). For me, while observing, every time I was making notes of the above concerns quite particularly in my mind. In this context, Conklin (2007) and Joseph (2011) also emphasize the researcher's focus on what is to be discovered and which method will best capture the richest data relevant to the inquiry or method to choose to provide the complete picture of the issue.

Again, in the observational processes, I considered all these perspectives and gradually indulged in field inquiries with more focused and continued observations. Those observations helped me learn more about the situation, events, and interactions, how things were occurring (Marshall & Rossman, 2010), and what types of emotions were there. Lehman (2006) also states that emotions influence our perception of particular aspects of a situation and are fundamental to our ability to function. Considering those concerns, I was taking field notes (voices/stories/cases) of all types of observations. Jotting down notable behaviors, attitudes, and facts that I was observing was my main task while observing the participants, actions, and fields. As a form of field notes, sometimes I used quick standing notes, or we can say, scratch notes/jotted notes or memos, sometimes mental notes (keeping in mind using some formula/short form or "Mnemonics"- such as "ASK" for attitude, skills, and knowledge; 3G for three generations like young-aged, middle-aged and older-aged; etc.), and, where possible and suitable, sometimes, in the evenings and the early mornings, I prepared full field-notes also. I wrote detailed field notes from those scratch notes and jot-downs as suggested by Sangsubana (2011). Those scratch notes and memos allowed me not to miss any important facts, actions, or expressions made by my participants. Even I, sometimes interestingly but naturally, used jotted notes/scratch notes while eating and talking simultaneously in the kitchen. And, sometimes, I took notes, even sitting around the fire (wood stove- *ageno/chulo*),

holding conversations with them. They were also used to with my studentships or habits of writing, even very simple and small things for personal memory.

In my observations, both overt (open, direct) and covert (indirect, close/sometimes hidden) observations were made; however, being an ethical researcher, I was putting my emphasis on doing overt observations rather than covert observations. These are common practices in the ethnographic study as per the requirements (Babbie, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Humphreys & Watson, 2009). In my case, overt observations in the local meetings/cultural gatherings also provided additional quality inputs to my research work. There is a general understanding that covert is akin to spying. However, Mitchell (1999, as cited in Cohen et al., 2007) have made clear that there is a vast difference between covert research and spying; for instance, spying is ideologically proactive, whereas research is ideologically naïve and spies have a sense of mission and try to achieve certain instrumental ends, whereas research has no such specific mission.

As per the above scholars, on some occasions, for me, covert observations of participant(s) also provided rare data that were not easily accessible and visible. Despite all the facts, I didn't have many covert observations. In my observations, I tried to be an active observer, involved in their day-to-day chores and other social activities wherever possible, which was a good opportunity for me to be more friendly in the local contexts and also a part of my immersion in the field.

### ***Bhalakusari Way of Exploratory Inquiry***

In data collection procedures and thesis texts, *kurakani* and *bhalakusari* have been used as alternatives to semi-formal (semi-structured) or informal interviews/conversations with the key research participants and other selected persons since the ethnographic qualitative inquiry is somewhat different, innovative and more flexible approach than other methods within the qualitative approaches (Corby, 2012; Ejimabo, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). I was very interested in seeing, talking to, and experiencing the everyday lives of the locals and the tourists visiting the area. These theme-focused (Corby, 2012) sharings (feelings, actions) allowed me to strengthen our mutual relations (mutuality) and openness too. Gradually and simultaneously, with participant observations, I could talk to them in my *bhalakusari* or *kurakani* way. They also felt easy and more comfortable while talking informally or semi-formally.

*Bhalakusari*, like *kurakani* (Dhakal, 2021), is a Nepali word that means talks, conversations, formal and informal interviews, chitchats, conversational-style-of-dialogue, etc. I held numerous *kurakani* in the initial stages of the field visits, and later, I experienced and realized that *bhalakusari* is a bit improved style of *kurakani*, requiring comparatively more time for having descriptive, reflective, and inductive insights from the research participants. In the first listening, *kurakani* and *bhalakusari* words, which are common and largely traditional Nepali words, may give almost the same meaning, connotation, and understanding. In this context, Dhakal (2021) also asserts that *kurakani* represents informal talks, chitchats, or conventional style of dialogue as a method of ethnographic inquiry and subsequent write-ups. However, based on my experience, I can assert that the *bhalakusari* way is more formal than the *kurakani* way in the context of qualitative field research. More clearly, to show a distinct difference between *kurakani* and *bhalakusari*, it can be said that *kurakani* can be held anytime, even while standing, eating, walking, waiting, or whatever.

Thus, to elaborate further, "*kurakani*, in the rural contexts, is taken as informal talks/chitchats/conversations" (Dhakal, 2021, p. 79); nevertheless, *bhalakusari* is taken as not exactly formal but a bit formal and a bit informal way, or we can describe as semi-informal talk. Going through a gradual process of scholarly developments, I now comprehend that the *bhalakusari* word, instead of *kurakani*, gives more justice to my ethnographic conversations with the core research participants, the homestay operator ladies of the study area, and also with the homestay guests/day-trippers and other local men and women actors engaged in managing local rural tourism products and related ancillary services.

Although there are more than a dozen of Nepali words to denote the meaning of informal and formal conversations/interviews or *bhalakusari* /*kurakani* (such as: *baartaa*, *bhetbaartaa*, *baartaalaap*, *antarbaartaa*, *antaranga*, *sambaad*, *guff*, *guffgaaff*, *sambaartaa*, *antarsambaad*, *samlaap*, *sawaal-jawaaf*, *kurokantho*, *baatchit*, *gathaaso*, *bolchaal*, *prashnottar*, *bahas*, *chhalphal*, etc.), the term *bhalakusari* is more suitable for my exploration as well as for my expressions and write-ups. The one-time interview may not be sufficient for the full discovery of experiences from a person, the homestay entrepreneur.

Thus, I can conclude that through *bhalakusari*, the same person can be approached many times during study since it is relatively less formal than the interview method and a bit more formal than the *kurakani* method. My field observations also suggested that, in real-world situations, rural women prefer to talk more frankly during informal times/settings rather than a well-set interview time. As I have experienced and understood, *bhalakusari* demands more time than *kurakani*. Likewise, *bhalakusari* requires a bit more formal setting than the *kurakani*. From participants' perspectives, *bhalakusari* may generate more quality information than the *kurakani*. For scholars and researchers who spend longer time with the participants for in-depth exploration, the *bhalakusari* inquiry process better fits from multiple perspectives, including semi-formality, semi-flexibility, seniority/juniority realities, and so on.

My "prolonged stay" (Dawson, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2017) in the village made it possible for several *bhalakusari* with the same person/household. After his rigorous narrative study as a part of the doctoral research, Gautam (2017) also shares that in each meeting with his participants, he listened to their new experiences; new stories of the participants emerged in each meeting. Like him, I was also accustomed to listening and re-listening to my participants, expecting new stories and experiences (Gullion, 2016) if anything was left in the previous visit/*bhalakusari*. My participants were used to adding up some new points/issues in every encounter/sitting as a part of the lived social world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This process was part of an intensive ethnography, ultimately enriching the data quality and credibility (Flick, 2011). Sometimes, I even remember the word coined by the scholar Janak Raj Rai. He termed the intermittent type of ethnography or the ethnographic study as longitudinal or cross-sectional ethno-study as "*fursad* ethnography" (Rai, 2013). However, I was sure I was not doing the *fursad* ethnography, although my study also took some breaks and restarts due to my professional ties and the global COVID-19 pandemic in between.

In my case, due to my prolonged stay in the field, I had the opportunity of having adequate time to hold several rounds of *bhalakusari/kurakani* with my core research participants (the main homestay operators) and other additional participants, including family members of the homestay, the tourists, neighbours and relatives, local social (NGO) and political representatives, tourism trainers and experts, and

local teachers and students as well. As key respondents, the homestay operators always felt comfortable sitting for a *kurakani* or *bhalakusari* instead of taking/giving (formal) interviews or holding too formal conversations. I also tried to assure them that they would feel free and confident to hold *bhalakusari* with other tourists and me so that a good opportunity for observation and conversation would happen there. This way, while clarifying my purpose, they were more enthusiastic and comfortable about/supporting my endeavour. As suggested by Kvale (2012), in some cases, while there was difficulty in making sense or meaning from the field notes, recordings, and transcriptions, on some occasions, I repeated observations (Babbie, 2004) and *bhalakusari* with some of my key research participants and other additional information counterparts, which helped collect better information/data, and contributed to enhancing the quality of my research.

#### ***Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)***

Being a participatory practitioner, I always prefer holding participatory discussions in the fields. Accordingly, I held different FGDs with my participants and other local actors engaged in the local tourism development and management processes. In addition, representatives of local cooperative management also took part in the FGDs. The cooperative is supporting micro-enterprise development, giving more priority to women in the area. Flick (2009) suggests that, in the FGD process, a particular group, such based on gender, occupation, interest, experience, educational or well-being status, geography, and so on, is invited to take part in the discussion programs and such discussions are focused on a specific theme or issue. I tried to do so and held three FGDs during my stay in the field.

I developed key issues related to homestay initiation, learning opportunities, capacity-building concerns, and the main challenges they have been encountering in the overall learning processes for the betterment of local community homestays. This process supplemented some new information, which was not possible to get from personal talks/*bhalakusari*. Flick (2009) also highlights that FGD is an important method of "information generation in qualitative research" (p. 469). Likewise, according to Chambers (2012), participatory experience-sharing and reflections are possible through such FGDs, in which marginalized, voiceless, and directly engaged are encouraged to partake. I fully realized that in the FGD processes that I adopted. With me, too, some marginalized, less exposed women participants who also had

never attended formal school classes were frankly speaking on such occasions, supporting their keen views and, sometimes, also amplifying their views. These voices helped me "triangulate other information" too (Cohen et al., 2007). Chambers (1997; as cited in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011) also believes that FGDs are mostly useful for women and marginalized people to express their inherent voices, inner voices, and experiences freely and frankly. Several issues being raised in the discussion processes are then taken to the forefront, or further actions are taken.

The 3-round FGDs in my exploration included single-round, with a women-only group, a men-only group, and a mixed group. While going through the first FGD, I also realized that FGDs could offer a particularly fruitful method for thinking through qualitative research since these are held for collective conversations or group interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). I conducted mostly small FGDs, partly directed and partly non-directed. While facilitating the discussion processes, I always focused on key elements of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) behaviors, as Chambers (2012) and Mosse (2005) suggested. However, it was very difficult to abide by all "Do's" (notably, Robert Chambers has listed more than two dozen such "Do's" (2012), such as: when in doubt, do something new; be of good heart; celebrate learning; experiment; innovate; adapt; combine; invent; improvise; vary; sequence; dare; reflect; risk; self-critique; seek; change; explore; share; discover; spread; collect; enjoy; and, make own list.

As a PRA practitioner, I tried to abide by most of the participatory ethics suggested above. Most often, I was trying to follow the "de-learning" process to learn from the locals or my participants, and, often, I was critiquing whether I was following the right track; I was making myself very flexible to adapt to the local culture; and also regularly, I was learning and reflecting myself with time-to-time sharing with my professors and scholar friends at the University.

There was also a chance to de-learn and reflect on my experiences in the FGDs. In this context, Corby (2012) also presents two critical reflections on the use and limitation of FGDs: "Focus groups are particularly useful in the early, more exploratory stages of research" (p. 148). Despite having considered all those loopholes and limitations, from the beginning, I paid special attention to letting the people talk freely to generate more views, bearing in mind that FGD research entails bringing together targeted people, mostly women, to share information about the

research topic. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2011) also state that FGDs afford women much safer and more supportive contexts to explore their lived experiences and the consequences of these experiences with other women who will understand what they are saying intellectually, emotionally, and viscerally.

I was more conscious of ensuring that participants had something to say and felt comfortable enough to voice their concerns, and I kept the meeting open-ended but to the point (Cohen et al., 2007). In such FGDs, I covered key aspects of homestay initiation, participation, development processes, management issues and experiences, etc. To be more particular, some questions put in the forums and floors were: Why did you start homestay enterprises here, and how did you learn to run homestay? Was the process of making and developing a community homestay in the village participatory and inclusive? Who is participating in the homestay program? How are women encouraged to participate, and who is facilitating? How are homestay management-related decisions made? How do you select/elect the management committee, and are there any challenges? How are you distributing the benefits of community homestay tourism to non-participating households? Are sustainable methods in practice in this area? Accordingly, the discussion outputs were recorded in chart papers and my notebook; later, gist points were displayed on the wall, like a "poster market" for their further inputs and common agreements/understanding.

The outputs were very useful to add to my whole database or the bank of homestay knowledge for further analysis and interpretation and for developing my insightful and thought-provoking views. Common concerns—as supplementary information—associated with homestay initiation, learning opportunities, homestay growth, and management challenges were captured through those FGDs, which also served as data triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) in the process of meaning-making and interpretations (Dawson, 2013). I also realized that FGD, in such rural settings, can be a good tool for generating common knowledge, experience, sense, and understanding from both an experiential learning and a capability appraisal point of view.

#### ***Kurakani with Different Experts, Local Leaders, and Tourists***

In addition to the above tools, I also held *kurakani* (Dhakal, 2021) with additional informants who were not directly engaged in the operation of local homestays but were indirectly linked to local tourism management practices as key

stakeholders or local leaders/actors talked to some tourism and training experts/facilitators in Kathmandu, the capital city, as additional inputs for the research work. In total, 34 personnel were included in the *kurakani* process. However, their experiences and inputs were not analyzed from a gender perspective; instead, they were taken as common data as complimentary/supplementary as well as regulatory inputs in the whole qualitative research process. These processes further enriched the information on the social world of the homestay operators and the overall homestay cosmology of the study area.

While talking to those participants, due to COVID-19-related problems, especially in Kathmandu in 2020, some *kurakani* were held virtually (Zoom talk and

**Number of participants involved in *kurakani* (informal talks)**

Tourists:	7 (5 domestic, 2 international)
Local leaders:	4 (2 male, 2 female)
NGO personnel:	3 (1 male, 2 female)
Social Mobilizers (SM):	2 (male) (no female SM in the area)
Trainers/facilitators:	3 (male)
Local teachers:	3 (2 male, 1 female)

mobile phone calls), too. With some of the field-based participants, telephonic *kurakani* continued even during the crafting process of this thesis. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), George (2022), Kvale (1996), and Silverman (2012), this unstructured/flexible but step-wise tool provided me with rich, complementary and supplementary information in the overall exploration process.

I got good responses from the participants based on their own experiences. More importantly, the tool was useful in gathering the views of elderly people of both sexes (mostly community leaders). Because they have rich traditional and indigenous knowledge and skills (Abdullah & Stringer, 1999; Quiroz, 1999), they can talk a lot about participation, governance, and their livelihoods. In the process, I had *kurakani* with two local social mobilizers (SM) of the former tourism project and also three local NGO personnel presently working in the area for the overall upliftment of the local communities through hard- and software development processes, particularly targeting the Chepang communities and other marginalized sections of other ethnic groups in the Mahabharat Hills.

Regarding teachers' and students' participation, there was a secondary school near the homestay site, and, on some occasions—local teachers were also my informal

and additional informants to further enrich the context and realities (Dawson, 2013) about social, environmental, and geographical knowledge. Teachers with more than five years of experience in the school were purposefully consulted for such information, including the head teacher. They mostly talked about their involvement in local environmental and cultural issues and also about students' engagement in the whole community-based tourism process of the area. In other words, they were also local stakeholders of the local tourism development initiatives since local schools also play positive roles in the local community/tourism development processes through students' clubs, clean-up campaigns, cultural programs, and more.

In the process, I also wanted to know the perceptions and experiences of the domestic and international tourists visiting the area during my visit/stay in the village. As better insights and quality information based on personal experiences play significant roles in qualitative inquiry (Flick, 2009), I was very concerned about bringing the perspectives of those visitors. While talking to them, I followed mostly the very informal *Kurakani* way. I preferred this information/opinion collection method since most tourists usually do not like or do not feel comfortable with structured or formal interviews, or even semi-structured interviews, because they are always in free-time-mood and in leisure-mood with their unique joyful moments.

There were mostly domestic tourists at the site; nonetheless, some, or we can say very few, foreign tourists also visited the site during my multiple visits and stays there. They also individually provided their views, experiences, and opinions about homestay services and their experiences in the area. For locals, too, talking to the tourists at their homes or surroundings since this is their everyday life. Although the language barrier is a main hurdle (which will be discussed in detail later on), locals always show enthusiasm when talking to tourists. These observational moments also gave me lots of information and ideas to take meanings from the field. Further, as a qualitative or ethnographic researcher, my roles were more focused on observations and self-experiencing (the homestay taste) rather than being a sole question-maker, interviewer or only a *bhalakusari/kurakani*-initiator.

### ***Study of Artifacts and Participants' Documents/Records***

As I was investigating and interpreting the logical learning and adoption of the community homestay world in the research area, generally in ethnomethodology or ethnography, as provoked by Connelly and Clandinin (1999, as cited in Cohen et al.,

2007), and Denzin & Lincoln (2018); I was trying to get more and more observable (old) materials, such as oral history, stories, annals, chronicles, photographs, memory boxes, interviews, journals, autobiography, letters, conversations, documents, etc. I was convinced that those sorts of materials would also help enrich the data. However, getting old artifacts (carving and other)/materials from them was hard for me.

Despite this, I was also trying to find local biographies, autobiographies, stories, discourse, narrative writing, personal history, case stories, life histories, personal experiences, and case studies or whatever. However, it was very hard to get any type of scholarly and practical/personal document (Cohen et al., 2007). However, I was able to get some notes (note-copy/book) from the gatekeeper and some other homestay operators. The notes and registers were in very rough form, without dates.

Although, on a limited scale, those materials also gave me some ideas for further explorations—through observations and *bhalakusari* focusing on local culture, practices, and homestay-related matters. Similarly, different types of local musical instruments (e.g., *Maadal*, *Damphu*, *Khainjadi*, *Mujuraa*, etc.), the latest arts and crafts (mostly bamboo-based), old and new photographs (kept in albums), ornaments, dresses/costumes, etc. also helped broaden my knowledge and deepen my insights on the features of local people, practice, and on cultural tourism. By permission, I was able to take some photos of those materials; nevertheless, due to ethical reasons, I cannot put those images here. The essence of those materials is reflected in the findings, insights, and discussions. In short, materials of those sorts, albeit very little, also greatly supported my explorative inductivity and interpretations for meaning-taking and meaning-making.

### **Data Synthesis, Analysis, and Interpretations**

Data analysis and interpretations play crucial roles in the whole research process. Scholars say the data analysis process is chaotic, ambiguous, and time-consuming (e.g., Dawson, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Humphreys & Watson, 2009). However, as several ethnographers have expressed, I felt it was a creative, constructive, emulating, and fascinating process. Despite this, nevertheless, on some occasions, while analyzing and playing with the data, I experienced like sometimes illusion and sometimes confusion; but after thorough literature reviews and consultations with my supervisors—ultimately—most of the time, I felt achieving and climbing and sometimes, ascending at the top like a mountaineer at the "top of the

world" without oxygen and with a national flag! I came to realize that the processes never walk linearly as Schwandt et al. (2007) mention: "It is the activity of making sense of, interpreting, and theorizing data", which—according to Charmaz (2006)—"signifies a quest for general statements between data categories/coding". Several field notes, along with some audio-recorded transcripts (in the Nepali language), were based on the observations, reflections, FGDs, and *bhalakusari/kurakani*. According to Sangasubana (2011), in qualitative research methods, the process of understanding is inductive, in which we begin by learning from the data rather than starting with pre-conceived notions about our subject matter. I also used inductive and sometimes deductive approaches while analyzing and interpreting the field data and subsequent meaning-taking and meaning-making processes (Gobo, 2011). My field notes and other information records were systematically documented and maintained. The audio-recording-based transcripts (voices/quotes) in the Nepali language were translated into English during the writing-up course. My field notes, and diaries were in a mixed language: sometimes in my first language, Nepali, and sometimes in English; even sometimes in "Nenglish".

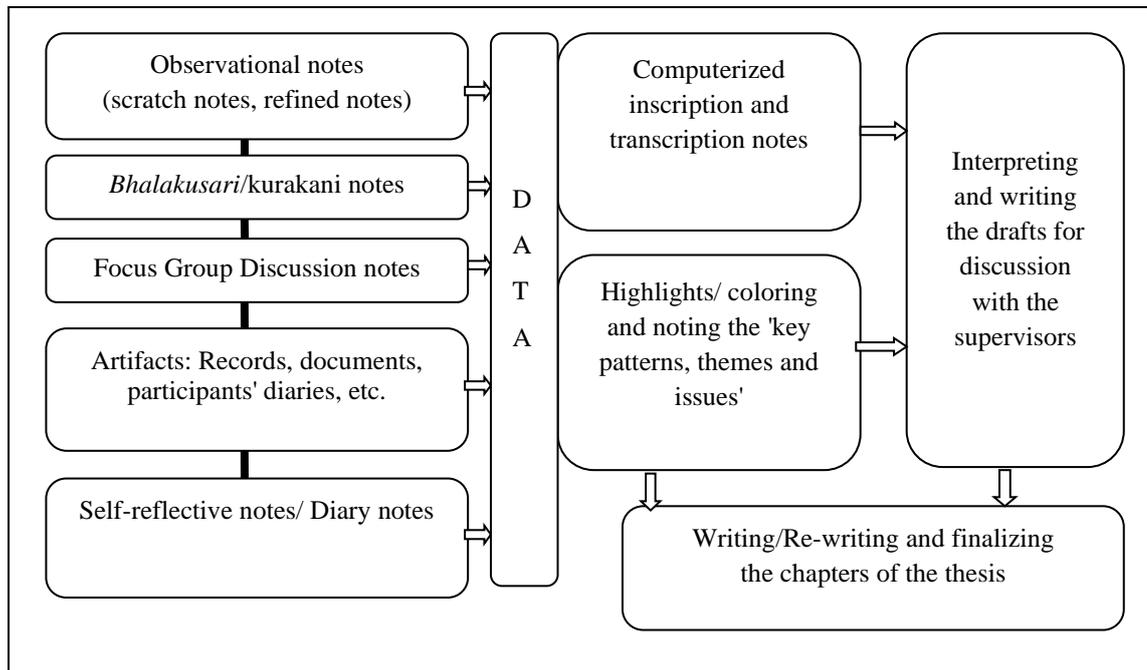
Those key documents were refined and, where applicable, key voices and words translated into English for further processing. Using different colors with a sign pen, I highlighted the keywords, major issues, main perspectives, and important sentences for further processes. Based on the color and bold letter-based highlights, I also summarized/synthesized and manually coded the major patterns and phenomena or key issues/themes and essences as major inputs as suggested by Dawson (2013) and Saldana (2009)—especially for the findings (insights) chapters of the thesis. I did not use any software for the analysis since I did them manually. Consequently, key research questions-based themes/sub-themes, issues, and major patterns were analyzed and abstracted from those ascribed and highlighted notes for my initial write-ups. The essences of recorded audio transcriptions and follow-up phone calls-based concerns and developments were also synthesized and merged into the main themes and issues based on the field notes and also based on the key codes and their categorization (for example, homestay conception and inception related, learning and capacity development related, and homestay development and management experiences and locally encountered challenges-related). Flick (2011) also suggests

that thematic/issue-based synthesis is a common process of abstracting and analyzing qualitative information.

While finding the crucial issues and developing appropriate themes as topics and sub-topics for my thesis, the key principles and attributes of "Experiential Learning Theory", and "Capability Approach" were logically and analytically considered. According to Gough et al. (2012), thematic synthesis is a technique that can be employed within a review to bring together research findings from many different types. One of the key activities in synthesis is the translation between the results of studies with different characteristics. Gough et al. (2012) further illustrate that these characteristics may be one reason it works well when synthesizing multiple research studies. These are often multi-disciplinary and require the researcher to consider their analysis from different sides of the paradigm divide.

### **Writing the Thesis: Crafting, Drafting, Sharing, and Improving**

In crafting the thesis, as mentioned above, the categorized and thematized information based on key research questions/sub-questions and transcriptions helped me make the meanings, developing the crafts and initial drafts as field insights of the whole ethnographic study (Gullion, 2016). Initially, I wrote nine chapters. Those initial voluminous draft chapters also worked as original field inscriptions, maintained as different sequential versions, e.g., V1, V2, V3, and the like. Following my qualifying presentations, supervisors' advice, and ideas, my draft versions went up to "V17"-drafts. All the notes were systematically maintained in my "research library" as MS Word files and selected audio and photographic/art-based sketches/drawing files. Photos (self-taken, but rarely where allowed and where possible) were used to recapture the field situations and fine-tune the ideas grasped from the field. However, I cannot put those original pictures in this thesis due to the compulsion of anonymity of the place and participants, as well as ethical reasons. Here (in Figure 1), I present a depiction of my data analysis, interpretations and thesis-writing processes).

**Figure 1***Data Analysis, Interpretations and Writing Processes*

Being an ethnographer, I was very much concerned about interpreting the senses and making meanings from observations and local expressions. Equally, as suggested by Campbell and Lassiter (2015), I tried to mirror the impressions I made from those occasions and sessions. Obediently speaking, meaning-taking, meaning-making/sense-making or attributional activities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) was a bit difficult part for me since many researchers have also indicated that some biases could emerge even within the "self", depending on the "inner" and "outer" circumstances, such as moods, mentality, timing, seasonality, weather, level of understanding, locally expressed ideologies and flexibility/rigidity, and so forth (Saldana, 2015). I was also adequately concerned about my research ethics in such cases. All these considerations provided me with an opportunity for a better and deeper understanding of the local social world and homestay cosmology.

All information and insights gained through extensive engagement with the research participants helped develop my confidence in struggling to become an ethnographer of Nepali homestays. While making meanings or meaningful interpretations from the researched texts and the contexts, I have used a sensible approach toward research participants' words, actions, and reflections. Kvale (1996)

suggests five approaches to the meaning-making process: meaning condensation, categorization, narrative, interpretation, and ad-hoc. However, in my case, I mostly used an inductive interpretive approach when interpreting the meanings from the generated data.

### **Quality Standards of My Research: Ensuring Credibility, Dependability, Transferability, and Confirmability**

As an ethnographic researcher, I have used different alternatives for quality-checking and assurance, from its design to carrying out fieldwork, generating data, understanding it, drawing the meaning, and finally, writing the thesis. Quality is the key component of any academic research (Creswell, 2018). However, enhancing the quality of the research and the field findings is always a challenge for qualitative researchers. I also realized the same in many instances. According to Kelly and Ashiagbor (2011), in qualitative research, performance standards rely on integrity, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Flick (2011), Taylor and Medina (2011), and Ejimabo (2015) suggest that qualitative inquiry researchers must use concepts of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability to maintain quality standards. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) warn about the triple crises to ensure quality standards, which include the crisis of representation, legitimating, and praxis. Equally, Luitel (2012), in the context of educational research, mentions six quality standards, viz. incisiveness, illuminating, verisimilitude, transferability, pedagogical thoughtfulness, and critical reflexivity.

During the whole process, thus, I have tried to maintain methodological rigor while designing and implementing the research work. My prolonged stay, persistent observation, and reflexivity have also played a crucial role in increasing the above-mentioned key factors of quality standards (Flick, 2011; Luitel, 2007). Lichtman (2013) further emphasizes that "reflexivity is the bending back on oneself" (p. 164). I also tried to make investigations as vivid/lively as possible (Wagle, 2016). Categorically, as highlighted above, I maintained the research quality standard criteria such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, as briefly discussed below.

Credibility in qualitative research is often equated with validity in quantitative research (Flick, 2011; Neuman, 2013), and confidence can be placed in the truth of the research findings. To make my research methodology and processes credible and

trustworthy, I chose research participants with long experiences in the homestay fields, where I mostly focused on their cultural and "social worlds" or "lived experiences" in a multifaceted manner for better incisiveness. According to Loseke (2013), "social research is the systematic and empirical exploration of human social life" (p. 3). Thus, in social research, trustworthiness plays an important role, indicating the closeness between the study's findings and the phenomenon's reality.

Although Denzin and Lincoln (2005) mention that capturing the entire lived experiences of the research participants is a difficult task, I was trying hard to capture them as much as possible. Those were ensured through my intensive engagement with the participants as a participant-observer, prolonged stay on the site as a "homestay tourist", and intense *bhalakusari* with the participants (Flick, 2009). Prolonged stay in the field was one crucial way of enhancing credibility. Due to the nature of the study, one-sitting talk or observation won't be possible to grasp the key insights on the phenomena. I always bear in mind those crucial facts. My longer stay in the field (in those community homestays) was for better understanding and rapport-building, as well as in the process of being "emic" (insider) as far as possible (Rai, 2020). My immersion in the field was giving me more confidence day by day.

This helped me reflect on multiple experiences from the local culture and sub-cultures. The insider positioning facilitates the purposeful selection of information-rich participants as the researcher's judgment, and "it helps to begin research activities from the researcher's own family" (Rai, 2020, p. 47). I was trying to make the ethnographic exploration more authentic, representative and credible (Bryman, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) states that ethnography as a methodology can offer insights into the research that takes place in natural settings, generate further research, and contribute to knowledge.

Equally, Bryman (2008) says that the quality standard is maintained through trustworthiness for "assessing the quality of qualitative research" (p. 700). Qualitative research gives equal importance to the research participants' views, regardless of how many of them opine on it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In these processes, care was given not to obstruct any participant's autonomy since the "Do No Harm" principle was fully adhered to. All these processes helped me to develop confidence, create comfortable circumstances, and create an immersing environment for fulfilling

the research purpose. For better credibility, all these realities were further verified by different tools, like observations, *bhalakusari/kurakani*, and FGDs.

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time (Ejimabo, 2015). I ensured that I was familiar with the purposefully selected participants and the data generation process. Their rich experiences in homestay involvement in the area allowed me to fully depend on the data from the fields of investigations through mutual understanding and securing their privacy (and sometimes "seclusion"). Research processes are believed to contribute to the mutual understanding between the researcher and others (Loseke, 2013). The experiences and voices of both males and females and the mixed voices of the local ethnic groups further increased the dependability. I tried to present their expressions as accurately as possible because ethnographic scholars believe that every individual's perception, which is relevant to the study, needs to be included in the analysis with high importance.

This research was grounded on transferability as well. Thus, the data I gathered from the field has ensured authenticity with greater credibility, dependability, and confirmability; thus, the research findings will be transferable to similar areas and cases where inclusive and community-based homestay practices are initiated. Further, several sources/methods, such as data verification or triangulation, have helped make the data more constructive and useful. Another way was thick description, which is also associated with the transferability of the research. The research outputs have wider applications and implications from the perspective of sustainable and equitable homestay development in Nepal.

Also, homestay development and management practices by trained and untrained persons further confirmed the quality of responses or expressions during different methods of information/data collection. Their voices were from their hearts; their actions supported the voices, and they were comfortable, too; thus, the information collected from the actual social world (Altheide & Johnson, 2011) is further confirmed. I also tried to get engaged in their daily activities, including kitchen and farm-works, which enriched our conversations and further helped in interpretations. As Berry and Patti (2015) suggested, I also carefully analyzed those interpretations repeatedly and added further *bhalakusari* and observations with them for their rigorous scrutiny. Thus, other researchers can confirm or corroborate the results of the inquiry.

### **My Positionality in the Research Process**

In this research process, I was aware that ethnographic study is an ethical commitment that demands engaged actions from the field research to the writing stages (Dawson, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Thus, in the field, I clarified with my research participants that I was a "researcher student (scholar)" in the education/tourism learning process rather than a tourism professional. I was pertinently a knowledge seeker (Dawson, 2013) from an advanced research point of view rather than a sole knowledge provider in the field. In the process, I clarified my roles and my "positionality" (Rai, 2020) as an ethnographic researcher and acted as a field researcher, staying with the community as a researcher/study guest coming from other communities within the country. I observed and lived with them; I talked to and listened to them and shared my observations and experiences with them when the activities, events, and local stories and contexts demanded, as a part of my cultural immersion. I followed some rapport-building techniques (McGrath, 2019) also since building rapport and establishing comfortable interaction in qualitative research is considered an important task (Dawson, 2013). I tried to build a relationship among the respondents to involve their feelings of connectedness, as suggested by Kara and Pickering (2017). For me, a good rapport-building process (Bhandari, 2012) was an exciting and fulfilling feeling when I began to establish good relations, frequent communications with regular *hai/hello/namaste/good morning*, etc., with everyone in the village to strengthen affinity (Qiu et al., 2021) and cordial relationships with my research participants and other stakeholders in the locality and vicinity.

Likewise, I was not trying to influence them from my position, experience, words, and also my behaviors and transactions; rather, I was trying to catch up with their existing knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors towards other tourists visiting during my stays in their homestays and towards me. I was aware that I would not influence the research participants because maintaining continual cooperative and mutually intelligible activity is crucial for any ethnographic research (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015). In reality, and more importantly, I was privileged that my supervisors' continuous advice, monitoring, and mentoring over my research activities during my prolonged field stays further helped ensure both influence-less positionality and humanistic integrity with due care to ethical issues. Below, I elaborate on my ethical considerations and how I did actual practice.

### **Ethical Considerations**

It is argued that in all research activities, whether they are qualitative or quantitative, researchers follow proper ethical rules or research codes. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) and Kvale (1996), several codes of conduct of research for ethical reasons are a must since ethics in the research process plays paramount roles. In the ethical theory by Murphy and Digwall (2001, as cited in Flick, 2009), there are four major issues I addressed in any qualitative research work: first, non-maleficence (researchers need to avoid harming participants); second, beneficence (research on human subjects are expected to produce some positive and identifiable benefit rather than simply carrying out for its own sake); third, autonomy or self-determination (research participants' values and decisions need to be respected); and, the fourth is justice (all people need to be treated equally).

As a qualitative value-laden explorer, I considered the following codes of ethics as suggested by Christians (2011): getting informed consent from the research participants, not invading their privacy (autonomy) and maintaining confidentiality, as well as the accuracy of the facts and figures through different means and methods. Following Baker (1999), Hammersley and Atkinson (2009), and Chatfield et al.'s (2022) experiences, I also used a local "gatekeeper" to get easy access to the field/participants, avoiding harming the participants and not deceiving them about my objectives (Kanel et al., 2023). Campbell and Lassiter (2015) also emphasize that—in ethnographic research—the implications of ethical codes are more valuable and sensible than in other types of research.

Thus, in my case, the non-maleficence and beneficence issues were deliberately and cautiously considered. Similarly, the key research ethics, in this case, is not to tell lies or unrealistic things and not to show any impractical commitments (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Cohen et al., 2007). Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) also amplify the dynamic process of ethical research practice. These are developed through the respondents' equality, caring, and intention. My morality was guiding me toward doing informed and fair research. Benn (1998) raises the issue of morality and culture, saying that different cultures have different practices and moral priorities, and those which prevail in any one culture are right for that culture.

I always respected local culture and traditions, where applicable. Similarly, in all cases, as a core ethics of qualitative research, I have maintained anonymity (of the

area/village, tole/settlement, and research participants involved) in all analyses and write-ups. I have created pseudonyms (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015) for all the participants because anonymity or changing the names of the participants helps avoid the dangers and disadvantages to the participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) due to the results of the research.

Likewise, while doing this ethnographic research, I also felt that ethical behaviors need to be demonstrated by all sides- from research stakeholder perspectives: the researcher himself/herself, the gatekeeper, and the research participants. I also did the same where and when problems arose. I was convinced by the statement by April et al. (2010) that ethics is concerned with moral obligation, responsibility, social justice, and the common good.

Similarly, the researchers can sometimes demonstrate unethical behaviors like impractical commitments, biases, misinformation, under-information or over-information, etc. (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015); in such cases, I was fully aware of such matters. In my study, since I have described the number, name (pseudonym), and nature of my core research participants, all seven participants (a mix of major ethnicities) have shared their feelings, experiences, and opinions while talking to me and also talking themselves among each other. Further, in my write-ups, I haven't mentioned their "Homestay Serial Number" (which is very common in all homestay villages in Nepal) to maintain the research ethics as highlighted above. Ethically, in this research, seven homestay operators (women) speak much, demonstrate their actions much, and, epistemologically, become the major tales-teller or experience-sharer to me. As a last part of the ethics, Campbell and Lassiter (2015) also highlight that some collaborative actions or partnerships could have been possible during the research process.

Nevertheless, I did not initiate such possibilities while being in the field. I did only some intellectual interchanges with the locals, providing my ideas, sharing my experiences, and exchanging related (intellectual) knowledge and skills contextually appropriate to their day-to-day life/homestay management and local development. In this respect, I also ensured my research participants' comfort and always appreciated the valuable time they spared for the cause (Lichtmen, 2013a). Likewise, for ethical considerations, in a nutshell, I maintained confidentiality in every stage of the research process.

I obtained the approval (oral consent) of the participants to observe them, and I participated in day-to-day activities wherever and whenever possible. In this context, Flick (2011) also suggests that the consent-taking process needs to be self-evident, and such studies generally involve only these two types of people: those who have been informed about being studied and those who participate voluntarily. Additionally, as suggested by Campbell and Lassiter (2015) and Kara and Pickering (2017), I was trying to jointly and collaboratively generate some texts—related to local foods and culture—where possible. These all are reflected in the findings chapters of the thesis (mainly in Chapters IV, V, and VI).

### **Chapter Essence**

In this chapter, I elaborated on my research paths, focusing on the research paradigms and my research philosophy from ontological, epistemological, and axiological stands. Then, I described my research methodology, the ethnographic way of inquiry, with a brief illustration of the research site- the MH of Bagmati Province, Central Nepal. The *bhalakusari* way of field-level conversations and interactions is a less exposed tool in an ethnographic study, which is well elaborated in this chapter. I also highlighted how I analyzed the homestay data received from the field, and equally, I elaborated on my quality standards, depicting my credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformity while performing homestay-related learning inquiries. In this process, I portrayed my ethical considerations, too.

## CHAPTER IV

### HOMESTAY OPERATORS' INITIATIONS IN SETTING UP HOMESTAY ENTERPRISES

In this chapter, I describe how the homestay operators in the study site (MH) knew about homestay tourism and how they initiated homestay enterprising. In this process, I mainly tell tales and experiences of the homestay operators as they shared with me during the observations, *bhalakusari/kurakani*, and FGDs (Van Maanen, 2011). The tales around the themes and issues generated are based on research question #1. While detailing the research outputs, I revolve around the thematic sub-questions or pertinent issues like how the local entrepreneurs got information about homestay tourism and who facilitated the process of community homestay establishment and development. I also looked at the questions, such as what major steps were adopted for establishing community homestays in the area and how the homestay enterprising is running and expanding in the area.

#### **Knowing, Observing, and Experimenting**

Let me share a brief story about how the homestay operators of the MH had opportunities to hear and learn more about homestay enterprising as a possible new economic, social, and cultural venture in the area. As mentioned in Chapters II and III, in Nepal, tourism—including homestay—is considered a reliable vehicle for economic growth and overall development of the local area and its people/stakeholders' capacities (from a "human capital" perspective). Based on the empirical experiences, the project UNDP/TRPAP (2002-2007) was an example of Nepal implementing a pro-community rural tourism initiative that developed several CBT-based products, including SRT models and homestays in culturally rich pioneer and unique areas.

According to the project document (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007), the main aim was to make the local people aware of the potential of their area and encourage them to engage in tourism enterprises directly and/or indirectly to increase household-level incomes with preservation/conservation of natural and cultural resources and their promotions. The direct beneficiaries of the area and also the entrepreneurs in the surrounding areas of the MH gradually learned about rural/homestay tourism and associated benefits while being involved. However, I was in the field to observe real

happenings in the communities and to learn the perspectives and experiences of the actual actors in the field of CBT.

My research started with exciting scenes and local voices. The month was March, and it was not a busy month for the locals. It was the initial stage of my research. One day, I was conducting a *bhalakusari* with one of the research participants, Shukrikala. She was just sitting on a *mudha* in her courtyard. She gave me another *mudha*. I sat down at an adequate distance to ease the communication process. I was still a stranger to them. My emic processes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2017) were going on; however, I had to spend more and more time with them for



(Preparing food for guests © Author)

better immersion in the homestay community in the Mahabharat Hills.

That day, her husband and daughter were cooking food in the kitchen. I realized that her husband was also helpful in kitchen matters. Shukrikala's daughter served me a glass of hot water, and we continued talking about different things, such as her farming, family members, homestay experiences, etc. But that day, I was more focused on getting more and more information regarding her experience, the initiation of homestay in the area, and the things they learned during the processes of establishing homestay as a new enterprise.

She shared her experiences based on her learning from the ground. She said that initially, the tourism development workers, actually called social mobilizers (SMs), gave an introductory orientation about the potential of local tourism and possible opportunities for local communities. It was, at the start, just a two-day event. The event taught them about tourism, rural tourism, and the importance of the MH area from culture-focused rural tourism development potentials. She heard a lot about the need to protect and develop local culture and traditions, as well as the protection of plants, trees, animals, soil, water, and much more related to diversity and the environment. She also learned about waste management, health, hygiene, etc. She continued, saying, "*After the event, I also showed my interest in getting engaged more in tourism-related activities.*" Then, she was very hopeful of getting more and more

benefits from tourism work. However, she also said that the homestays have not paid the economic benefits as anticipated.

My interactions and observations continued. In the same connection, the next day, I had another *bhalakusari* with the research participant, Buddhi Maya, who was Shukrikala's neighbour. She had a bit of a different experience. She shared that after some developmental support from a rural tourism project, the locals started getting some tourists from different parts of Nepal and some from foreign countries, too. And, due to the absence of hotels in this area, "we decided to open homestays in our village", she happily shared.

She further stated that, before, tourists used to come with camping equipment and gear (e.g., tents, utensils, etc.) and used to stay in the open grounds of schools or other grazing flat-lands or small *khet* (paddy fields) and *bari*-lands (maize fields or generally non-irrigated farm-lands); and, realizing this, the locals decided to start homestays in their houses. She continued re-calling the past days: *"Initially, the tourism project also helped the local communities build a special infrastructure as 'community guest house cum cultural museum' with some beds and eating facilities; the same building served as a common meeting venue of the locality"*. However, as I was trying to make sense of her voice, she was unhappy with the ongoing scenario of the local tourism development process in the Mahabharat Hills. She lastly added, *"The project-supported community guest house did not work for a long time, then instead of running that community guest house, the project again encouraged us to run individual homestays where possible"*.

Accordingly, as Buddhi Maya further claimed, before launching homestays in the village(s), locals learned more about the basics of homestay development and management with some cultural considerations. More importantly, local SMs helped them from the very beginning, and later, the local government—village development committee (VDC)—also started talking about rural tourism and homestay development activities.



(Welcoming the guests © Author)

Like Buddhi Maya, in another *bhalakusari*, research participant Mangala Devi also recalled her experiences of how tourism and homestay development in the village were initiated. She elaborated that, in the beginning, the homestay was a new word for them, but "paying-guest system" was a well-familiar term among the villagers, and it is a part of Nepali culture. Previously, the villagers used to provide free food and accommodation services to strangers (on rare occasions) if—by chance—they came in the evening to their doorsteps, but the homestay enterprising initiative in the village encouraged the locals to earn more money from the services rendered. *"Now we see this as a business (enterprise), and we also want to be a business-person by providing homestay service to domestic as well as foreign guests"*, she added.

According to her, the locals gradually knew that homestay was a good source of earning (additional) money. They (including Manga Devi and Buddhi Maya) also got a chance to visit Sirubari, the pioneer homestay village in Nepal, which provided them with a better understanding of homestay enterprising. The trip also helped develop an understanding that, if properly developed, it can provide many things and many benefits, such as new knowledge, hygiene, and sanitation-related ideas and concerns. She again added, *"We learned from Sirubari that local women's leadership, green development, local infrastructure development, and so many things can be achieved through homestay tourism"*. They had the opportunity to closely observe the positive effects and long-term impacts of Sirubari Homestay, which began in 1997 AD (Kandel, 2011). In the same *bhalakusari*, the last point she shared was very important. She shared that the local group had a good opportunity to see many community-based and women-led integrated developmental activities in Sirubari through rural tourism or homestay tourism.

In the same context, during an FGD session, one of the male members (Dasnami) of the local Homestay Committee, who also works in a nearby school as an administrative staff, added:

*Homestay is not only for earning, but also for learning; it, directly and indirectly, helps to learn so many things including a new language, development issues, culture, tradition, food, clothes, education, literacy, technology, and so on.*

In this respect, research participant Shukrikala voiced:

*We did not know how to form the homestay committee, the roles, where to approach new initiatives, etc. Then, the supporting organization (the project) helped us to form the group and to make local homestay rules (code of ethics) as well.*

Interestingly, in the same FGD, a lady added that some negative drawbacks of homestay tourism could be observed, including more noise, the burden of waste and rubbish, etc. She later shared that she had also been to Sirubari homestay village. Thus, in the forum, she suggested everybody be more careful about those negative matters. Once again, reflecting on Sirubari's visit experience, she also echoed, "*We know that homestay development and local conservation activities are important and need to be managed together*". From these discussions, I realized that homestay operators' experiences and answers hardly come in systematic and chronological order, or, we can say, answers don't come based only on the central question(s) (Creswell, 2009), as we generally anticipate.

Likewise, in an initial talk, the guide and the gatekeeper, Mr Ishwar, also added some new points, saying that after replacing the community guest house idea, the homestay idea was developed, and some selected locals—mixing both males and females—were taken to exposure visits to famous homestay destinations like Sirubari (Syangja), Ghalegaun (Lamjung), Briddhim (Rasuwa) and other places. After those visits, the locals were very impressed and convinced to start homestays in this area. Once they completed exposure visits, every participant was ready to start homestay in his/her home, no matter what the condition of the infrastructure was or what the key criteria were; they just showed interest in being indulged in homestay enterprising. Then, the facilitating project/organizations were ready to provide some support and special training and capacity-building programs on cooking and baking, homestay management, enterprise development and management, etc.

In this context, research participant Shanishchara in an informal talking, which is a common culture in Nepal to share internal feelings and reflections frankly, highlighted the initial stages and shared that she was also one of the participants in the exposure-visit team and once she got that opportunity, she immediately decided to open a homestay room in her house. She further added,

*I saw lots of benefits from the homestay that Sirubari and Briddhim people are getting. In the visits, we saw such benefits with our eyes, and it is now very*

*easy to believe that homestay can provide lots of opportunities if properly run and managed.*

I continuously watched the scenes of the everyday life of the people of MH and talked to the local homestay operators from time to time to excavate maximum information based on their practical experiences. In the same line, on my second visit to the area—on the third day—waking up in the early morning at Som Maya's homestay, and after having breakfast there, I was just roaming around the homestay yard and next to the house, I saw another lady of a homestay (and, later I knew she was Aaita Kumari). There, she was busy cleaning the room and clothes of the homestay room, which was, perhaps, not in use for a long time. At the same time, I started talking to them. That day, it was a very short *bhalakusari* with Som Maya and Aaita Kumari. In the beginning, I asked her about her experience with starting a homestay.

In that *bhalakusari*, my inquiry went like this: "Who helped you start a homestay enterprise?" Aaita Kumari (without waiting for anything, started describing) said:

*We first got a one-day class about tourism development and environmental conservation in this area. There were some staff members from a project and also from the DDC. We got a good orientation from them. In addition to orientation training, one "ghumghaam karyakram" (exposure visit program) was also arranged for us. The project helped us with all those things. We were encouraged to start tourism in our village. After the four-day visit, we received some materialistic support from the same project. Initially, we were seven households showing interest in opening group homestays, and each of us got materialistic support worth Rs. 25,000 (twenty-five thousand), which included quilts, linens, blankets, pillows, essential kitchen utensils, waste bins, door mats, buckets, plastic chairs, mirrors, slippers, etc. Those granted items encouraged us to start the group homestay enterprises with many expectations and aspirations. We were keen to keep guests in our houses and earn money from them. Also, we wanted to know more about homestay management and preserving our culture.*

And, while we were talking to each other, her (Aaita's) husband Bikas (name changed) arrived from his *goth* (buffalo/cow-shed) and added some more points saying (here presented the summarized excerpt):

*The project emphasized local people's participation, giving special priority to women and low-income households like us. The project, in the beginning, wanted to introduce homestay in every household in the village. Still, very poor people had too small houses (huts) and could not allocate a separate room for homestay purposes. Thus, those who could not start homestays were involved or suggested to get involved in other economic activities based on local knowledge, skills, and resources, such as portering, vegetable production, handicraft production, poultry farming, etc. In the homestay program, mostly the households who could spare a room for guests were encouraged. We also had a small separate room for guests, thus starting to get involved in the homestay development process in our village. Now, my wife looks after the homestay, and I often go outside for labor work. But we haven't had any guests for the last few months.*

Later, in my observations, I found those project-supported items, as mentioned by Aaita Kumari, Som Maya and Bikas, in their respective homestays. They also shared that some added items were purchased by themselves in the last few years. Still, some homestays have good (big-sized) beds (cots), and some have sub-standard, medium-sized ones, which were not according to the Homestay Guidelines. Similarly, some have new utensils, and some have very old ones. New utensils gradually replaced old ones, which could have antique value from a "traditional" point of view.

The next day, I was at Buddhi Maya's homestay, where most of the things were old, and some were insufficient, too. Relating to that context, in a short conversation, she added,

*This was due to insufficient budget support from the Project and the local government, and we also could not earn as much money from homestay enterprising as expected. That's why we could not invest in buying new things or replacing old ones.*

She later took part in an FGD. There, she again added more such points and her personal views regarding small and insufficient budget support from the facilitating organizations. She also commented that the organization's support was like

a very small token. However, the organizations claimed that such support was just to encourage the locals as seed money and not to develop everything they wanted fully. Rather, locals were expected to contribute by themselves, and it was suggested that project support be considered a factor for motivation or a trigger for attracting the interest of the locals to boost their engagement with homestay enterprising. In this context, one of the former social mobilizers of the area also added that the supporting organizations created the desires and hopes of the locals with more opportunities for earning and learning through the homestay program, which was motivating. The following section explains experiences in the facilitation and motivational processes in the study area.

### **Motivation for Homestay Enterprising**

*"How can there be laughter, how can there be pleasure, when the whole world is burning? Will you not ask for a lamp when you are in darkness?"*

- The Buddha

We understand that the needy and marginalized people need a lamp to remove the darkness of backwardness and underdevelopment. The facilitation process is a kind of "lamp" in the backward and deprived society. According to my research participants, as primarily shared during our *bhalakusari* and FGDs, the initial facilitator of the homestay initiative was a tourism project supported by foreign aid, which was oriented more towards community homestay enterprising. From this perspective, research participant Som Maya's voice is worth noting:

*My husband and I both attended a two-day workshop organized by the project, and we got information about tourism potential in our area and the possible participation of men and women in different tasks and businesses. Also, we got to know about entertaining guests in our houses. But, initially, we (my family) were not interested in keeping guests in our house since our house was so small compared to other houses in this area. We first decided to get involved in handicraft-making (bamboo-based crafts) and then started getting many opportunities to have more training in other subjects. After a few years, we added an extra room to our house with a thatched roof, and gradually, we could also welcome guests. Thus, the Project's facilitation and support motivated us to participate in homestay enterprising and other skill-based activities, including handicraft-making, bee-keeping, poultry, etc. Besides the*

*Project, some other facilitative organizations and local VDC offices supported further skills development (software) and some logistic or materialistic supports (hardware). These were our main foundations for starting new enterprises relating to tourism, like community homestays and others.*

However, in my observations from 2019 through 2022, most of the houses in the area are new, rebuilt after the devastating earthquake of 2015 (April 25), with support from the government (National Reconstruction Authority- NRA). That process demolished the then-thatched houses since the locals were encouraged to build new houses with metal (tin) roofs rather than the traditional thatched ones, for which the Nepal government provided more than three hundred thousand rupees (those amounts were allocated in three instalments according to NRA). Under this support, each victimized household was expected to make a new single-story building with two to three rooms.

Equally, a special model for such reconstruction work was provided by the government through NRA; accordingly, most of the reconstructed houses in the MH are uniform in key patterns and features, with blue, red, or green tin roofs. Now, some families have two buildings too, the old one (repaired/retrofitted) and the new one; now, in the villages, they can offer better homestay services than before. Nevertheless, those with just a single house built under the earthquake-grant support from the government cannot adjust the guests (tourists) as such. Further, I observed that women of this community were more mentally pressured and "traumatized" (Jang et al., 2018) due to earthquake effects despite the government's support for the rebuilding process. Although there are some positive comments from the local leaders, Chepangs were found sensitive towards their lost "traditional houses" with their own architect. In this context, a Chepang community leader (male) remarked:

*We lost our old houses with thatched roofs made of wooden materials and the traditional looks of our huts and houses. Now, each village is seen as the same, with the same styles of houses and the same types of roofs. From housing and other facilities, it is difficult to recognize who Chepang is and who Giri-Puri, Magar, Brahmin-Chhetri, Newar, Dalit, or other castes are. We were, truly speaking, very fortunate to get the hits of the earthquake of BS 2072 (2015) since we also got a chance to make a new house. But, we can not find Chepang traditions in these new houses.*

According to him, Chepangs' specificity in the local construction area has been lost due to grant-supported reconstructions and mandatory standards or norms of building construction from the government/NRA. That hampered the local traditional system (or traditional rural architecture) to offer unique cultural tourism. Despite this, however, the hopes of getting tourists in the area and governments' further support for additional rooms in the reconstructed houses are continuing. At the same time, due to the new construction of houses, the opening of new "hometels" is also continuing in the area. In different discussions, local leaders were found confused about whether to promote homestay or "hometel" in the area. Due to an unexpected stagnation in the homestay business and a small boom in the "hometel" business, some homestay operators were also found indecisive.

In an FGD, it was learned that the rural tourism development or homestay establishment facilitation through the social mobilization process was carried out by local social mobilizers appointed and trained by the project. According to them, the project took this from the implementation point of view and as a longer-run local capacity development initiative. "The recruited social mobilizers were mostly from the same area/VDCs," shares the former project manager in a short *kurakani*. Supporting such facts and referring to demonstrative cases, Kunwar and Pandey (2014) also stated that the TRPAP project, which was implemented for about five years, was successful in demonstrating some of the good examples of poverty alleviation in rural areas of Nepal, which was possible from the joint efforts of different stakeholders leading towards developing diversifying tourism products in the country. Among the products, homestay villages were some of the notable new products- which focused on women-led income generation and poverty alleviation in the respective areas.

From observations and interactions, it was learned that the social mobilization processes were implemented as a step-wise combined package, which included the basic orientation through TEAP; group formation/reformation; saving and credit schemes, management skills development training, production-focused various skills-oriented training, exposure/educational tours to famous tourist/homestay destinations, venture capital fund or revolving fund supports, business plan development related capacity enhancement, market linkages, and so forth. The social mobilizers of the area were delighted to share such things during our *kurakani*. "Many people and

organizations appreciated the gradual steps and processes adopted by that tourism project," a former social mobilizer of the MH shared proudly. He also shared that the facilitation processes were backed up by the district-based tourism advisor of the tourism project and from the central office in Kathmandu.

Rural tourism-based local capacity-building initiatives were first started from the capacity development of the local facilitators or the SMs. One of the SMs in the area, in this context, added:

*We also did not come with a tourism (educational) background; thus, in the beginning, the project gave us a four-week basic pre-service training, which was a life-giving ignition for us to enter the village as rural tourism facilitators, and we were able to orient and convince the local people towards tourism development with multiple opportunities of engagement for both men and women in the settlements. We worked for many settlements, but homestay was impossible for every settlement. We facilitated them where the maximum possible was to link with the area's key tourism product (the Mahabharat Hill-top). It was a big learning for us as well.*

His expressions with me denote that the mobilization/facilitation and motivation processes were rigorous, time-consuming, and equally motivating to initiate the initiatives. With this respect, research participant Som Maya further shared that the locals were attracted to the project activities mainly for four reasons: (1) by getting many training and workshop opportunities; (2) by getting exposure opportunities to visit various tourism destinations with homestay facilities; (3) by getting some loans (micro-credit) from the project for small investments in our farming; and (4) by getting other many things as grants or subsidies as well, which mainly included: agri-equipment, seeds, infrastructure-developmental support, like the constructions of local trails/footpaths, toilets, repairing of old temples and religious places, drinking water system, sanitation, and waste management.

*"Those all supports were intended to develop community-led homestay facilities in the area",* Som Maya further added.

In another follow-up *bhalakusari*,



(Guests in the village- 1, © Author)

Som Maya quite frankly shared that she had a very good and positive experience with the tourism program. She added:

*The seed money as "Ghumti-kosh" (revolving funds) provided by those organizations was one of the major factors for being motivated towards new initiatives (tourism) in the village. Now, from that fund, we have established our cooperative in the village. Our savings in this cooperative have increased, and we have no trouble getting small loans when needed for business or (even) social causes.*

From her experience, meaning can be taken that when the facilitating organizations provide multiple opportunities, including monetary back-ups like seed money (capital) for micro-enterprise development, training and marketing skills (Schmidt, 2022), local people prefer working in groups, remain intact in groups, and continuously show interest in taking new ventures through such groups. Gradually, as many cases show, those groups can be converted into cooperative(s). This was a good example of the CBT initiative in Nepal.

The above experiences also signify that the tourism program in the area shared lots of knowledge, provided some materials, and tried to boost the courage to do something even by continuously placing locally recruited facilitators or social mobilizers/rural tourism facilitators in the area. The community homestay initiative in the area was also one of the examples of such participatory action-oriented development endeavors. The homestay entrepreneurs in an FGD also shared that the homestay initiative was good for helping the locals generate extra income, providing better opportunities for engaging and learning multiple aspects of sustainable community development along with groups' capacity enhancement and better networking. Other studies have also shown that the tourism development process helps expand networks and group cohesions (e.g., Sedai, 2018; TGDB, 2013; TGDB, 2016). Nevertheless, in the study area, due to the stagnation of homestay businesses in recent years, the potential benefits of homestay are not being fully realized by homestay entrepreneurs.

Their groups and networks, however, have been useful for learning and sharing new knowledge and skills among tourism actors. From a learning and sharing point of view, this practice is called "Community of Practice (CoP)" in the words of Wenger (2004). Wenger emphasizes that learning within a CoP is a social process

deeply rooted in participation and shared practice. He highlights the following six key aspects of learning in CoPs: i) learning as social participation, ii) mutual engagement, iii) shared repertoire, iv) joint enterprise, v) identity formation, and vi) situated learning. He emphasizes that learning is not just the acquisition of knowledge but involves active participation in a social community, and through such engagement in shared practices, individuals become part of a group and contribute to its collective understanding and evolution.

In my observations, I also found that the locally established cooperative, which is also one of the means of CoP, has grown well and has been able to build its office building with sufficient space for local meetings and other purposes. The cooperative is located in the middle of the settlement and, with one full-time staff, provides different financial and capacity enhancement services to its members. It has also initiated the purchasing and selling of local agri-and-livestock products. The cooperative is developing market systems linking with other nearby market centers, mostly located on the highways. This strengthened market system has recently attracted many members to become



(Guests in the village- 2 © Author)

vegetable and poultry farming

entrepreneurs, albeit on a small scale. Due

to all these economic and social activities, regular meetings are held at the premises of the cooperative building. Additionally, the cooperative has started linking the locals with new alternative income opportunities.

Homestay operators also said that, to some extent, governments and NGOs have supported them in commercial vegetable production. This is mainly due to the recently developed road links from the main market centers (in the highway) to the area. I also observed that local interests in engaging in tourism and agri-trades have heightened. Nevertheless, proper facilitation and technical support schemes are not adequate. According to a local leader of the Ward Committee, the federal and province-level governments have failed to provide technical services to local governments as anticipated. In a *kurakani*, another local leader (lady) also said that, owing to limited support from upper governments, the entrepreneurs have not been

able to develop long-term vision and plans for sustainable rural tourism development as well as homestay development/promotion strategies in the area.

The lady leader of the area further shares, "In such conditions, sometimes, we are confused when deciding what to do and what not to do; we have been like *kuhiroko kaag* (crow in the thick cloud!)". These expressions and statements of the local leaders lead us to understand that rural tourism and community homestay development processes are urgently demanding adequate facilitation and technical support until the locals can manage those efforts sustainably and confidently.

### **Tourism Resources Mobilization, Support, and Networking**

After my long stay in the area, I came to realize that several travel and trekking companies have been promoting MH as a valuable tourism product with different cultural and nature-based hiking routes. Based on Sirubari's experience, they were also convinced that homestay tourism cannot vibrate and flourish until and unless a good promotion is done. In such cases, in addition to local initiations, external facilitation and support are instrumental in promoting national and international tourism products. The interesting thing is that, as competitive sites, other rural destinations are also emerging in this area. The companies have branded the culturally (mostly Chepang) rich area as a two- to nine-day tour package, considering the availability of time, energy, and money for the visitor(s).

Due to beautiful hills, nicely settled settlements/villages of different ethnicities and castes such as Chepang, Brahman/Chhetri, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Newar, Dasnami, etc.; old forts, green jungles with Rhododendron national flower, spectacular waterfalls, and some unexplored caves; the area is also considered a good destination from not only cultural but also from natural attractions point of views as well. There are many excursionists (only day-trippers or sometimes hikers only) in the area. These hikers or excursionists just make a short trip of half or three to five hours and return to their place or other destination(s) on the same day, which does not provide many benefits to the locals.

I found that many youngsters who come just to see the local attractions/places do not want to stay in homestays; rather, they prefer to stay in a big group (they also call it "hall-stay"?) or disperse in the evening and go back to their respective places. This practice mainly applies to domestic tourists. As mentioned earlier, from the past to the present, there have been very few international tourists in the area. For such

excursionists, no trekking or travel companies are consulted. They prefer free and independent hiking and trekking, sometimes with food items and drinking water in their bags, and they do not spend any money in the local area. Commenting on this practice, the "hometel" owner also shares that generally, the hikers in this area leave only a small monetary impact in the village. Still, they may show the value of the area as a mass-tourism site, which is not the interest or focus of the local entrepreneurs at present. The homestay entrepreneurs were also found to have the opinion that they would need good-spending tourists because only those good-spending tourists would buy local products and services, so the survival and expansion of local community-based tourism enterprises and businesses would be possible.

The "hometel" owner's experiences also give a sense that the area has not had a chance to receive tourists as per the potential or carrying capacity and local expectation. I also closely observed that the homestays available in this area can accommodate some 40 tourists each night easily. However, the actual occupancy rate is very low. Local expectations are not met. "Due to this, the multi-ethnic community homestay of the site is deprived of multiple benefits and possibilities," a local guide seriously commented.

As indicated earlier, in this area, homestays are owned by people of different ethnic backgrounds, including the Dashnami group (Giri/Puri), Magars, Chepangs, and Brahman/Chhetris. Site-specific variances could be observed based on the dominance of certain communities in a particular locality. Chepang people have been gaining some economic benefits from homestay-based tourism, but they have comparatively received nominal benefits. Following a question about how much economic income has been made through homestay tourism, the research participant Shukrikala, in a *bhalakusari*, put her experiences in this way:

*Truly speaking, so far, we have not earned much money from this business. In the initial stage, say 2004-2007, we earned a fair amount of money from homestay tourists, but after the Project left the area, and also owing to the devastating earthquake of 2015 in our area, the arrival of tourists sharply reduced. After that, tourism could not be good in our area.*

Supporting her views, participant Buddhi Maya also added that the homestay businesses, so far, have not been major income sources of this locality; rather, they just provide some supplementary income. Buddhi Maya further shared that, on

average, every year, 8 to 10 thousand rupees can be earned from the homestay guests, not more than that in the present context. This amount is extremely low to become a homestay entrepreneur, and this is not an encouraging case. Despite the low income from tourism, the area feels proud to demonstrate a new example of homestay operation by Chepang communities as well in the MH, which is a new feature in Nepal from ethnic and cultural perspectives. I saw the rays of hope in some of the homestay operators. They still believe that the homestay enterprising or local tourism system in the MH, one day, would become the "mainstay".

Despite many ups and downs and several hurdles in the MH homestays, the operators are optimistic, too. I observed less hope for immediate growth of tourism in this area, including the paradox of homestay and "hometel". Despite all these, the practice of homestay for more than a decade and learning from such practice can be brought to other similar communities of Bagmati and Gandaki provinces (e.g., Gorkha, Lamjung, Dhading, Makawanpur districts) or other parts of Nepal.

One day I talked more with Buddhi Maya regarding cultural and group experiences; she added that after forming the homestay group and cultural group in the beginning (now not very functional due to the devastating earthquake in 2015 and COVID-19 pandemic- author) they were encouraged to work in groups, to make visits in groups and also to hold voluntary actions such as- village/tole (settlement) cleaning, foot trail, and religious site cleaning, and so on; which also facilitated their social ties and social/cultural bounds. She said, *"These are the additional benefits of homestay enterprising"*.

In the same manner, according to the trained local tour guide of the area, more promotional efforts are being sought by the tourism operators/agencies and the tourism development facilitators in the area. He shared that the area was not promoted well since there were very few travel/trekking companies from this area; unless locally-owned travel companies or tour operators pay attention to promoting and marketing local tourism in the regional, national, and international markets, the locals cannot take many benefits. He further commented that in the last two decades or more, the area might have progressed a lot, "but still, it is disadvantaged due to less attention from travel/trekking companies". Furthermore, I learned that very few companies and agents are focusing on tourism promotion in this area.

Limited business networking activities are there. Thus, owing to this, minimal efforts are being paid to promotional and marketing causes. Emphasizing such phenomena and contexts, Mahato (2013) also notes that networking cooperation in tourism includes business referrals and partnering in marketing activities- brochures, advertisements, and website creation; trade show and visitor center/museum promotions; and the joint hosting of local familiarization visits arranged for media and travel writers.

Similarly, depicting an observational note, one day, in the middle of the village, I met a pair of tourists from Kathmandu, and I asked them whether they had sufficient information about local tourism products, services, and booking systems. One of them (male) immediately responded that digital information about local tourism is very poor, and any desired information is hardly found on websites, social media platforms, or on the internet. A homestay owner (lady) supporting the views and experiences of those tourists also agreed that no homestay can put information on the "web" for several reasons, such as poor educational or literacy level, cost matter, and poor electric and electronic facilities in the area.

Furthermore, as observed, poor facilitation and support mechanisms have also created impediments to networking and promotional efforts in the MH to develop tourism-centric local enterprises. In such cases, Golchha (2023) also criticizes the acute access of women entrepreneurs to digital literacy and the digital revolution. In the absence of such skills, they are left behind in the participatory planning activities and also in the promotional events of local tourism products and services. In this context, in an informal (standing) *kurakani*, a senior official at NTB states that the promotional and marketing plans are developed according to the tourist data being annually published by the government, and it needs different strategies and interventions to be customized and compromised based on the local feedback and also reactions from tourist source-markets. These requirements and links are disconnected while considering the national marketing procedures and mechanisms. Digitalization of participation, places, products, promotions, pricing, and purchasing/payment has been talked about in recent times, which is crucial from the perspective of enhancing local ability and capability point of view.

Furthering the context, in a *bhalakusari* with the research participant, Bihi Devi and her husband (together) mentioned that the local tourism developmental

efforts would need good support from tourism organizations and the local *palika* (rural municipality) to effectively develop homestay-based rural tourism in the MH. They both were advocating for developing local-level capacities for men and women. This can be an important task to boost local cultural homestay tourism. Locals want lots of facilitation, training and workshop opportunities, more exposure visits, and strong promotional and marketing support from different levels of government—Federal, Provincial, and Local. I realized from their expressions that they had the mindset of being always dependent on others' funds and facilitations. The dependency syndrome can be observed to a greater extent in the area. Bihi Devi's voice: "*We cannot take up or pick up without external support and facilitation due to our limited exposure and capacities*", also denotes that all local development endeavors must be supported by external development partners. This practice has further weakened their courage to take new risks and challenges.

The homestay operators' claim and desire also hinted that the locals of the MH primarily thought and initiated the homestay tourism enterprising dominantly from external inspiration and facilitation. They got initial back-ups and motivational energy in the beginning phases. Nonetheless, several pull factors in between, and also in the absence of proper facilitation-related support from the responsible institutions or mechanisms, local tourism is currently almost in an inactive phase or stagnant period (Sahli, 2020), or we can say that it is at the zebra-cross—whether to go ahead or just leave the initiative here. Locals are confused about whether to seek other alternatives to replace the tourism ideas from a livelihood perspective or think about reviving homestay tourism—but how?

It was also observed that local capacity development efforts from a sustainability perspective are still inadequate. It is because, for the last few years, the contributions of homestays to the local economy and capacity development have been extremely minimal. Some sporadic drops or percolations cannot irrigate the fields of common interests and aspirations of homestay development and overall empowerment through an enhanced capability of the locals, as originally planned or dreamt of by the Project. In this context, some locals also hinted that the anticipated roles of media people also did not happen in the case of MH, although they claimed this culturally rich site was a pioneer and unique product of Nepal. "*We did not recognize the local potentials, capacities and desires*", says a local social mobilizer in

a *kurakani*. Empirically, some scholars (e.g., Huang, 2013; Suzuki, 2011) have also argued that media-induced tourism can also work better for the promotion and marketing of a destination, provided that negative effects are also taken into consideration from the beginning and "minimal impact travel" (MIT) practices are encouraged (Wall et al., 2023; NTB & KEEP, 2023). Field experiences demonstrate that these key interconnected issues need to be well understood and discussed in the process of developing local tourism products and services with an enhanced resource flow mechanism, strengthened collaborations, and networking. All these steps and procedures need to be considered vital for strengthening the capacities and utilizing them in sustainable community-led homestay tourism in the area.

### **Developing and Strengthening the Homestays**

Homestay enterprising in this area started almost two decades ago with special branding. The area was considered feasible for developing homestay-based community tourism efforts in the province. Different international and national organizations (e.g., MoCTCA, Ministry of Local Development, UNDP, SNV Nepal, DFID, many local NGOs, etc.) supported the initiative. Initially, the settlement near the Mahabharat Peak had seven homestays, and later, some more were added, making a total of 12.

It was perhaps an expanded period of homestay enterprising between 2004-2007 in the area. Nevertheless, in my observation, very few homestays in the area are running their business at previous levels. Especially after the termination of support from the tourism project and after the deadly earthquake of 2015, the homestay enterprising in the area almost stopped. According to one of the local guides, for the last seven/eight years, the homestay businesses in the MH have been shrinking unexpectedly. Instead, "hometels" are gradually growing and occupying the homestay spaces. Some homestays have been transformed into "hometels".

Now, old signboards for homestays could not be seen in these hometels. Instead of small wooden sign-boards commonly placed in every homestay household from the very beginning, now they display big flex-boards saying: " यहाँ अर्डर बमोजिमको खाजा, खाना र जलपानको राम्रो व्यवस्था छ ।" (Here we provide all types of snacks, food items, and different types of drinks as per your interest and order). These notices denote that "hometels" are more demand-driven than supply-driven. However, homestays are always supply-driven based on local food items/materials. Lately, noticeably, these

"hometels" have been affecting the motivation of homestay operators (Kanel, Bhattarai, and Gnawali, 2024). Nowadays, tourists (mostly youngsters) are attracted to such "hometels" where order comes first and is then served accordingly. Relatively, as per my field interactions, "hometel" prices are a bit expensive as well; thus, more profit is possible from these new services in the area.

All these are attributed to the decreased facilitation and leadership support in the last few years, especially after the project interventions were phased out. The former manager (Bhagawan) of the project, in a *kurakani* in Kathmandu, mentioned that the project tried to institutionalize the concept of rural tourism/community homestay tourism in the area through the district development offices (e.g., DDC) in close coordination with NTB and MoCTCA. However, regarding the post-project period's tourism-related facilitation process, one of the participants in an FGD strongly shared that the facilitation from the province or district/local village administration concerned municipality has been almost zero or too minimal for the last few years. She, in that context, or linking the project's phase-over from her village(s), sings a very interesting and touchy song in the group:

कहाँ सा-यो मायाले डेरा ?

शून्य भयो पाखा र पखेरा !

*"Where has love found its sojourn?*

*The valleys and slopes feel so lonely." (My translation)*

According to the former local social mobilizer, a reduced extent of facilitation by the concerned organizations has discouraged local people from getting engaged in rural tourism development and homestay business operations, including engagement in various types of skills-focused tourism-related enterprises, as compared to the past. In such cases, putting an eye on the sustainability aspects, Dahal (2014a) argues that the interventions initiated by the donor-funded project need to be continued for at least a few years if the project was designed from a sustainability perspective or with a long-term vision. Nonetheless, in most cases in Nepal, these thoughts and philosophies are not working yet. In this area also, in the absence of continued facilitation or only with limited local level initiations, the homestay entrepreneurs are now trying to get engaged in other types of agriculture and livestock-based enterprises and also seeking job-oriented tasks in nearby towns, construction companies, and even in foreign countries, such as in Gulf countries. The SM further states, "Less

facilitation means less motivation, less motivation means less initiation and engagement."

In a gist, it can be said that in the MH, the project or special program-based initiatives were there to establish the homestay enterprises; nevertheless, the decreased level of external facilitation and material support also narrowed down the homestay operational activities. Rather, they started engaging in individual types of (non-tourism) enterprises and employment opportunities. Although they became homestay operators for some years, they faced several problems continuing the initiative, including the devastating earthquake in 2015, COVID-19, the economic downturn, etc.

### **Homestay's Growth as an "Hometel": An Empirical New Learning**

One day, in the evening, I was having *bhalakusari* with some domestic tourists (youths) in the MH. They were in a group of six (4 boys and two girls) and had arrived from Terai/Madhesh area. That night, they were not staying in the homestays; rather, they were staying in a nearby "hometel". I asked them, "Why did you leave the homestay where you had stayed last night?" One of them instantly shared his opinion, *"We stayed there one night, and still, we have two more nights to stay in this beautiful cool place. But we did not like the "homestay life" as we had very limited options for our entertainment. We also did not get food items per our choice and order; only the homestay operators' choices and supplies were there. Thus, we wanted a different experience— a new experience of full entertainment and joy."*

It was not difficult for me to make sense of and understand these youth visitors' concerns and their sub-culture. In every part of the world, youth culture is growing. In Yang's (2014) words, youth culture refers to a special sub-culture representing youth and society worldwide. Thus, fitting with the homestay's "authentic culture" (Kunwar, 2017) to these youth sub-culture groups may not be possible everywhere. Even in the MH, they were opting for hotel/"hometel"-stay for their *bindaas* (with great fun or they say *masti*). From a *bindaas* point of view, they put homestay accommodation as a "last option". Such tourists are known as backpacking "hedonists" (Kunwar, 2017, p.50) who care less about local culture or traditions/flavors but they are more interested in chasing extreme fun, luxury, fine food, and exciting experiences.

For me, it was unexpectedly interesting to note! I could easily draw a meaning from that case that "every tourist who comes to the village is not a cultural tourist, and he/she may not like the idea of homestay from a cultural perspective only". For some people, homestay is just an alternative mode of accommodation. However, those concerns and measures have yet to be identified in detail. In my study, I found some conflicting ideas from the field regarding the younger generation's interest in staying or not staying in homestays.

At present, there are 12 homestays in the area. Nonetheless, they all are almost non-functional or less functional at present, especially after the devastating earthquake of 2015 and the global pandemic of COVID-19 (as briefly illustrated above as well). Also, it was prudently observed that earthquake destruction in the houses and less arrival of tourists in the surroundings were the main reasons for shrinking activities in the homestay cosmology of the area.

Moreover, in between, the opening of a "hometel" in the area by constructing some huts (especially to provide food and bed services to the rescuers/rehabilitators and reconstruction workers from various organizations during the earthquake rehabilitation and reconstruction times). Furthermore, increasing frequent transportation services to these villages from the main highway's key market points—along the Kathmandu- Mungling (Prithvi) Highway road—were major causes of gradual inactiveness and (almost) abandonment of those homestays, I say the "initial" homestays. In my focused observations and interactions in the area, I came to find that the local unpaved motorable roads in these villages are fine, except during heavy rainfall days. These newly-built roads are round-the-year gravel roads. Now, frequent bus and jeep services encourage visitors to visit these areas. However, with these increased transportation services, same-day returning or moving to other nearby destinations has also been possible, which means there could be fewer overnight stays in the area. It was also observed that only very few special interest visitors, or we can say cultural tourists, stay there for one or two nights. In the later years, even such cultural tourists stayed in local "hometel" rather than at homestays. According to the local "hometel" operator, up to sixteen guests can easily be accommodated at a time.

It is notable that, as per the homestay rule, it may not be possible to accommodate many visitors at a time. However, the "hometel" makes this possible. The visitors—mostly domestic ones—who often come in groups prefer to stay in a

big group at the same venue, and they do not like to be separated while eating, entertaining, and sleeping. They prefer entertaining through different songs and dances, from early evening till late night. In my prolonged observations (Dawson, 2013), I found that locals are now not encouraged or fully motivated to promote homestays. Rather, they are gradually converting those previously established homestays into "hometel" with big-sized signboards (flex-boards) and several imported foods and drinks, for which no group norms or local codes of conduct are required (so far).

What is "hometel", then? Of course, this is a new word for Nepal. When previously opened, homestays are gradually converted into "small hotels", having an 18-hour opening (5 am to 11 pm); any time any visitor can have different types of ordered food and drinks with accommodation facility, they are called "hometels". These "hometels" are run by family members at their own house/home, in which, still, we can have some family environment, but not fully like in a homestay setting, because "hometel" entrepreneurs are always busy serving the customers, since it is considered as a *khaja-ghar* (restaurant/tea-shop) or, to some extent, like a *bhatti-pasal* (pub house).

"Hometels" often use the market-led or demand-driven principle and always focus on mass tourism. In recent publications (mostly Nepali), I have used this *hometel* word frequently. In India, typically in the Chandigarh area, some hotel entrepreneurs have used this "hometel" word to market family-run small hotels with a homely environment (e.g., <https://www.agoda.com/hometel-chandigarh/hotel/chandigarh-in.html?cid=1844104>). This trend has emerged as a new issue in the local tourism development processes in Nepal, encouraging the development of private small- and medium-sized accommodations.

Nevertheless, in such cases, some locals also worry about the concept of participatory community tourism development or community homestay tourism endeavors because those practices would be diminished. The original nature (culturally rich, supply-driven, special-interest-tourist based, etc.) of homestay tourism will have dwindled. From such perspectives, local people's self-initiated participation in community tourism has been crucial (Devkota et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the stakeholders of many places do not know how to participate in such

tourism initiatives due to inadequate awareness of culturally rich sustainable tourism businesses, as well as related capacity enhancement efforts.

With this, I raise a big question here. Why are "hometels" emerging in place of homestays in this destination? I also got some answers from the FGDs. In a discussion, one community leader (male)—as well as the homestay committee member—commented that, due to fewer arrivals of tourists in the homestays, the homestay committee had also been unable to properly manage the homestays; for instance, local homestay operators were not able to divide the guests into different homestays as it used to happen in the initial days of community homestay establishment in the area. It was further known that owing to the low level of activity of local homestay entrepreneurs, *hometel* owners entertain or manage almost all the guests coming to the area. Due to these reasons, other homestay operators have been just spectators of such *hometel*-based tourism activities for the last few years, especially after the devastating 2015 earthquake, and the serious impacts of covid-19 in the area.

In another FGD as well, the local community members reiteratively stated that homestay enterprising is unsuitable for poor and marginalized people as they have very small houses, limited rooms, limited resources, and limited access to different governmental/non-governmental services. One female participant further added:

*Although, in this area, some Chepangs showed their interest in being homestay members to get the 'grants' or other support from the Project and other endeavors, now they are also showing problems in running the homestay saying that their houses are not good for running homestays. Therefore, getting good incomes and other benefits from homestay enterprising has been a challenge for different reasons.*

During my stay in the village, I also personally and deeply realized that Chepangs' houses, even the re-constructed ones (after the earthquake), are not suitable for establishing homestays since most of the houses are small with just one hall-type room or a maximum of two to three small rooms, which even become inadequate for their family members. Irrespective of all these facts, according to the local guide, at the beginning of the project, it could not stop the desire (and social pressure also) of some of the potential homestay operators from the Chepang community. Thus, to make it more inclusive by compulsion, they were firmly included in the homestay

group and provided materialistic and nonmaterialistic support, various training events, and opportunities to do some observational study tours. With these initiatives initially, some locals were also impressed and encouraged to be included in the homestay group in the Mahabharat Hills.

In a separate *bhalakusari*, a local woman leader who has gained some developmental and social mobilization experiences shared her feelings that homestay could be a good example of local community-based participatory actions, which required support through various ways, including financial grants, new skills, different materials, and social and cultural backing-up. She also stated that a transparent and effective grants system could have been developed to enhance local commitment and dedication.

At the same moment, I came to realize that all these observations, expressions, and feelings simply indicate an important demand for facilitative support for expediting the community-based tourism development efforts to expand the community-led homestay enterprising in the area. Alternatively, individuals-led "hometels" or "small hotels" could flourish gradually in the MH too, as can be seen in other parts of Nepal, such as Ghandruk and other sites in Kaski district, West Nepal and Briddhim in Rasuwa district in Central Nepal. Gatlang village (Kunwar & Pandey, 2014) is another example, where a community guest house is replaced by such "hometels".

To summarize this section, overall, the homestay development initiative in the MH was triggered by a rural tourism development project that continued till the end of the project period (2007), running for almost five years. During that time, there were some synergic works among the project and different governmental and non-governmental entities. Nevertheless, after the termination of the project, many support-oriented activities were abandoned, local facilitation was squeezed, and locals were gradually diverted into other types of enterprising (e.g., vegetable, transportation management, etc.) as well.

These all have contributed to lessening the homestay-related activities in the village. The earthquake in 2015, COVID-19, and many other tourism-related problems have also discouraged the locals from going further to revive community homestay in the area. However, as in other parts of the world (NTB, 2022; UNWTO, 2022), the MH area is also gradually thriving and reviving its tourism

activities through "hometel" based accommodations. In this respect, UN Tourism also indicates that the globe is hoping for new tourism opportunities in the post-COVID situation as inbound (incoming) and outbound (outgoing) tourism activities are now growing globally (Sharma, 2022; UN Tourism, 2023). These rays of hope are also spreading in the MH, especially in the years 2022, 2023, and 2024. As an alternative source of accommodation, it has also been prudent that "hometels" could also be a viable and reliable base for tourism promotion in the area.

Internationally as well, as Luo et al. (2024) report, there are numerous "homestay hotels" in China, and they are in growing trends with more focus on profitability and sustainability through multiple ventures, green concepts, including PV-battery system solar energy promotions on the roof-tops. Thus, a new discourse has arisen in the MH area on whether to promote community-based homestays or give priority to individual-led "hometels" for providing reliable and authentic cultural accommodation services for promoting sustainable tourism.

### **Chapter Essence**

In this chapter, I presented and elaborated on the processes and steps of homestay enterprising initiatives taken by the locals of the Mahabharat Hills of Bagmati province. The homestay operators got a chance to get some introductory and motivational sessions from the facilitator organization(s), and they also got chances to make some study/observational visits to some of the pioneer (model?) sites of community homestay tourism in Nepal, which inspired them to be homestay entrepreneurs in the area.

They have received both hardware and software support from the facilitating organizations. However, homestay enterprising has not been an attractive initiative in this area for several reasons, including the inactiveness of the entrepreneurs after the devastating earthquake of 2015 and also the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Convincingly, a new mode of village-based accommodation, "hometel", is gradually replacing the homestay concept in the MH, where additional income sources are also being increasingly shifted from traditional farming and homestay enterprising to various types of off-farm jobs, commercial vegetable cultivation, more commercialized "hometels", and poultry-farming, among others.

The concept of "hometel" has come into the front of Nepali tourism professionals for further explorations and discourses. "Hometel" could be an

alternative way of developing the area as a sustainable rural tourism site caring for the local nature and culture and also linking with enhanced local production and supply systems through better learning and focused capability enhancement with more community-oriented ventures and efforts.

## CHAPTER V

### HOMESTAY OPERATORS' LEARNING AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

In this chapter, I bring the experiences of the homestay operators of MH and their learning and capacity-building efforts. In this context, I illustrate what and how they learned about knowing the homestay enterprising and establishing and operating those homestay enterprises in the area. Here, I particularly explore the "What" and "How" parts of the overall capacity development efforts and endeavors. More concisely, in the "What" part, I mainly try to deal with the 'content/curricula and contexts' matters, while in the "How" part, I particularly make an effort to elaborate on the adopted processes, strategies, and approaches/methods during the whole learning and capacity development processes. In this chapter, I further delve into the perspectives of the learning facilitators who were/are engaged in teaching-learning activities or training, as well as integrated capacity enhancement initiatives. Similarly, I explore connections between their learning and actual practices from an andragogical perspective and also an inter-generational interface.

#### **The Contents and Contexts of Homestay Learning and Sharing**

The homestay operators of the MH have been able to learn in different ways and through different strategies, as I found from my observations, interactions, and other sources of information. The homestay operators' strategies and ways of learning are included in their life-long learning initiatives, too. Life-long learning is a well-established perspective in education and training (Kolb, 1984). Life-long and adult education practices are interconnected since both denote that learning never ends in human life. As noted earlier, learning continues in formal, informal, and non-formal ways. In this context, Fleming (2018) also claims that "social action, social movements and community development are major concerns of adult education/learning" (p. 121). Here, I try to examine all those facets of learning and capacity enhancement in the communities.

When I entered the field as an explorer, I was very concerned about knowing more about the subject matters or contents being in practice in the teaching-learning processes in community homestay operations. Homestay hospitality activity starts with welcoming the guests. The homestay hosts are always ready to welcome the

guests anytime they arrive. In my observations and interactions, I found that a single or solo guest or any number of guests without prior information are greeted with just greetings (*abhivaadan*, *namaste*, etc.). In such cases, only in rare instances are the tourists welcomed with flower bunches; otherwise, they are welcomed with just a smile and "Namaste" greetings followed by an offer of drinking water, tea, coffee, or any type of local "welcome drinks". However, when the guests come with prior information, and also in a group, they are greeted with *tika* (sacred rice mixed with curd and red-colored powder to put on the forehead) and a garland or flower bunch. Irrespective of this tradition, there are some seasonal difficulties in the MH because getting fresh flowers in the winter is almost impossible. In such cases, tourists are greeted simply with greetings, *tika*, and welcome drinks.

In this context, research participant Bihi Devi also shares her experience: *After we learned from the Sirubari visit, when there is no big group of tourists, it is difficult for us to manage a welcome program by the local homestay management committee. Individual or small groups of tourists are welcomed by the concerned homestay operators only in a simple way. In that case, instead of finding flowers and garlands, the welcoming of the tourist is managed simply by exchanging "Namaste" and available drinks like water, tea, or sometimes "raksi" (locally made alcohol). Tourists also do not expect much formality in such receptions when they come alone. This is our traditional way of welcoming relatives/guests.*

Additionally, according to her, during tourism awareness workshops, observational field trips, and homestay training programs, she got opportunities to brush up on existing (traditional) knowledge and skills through different subject matters. While Bihi Devi was talking to me, Shukrikala joined her and started talking about what they learned in different training and workshops. They gradually remembered many topics while I was taking my special notes in a diary (in front of them), such as preparing the homestay room, cleaning and maintaining the room, preparing the menu and fixing locally agreed rates for foods, drinks, and accommodation; welcoming the guests, preparing (cooking and baking) different food items giving local foods more priority; offering/serving the foods and beverages with good hospitality; conversation with the guests, developing and abiding the code of conduct, managing local visits of the tourist(s), billing and accounting, farewell of the

guest(s), and proper waste management and sanitation maintenance. In addition to these subjects, the locals say that the exposure or observational visits and training programs emphasized learning more about energy-saving skills, using improved (smoke-less) stoves, using bio-gas technology, trekking trail maintenance, development of homestead gardens, health precautions, etc.

During the same *bhalakusari* process, Bihi Devi's husband, who was continually observing and listening to us, added that the homestay training package covered most of the things required to run the homestay, including preparatory things, operational, maintenance-related, and preventive and precautionary matters. In the FGD, some participants also shared that they learned so many things about homestay management, including theoretical (knowledge) and practical (action-oriented) subject matters. However, one Chepang lady expressed that the training gave more theoretical knowledge. Instead, the exposure visit allowed her to see and realize many things, including housekeeping, welcoming, cooking, serving, entertaining visitors, cleaning, billing, guests' farewell, etc. According to her expressions, it was notable that exposure visits and training programs complemented the overall learning and capacity development process. The FGD participants also claimed that the exposure visit was more important in getting motivation and developing confidence by "seeing and believing".

In this context, further, the interactions and FGDs reveal that the homestay operators of the area have also had opportunities to refine or improve their traditional skills of making bamboo-based crafts, e.g., *mudha* (stool) and also some decorative items (such as newspaper-stand, letter-box, mirror-frame, photo-frame, pen-stand, *churi*/bangles-holder, etc.). It was with the intention that every tourist wants to take something as a "souvenir" from the destination.

Thus, realizing that fact, among others, some bamboo-based handicrafts were encouraged by the locals. Skills refinement training was provided by the facilitating organizations (including TRPAP, local government, and some NGOs at a later stage). Scholarships on homestay tourism also highlight such concerns and perspectives. My inquiries also reveal that some subject matters were covered during the training/workshop programs and exposure visits, which were further reinforced by occasional exhibition-oriented programs and festivals held locally in the district

headquarters and in the capital city of Kathmandu. In this context, participant Mangala Devi says:

*There was a national rural tourism exhibition program in Kathmandu, and I also participated. We stayed in Kathmandu for four days. The Project bore all expenses. While going there, we took our local handicrafts with us for display and sale. We were in a group of men and women from our district. There were so many display stalls from all over Nepal. Many rural destinations took part in that mega-event. There, many types of handicrafts and numerous food items were displayed/and put on sale. We enjoyed it and learned so many things from that exhibition too. I never forget that special event. That was a big learning event for us.*

Based on different expressions by the research participants, the key contents of those exposure visits to Sirubari and/or other destinations could be summarized as follows: tourist-welcoming styles, food items, cultural shows and entertainment, guest distributions, local pricing, management of tourism attractions, communications with guests, billing and payment procedures, benefit sharing, farewell, etc.

During the study period, I also reviewed a homestay training course curricula/manual being used by various organizations/individual consultants while running "homestay management training", which was formally developed in the initiation of the Nepal Tourism Board in 2011 on the occasion of "Visit Nepal Year" (VNY). In Nepal, generally, the curricula-based homestay training programs are mostly run for a week as basic training, and the course duration depends upon the resources available with the training organizer(s). As for the tourism trainers whom I met in Kathmandu, in such cases, the theoretical parts of homestay management are shortened, and the cooking (food and beverage preparations) part is given more emphasis.

In my inquiry, I also found that a minimum of 3-day homestay training and a maximum of 10-day training events supported by various organizations are also common in the homestay field. In some cases, 2 to 3 days' refresher or follow-up training has also been organized by the concerned facilitating organizations. Those training packages have been mainly developed by the Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hospitality Management (NATHM), NTB, and TGDB, and based on those models, other NGOs/INGOs have also made some tailor-made courses to suit local contexts in

their working or target areas (NTB, 2011a). The training manual by NTB is the latest one in the homestay arena. These basic and modular courses are further refined/tailor-made by various local private companies and CBOs involved in the homestay and "Small Hotel and Lodge Management" (In the MH context, as I prefer to say "hometel") training. The key organizers of such training courses include local governments, colleges, private companies, including the Federation of Nepali Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) branches, and individual consultants/professional trainers.

The 7-day modular training manual developed by the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB, 2011b) to provide homestay training to the homestay operators of various parts of Nepal, especially to facilitate the "Nepal Tourism Year (NTY) 2011", worked as a milestone in the capacity development process. According to the manual, the training package—which was the most updated one—included subject matters like i) Introduction to tourism, tourism in Nepal, homestay tourism, ii) Importance of tourism, benefits, types, positive and negative impacts, iii) Homestay operation and management techniques; iv) Reception; v) Housekeeping; vi) Food and beverage production and quality control; vii) Food and beverage service and hygiene and sanitation management; viii) First aid and general treatments/precautions; ix) Ethical/moral issues (codes of conduct) in homestay tourism; and x) Packaging, promotion, and marketing of homestay and local tourism products/services.

According to some homestay/rural tourism trainers in Kathmandu and Chitwan, the one-week package of homestay training made it easy for many facilitators and trainers in response to guide the locals who started homestay as a new enterprising. The package/manual was prepared in simple Nepali language, which could also be used as a resource for participants with some (basic) literacy skills. According to a trainer, "The well-developed manual also mainstreamed homestay training processes in Nepal." Likewise, according to a senior official at NTB, most comprehensive inputs from NTB, TGDB, and NATHM were streamlined in this manual.

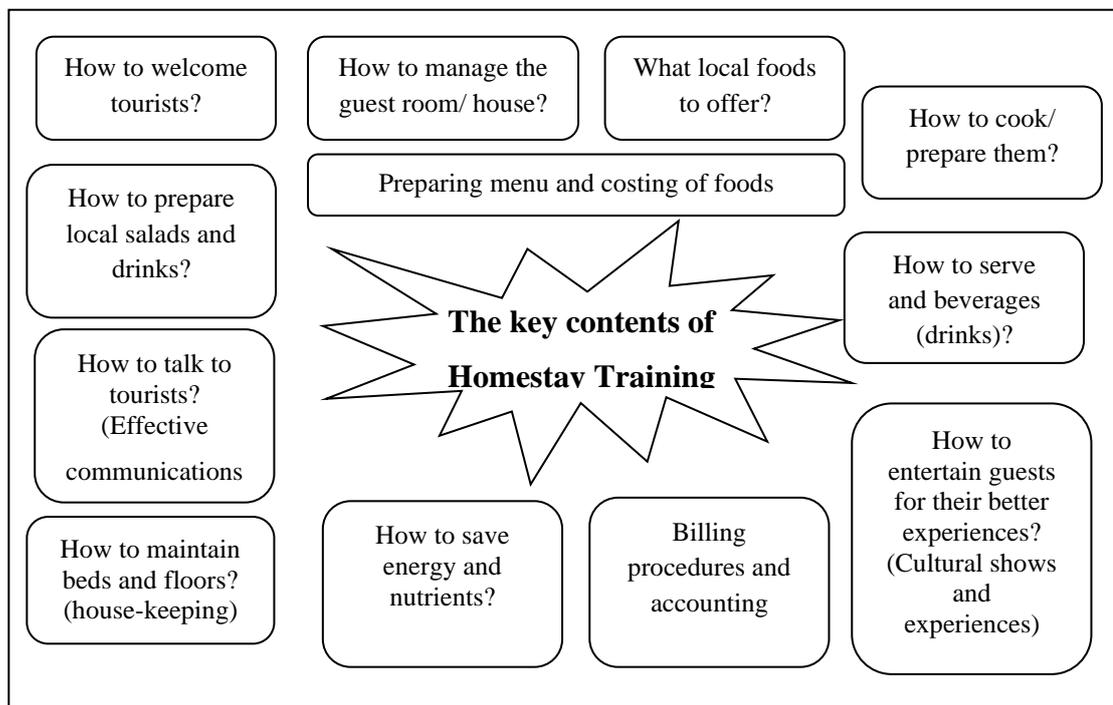
In general, initially, NATHM—established in 1972 under the GoN's Ministry of Tourism—develops and facilitates such short courses in Nepal, along with its regular Bachelor and Master's level tourism and hospitality academic courses (NATHM, 2021), and further promoted by NTB and other organizations. "To some

extent, Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT)'s inputs are also shared in such efforts," a senior trainer at TGDB shares his experience with this author. He further stated that NATHM's modular contents and packages help develop new packages for local-level mobile training by TGDB. The package always has a short observational or study tour to model the homestay site(s). According to NATHM (2022), homestay training is one of the five major courses conducted under NATHM's "Mobile Outreach Training" courses. The other mobile courses are small hotel and lodge management training, hospitality and food safety standard training, hotel operation management training, and local guide training.

From field observations and interactions, it was also noticed that the homestay training package itself is a well-defined and satisfactory package from the contents' point of view. However, the practical and theoretical aspects of those contents and subjects are not balanced. According to the trainees, they mostly deal with the theoretical parts and often spend less time on practical aspects. In addition, contextualizing cost-matters and practicalities of the contents, a freelance homestay trainer in Kathmandu, who has been conducting such courses for the last 20 or more years, shared:

*If homestay training is given with full emphasis on practical parts, it is very costly and time-consuming. Our training events have covered many things as "tips", but not in full or wider detail. Sometimes, training courses are completed with some demonstrational sessions rather than giving everyone a chance to practice in the classroom. If we do so, we need lots of materials and time, which is generally out of our plan, expectations and estimated costs because the organizers only see the training events from "target" perspectives. They usually do not care about how much the participants have learned or will learn, but they are more concerned about the total number of participants because more participants will justify the rationale of the training and cost matters. This is a ground reality. What can we do?*

To summarize this section, content-wise, the homestay operators have gone through different topics and contexts- formal training sessions or observational tours organized by various facilitating organizations. Figure 2 below depicts the key contents of the homestay training and workshops run in the homestay destinations, primarily based on the national curricula/manual developed by the NTB/NATHM.

**Figure 2***Key Contents of Homestay Training*

(NTB, 2011b; Field Notes, 2019-2021)

In addition to those directly related topics, participants are also taught/self-learn about enterprising, local environment conservation, waste management, cleaning campaigning, health and hygiene maintenance, etc. It depends on the institution's purpose, intent, resources, and other factors involved in local capacity-building programs or activities. Below, I elaborate more on the enterprising skills of homestay operators' overall business capacity development.

**Learning Enterprising and Entrepreneurship Skills**

I was particularly interested in observing the cases of different enterprises (income-oriented small businesses) within the homestay families and their neighbours. And I also interacted with some entrepreneurs regarding their learning and initiations. In a *bhalakusari*, research participant Shukrikala said:

*After I learned the skills from a 5-day mudha-making (bamboo and plastic rope-based stool-making) training, I have continuously produced bamboo mudha, which are sold locally. Sometimes, domestic tourists also buy these mudhas. However, due to the larger size of mudhas, foreign tourists only enjoy sitting on them in homestay houses in local tea shops; they do not show interest*

*in buying or taking them to their homes. Annually, I earn about five thousand rupees from a mudha-making enterprise. It is good money for me. My husband does not care about the money; I can spend this money on my interests and needs. It is very good to earn extra money from self-initiated skills. It is not a big business, but from this, we learn how business is done, how prices are fixed, how profits are increased, and how negotiations are made with customers. It is mostly done during my leisure time. It has also helped me to connect with many men and women from local and outside areas.*

Shukrikala, this way, interestingly shared her experiences with this *mudha*-making skills and enterprise. One day, in her yard, I was having a long *bhalakusari* with one domestic female tourist (from Hetauda) about her interest in coming to the area and her preferences for buying handicrafts. She also wanted to buy some local handicrafts, but except for bamboo *mudha*, there was nothing at that time. She said, "*Mudha* is available in Hetauda also; why carry it from here?" She wanted some small-sized crafted things to take home rather than big and voluminous things.

Enterprise always earns money, and it demands good practice. A good homestay practice requires more tourists, and for more tourists, good promotional and marketing support becomes the backbone. A gradual increase in tourist arrivals in the village(s) enhances the confidence of the homestay operators. Learning and capacity-building issues are directly associated with the overall performance of the homestay enterprising.

A report by UNDP/TRPAP (2007) stated that more than 30 types of skills-oriented enterprise-related training courses were given to the local stakeholders during the project period. Likewise, according to locals, the then DDC and VDC offices also organized awareness and skills development training in this area, targeting both men and women. In a *bhalakusari*, the research participant Shanishchara remembers:

*Those (Project) days were very special; we got chances to take part in several training courses, and many organizations were coming to conduct different types of training courses for us. Many organizations gave training, training, and only training; some used to provide only food and snacks, but some also provided cash allowances. While there were cash allowances in the training, we never missed them. Women got more opportunities than men. Nowadays there are very few training opportunities in our village, why?*

Adding her concerns and views, another research participant, Aaita Kumari, lamented that, in addition to a literacy class, she also attended more than six training courses, which provided her with good skills and knowledge for running the homestay business, along with some additional modern farming skills, such as seasonal and off-seasonal vegetable farming, bee-keeping, poultry-keeping, smokeless stove, organic farming system, etc. Supporting her views, one of the then VDC officials (male leader) at the village also remarked that many organizations and projects had poured their inputs into developing capacities of locals, and those training courses—to some extent—helped the participants handle different types of businesses and enterprises in better ways. However, he further added that most of the training courses were of very short duration, and some were just in the name of training.

In the same context, research participant Mangala Devi shared that they once went to the district headquarters for training for just two days. Still, they only had to spend two additional days on travel (going from the village and returning). Then, she always asks: "Why do the training organizers not think about this matter? Instead, it would have been better to take a four-day training in our village". These expressions give a sense that there are many local experiences in giving and receiving new knowledge, skills, and opportunities for more exposure to new worlds. Local organizations always seek more training for their members, no matter where it comes from and where it is held. In this vein, one active lady, who was in the executive position in her cooperative as well, shared her experiences that they were trying to do many things, but due to a limited budget to mobilize and also due to acute knowledge and skills as well as limited networking skills about exploring more training and educational opportunities it becomes hard to get different types of training as per the requirements of the group members.

Furthermore, she shared that a low level of literacy or educational attainment to initiate and run different businesses; it also becomes hard to internalize new knowledge about enterprising, investment, profit and loss, estimation, or alike; for example, "business literacy" (Sharma, 2017). In our *bhalakusari*, Aaita Kumari and Mangala Devi frankly shared their feelings and experiences. I could not stop them from talking about whatever they wanted to say. The matters they shared with me were almost common for the women of the MH, where, in general, people have low levels of formal education and literacy, low levels of monthly or periodical saving and

mobilization in the groups or cooperatives, and mushrooming (fashionable) growth of local organizations without proper facilitation and supports (e.g., Moret et al., 2021 also report similar problems). Nonetheless, long-lived saving and credit groups are perceived to continue to generate positive outcomes for participants and their dependents and can serve as a valuable platform for local programs and initiatives. This process can develop good leadership, trust, and love among members.

For this, Moret et al. (2021) also suggest that there needs to be a mechanism for continually supporting such long-lived groups with targeted capacity development to improve strong practice and self-reliance. According to them, community capacities are not taken only from economic terms but need to be taken as social terms. In this context, research participant Som Maya also shares that only financial matters (economic monies) do not matter much in society since a lot of social earning (or social monies) can be achieved from the local groups and committees. Nevertheless, she indicates that local women desperately need financial and social/cultural literacy.

Her concerns indicated that local groups are not only for "money" but also for better relations and social capital building. They always want more literacy skills and educational gains for a better life and enhanced livelihoods. In different conversations, they always indicate an anticipatory future. Their need for multifunctional literacy to enhance their life skills was also realized during the field study. Perhaps, for this, I was biased toward the notion from Sharma (2014) and Sharma (2017). In this sense, Sharma (2014) advocates for "functional literacy",; and Sharma (2017) also claims that citizens without statistical literacy may be unable to discriminate between credible and incredible information and will have difficulty interpreting, critically evaluating, and communicating reactions to such messages.

Different scholars suggest that not only could formal classes and individual teachings enhance literacy and numeracy in the communities, but regular participatory actions can also increase significant skills and knowledge, including participatory numeracy and business literacy. To support this fact, Carlos (2011) also mentions that "participatory numbers" generated by the community people can be of better quality than numbers extracted by a group of interviewers. Nevertheless, I assert that both the techniques (individual and participatory) could generate a satisfactory level of quantitative and qualitative facts and figures if proper care and attention are given to

the purposes or objectives. This intent requires further cross-checking or validation, a genuine process for any credible inquiry work. These skills of financial and social inquiries can be ensured through an intensive program of multiple literacy development. In my interactions and observations, I found that the connectivity or networking among those disciplines and the commitments of concerned stakeholders were somewhat missing. These missings could be restored through systematic and participatory planning and implementation processes in close coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders. On this front, local teachers and educators must also be trained to communicate new developments and concerns.

Local capacities and leadership can bring many positive changes at local levels to a greater extent. Nyaupane et al. (2020) also suggest that local adaptive skills, along with confidence, are crucial for developing management skills and resilient capacities. These are possible through different supportive interventions. For example, viewing international experience, the rural Indonesian case reported in an international development journal by Untari et al. (2020) also shows that intangible heritage-based original Sumba cloth-weaving businesses have supported the developing local leadership capacities of participating women. In recent developments in tourism, emphasis on sustainable, equitable, and resilient tourism throughout the world is essential (UNWTO, 2020). Achieving equality in tourism is challenging since small entrepreneurs' capacities to tap opportunities are always limited.

In Nepal's case, as Rai (2019) indicates, the entrepreneurs of Nepali small and micro-entrepreneurs (SMEs) have particular ways of acquiring entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, including observation of others' practices, participation in training packages, connecting to the networks, and "learning from the customers" (p. 276). These are possible through dialogues and feedback mechanisms. Rai further claims that the customers' demands, feedback, and suggestions always shape the entrepreneurs in favor of the current context of the marketplace. Relating to such findings with the homestay operators' learning process, there are many similarities among different strategies (learning "habitus") taken by these practitioners.

Local practices and new learning associated with hygiene and sanitation are also worth observing and researching in tourism. One day in an FGD, while displaying the discussed points, some participants added new points, which was a good method of generating participatory information. Later, one leading woman

participant shared her views that she did not notice that they had such valuable experience and opinions since they generated a lot. The day, they also learned many things, things they never realized would deserve such an important value and importance; due to that, they were glad to discuss local homestay learning and management practices and other issues of participatory community development and resource generation.

In this context, elaborating on the need for participatory learning and action practices, Robert Chambers (2012) also says that "in many circumstances, local people learn and are empowered through their appraisals and analyses, and outsider professionals are informed and kept in touch and up-to-date....." (p. 90). Likewise, participants and the trainers could learn from each other in the participatory learning process. Nonetheless, several challenges may arise while initiating such participatory learning and action practices. The challenges are discussed in Chapter IV. According to an FGD with a women's group, they shared such enterprises have been a boon to rural women, which is why regular deposits in the savings group or cooperative have been possible. The chairperson of one of the local saving and credit groups (lady) said:

*Our members are very regular in saving their amounts every month. Their small enterprises and labor jobs have helped generate some cash incomes; owing to these, there is no problem with depositing monthly amounts. They also easily get loans from our savings when they require.*

It is said that there are currently thousands of saving and credit groups (sometimes also called "Self-Help Groups"- SHGs) in Nepal, which are also linked with local cooperatives and finance companies (NPC, 2021). All these efforts are helping rural poor, marginalized, and less exposed women engage in different economic and enterprising activities. SHGs and micro-finance groups have effectively built sustainable leadership capacity in women, substantiated by self-efficacy to lead in daily life (Lamichhane, 2020). It is also advocated that the more the women's leadership capacity is developed, the more their self-efficacy increases. In other words, they feel competent, empowered, and emboldened to participate in decision-making (Bryan & Mendaglio, 2020; Nogueira et al., 2020). Poudel (2013), however, outlined the availability of limited micro-finance services despite the huge potential to generate incomes and reduce the poverty levels of rural men and women. He noted

five main constraints related to the "capacity" of micro-finance institutions' operations to reach the rural poor's doorsteps: accounting, auditing, strategic planning, financial analysis, and portfolio management.

Micro-financing activities, which require lots of training and educational support, must be seen from a "human capability investment" perspective (Baumol & Blinder, 2011). They can develop their bargaining power and grappling skills through group initiatives, performance, and cohesiveness. In this line, Tight (1996) also argued that there are "three levels of benefits" from such education, training, and learning: at the "individual level, at the organizational level; and the level of the society" (p. 73). McKenzie and Woodruff (2014) also mention that, globally, business training programs are popular policy options for improving the performance of enterprises. Likewise, in the context of Nepal, Gosai (2022) found that different micro-enterprises, including handicrafts, could greatly help local women and men, citing a touristic city of Central Nepal- Bhaktapur example.

Nevertheless, I observed that, at present, the local market system is weak; marketing channels are not well developed; thus, they need to be strengthened in the pursuit of providing more benefits to existing enterprises. In this connection, Lamichhane (2021) also suggests that creating an entrepreneurial "eco-system" entails the development of an entrepreneurial mindset as a necessary condition. Viewing from an eco-system perspective, it demands the proper attention of all concerned, from production, promotion, branding, and marketing to consumption. Proper production, quality assurance, labelling, transportation and storage, and proper selling/distribution are major aspects of such an eco-system, which can also be considered from a value-chain perspective. In the Nepali language, there is a famous saying, which is also in practice in the Mahabharat Hills:

*Goth dekhi Oth samma;*

*Aali dekhi Thaali samma*

(From "farm to mouth"; "from terrace to table"; "from farm to fork")

These concepts fully embrace the values of value-chain or conceptions of value-add in tourism and/or other related businesses. It means that all the concerned people/stakeholders are expected to be ready to perform according to business ethics (humanism), including the basic material producers, suppliers, processors or producers, retailers/wholesalers (the market), and finally, the consumers or purchaser

(in tourism case- the guest). Responsible and ethical businesses can ensure such "eco-system" oriented responsible businesses; however, for a long time, "quality assurance in the tourism sector has been a challenge" (Poudel, 2019, p. 12). For all these, basic infrastructure development and diversification in tourism products with concerted efforts are essential to help foster tourism activities and businesses.

### **"We Want to Learn to be More Vocal and Empowered"**

One day, in one instance, research participant Aaita Kumari, in her courtyard, said that the group learning process starts from a close learning group, and she said, "Where we always feel courageous and confident in sharing our inner voices and own choices." She further added:

*When I come to such groups, I always feel comfortable sharing my feelings and experiences without fear or intimidation, as other women also support my voice and encourage me to speak more and more. When there are common voices, we feel secure and also proud while expressing our community voices. We know common voices never hurt a single person, but a single voice may sometimes make the person a victim or a target if any indigestible matters are shared. Thus, we always feel easy to express ourselves in groups.*

There is a general conception that the capability-building and empowerment process begins with involvement in the work and also in decision-making. To enhance the process, adequate knowledge and information are required. Such knowledge, information, and skills are received through different channels, including training, workshops, exposure visits, and so on. According to the literature, Wijaya et al. (2021) also learned that when malnutrition mitigation and community empowerment through the sustainable food reserve program successfully enhanced nutrition status in the communities. In another context, regarding the empowerment process, sharing her experience, one day in the early morning, the research participant Mangala Devi explained:

*In the beginning, before taking any training and opening up the homestay, I used to be afraid of new-comers or strangers in the village; I would not speak to them; I was a very shy woman, even telling my name in front of a group was a difficult task for me; but, now I don't have that habit. I have am more confident. I can speak to any person or any tourist if he/she can speak in simple Nepali with me. I do not understand English.*

As mentioned by other scholars above, my participants also felt "confident speaking in a group" (Volker & Doneys, 2021). Accordingly, at the same time, local voices reveal how tourism development and other associated educational and awareness-raising activities are helping local women bring leadership changes and empowerment shifts. In this context, in a *bhalakusari*, Shanishchara said:

*We have been able to speak more, and also share our more "kura" (opinions/ideas) as compared to before, and nowadays, we are not hesitating to speak to outsiders. It is a good chance we have experienced ourselves in the last 15-20 years.*

Her inner voices indicated that engagement in tourism-related small enterprises—based on local skills/traditions and resources—to some extent can empower women and marginalized people of the society economically and socially.

### **Learning to be Participatory and Inclusive in the Women-led Homestay Enterprising**

Lately, it has been interesting to note that, in some parts of Nepal, there are Dalit (so-called "untouchables" in Nepal) homestays as well. These are growing trends, too (Bhadgaunle, 2022). However, there are some doubts about whether these "Dalit homestays" will have any social stigma or cultural problems. A famous intellectual writer Aahuti (2020), criticizes the hierarchical caste system in Nepal and demands revolutionary actions to enhance Dalit people's participation in every sphere of the developmental processes.

Nevertheless, our societies are gradually starting to realize these facts and recognizing the traditional knowledge and skills that Dalit communities have (Koirala, 2024). Despite such facts, Dalits' opening of homestay businesses has been a new phenomenon in the Nepali homestay sector. As Bhadgaunle (2022) reports, in the case of Aampswara village (Tanahun), presently in the local Community Homestay Committee, out of 11 members, eight are male, and three are female. One woman member in this concern claims that, due to more opportunities in training and meetings and also more exposure chances to males, they always take more benefits than the females do. Here in the Mahabharat Hills, there are more males than females on the homestay committee.

It is well acknowledged that homestay tourism can make economic, social, cultural, environmental, and other multitudinous contributions even in families of low

income, low formal educational attainment, and low levels of governmental support. However, Nepal's tourism development initiatives have always taken momentum on an ad-hoc basis. Owing to this, the tourism sector's real roles are also unexplored, unrecognized, and unplanned. There are many destinations in Nepal where long-term vision and plans are absent. In such situations, tourism runs on an ad hocism, always paradoxically far from the cry for transformative and sustainable approaches. For instance, furthering the discussions of social aspects of rural/homestay tourism, some religious and ethnic or caste-based socio-cultural or "socio-religious" issues (Stiller, 2018) have also played roles in Nepal's tourism towards making it less paradoxical and more/less sustainable.

Among others, as illustrated above, Dalit people's participation in the tourism sector, particularly in homestay, has also been challenging. Many scholars (Bhadgaune, 2022; Kandel, 2011; Kanel, 2019b; Sedai, 2018; Subedi, 2016) criticize that Nepal's tourism sector has not adequately thought about empowering and transforming Dalits and other deprived people through tourism. Bishwakarma (2018), in this context, emphasizes that transformative educators' roles are expected to bring transformative changes in a real sense. He further advocates for creating blissful and respective values of tourism and other local development processes regardless of caste or other differences. Again, he puts it strongly that transformative education is needed to reform a discriminative society.

He advocates for hitting on unnecessary religious beliefs and socio-cultural values and practices that are crucial to fundamentally transforming society. In the same perspective, Foucault (2007) mentions that nothing is fundamental since all these are based on the foundations of power in the society or the self-institution of society, and "there are not fundamental phenomena; there are only reciprocal relations and the perpetual gaps between intentions concerning one another" (p. 166). Singh et al. (2020)—citing a case from Bandipur, Nepal—also discuss the importance of cultural values-based tourism towards strengthening connectedness and sustainability. These statements and advocacies indicate that paradoxism and doubt in sustainability in the Nepali tourism sector need to be well investigated, and possible solutions and alternatives need to be seriously thought/planned so that innovative ideas in the homestay sector can be further explored and up-lifted. Smith (1989) also emphasized innovativeness in the hospitality sector. He claims that the drive to innovate in the

hospitality sector capitalizes on notions of hosts and guests to stimulate people's imagination and suggest ways of relating and engaging with each other.

### **Learning Practices in Homestays in the Mahabharat Hills**

While exploring different ways and sources of learning in connection to homestay tourism development processes in the area, I came across different formal, informal, and non-formal means and sources of learning. These means and sources include traditional knowledge transfer systems, observational tours, and social media/ICTs. In the following section, based on my prolonged observations and interactions, I elaborate on the local contexts of these happening in the real senses in the MH. The participants said that the capacity and confidence to run homestay tourism and associated activities were ignited by the UNDP/TRPAP project (2002-2007) through regular meetings by social mobilizers, workshops, seminars, and many more. While following the major patterns and themes of the information I gathered and analyzed through my observations, *bhalakusari/kurakani*, FGDs, and other interactions, the homestay operators have learned through different ways depicted in **Box-1** below.

#### ***Box 1. Ways and Sources of Homestay Operators' Learning in the Mahabharat Hills***

- i. Learning through traditional ways of intergenerational knowledge transfer
- ii. Learning through self-experience ("learning by doing")
- iii. Learning through training and workshops (formal classes/sessions)
- iv. Learning through observational visits, exhibitions
- v. Learning through peers/groups/networks (community of practice)
- vi. Learning through host-guest interactions and guests' feedback
- vii. Learning through different digital modes/ICTs and media (mass, social)
- viii. Learning through kids

(Source: Author's findings, 2024)

The following sections elaborate on the processes of how the homestay entrepreneurs were able to gain new knowledge and skills, as depicted above.

### **Learning through Traditional Ways of Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer**

I was a "participant observer" in the field. Thus, I visited the homestay owner's bari-land (upland farmland having no irrigation facility) with them. One day, during my initial field visit, I got a chance to visit their bari-land; they happily allowed me to

observe their (daily) agricultural work there, and I also got a chance to get some new information, albeit informally, because note-taking was not possible for me there. At that moment, they were harvesting *tori* (mustard) from there. I also helped them uproot *tori*-plants together. It was a special moment, with some fun for me, which made me a true participant-observer from an ethnographic perspective. I was talking (having *guff-gaff*) to them as well. It was a fun time for me; some sort of nostalgic time also, since my childhood was also spent in such bari-lands in Gulmi district, West Nepal.



(Learning from seniors © Author)

We all were enjoying up-rooting *tori* there. At the same time, a sound came to me, "It is *faapar* (buck-wheat), and it is *bethe saag* (a traditional local winter leafy vegetable, lamb's quarter); do you know, sir? Do you like this *saag*?" He (the male owner) asked me those questions, showing the *faapar-saag* and *bethe saag* in his hands. I hurriedly replied, "Oh yes, I know these vegetables. These are also available in my village, and I love these fresh vegetables very much." I also requested that they cook those vegetables in the evening. After my request, they were also very happy. With these conversations and my engagement in bari-lands and others, I was gradually more familiar with them. At the same time, the man swiftly said, "If you like these types of local things, we do not worry how long you stay here because we have plenty of such local vegetables, and we don't need to go to market for other green vegetables".

After returning from the farmland, in the evening, a big question arose to me: "Don't they grow modern vegetables like cauliflower, tomato, peas, beans, etc., in this area?" I did not ask them instantly because I just wanted to observe their activities through an emic lens. I had hoped that the answers to such questions would emerge automatically on the way to my journey of field research. I was also enthusiastic about learning and adopting the participant observation approach as described by many scholars (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Dawson, 2013; etc.) since this was

my first experience academically exploring everyday life and everyday lived experiences through an advanced qualitative and ethnographic research lens.

On the same evening, I got to eat *makaiko dhindo* (maize flour pudding), *faapar-saag*, and *gundruk ko achaar* (fermented vegetable pickle). I was not demanding the things, but I was requesting them to serve local foods instead of going to the markets for expensive or *bikaase* (modern) vegetables and other imported food items. All these local foods gave me a new taste, an authentic taste, like the tastes of my childhood in my village. The days continued with such tastes, adding some more flavors of local vegetables like *sisno ko saag* (nettle-foilage), *padina* (mint/mentha), *kodo ko dhindo* (millet-flour pudding), *kodo ko roti* (millet-chapatti); *tarul ko tarkaari* (yam), *niuro* (fern), and so many others. The interesting aspect was that the more I liked those things, the more happiness there was because I was eating everything they would provide with special taste and interest.

Even though I wanted to taste *chiuri* (butter tree), a very popular tree in the Chepang area in the MH, it was not possible due to off-seasonality. The man said that nowadays, *chiuri*'s ghee (butter) is hardly available in this village because nobody cares about it, and the young generation does not like to collect *chiuri* seeds. Also, they do not like the taste of it. According to him, so many types of oil packets and cow/buffalo ghee packets are available in the market; thus, local people feel inferior if they use *chiuri*-fruits or ghee. Perhaps due to this, the number of *chiuri* plants is also decreasing in the area. Previously, the Chepangs, culturally, used to give *chiuri* trees to their daughters as dowry, but now all those stories have the stories of *ekaa desh ko katha* (stories of once upon a time). These are the common voices in the MH.

From the very first day, I was thinking and committing myself that "whatever is provided by the villagers, I will accept them, and I won't demand more things that are not available in their home/neighborhood houses." In another sense, I was also trying to be a responsible tourist, a local tourist, a green tourist, and, most importantly, a research student with much flexibility and adjustment. So, how did they learn to collect, grow, and cook such varieties of things? Several questions started emerging within me. This also created a joint learning/sharing process, or collaborative learning (Dawson, 2013; Saldana, 2015). We, both sides, were taking mutual benefits from each other.

Thus, as a new enterprising venture, the homestay adds additional knowledge, skills, and practices to the existing knowledge, skills, and practices. All these efforts help improve efficiency, effectiveness, and impressions. For instance, every household grows flowers based on the season and necessity; however, homestay creates extra demand for flowers around the year in larger quantities, thus needing extra planning, production system, and management.

Likewise, cooking local foods may require some more hygienic precautions and consciousness towards attractive looking with some physical and psychological considerations; for example, cooking *daal* (lentil soup) or *saag-sabji* (green vegetables) in an iron pan/pot may not be a new thing for the villagers, but knowing and telling a scientific reason behind this (the iron-pot-cooked item gives more iron content [nutrient] to the consumer) would add a value in the kitchen for the tourists. This will be beneficial for the host families as a life skill.

In the same manner, hundreds of such cases and examples are associated with better cooking, better preserving (storing), better serving, better eating, and better digesting. New (scientific) knowledge or new observational exposures and training/workshops can add these new and advantageous knowledge types. Thus, locals are also interested in getting more exposure and more (modern/advanced) training to broaden useful knowledge and ideas and make the homestay enterprising easy, attractive, better, profitable, and competitive. The homestay operator and the research participant, Buddhi Maya, shares her experience in this way:

*We know hundreds of indigenous and traditional skills and things, like cutting grasses, taming animals, milking the cows or buffaloes, churning, husk-removing through traditional rice mill/dhiki, grinding with traditional stone-grinder/jaanto, grading, cooking and serving, house cleaning, washing, dish-washing, ploughing, digging, and so many other skills. We learned these generational skills from our grandfather/grandmother, father/mother, elder brothers/sisters, and many other neighbours and relatives. We even learned some local/traditional and new skills from our friends. We also learned many new things like growing new vegetables, cooking different items, saving energy and nutrients while cooking, and so on from our teachers, trainers, and guests; and visiting our relatives' houses, like our maternal house, our mother's maternal house, and so on. They also provided some chances to learn*

*new information, ideas, and techniques/technologies. At the same time, while returning to our home, we bring different types of seeds and saplings from those maternal houses with some farming and harvesting tips. We have many opportunities to learn new knowledge through knowledge-sharing and experience-broadening exercises. Sometimes, we don't realize that learning comes through all these processes knowingly or unknowingly.*

In my observations and *bhalakusari* with her, it was found that she could not properly indicate whether it was the formal, informal, or non-formal type of learning because she was unaware of these academic words. Nonetheless, while relating with expert knowledge in learning practices, the lady said she had many formal and informal opportunities to get new knowledge and skills, including some physical (seeds, saplings, etc.) materials to re-test/re-try the knowledge or practice as an informal business or enterprise. The World Bank (2021) also claims that the informal sector in emerging markets and developing economies accounts for around a third of GDP and about 70% of employment.

While speaking to me, Buddhi Maya and other members also were mixing some English words during our conversations, for example, good morning, tea, breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, ready, early, late, hot, cold, boil, fry, cup, glass, plate, spoon, waste, room, door, hanger, call, etc. I noticed that, gradually, they were becoming habitual with new English words. Her husband also said that mobile phones and YouTube videos (there was internet service through the data package) were also helping to understand and use some English words recently. The village was moving towards better ICT use with the recent availability of central-grid hydroelectricity service.

Parental learning for adults and children is always very important. In this context, after surveying 470 persons—linking seven different types of value domains (educational, moral, religious, political, social, leisure, and community)—Hakoyama and MaloneBeach (2017) found that adult grandchildren saw their educational values as most similar to those of their grandparents. They have also compared such value transfers from gender perspectives, such as grandmothers' influences more on religious matters, grandfathers' influences more on leisure, political and social affairs, and so on.

Since the homestay enterprising is some sort of "total household management" or "total hospitality management within the household" with regular guests and relatives, traditional knowledge and skills transfer systems or intergenerational learning practices play significant roles in the overall learning processes. Traditional/local knowledge systems, like growing different types of food crops, vegetables, fruits, spices, medicinal plants, etc.; and keeping animals for different purposes such as milk, meat, draught power, wool, farm-yard manure, and so on; are continuing in these rural settlements for centuries. Our ancestors were real researchers and have innovated and developed many skills, technologies, and knowledge (Acharya, 2023). Some modifications in such practices are common in all generations and geographies.

Preparing craft-based items (carving), weaving, carpentry, painting, making local medicines and holding primary treatments, cooking different types of local foods, washing and cleaning, singing, music-playing, dancing, and some other types of skills are all traditional knowledge-based skills and practices which are gradually transferred from seniors to the juniors of the household/society (Ember et al., 2007). These practices and technologies could be simple or sophisticated depending upon the level of development in that particular family/society/country. All these processes can also be said to be situated learning (Desforges, 1995). According to Desforges (1995), situation-specific learning and skills have some limitations; they are not always transferable but could be very useful for the local situation and contexts.

Homestay operators' children's formal and informal learning (Baral, 2022) in schools and outside have also benefited the local households, especially in waste management, sanitation, and other social activism-related actions, including "no smoking", "no alcoholism", "no violence against women, children, and senior citizens", "no-jungle fires (*dadhelo*)", "no-begging", "no child marriage", and so on. These activities are further equipped with the child club/green club approaches. For instance, one day, I was walking through the school grounds to reach a local temple, about which, in a discussion the previous day, an issue was raised about its preservation and decoration needs. It was my second visit to the temple to observe the situation closely or for the reality check mentioned by the villagers. Some children stood in a circle on the school grounds and discussed the upcoming World Environmental Day.

At that time, their teachers were not there. They discussed organizing a street drama focusing on environmental crises and conservation practices suitable to the locality. They, at the same time, also discussed the script and the procedures for the child drama. The children were between the ages of ten and sixteen years. They were associated with the local child club. Dahal (2014b) also states that child clubs can contribute to school activities and community affairs in several ways. In the same context, later, I was better informed by the head teacher who said that "the former tourism project taught the skills to initiate some school-based TEAP focusing mainly on local waste (mostly plastic and broken glasses, etc.) management, maintaining hygiene and sanitation in and around school premises, plantation programs, etc.". The head teacher informed me that they had some plans for expanding extra-curricular (co-curricular) activities in school by involving the students in different types of activities, not limiting to sports and cultural programs only but also covering social practices and malpractices, "environmental issues" (Dahal et al., 2020), tourist and tourism management issues, cleaning campaigns, and more.

Local experiences reveal that even eight/nine-grader children can cook food for their families, rear goats/sheep and cattle, and do many other farming and household management things, including singing *bhajan/dohori-geet* (Nepali folk song which is sung between two groups of male and female as forth and back) and other songs, and dancing with their parents. These all have been possible through inter-generational exchanges of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The parents become the main source of such situated learning, transferring their positive values and morality as well.

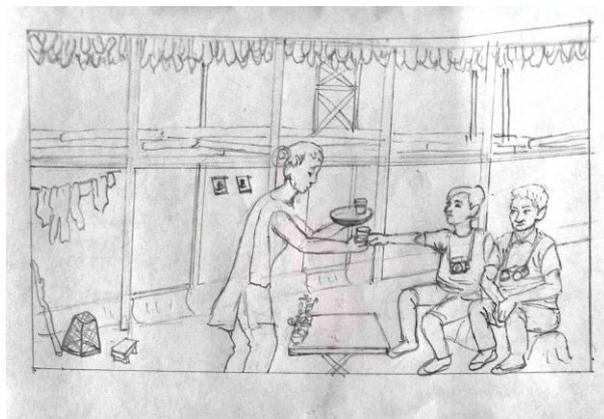
### **Learning through Self-Practice or Experiential Learning**

While presenting the insights related to self-practice-based learning or experiential learning of the homestay operators, we need to discuss the capacity development interests of both individual and community groups. They try to develop their knowledge and skills through self-practice and also by experience. Such processes help them develop multiple capacities and gain overall confidence. Individual and community capacities may involve multiple arenas of community capital development. Community capital may include major social, human, economic, cultural, natural, political, and environmental assets which lead toward sustainable growth and development (Fey et al., 2006; NPC, 2021; Sharma, 2012). The

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also support enhancing local experiences and developing capacities through different provisions with an emphasis on localization of the SDG-intents (NPC, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021). Local key stakeholders and actors, with a community approach, play roles in the overall management of local tourism products, including homestays, as a part of the capacity-building agenda for overall empowerment.

Supporting the reality, one of the former ward chairpersons of the area (male) lamented that when opportunities are created and given, everybody can develop his/her capacity and empower him/herself. Thus, homestays have also supported the creation of new opportunities and

new linkages- both forward and backwards. In this context, in a *kurakani*, a high-school teacher also shared that he was convinced that tourism could help empower local women and other actors as seen in the surroundings. He also emphasized that even the Chepang



(Learning by self-practice © Author)

people/women of the MH, who were left behind, could easily express their opinions and feelings without any shyness and hesitation in recent times, and their children have become advanced now.

He further added that women involved in local tourism activities are now more literate and more aware of developmental and local governance issues. I also noticed that there are some Chepang leaders in the rural municipality/wards, some of whom are women members. Time has brought some changes in these areas, too. However, they still hesitate to send their grown-up daughters to high school and colleges in fear of early self-marriage, locally called as "poila jaane".

Families who are more conscious about self-development or even their own group's (community) development utilize multiple sources to get facilities for such efforts. There were some cases of sponsorships by foreign as well as domestic tourists; when they come to visit the area, then they continue links and connections with the local people and extend some special gift-supports like money, clothes, stationery items, and other special commitments for longer-term education/training as

well as employment supports. According to a local Chepang teacher, in a primary (basic) school of the MH, some tourists regularly send their gifts to the school, and the school manages to distribute them to the students on an equity basis (more needy ones get more, but small supports of general gifts to all the school-students). His claims were further supported by a homestay operator and the research participant, Som Maya, who is striving to learn more and more in different ways in the quest of being a local leader in future. She says:

*Though I could not study much in school (just a 5-grade pass), I still strive to learn more through my son and daughters, local teachers, and the internet (e.g., YouTube, online media, etc.). Now, I have realized that I missed big opportunities for high school education due to early marriage and other compulsions/problems. Also, I have realized that learning never ends in our lives. We must be active and dedicated to self-learning in our "free" time. I am doing so. I have opened my account in a local cooperative and a bank account at a local development bank in the nearby bazaar. My husband supported me in opening these accounts to make me a future Chepang leader in the area.*

My field observations also reveal that early marriages are rampant, and local lives are hard, especially for marginalized people. Limited earnings have put pressure on sustaining their livelihoods. Relatively, the area is deprived of poor quality roads/trails, low-voltage/irregular electricity, drinking water problems, cooking energies (firewood problems), and internet connectivity. After the construction of the unpaved motorable roads in the area, cooking gas cylinders, to some extent, have eased the local lives.

Nevertheless, it is costly to replace the local fire-stoves completely, and it is benefiting only some better-earning families. In another sense, the gas cylinders have helped save some firewood consumption and, thereby, saving local forests/trees. They are gaining new experiences with such developments in the area. The people-forest interface is a core feature of the rural setting, and tourism without these features cannot be considered (NPC, 2020). Lately, dependence on resources has gradually decreased. However, the availability of traditional food crops (*gittha/tarul/vyakur*: different types of yams) has also become difficult due to the depletion of the natural quality forests. Despite all these, a local male leader believes that linking the overall capability enhancement through homestay initiative, to some extent, is broadening the

horizon of the entrepreneur women's engagement in multiple sectors, including economic, social, cultural, environmental, educational, and political. However, he further mentions that they are not happening in a visionary, integrated and coordinated manner. He critically shares:

*Different organizations are isolating many activities without proper coordination and communication-sharing; on many occasions, resource-pouring has been duplicated. The local government's roles are neglected, and the leaders do not have proper visioning, planning, and result-oriented targets. Many things are happening haphazardly. Despite these shortcomings, in the last 15-20 years, several changes in local development, including women's overall development, upliftment, and empowerment, can be felt in this area. Chepangs are no longer those "old Chepangs"; they are now like Magars, Giri-Puris, and Brahmin-Chhetris. In this area, not much difference can be observed. Nowadays, the Chepangs are also empowered; the women members of the family have also changed unbelievably. Now, they do not escape or hide in the corners while seeing or encountering the outsiders; they can now easily face the outsiders and talk freely and frankly.*

His concerns denote that despite low levels of development coordination and less focus on women's development priorities, some changes in the rural area can be realized, and Chepangs also have chances to develop themselves from not only economic perspectives (Adhikari, 2024) but also from social and cultural as well. These deliberate changes also encourage them to be involved in tourism-related businesses, including community-led homestays. Personal and group experiences through "COP" have further shaped their experiential learning, too, with widened capacities to tackle new challenges.

### **Learning through Training and Workshops**

Several studies have already indicated that homestay operators receive different types of opportunities to attend various learning events like training, workshops, seminars, conferences, etc. (e.g., NTB, 2022; TGDB, 2018; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007; VITOF, 2018). In the actual field, my research participant Shanishchara also shares that in the last 10-15 years, many locals have had a chance to participate in one training event, at least, of their interest or need. One of the training programs was homestay management. She also participated in that training,

including two to three others. However, she shares, "... all the participants do not get an equal chance, and also it is the fact that all the trainees do not use their learning into practice equally". She also commented that, although all the training is good in contents or subject matters, applying learned knowledge, skills, and ideas in day-to-day life is challenging.

I gathered their experiences and senses, including FGD, reading their training notebooks (where available), *bhalakusari/kurakani*, etc. According to them, they hear new things in the training and workshop programs, share their own experiences, and participate in several discussions. These processes develop their confidence and capability to engage in and manage homestays. Such events help fulfil the gaps in knowledge, skills, and understandings required for effectively managing tourism enterprises in the locality. In an FGD meeting, the group members also expressed their opinions that the villagers, in total, could receive more than a dozen types of training and workshop activities. I also took some ideas from one former local Social Mobilizer in this context. He highlighted that:



(Training program © Author)

*Along with many technical matters, locals are also equipped with managerial skills. For example, the*

*community leaders of the village were also provided with specially designed five-day training on "Management Capacity Enhancement Training" (he was calling it short MCET), which helped them develop the multidisciplinary capacity of working in a group and also develop personal leadership capabilities including- group facilitation, regular saving practice and saving mobilization, speaking and speech-giving (communication) skills, report writing skills, effective meeting conduction techniques, minute-taking skills, developing gender and social sensitivity, planning and budgeting for the community works, etc. Both male and female members attended the training. That training also helped them enhance essential skills for effective group/committee management, self-planning and development, and homestay management.*

Like the Social Mobilizer, other research participants shared their training experiences, and the tourism project and other supporting organizations in the area provided several types of opportunities. Adding to this context, the research participant Bihi Devi was happy to share that all development programs begin with orientation and training to the locals, "due to which we get opportunities to develop our knowledge and skills for our future."

According to her, the capacity development of the local stakeholders becomes a central part of any community development program. They also indicated that training and study visits were the main beauties of the homestay development program facilitated by the supporting organizations. In the MH, homestay/rural tourism-related exposure visits generally started after the TEAP classes by the facilitating organization(s). The TEAP ran for one to two days, covering mainly the basics of tourism development, the importance of people's participation, women's empowerment from tourism, identification of local tourism potentials, including the possibilities of operating community guest houses or homestays, taking care of the local environment, waste management, etc. These TEAPs were conducted within the village(s), from the school grounds to the courtyard of the communities. Then, to capacitate more, the key actors of the local tourism system were gradually taken on different (outside-the-district) observational tours or exposure visits to famous homestay destinations like Sirubari, Ghandruk, Ghalegaun, and other tourist sites in Gandaki province.

Followed by TEAP and exposure visits, they received more training and workshop opportunities for technical and managerial skills enhancement. I already discussed in previous sections what subjects they are mostly given in such training/workshop programs. The section below describes how "exposures" were made and what the homestay operators experienced relating to their learning and capacity-building opportunities and achievements.

### **Learning through Exposures**

Like in MH, throughout Nepal, as a basic rule or developmental practice, most of the homestay operators get such opportunities for exposure visits to observe best practices or demonstrative places within the country, which is generally organized in groups (UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). In the learning process, non-formal and informal training and education practices create awareness and change KSA (knowledge, skills,

and attitudes) required for homestay management and the local destination development process. In this context, observational exposure visits or study tours have also been a major part of such learning and capability enhancement schemes.

Here, before going further, I want to put a catchy voice of research participant Aaita Kumari, who shared during a *bhalakusari*:

*In the initial stage of homestay development in our area, I got a chance to visit Sirubari in the Syangja district, which encouraged me to start my homestay business. Like me, many women and men in my village have had chances to participate in different*

*observational trips organized by various organizations, including the rural tourism project implemented in the area.*

*We spent two days in Sirubari, but it was very fruitful. We learned so*

*many things from there. We learned how to make our houses good-looking, clean the environment, welcome and serve tourists, and many other things. And the very important thing I learned from there was homestay operators' attractive and clean toilets. After the visit, I also decided to make a clean toilet in the house. Now we have a good toilet, too. You can realize this, sir.*

Another research participant, Bihi Devi, also has a similar story. After Aaita Kumari, in another *bhalakusari* in her courtyard, one day, she shared with me as follows:

*We were taken to Sirubari (the pioneer place of homestay in Syangja, Nepal – author) for a 2/3-day trip, and, by seeing and interacting with the locals, we learned many things about homestay establishment and management from there. I was very much impressed with the well-cleaned toilets they made in their village. After returning to my village, I also forced my husband to make a toilet in the courtyard, and he was ready to accept my proposal. The tourism project also provided some financial and materialistic support for this purpose. That was my first prioritized commitment after that successful trip,*



(Exposure visit © Author)

*and within three months, we constructed a toilet linked with a plastic tank and a tap for flushing and cleaning. I will never forget that trip. Learning-based visits are always good for us rather than long "gangan" (lecturing only on theoretical or rhetorical matters) in the classrooms.*

These opportunities help create awareness, trigger their motivation, and develop positive attitudes, visualizing many things from "it-can-be-done"-attitudes. The term attitude means the totality of beliefs and values that cause human behavior to be what it is, and the term values refer to motivations of human behavior towards particular ends (Jhingan, 2010). In this context, Crow and Crow (2008) add that attitudes developed early are not easily eradicated. They may take some time to replace with new attitudes and behaviors.

Similarly, another story comes here. In the initial stage of my field studies, one day, or I can say the second day of my second trip/stay, and on the way to their (my host family's) *bari*-land with them in the morning, I automatically got the answer of my question, "How do you welcome the tourists?". The homestay operator, Shukrikala, again shared that she had also visited Sirubari village long ago with the help of a tourism development project working in the area. She said that she learned many things from the exposure tour but was mainly impressed with three things: welcoming the tourists, maintaining the cleanliness and sanitation of the house and surroundings, and giving house code numbers or serial numbers to each homestay in the village. She wanted to give credit to Sirubari for those specific learning and motivational benefits. According to her, she learned how to welcome and farewell to the guests so nicely from Sirubari. It was mainly associated with group tourists, and later, they realized that a certain (advance) time was required for necessary preparations for collecting flowers, making garlands, etc. Without prior information, it would be hard for the villagers to prepare and to be gathered to welcome the guests.

In the FGD, research participants also shared that some of them in the homestay group had gotten a chance to see Kathmandu, the historic capital city, for the first time due to training opportunities. Visiting famous tourist places in Kathmandu, like Pashupati Nath temple, Swayambhu Nath, Thamel, and many other sites, they felt that the training itself was a good opportunity to learn, but it also provided a good chance to visit other famous places of the capital too. During the visit, they were also surprised to see Thamel's tourism activities and became amazed

to see hundreds of tourists in a day, which was very interesting for them. "Thamel was far bigger than Sauraha, and many tourism activities could be observed there", said Buddhi Maya, who had already been to Sauraha of Chitwan. One day, during a short *kurakani*, she said, "We are in a paradox, whether to prefer the training conducted within the village or outside the village?" Such paradoxes were also raised in FGDs. From such concerns by the participants, I was also trying to find meaning- why do some people prefer on-site training, and some prefer off-site (outside) training? Is there any gender difference in such opinions? Is there any other hidden agenda behind each person's logic?

At the same time, the participants got a chance to observe both eco- and cultural tourism development of Sauraha (Chitwan), Amaltari (Nawalparasi), Nagarkot (Bhaktapur), Patleket (Kavre), and many other sites of Bagmati province including Goljung, Gatlang, and Briddhim of Rasuwa district. Through such efforts, the existing and potential homestay operators were able to acquire different ideas on how to proceed with homestay development in the area. Similarly, these exposures also broadened their knowledge and helped change their attitudes towards developing and sustainably managing homestays in the MH, a new commercial venture in the area.

And interestingly, to some extent, during the exposure visits, the participants also learned some skills through close observations of the host family activities. Those skills included cooking local food items, maintaining sanitation and hygiene, and better housekeeping. The research participants' expressions also indicate that they had at least one opportunity to be exposed to famous rural tourism/homestay destinations, as indicated above. Research participant Mangala Devi also articulates that those tour activities motivated and encouraged each participant to do something or actively engage in homestay enterprising after completing the observational tour.

Through such observational visits, indigenous/traditional knowledge and skills are also transferred. Indigenous and local knowledge is knowledge produced by and/or distinctive to a particular cultural group or any loosely defined group of resource users (e.g. homestay group) in a given area, and such knowledge can be categorized into three types: individual, distributed, and community (Maden, Kongren & Limbu, 2009). In tourism, indigenous and local knowledge plays crucial roles from various perspectives (Abdullah & Stringer, 1999; Bhutia et al., 2022). Homestay, a

type of cultural tourism, is a blend of indigenous/local knowledge and new knowledge. However, the new knowledge is influenced by colonial, hegemonial, and cultural dominance perspectives (Abdullah & Stringer, 1999; Macedo, 1999). Challenges in local indigenous knowledge and practices are rampant even in this post-colonial time. Due to over-globalization and over-westernization, the new generation has been less conscious about local language, culture, foods, and so many such things. In this context, giving importance and high priority to local traditional foods, languages, and cultures is an essential task for sustainable tourism promotion and local development. According to Uprety (2018), if all traditional and indigenous food items are preserved and promoted, they can greatly help with cheap and easy nutrition, self-sustained food safety, and cultural tourism purposes. These can be promoted through rural/CBT/and homestay tourism with proper orientation and learning activities to use local, traditional, and organic foods.

In the area, I observed different activities undertaken under the homestay and rural community tourism development initiative have been helpful for the men and women to raise their socio-cultural sensitiveness and awareness, which are cornerstones of pro-culture, pro-social, and pro-environment development works. Local participants' observational visits and exchanges have also provided them with opportunities to better understand the reality of actions led by different communities, including *Aama* leaders (*Aama Samuha*/Mothers' Group).

The community actors' study tours also provided the participants with more opportunities to learn about participation and overall empowerment processes, particularly of women, marginalized communities, and many other disadvantaged, which was realized through several interactions by the participants, for which I was observing their actions and voices through feminist lenses. I also realized in the field that it is crucial to raise critical mass. Several authors have discussed the roles of such masses in escalating their voices and choices in different spectrums of development and empowerment functions. Critical masses are ensured through different mechanisms such as quotas, special nominations, etc.

Despite such arrangements, Iyer (2019) advocates that perhaps quotas need longer to work, or perhaps they work better in non-political than political contexts. Empirical research on feminism in practice in Uganda (Mwachi, 2022) demonstrated that enhanced women's leadership training and roles had broadened their participation

in local developmental processes and other affairs. Consequently, she reports that they also play roles in championing women's issues in their communities, including capacity building of local women and appreciating other women. Pasa (2021), in Nepal, also found that informal education provided to women in the process of developing local tourism has greatly helped in developing their leadership and inclusive conversational skills. For this, the practice of inclusive education is also important. In the same respect, NPC (2020) claims that access of girls and boys to free quality primary and secondary schooling, access to quality early childhood development, and equal access for women and men to affordable quality technical and vocational education and training, and youth and adults with relevant skills for employment.

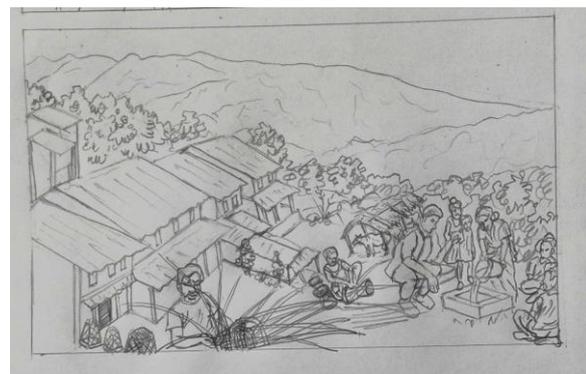
The NPC has also mentioned that the above concerns are priority indicators in inclusive education (2024). However, according to Bagale (2015), Lamsal (2023) and Paudel (2024), TVET programs in Nepal are fragmented, and these are not directed to the needy people, not implemented in an integrated, systematic and strategic manner, including the absence of key elements of sustainable development, including values, ethics, knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Tremblay (2006) identifies that these initiatives have limited collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders (i.e. market, community, industry).

Through my field observations too, I found that households with more field visits and exposure opportunities, as well as more connections, could introduce and adopt new seeds, plants, technologies, ICT-based gadgets, etc, including a good role in enhancing contextual learning (Chapagain & Neupane, 2020), reducing personal/social misbehaving and malpractices. As highlighted above, certain social malpractices and misbehaviour could also be observed in many homestay/(rural) tourism destinations. They may not happen regularly, but occasional misbehaviour or bad ethical conduct is reported in many destinations. Linking to the context, a homestay operator (non-participant) lady in the area mentioned that they were very much concerned about reducing the "bad" things, protecting local forests and water resources, making the foot trails and roads waste-free, and also trying to reduce plastic and chemical use. which were also learned more during such exposures facilitating the process of learning by seeing/observing.

A similar experience was shared by one of the NGO workers (female, Chepang), saying that women-focused training and educational support programs are booming in the area, due to which women's exposure and learning have been on the rise, which process, according to her, is ultimately contributing to overall capacity development of the participants. Furthermore, the former project official in the district, in a short *kurakani*, claimed that the homestay operators, compared to other non-participating men and women, obviously get more opportunities for enhancing their knowledge and skills, expanding the business through micro-finance support, product enhancement, linkages with markets, sponsorship support by tourists and others, and business literacy exposure. However, my observations and realization reveal that there are still big gaps between "understanding" (knowing), wishes, and actual "doings". Study tours or exposures mostly help boost motivation, but the actual practice requires other supplementary learning and complimentary support or intensive planned facilitation with proper synchronization.

### **Learning through "Communities of Practice"**

Peer groups and networks (also called "Community of Practice"- CoP) (Wenger, 2004) have also played key roles as learning sources in the process of homestay initiation and development in the study area. The homestay entrepreneurs have learned many things from their communities, who have also been practising similar homestays/rural tourism and agricultural production systems for a long time. Principally, according to Wenger (2004), locals or professionals use CoP as one of the major learning sources/methods to equip themselves, in which they share knowledge, passion, concerns, and ideas among the team members (e.g. friends, groups, communities, networks, etc.) so that they can learn how to do the things better as they interact regularly.



(Learning from peer © Author)

For instance, one day, in the initial stage of my field visits, I was having breakfast at Mangala Devi's homestay. She served pan-cake and a cup of tea. At the same time, I asked her why she prepared

pan-cake instead of making other traditional (*raithane*) items such as millet bread, wheat bread, beans, etc. She instantly replied:

*Actually, I wanted to offer a new item for you, because you eat almost the same types of food every day. I know that even if you stay in other homestays, you get almost similar items that are easy to prepare and easy to serve. Everybody wants to offer habitual foods only. But today, I tried a new item, a pancake. I learned to make this item from my friend, who had a short training on small hotel lodge management in Bharatpur, Chitwan. She is very good at making pancakes and other non-traditional items. Thus, sometimes I call my friend when I am confused about cooking new things, such as special soups and different types of cakes—including pan-cake—and I get immediate solutions from her. She also asked me if she was having any problems. These types of mutual help provide us with a lot of support and confidence.*

Taking meaning from her voice was easy for me. We can learn many things from our peers, co-workers, networks and so on. Wenger (2004) further suggests three essential characteristics of CoP: the domain (identity-based interest group), the community, and the practice. Likewise, according to Carvalho and Santos (2021), peer learning or learning from the community is also a common practice because it is a learner-centered approach which facilitates the development of soft and technical skills (Siemens, 2004). It is considered one of the most effective ways to learn fast, and it also suits local contexts.

Peer learning is common not only in academic fields but also in community (informal and non-formal) learning processes as well. These perspectives give the sense that multiple connections and networking activities are useful in gaining new knowledge and enhancing mutually encouraged teaching-learning processes. In these processes, learners share information, ideas, views, and whatever in their networks and among different peer groups. In the same context, Fischer et al. (2003) also state that learning from "others" may happen from colleagues, friends, mentors, parents, relatives, and even from children. And, accordingly, they further claim that new knowledge- of what, how, and why helps meet the new challenges from the complex natural, social, and spiritual worlds more successfully and enjoyably.

In this perspective, to bring more illustrations from the study area, some homestay entrepreneurs have even started their links with international friends

through the tourists visiting the area and with the village's foreign job-holders (friends in the diaspora). In this context, based on a study in West Nepal, GIZ Nepal also found that some of the homestay operators have learned to run the homestay businesses from their friends and relatives (Sedai, 2018). Obviously, in Nepal, developing informal and formal groups and networks have been a key phenomenal means of shared or participatory learning, a common practice of CoP.

Generally, social learning and mutual norms become valuable assets for participatory learning and action in community-based initiatives or CoP. To link this context, according to Bourdieu (1990), these learning and sharing processes help form different capitals in the society: i.e., cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, i.e., educational or technical qualifications), economic capital (material wealth) and symbolic capital (i.e., accumulated prestige or honor). However, they need proper practice or actions to achieve the goals (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For this, as Wallace and Wolf (2008) noted, people manoeuvre, develop strategies, and struggle over desirable resources. The homestay operators are also doing their best to learn from each other, and in such cases, they feel more comfortable than in any learning style(s). In this context, additionally, based on research in Nepal, Bhusal and Pandeya (2022) also suggest that informal forums could be a good mechanism to enhance local people's learning and participation in local development and governance issues.

In this process, many youth groups, women/mother groups, farmers' groups, and forest users' groups/networks have been encouraged by governmental and non-governmental entities of development for shared learning and action. In the same light, pointing out the importance of network-based learning for children in Nepal, Dahal (2014b, p. 43) also advocated for enhanced and encouraged networking among child-led organizations. This may, to some extent, apply to youngsters and older people too. In rural areas, for example, learning green (eco-) practices through peer learning or CoP is very common, and it was also found in the study area. The homestay operators and other members of the local homestay committee are also advised to learn and adopt green practices in the homestay system where applicable.

In this context, a homestay owner in Nawalparasi (Amaltari)—who is also associated with HOFEN—reportedly shares that homestay members are encouraged to practice green concepts in all activities, such as welcoming, serving foods and

drinks, health and sanitation, local tours, handicrafts and souvenir making, and so on. In such actions, mutual sharing, learning, and small group networking have worked better and further. The "Homestay Operation Directive 2010" has also guided the homestay operators to systematically adopt environment- and local community-friendly homestay enterprising in Nepal. Local participants also expressed that learning activities are held in groups and at regular frequencies. Research participant Shanishchara's short voice is noticeable in this case:

*When we formed a women's group in our village, it started providing many opportunities for us. For example, we started regular savings and credit activities; we held regular meetings and knowledge-sharing gatherings, and so many others.*

These reflective tales and voices tell us the empirical truth that homestay development and other rural tourism-focused—including other sustainable development efforts are—directly or indirectly, supporting women's learning and capacity development endeavors. The learning-induced activeness, engagement, and leadership (productive) roles are helping to empower the local women and men. Pasa (2021) also found similar cases in the Syangja district in West Nepal. He stated that the close nexus between tourism and education could easily be observed, which most often are held in groups or networks.

According to Downes (2006), local people's groups and other networks can also be a good source of learning new knowledge and sharpening the learned knowledge and skills in several subject areas related to development and management. In this regard, Bell (2009) also mentions that group emphasizes sameness, order and control, borders and memberships, and additive/cumulative knowledge. According to him, a network further emphasizes diversity, autonomy, openness, and emergent knowledge. Both close groups and wider networks are vital for effective initiation and facilitation. The learners always make an effort to find some particular sources of information. Bell (2009) and Downes (2006) state that learning happens when different connections and information nodes are interlinked. The training/education facilitators help strengthen these interlinks through a facilitative process. Nevertheless, there are some challenges in such facilitation.

For example, in Nepal, the central organizations also plan capacity development activities for the locals, and the same happens at the regional/provincial,

district, and local government levels (TGDB, 2016; TGDB, 2024). Also, it is blamed that all organizations target the same beneficiaries knowingly or unknowingly. Owing to this reason, some participants at the local level have direct connections with top-level resources; thus, they can reap lots of opportunities for observational tours/exposures and training and workshops. In my observation also, I found some very active participants who have training in water and sanitation management, homestay management, seed management and seed-money (micro-credit) management; interestingly, they also represent local school management to pasture-land (community forest) management.

However, some genuine participants (needy but less exposed, less connected, less advantaged) have rarely gotten such chances. Thus, to be reflective and critical, it becomes evident that the more connections with different nodes of information there are, the more opportunities arise in the hands of an individual. Locals also opine that the development facilitators are anticipated to observe, analyze, decide, and rationally facilitate such (disadvantaged) participants or real beneficiaries. While investigating the real situation in my field regarding community homestay learning and earning practices, I came to draw some observations as follows:

First, not only for learning purposes but also for multiple objectives, rural dwellers usually form groups. Such groups may include women's groups, youth groups, forest users' groups, vegetable growers' groups, livestock-based groups, water users' groups, community electricity management groups, etc. While forming such groups, a geographical base becomes one of the major criteria. At the research site, several groups are formed, like the ones mentioned above. Also, being a rural tourism site, a homestay group/committee exists in the study area. As I have already mentioned, the group has members from different ethnic backgrounds: Chepang, Giri/Puri, Magar, and Brahmin/Chhetri. Ethnically, the village has a mixed society.

Second, they have made rules, norms, and regulations for smoothly operating the community homestay. All 11 members of the Committee jointly formulated those rules and are trying to abide by all norms as stipulated. Third, locals have received external facilitation for developing such norms and rules, which are crucial to running the homestays. Fourth, in this area, the homestay group combines the members of two settlements (*Gaun*) of the area, nine from one site and two from another, making a total of 11 members.

There is a common practice that the bigger group could be shown to outsiders, increasing the negotiation and bargaining capacity and commonly institutionalizing the local tourism development norms. In Nepal, there is a trend that the bigger the group, the larger the amount of support from the facilitating GOs/NGOs and others. In this context, in an additional *bhalakusari*, one male member adds, *Ek thuki suki, hazaar thuki nadi* (one person's effort may fail, but many peoples' efforts produce something special, trans.). He also believed that the bigger the group size, the higher the efforts and bargaining power. Fifth, the homestay group (committee) is dominated by male members, although most of the activities at the household (homestay business) are performed by females.

Sixth, although the homestay management committee is relatively inactive during the post-quake reconstruction and COVID-19's devastating periods (NPC, 2020; Pandey, 2021; Pageni, 2021), most of the committee members are well familiar with the major roles of the homestay committee. As per the Homestay Operation Directive (GoN, 2010), there are at least fifteen types of roles, responsibilities, and rights (3"R"s) that are clearly illustrated in the Directive. During our *bhalakusari* and FGDs, homestay members were trying to recall those roles and rights enlisted in the Directive.

Seventh, many homestay operators believe that domestic tourism is a major driver in sustaining Nepal's homestay rural tourism businesses. At least there were some domestic visitors during my observational stays in the study area. It was, nevertheless, very hard to meet foreign tourists on most of my visits. There were extremely rare cases of encountering foreign visitors in the area. According to the local guide, foreign tourists have rarely arrived in these areas since the devastating earthquake of 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighth, local traditions and cultures have changed rapidly in the MH. Even local religions have changed unpredictably (Rai, 2015; Rai and Chepang, 2018). It is also evident that where there is much dominance of one culture or religion over one's cultures, there are some resistances in different forms, including change of religion, leaving the traditional cultural practice, and trying to adopt the new one. This indication corroborates Gautam's (2017) finding that new generations, especially youths, tend to show many types of resistance. However, the locals do not like all such changes. For instance, one local female leader expresses:

*If this change continues in the next two to three decades, there will be no original religion and cultures (including sub-cultures- author) in this area. Religion has been a "trade", a "commodity on sale", and an item for frequent transactions. It's amazing, it's unbelievable. I am also surprised that nobody is serious about such serious matters.*

The instances here signify that the area has been adopting a new religion in the last few years, which has arrived in the village as a mission. In this thesis, I wouldn't highlight religious faiths and the change of religion in the area much. However, one fact is clear: changing political and developmental scenarios have directly affected local cultural practices, such as dress, ornaments, foods, drinks, etc. Many scholars (e.g., Kandel, 2011; Pradhanang, 2000) have noted that if the local identities are missed, how can the image of culture-based rural tourism be sustained? It is also dubious that increasing tourism in any area can affect the local cultural practices—sometimes, it may even vanish if proper care is not given. This has been a big question among many stakeholders. While holding *bhalakusari*, a local female leader in the village shares her experience in this way:

*Young couples aged between 30 and 40 have swiftly changed their traditional religions and cultures. Once they are converted to another religion, they become active in changing others, too. It is like a "dadhelo" (jungle fire). It seems like a "movement". It seems like a "campaign". We are just observing this. What to do and what not to do, we don't know".*

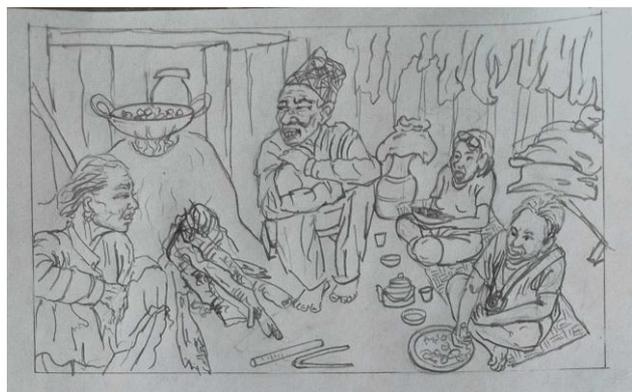
Thus, realizing these suffering facts, tourism, one of the prime sustainable development pillars, is expected to focus on rural and remote parts to uplift local culture and deprived people's concerns and status, including Dalits' participation, in the tourism sector. These efforts could help remove all types of discrimination, as mentioned above, and make them ready for unequal human, economic, social, physical, and natural capital-based rights with full humanism and humanity. Inter-group learning is also practised for forming and abiding by ethical roles and codes. Among my research participants, Buddhi Maya was somewhat conscious about religious and cultural values. In our every talk, she referred to her religious perspectives and minimum norms, such as: "We shouldn't hurt anyone"; "We shouldn't cheat anyone (tourists)"; "Our hard labor at present will produce sweet fruits later on", and so on.

One day, in the morning, I was reading a book entitled, "Great Thinker of the Eastern World" (McGreal, 1995). This book describes Buddha and Buddha's philosophies, and one line (p. 161) says, "Life in this world is one of suffering" (p. 161). While reading the line, I reflected on the dots and lines of my field notes as expressed by the participant Buddhi Maya., I was also concluding myself that (perhaps) the Eastern philosophies have taught people to do hard labor (for example, Gita says, *karmanye baadhikaaraste maa phaleshu kadaachana* ("You have every right to work but not expecting the fruits out of it; let the focus be not on the fruits and never be inactive", trans.); and not to cheat anyone, and so forth. These ethical codes of conduct also apply to ethical homestay management. The Homestay Directive also accommodates those values in its section under "*Aachaar-samhitaa*" (CoC). Moreover, the COP has been a reliable source of mutual learning, motivation, and day-to-day practices.

### **Learning through Host-Guest Interactions and Feedback**

The next story starts here. One day, I was sitting on a locally made *chakati* (paddy-straw-mat) at the *dalaan* (a traditional balcony) of a homestay, and I noticed some bottles of jam, their color a deep red. At the doorstep of the house, the husband and wife were engaged in a lively *kurakani*. They had no children at home (two sons migrated for work). They were laughing at each other and talking to each other. I also praised their companionship for many days because I found their very good bonds at every moment. And, suddenly, I remembered the lines of Hunt and Colander (2014), as they say (when there are no kids at home/with parents): "Companionship is now the strong bond between the couple" (p. 156). This is a universal phenomenon, perhaps. I noticed that the day was very lively and close.

I got a good opportunity to talk to them. Immediately and spontaneously, I asked them: "Where did you get these jam



(Host-guest interaction © Author)

bottles from?" The husband (because his wife had already been to the kitchen for cooking) quickly replied that the jam was made of locally available fruit- plum. I then

noticed that it was plum-jam; thus, it was deep red. I further inquired with him about his learning. And, he added:

*Sir, I made this jam from my plums. I have 4-5 big plum trees, and I can not eat them all. I cannot sell them all due to market problems or the lack of interest from the locals. Thus, I tried to make jam for the first time. I learned this from a domestic tourist who came here from Dhankuta some three years back. He taught me how to make jam from plums and pears. According to his suggestion, I also tested it for the first time. Let's try. We don't have bakery-house-baked bread here, but we can also use it in locally-made wheat bread, millet bread, and buckwheat bread. This is my first try. If it succeeds, I will make more next year and can try to sell in the nearby markets, too. Like jam-making, we have learned so many new things from tourists. This is one more benefit of homestay. We did not realize this before, but now we have fully realized that tourists not only learn from us, but we also learn a lot from them if we desire to maintain the culture of mutual sharing. I know a homestay is a good place to share mutual experiences and learn.*

In the same line, but in another context, research participant Aaita Kumari's husband also shared with me that he got a special chance to learn from a foreign tourist staying in his homestay for a few days. Based on his experience, the tourist also taught about green vegetable farming using human urine. After that, he practised using human urine in green vegetable production. There is a general trend that most homestay operators want to remain in touch with the tourists they serve.

This phenomenon equally applies to both domestic and international tourists. As observed, for domestic tourists, there is usually no problem with connections via different means, including phones, SMS, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media, all in Nepali language or "Roman" writings. They all can be contacted if there is a real desire to remain in connections ("pull factor"). Similarly, Baniya and Poudel (2016) also highlight that, for domestic travel motivations, pull factors have more roles than "push factors". They found pull motives as easy access, affordability, varieties in products and services, local history and culture, etc. Equally, domestic tourists' push factors were found, such as escaping daily life, seeking relaxation, sightseeing variety, etc. Homestay operators' continued linkages or connections with such tourists could also become a pull factor in revisiting the site, being more

attracted to local culture, hospitality, and affinity (Qiu et al., 2021). According to Dhakal (2021), mutual sharing and learning are further instigated through such a process.

On several occasions, guests also learned many things from the hosts; MH-homestay participants learned a lot from the homestay destinations like Sirubari, Ghalegaun, etc., and similar examples are also from abroad. For instance, in Malaysia, as noted by Inversini et al. (2022), travelers can have different types of experiences of transformative learning (Fleming, 2018; Mezirow, 1991) through the process of immersion and co-creation. However, in this section, we are more concerned about host-learning through the guests or tourists. With several observations and interactions in the area, it has been clear that homestay guests also teach many things to the homestay family members directly or indirectly. In this context, the local guide and the "gatekeeper" of my research program, on one occasion, frankly shared:

*I have learned many English words from my tourists, and they also provide suggestions for guiding techniques and processes. They even provide immediate feedback when they do not understand my expressions, explanations, or interpretations. They instantly ask me to repeat again and again. This instant feedback process also helps me polish my learning level in the language, technicality, and guiding techniques and behavior. But, certainly, they will also learn a lot from us. They learn about our nature, culture, history, religion, and so many other things.*

From the above observational stances and talks, one can assume that tourist places also have more opportunities to learn from the guests. Both hosts and guests can create a joint world of mutual learning (Inversini et al., 2022). An empirical study in Uttaranchal (India) by Patwal et al. (2023) also found that the local hosts were also learning about outsiders' cultures through interactions and joint performances so that they were further motivated to preserve their own cultures. MH experiences also reveal that visitors could be a good source of knowledge transfer. In the same context, I have another observation. Research participant Buddhi Maya has had a very good experience learning English words from tourists. She was sharing like this:

*Once, we had a very good tourist lady from the Netherlands, and she stayed for more than a week. She did not know how to speak Nepali. And, she came here alone, without any guide or assistance. Thus, she spoke English using her*

*"ishara"- body language (gestures and postures- author). We could not understand the words, but we understood her "ishara" well. And we gradually became habitual in listening to her (few words) and seeing her body language. We also learned many English words in daily use from her communications. She also learned so many Nepali words and "ishara" from us.*

One day, at the beginning of my field research, I was just roaming around the homestay village with a local teacher, who was also enjoying voluntarily guiding me and chatting with me. And, at last, we resorted to the yard of the homestay where I was staying. The family was busy when the younger brother and sister-in-law were at home and waiting for the green vegetables (*saag*, the vegetable of buckwheat) to arrive from the bari-land. They had already cooked *daal* and *bhaat* (bean curry and rice) and later cooked the *saag*. I realized rice (paddy and maize), lentil soups, and seasonal green vegetables are common food items in this area. When I was called "*sir khaana khana aaunus*" (Please come for lunch, sir), then I washed my hands with the water given in an *amkhora* (water pot). That was a common steel pot, like in other non-Chepong places.

I went to the kitchen and sat on the mat on the floor. The serving lady was in her late 20s. She had two small children (daughters). It was also strange for me: two children at just 20! I remembered the legal restrictions of the government; I also remembered the everyday advertisements through various media, such as: "*bihewaari, bis barsha paari*" (बिहेवारी, बीस वर्षपारि) (Let's have marriage only after the age of 20 years.). Such rules and messages are not properly working for the villages of MH. But, for locals, it is just a simple matter; they feel the matter is "god-gifted".

Now, I was on the mat, sitting on the mud floor. While serving the lunch to me, her husband helped to look after them but sat nearby me. The husband was interested in holding *kurakani* with me. I was treated like a guest, with some formalities, too; I could guess because his wife (I said "*bahini*" /sister) asked for every detail about me, such as the district of birth, marital status, and the number of kids, whether a *ghar* (house) is in Kathmandu or not, and so on. I simply replied to all the questions she asked. I guessed those answers would work for her husband too, although, at the same time, her husband was also asking me some follow-up questions like, "What do your wife and son do now?" etc. I also simply replied to them.

The kitchen floor was brushed just now after cooking everything. I tried to observe minutely in the kitchen. There were some steel plates, bowls, and glasses, and I was asked, "*Sir, haatle khaane ki chamchaale?* (Whether you like to eat by your hand or need a spoon?)". I said, "I don't need a spoon. I will eat with my hand." After my answer, she felt a bit comfortable as there was no spoon nearby, which would create tension in finding a spoon from their store or other places. I was trying to understand the meaning of our symbolic conversations at first. But the next day, I told her to manage a spoon if they had already got such spoons and forks at home before the lunch was prepared. That advance request allowed her adequate time to search and manage the things available at home. My feedback also worked for them.

This situation taught me that understanding "symbolic interaction" is crucial to ethnographic inquiry. Although I was eating, I continued to have conversations with them. I was convinced that sometimes quality information could be collected from these informal talks, like while working in the fields, cooking/eating, walking, etc. Host-guest relations are also further strengthened for future connections (Hada, 2024). Learning from tourists and the tourists' learning from the locals is possible. It is evidenced practically. I came up with so many examples.

What do the tourists say about this? Accordingly, I also tried to understand some selected tourists' cases to better know their perceptions. It was revealed that the hospitality and other services did not meet the expectations of domestic or international tourists. One domestic tourist (male) from the capital city, Kathmandu, shared with me that the tourism brand of the area is so attractive, but the products and services are not ready at that par. He was saying that city-based tourists usually come for a perfect stay to "take a break from the city" and enjoy the wonders of the nature and cultures of these pristine areas; nevertheless, finding those beauties in actuality hardly happens; thus, branding and local actions need to be synchronized for better satisfaction of tourists.

Similarly, an intellectual tourist from a nearby town (Hetauda, Makawanpur) opined that the linkages between Mahabharat Hills Tourism products and other associated tourism products are not happening in the real sense, causing less effectiveness of the provincial tourism development endeavors of Bagmati Province. Likewise, while visiting the site—based on his experience as an international tourist (male) from Denmark—he said that the area would need lots of cultural preservation

and development works to make the area an attractive destination with appealing and competitive features. "The level of services and the quality also need to be increased," he shared in our *kurakani*. From all those symbols and connotations, it can be realized that local tourism needs more attention to impress and satisfy tourists, be they domestic or international. During my observations and from the FGDs also, I noted that due to extremely low arrivals of tourists in these areas, local and/or outside investors are also not attracted to make investments in new avenues. Community homestay owners in the area are also less encouraged to improve the facilities, and pour more money in the name of homestay development. Lately, these have also barred their continued mutual learning processes through host-guest interactions/*kurakani*.

### **Learning Through Media (Mass, Social) and Digital Modes/ICTs**

During my observational stays in the homestays, I also quite interestingly observed many types of ICTS being used by the locals. Many households have radios, and often, they turn on the radios almost the whole day. Booming FM stations have further created more interest in listening to radio since they also cover local news and events. As a regular practice, the radios are hung on the walls and kept turned on by the seniors of the household every day. News, songs, special opinions, radio drama, advertisements, etc., are the programmatic items broadcast by such radios. In my observations, I also found that male members were more interested in listening to news and views; however, female members were particularly interested in songs, drama and advertisements.

According to Mangala Devi's husband, nowadays, local FM radio stations are good sources of information and entertainment ("infotainment").



(Learning from media © Author)

He also believes that different types of ICTs, including radios and TVs, are good sources of capacity development and empowerment. In the same context, Mangala Devi shared that her husband was fond of radio programs and loved to listen to them by sitting in the lobby or the courtyard. Sometimes, along with her husband, she also listens to such radio programs. This way, radio has been a good

friend of them for knowing and learning many things about the country, about local places, etc. She also shared, "For the first time, long ago, I also got a chance to get new information about homestay development program through this radio". They feel that national radio and local FM stations give so much new information along with entertaining songs. She further shared, "We don't know how to read newspapers, but we can easily learn many things from this radio station. It is our good friend."

During my interactions and special *bhalakusaris* with the homestay operators, I also found that homestay entrepreneurs have a keen desire to find new ways of learning through more connections, networking, and communications. They were very positive towards linking with new avenues, be they village-based, district-based, or any other type. Despite poor connections between mobiles and other telecommunications means or ICTs, local people maintain connections with the like ones when needed. In the learning and capacity-building process, these digital connections or ICT-based ways are also supporting them. It is evident that increasing access to internet services and different electronic devices such as computers, mobile phones, i-pads, or other hand-held devices, as well as peoples' networks, has greatly expanded the utility of connectedness in recent times.

It is also said that the world's future will be completely dominated by technology, and the growth of science and technology has been phenomenal in the recent past, improving the quality of life of human beings (Kalam & Pillai, 2013). ICTs are the foundations for overall development, including contextual, effective and efficient learning processes, which can be induced by multimedia technologies (Chapagain & Neupane, 2020; Mayer, 2010). The world is experiencing non-human appliances playing pertinent roles in teaching/learning and information-sharing processes.

However, availability, accessibility, technical ability, and electrical and electronic (internet) reliability have been major issues for a long time (Olsen & Hergenbahn, 2009), especially for learning purposes through such ICTs in the villages—where low levels of literacy are also obstructing rural populace. According to the locals of the MH, such obstructions are mainly faced by rural and remote-area-based women, who have been facing many problems with education/literacy, access, exposure, income, and so on. In this area, the digital world is also increasing at a fast pace compared to one decade ago. The information bank is so large all over Nepal

that it has been possible to access it through the ICT world. Virtual learning environments are also created globally.

This is a key phenomenon in the present world. According to Pahl & Rowsell (2012), digital and immersive worlds have become more prevalent, more naturalized, and more accepted as the forum for communication and understanding in the present world. Established media, such as newspapers, radios, and televisions, are gradually being replaced by mobile phones, ICTs, and social media. In the MH, I also fully realized this fact from my observations. Day by day the area is getting more and more facilities from the point of view of electricity and electronic services.

The internet and the web are changing the world so rapidly that information sources have become so vast, and connectivities have expanded so speedily. Owing to these, traditional extension services and market agents' roles are also changing rapidly. From a learning perspective, Stephen Downes and George Siemens, the main proponents of the connective theory (Bell, 2009), also claim that connectivism is a successor to behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism. According to them, connectivism theory explains that learning takes place digitally, emphasizing the role of social and cultural contexts and defining how and where it is occurring.

Peters (2009) also highlights the uses of Podcasts, Wikis, Blogs, Vlogs, media-sharing through YouTube and Flickr, video-conferencing, voice threads, Google documents, and so on being applied from classroom to family rooms. In the MH, from various observations and *bhalakusari* with the participants, it was noticed that—to some extent—the homestay operators' learning practices are also induced by different ICTs and social/digital networks for their day-to-day information-receiving and learning practices to better manage the homestay enterprises.

In my observations and talks, I focused on the question of how the homestay operators and the family members have been using such new technologies. I came to realize that through these ICTs, they are talking, messaging, video-calling, and updating their status through social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Whats app, TikTok, YouTube videos, LinkedIn, and many others. Such sharing activities have made it possible to get new information, solve knowledge-oriented queries, and so on. These are essential not only for homestay development and management but also for agricultural activities, as well as overall life/family/cultural management aspects. The

homestay operators' connections with neighbors, relatives, friends, and some selected guests/tourists were interesting.

According to research participant Shukrikala, such connections remain focused mainly on two main purposes. First, say "hello" and "Namaste" to better social ties and enterprise promotions. Second, knowing/learning new things or seeking solutions and solving problems from friends and relatives. Furthermore, as discussed in the FGDs, in such connections, they pay/use their in-person visit, make mobile calls, and send short messages (SMs), Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp, and other social media, including local FM radios. All these processes help them remain in business and social networks and also have bigger connections for better management of their day-to-day life and the homestay enterprises. I also came to realize from my observations that the more connections the locals have, the more confidence and empowerment opportunities they can gain.

Nowadays, the use of social media is also vibrantly increasing in this area. It has, undoubtedly, been a new culture of communication. In this context, citing examples from other parts, Kunwar et al. (2022) also indicate that the role of social media in promoting tourism in destination sites is increasing. The locals of MH have also realized that modern communication means have significantly eased the processes, although increasing accessibility and availability to each household is yet to be realized in the area. The participants of the FGDs further shared that many tourists nowadays visit online websites or social networking sites to make their visit plans or purchasing decisions, which is influenced by the information available by previous tourists who have visited and shared their experiences/feelings/opinions. However, this rarely happens here due to the poor level of promotional and marketing efforts.

In this context, research participant Bihidevi also shared that some tourists also bring new technologies, and while staying in the homestays, they teach (share knowledge) how to use such technologies. These facts suggest that all such processes of ICT-based communications and connections add new learning and motivate (creating "drivers") the hosts to use further advanced technologies where possible (internally and externally). Despite such utilities and possibilities of creating and sharing new knowledge through digital/ICTs, as I indicated above, there are still many challenges related to gadget availability, affordability, accessibility, reliable electricity

and internet connectivity, among others. And, as I observed, many times, they face serious challenges of language and techno proficiency to run their gadgets. My experiences in the field also reveal that the MH is also gradually adaptable to new technologies and information sources, investing huge resources in ICTs and smart mobiles, especially for the last two to three years when the area received a central grid of electricity for the first time. It was also a historic event, bringing more happiness to the area.

In the process of increasing the facilities of ICTs in the area, foreign job-holders and tourists have become significant drivers, bringing new opportunities for sophisticated technologies. However, as in other parts of Nepal, such opportunities are dictated by a range of structural factors such as ICT access, formal education, well-being, employment status, and so on. These factors also hinder the interests and further initiatives of the homestay entrepreneurs in the MH.

### **Learning Through Kids**

During my stay at the homestays, I paid close attention to the communication-related activities that shaped their daily operations. It was fascinating to observe a distinct social dynamic at play. Every homestay had at least one mobile phone, and often two—one used by the husband and the other by the wife. In some households, even grandparents were seen using mobile phones, although these were basic models without touchscreens.

I noticed a unique learning process within these families. Mothers and fathers often relied on their children to teach them how to operate, charge, and recharge their phones. Traditional radios were present in some homes, but they seemed to hold little appeal for the younger generation. The children were far more engrossed in exploring their parents' mobile phones, signalling a shift in the communication and information landscape in rural Nepal.

It is interesting to note, and perhaps less reported case also, that the homestay entrepreneurs (parents) are learning not only from other sources but also from their school-going children or kids (including son, daughter, daughter-in-law,



(Learning from a kid © Author)

grandchildren, etc.) as well. These parents feel that their kids are better in mathematical/numerical skills and also in the English language—although, as reported by Pokhrel (2022)—teaching and learning processes of the English language in rural areas have been facing several challenges. Learning basic English and communication technologies has become an integral part of rural life as well. Most of the schools in such areas are also now more focused on promoting English language and computer skills. Essences of both subjects are essential for running tourism enterprises, primarily requiring accounting and interpersonal communication/conversation purposes. Whatever the case, some parents also believe that their kids bring new knowledge and information about sanitation, nature and the environment from their schools/colleges. Even some of the children bring school-food (*khaja*- the mid-day meal) related messages to their parents since the government has been providing mid-day meals in primary/basic schools in Nepal for the last few years, which have been effective in attracting children from home to schools, and also retain them for the whole day (Rastriya Samachar Samiti, 2020). Along the same line, Dahal (2014a) also experienced that children's participation in different activities in schools and homes helped develop the confidence of their parents and teachers to initiate more community-based and community-oriented actions focusing on culture and nature. Homestay is one good example of such co-learning processes, including learning from children. Children also play important roles in local cultural (musical) performances such as dancing, singing, etc.

I noticed that the parents became happy while listening to English words from their kids. However, the kids themselves are not happy with their English language capacities because they do not have confidence in speaking and writing in English; in the area, generally, English is the third or second language. In this context, the homestay operator Shukrikala's daughter, who was in grade nine in a local secondary school, adds that her English is also not good enough to maintain proper communication with foreign tourists. This is due to her Nepali-medium schooling, where English is just a "subject" and not a daily conversational medium. She further states that her school is poor in English compared to other town- and city-based secondary schools. *"Even the English teachers in our school do not speak good English; how can we learn?"* she shared.

Adding her, a local teacher in a short *kurakani*, in that instance, says, "*In this area, even the English subject is taught in the Nepali language; then how will these students be able to communicate properly in English?*" He was also talking a lot about the general trends of English language teaching in Nepal. There are very few government-run schools in Nepal that teach in English medium. However, these limited schools cannot represent the remote and back-warded areas. In the same context, Manandhar (2020) found that, in English, teachers use their mother tongue and Nepali for all kinds of situations "including giving instructions, doing translation, or presenting foreign language structures" (p. 47). She further concludes: "This happened because some of the teachers feel that the use of the mother tongue/Nepali language always has an active and beneficial role in facilitating foreign language training" (p. 71). Precisely contextualizing the issue of the English language among tourism communities, Acharya (2013) also reports that even in the Pokhara area, "the capital of Nepali tourism", women employers and entrepreneurs face problems with languages to communicate with foreign tourists. She also mentions that women find it difficult to run tourism businesses due to language barriers, limited training opportunities, and access to capital assets and family resources in their rights, and they are compelled to confine themselves only to small businesses with low investments and low profit.

I observed the aspirations of local homestay operators, who want to know more foreign languages but want more proficiency in English. Sometimes, in informal group discussions, they share that "Tourism is a difficult business because if there is no English, there is no tourism". In this case, proficiency in their mother tongue is important, and then "multilingualism" (Awasthi et al., 2022) and "multi-culturalism" (Rai & Joshi, 2020) become essential parts of the contemporary world, including CBT/rural tourism, and holistic local development processes. Getting multi-lingual teachers is difficult in Nepal, especially in the rural/remote parts. In this context, the homestay operator Buddhi Maya's daughter, who is also an eighth-grader in the local school, criticizes the roles and capacities of English teachers, claiming and blaming that "*Good English teachers don't come to remote villages like ours.*" This could be a representative case for Nepal on the whole.

Despite all these facts, homestay operators (parents) are continuously trying to learn something new daily from their school/college-going kids as a mutual learning

process, especially English words and other modern words mostly associated with ICTs and contemporary development. Interestingly, even individuals with no formal education are gradually incorporating new English and ICT-based terms into their daily lives. They are adapting such new words in their own unique ways. I noted some English and ICT-based words in their daily conversations, like these: time, homestay, breakfast, lunch, dinner, bed, clean, driver, bus stop, station, speed, kilometer, horn, steering, brake, light, charge, plug, cable, size, switch on, switch off, full charge, recharge, call, video call, message, SMS, slow, fast, black and white, color, brightness, network, pack, smart, copy, paste, send, receive, like, reply, play/replay, email, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and so on.

Knowingly or unknowingly, locals use English words as part of their day-to-day "new" culture. Perhaps this is a "dominance" of outside cultures/experts in the local system in the words of Kandel (2022), Koirala (2024), Macedo (1999), and Abdullah & Stringer (1999). According to them, this is a global phenomenon, particularly in the "third world" by the so-called "first world". But, Awasthi et al. (2022) believe that, if properly used, multilingualism and multiculturalism are not harmful to society. From a tourism perspective, this serves as a positive signal that tourism "helps to bridge diverse worlds" (Kunwar, 2017), promoting connectivity across multi-religions, multiculturalism, and multi-lingual communities. This process helps foster mutual understanding and collaboration.

Local schools, tourists and travel staff are spreading such new words/culture. Interestingly, in my reflective note, one day, I wrote, *"If the English language is improved in schools, there would be more communications with the foreign tourists as well in the interests of homestay families. And for this, the school-community interface could also be strengthened for English language learning and cultural/societal awareness-building; as locals express, languages also help empower local people."* Locals were much convinced by the traditional Nepali saying: *bolne ko pitho pani bikchha, nabolne ko chaamal pani bikdaina* (A smooth talker can sell even flour, but a quiet one can't sell even rice, trans.).

In the same context, an Indian educationist, Prema Kumari Dheram, in her book *Promoting Learner Autonomy* (Dheram, 2010), also laments that learning English has come to be identified with learning as an essential survival skill. She further quotes, "Language is value-laden, an indicator of social status and personal

relationships." Perhaps, in the study area, too, realizing this fact, the parents are encouraging and helping their kids to learn their mother tongue and Nepali language, and they are simultaneously trying to learn numbers, letters, and English from their school-going kids.

In these processes, increasing mobile phone access has further helped the kids and parents to learn more about tourism and tourism-related literacy/numeracy and more English words. As highlighted in the FGDs, there has been a recent rise in parents relying on their children for support in learning ICT-based communication and English. This trend is driven by the increasing tourism activities in the study area and the growing demand for English proficiency, not only for managing homestay businesses but also for pursuing opportunities abroad, including foreign study and/or employment.

### **Chapter Essence**

In this chapter, I presented the findings of my field research, particularly focusing on Research Question 2: what and how are the homestay operators learning to operate homestays? Also, the chapter dealt with the experiential scenario of developing homestay entrepreneurs' overall capacities to handle community-based tourism in the study area. Here, I explored, analyzed, and synthesized the key contents of the homestay training/learning processes through their experiences and stories. In the same manner, as a gist of the findings, I presented eight different categories of learning sources, including- traditional or intergeneric transfer-based learning, experiential learning, learning from training/workshops, exposures; Community of Practice/COP (peer groups, and network-based learning), mass and social media/ICTs, host-guest interactions, and also learning from kids (children).

Even in this less developed and remote area of Bagmati Province, new ICT technologies have gradually occupied the learning spaces, demanding more innovative and developmental interventions. While being capacitated, in addition to its effort, the homestay entrepreneurs have opportunities to get external facilitative support from various organizations, including governmental, bilateral projects, NGOs, and—to some extent—local cooperatives and the private sector. To conclude, in this chapter, I also elaborated on some managerial aspects of teaching-learning management and quality assurance at the community homestay site of the Mahabharat Hills.

CHAPTER VI  
LEARNING CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY HOMESTAY  
ENTREPRENEURS

In this chapter, I present and discuss major learning and capacity development-related challenges experienced by the research participants. The challenges mainly focus on course design or content-related, participant-related, methods and materials-related (pedagogical/andragogical), language and communication-related, and other managerial aspects related. While so doing, I illustrate my observations and field-based experiences, views of the research participants, and the perspectives of others directly and indirectly associated with the capacity development endeavors of the community homestay site in the MH, Bagmati Province.

**Key Learning Challenges Encountered**

Homestay entrepreneurs' learning experiences speak about the programs, strategies, and practices of formal, non-formal, and informal education and training initiatives. Some questions may arise: Are we designing appropriate courses? Are we selecting the right participants? Are we choosing appropriate venues? Have we been able to teach in local languages? Are our participants motivated to learn new things per our course/curriculum design? Is there adequate coordination for integrated teaching/learning or capacity development/empowerment processes?

The field reflections could easily raise dozens of such questions or issues. From the data, it can be revealed that the community homestay/participatory rural tourism development initiatives have genuinely provided a fair deal of opportunities to rural women and men for their economic, human, and social capital growth through formal training, workshop, seminars, exposure visits (mobility), feedback and evaluations (mentoring), peer-learning opportunities ("COP" with better connectedness), engagement in economic activities (well-being), and so forth.

Among such opportunities, some have helped them develop soft- and hard-skills, broaden knowledge and exposure with enhanced mobility, and energize cognitive and behavioral changes with greater psychological confidence. In addition, they help build their relations and network, as well as orientation to new techniques,

technologies, and instruments. Nevertheless, in each step and process, the homestay entrepreneurs in the MH are facing several challenges and constraints, such as:

- i) Contents, contexts, and course suitability;
- ii) Training methods and the class size;
- iii) Low level of formal education and "functional literacy."
- iv) Language and communication-related barriers;
- v) Participants' interest and motivation;
- vi) Grasping, retention, and memorization capacity;
- vii) Coordination, collaboration, and management; and,
- viii) Monitoring, mentoring, follow-up, and evaluation.

These issues and themes are discussed below in detail.

### **Contents, Contexts, and Course Suitability**

Training and capacity development contents are expected to be closely related to local contexts; while doing this, integrated thoughts are also essential (Rai, 2019). Integrated community development encompasses various disciplines, including tourism, education, infrastructure, health, agriculture, micro- and meso-industry and trades, and so on. Homestay, as an integrated business, has many issues that need to be addressed. "For smooth plan and operation of capacity development, the trainers also need proper orientation and training; and then only they can ensure better exposure visits, better training programs, and enhanced continuous facilitation processes," laments a community-based tourism trainer and campaigner in the area. At the same time, "gender and social inclusion issues must be incorporated into the process of community development through the use of such disciplines," states a gender and social inclusion (GESI) expert in Kathmandu. She further adds that rural tourism initiatives, including homestays, have tried to address GESI issues to some extent, but they are not well-designed and are inadequate.

Homestay enterprising also demands systematic SME development, although some SMEs are culturally embedded. Developing an integrated SME system is also vital to sustain homestay enterprises. Many people show their interest in running homestays in rural parts, but the nexus between such interests and real possibility needs to be thoroughly assessed. In this context, reflecting his insight, Rai (2019) also illustrates that the sources of entrepreneurial orientation and skills in the context of the entrepreneurs of Nepali SMEs are early experiences, family and culture, and

education and training. The entrepreneurs value observing others' practices, participating in training packages, connecting to the networks, and making the sources more conducive. For instance, the education system might encourage focusing on the local SMEs, curriculum development of domestic enterprises, and so on. In any training program or capacity-strengthening event, holistically designed programs incorporating theory, practice, and exposure trips to successful places in a balanced way can produce better results to attain the goal of the developmental project. Field experiences also reveal that the well-thought-out capacity enhancement package can produce early results with the full motivation of the beneficiaries and concerned stakeholders.

According to an experienced tourism trainer in Kathmandu, for skill-based teaching, 70% of the time is required for a practical session, and the remaining 30% is allocated for theoretical and understanding parts. Koirala (2024) also gives importance to practical/field-based sessions of any type of learning activities for enhancing quality skills and long-lasting knowledge. In this context, the homestay operator research participant Bihi Devi's experience is also worth sharing:

*I always prefer field-based training with practical sessions and exposure visits to 'model' sites where we can learn from their lived experiences and success stories. For example, we were taken to Sirubari (the pioneer place of homestay in Syangja, Nepal – author) for a 2/3-day trip; and, by seeing and interacting with the locals, we learned many things about homestay establishment and management from there.*

Thus, field exposure, balance in theory and practice, and localizing the training package become crucial issues for enhancing the suitability of the course to real entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, as locals comment, in the present curricula and manuals, local contexts are less reflected, and local experiences are given less priority. These were the key issues that the research participants raised every time. For example, according to Buddhi Maya, Bihi Devi, and Shanishchara, there are abundant forest-based products such as yams (e.g., *gittha*, *vyakur*, *tarul*, etc., which are also called commonly '*kandamool*' locally) to offer to tourists; however, present model courses of homestay do not deal with such matters, neither they are localized; nor locally contextualized. Even the trainers do not know how to process them and offer them to the tourists in an improvised way.

This was just a general representative case. There are other stances, too, where training experts and trainers need to focus more on the suitability aspects than giving training on the national or standard model or module. The trainers (personal *kurakani*) also opine that the suitability of course contents and contexts is vital for successful teaching-learning initiatives. In my observations, I came to understand that there were some compulsions, too, since training outsourcing activities by project/ GOs/ NGOs/ INGOs usually do not cover the costs of pre-training field visits, needs assessment, localized curriculum/training package development, etc., which are essential steps and components for an effective training design and delivery from contents and contexts point of views. Silva et al. (2025) also reported similar gaps in the curriculum and teaching in the hospitality sector in Portugal. In their study, they indicated the need for educational institutions to integrate digital, green, and social-cultural skills more effectively into their curricula, ensuring alignment with industry demands and local sustainability challenges in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

### **Training Methods and the Class Size**

As briefly discussed in Chapter II, adults prefer to learn mostly through informal approaches with different flexibilities, e.g., time, venue, methods, etc. Recently, multimedia-based education and training, ICT-based learning, and blended learning (virtual + face-to-face) approaches and methods are also occupying good spaces in the teaching-learning processes. Timely feedback is also crucial for better teaching-learning tasks. My research participants have also expressed some challenges associated with the training methods that they experienced. According to them, methodological attention and a balance in different methods are also crucial issues in rural area-focused training programs. In a *bhalakusari*, the research participant Mangala Devi shared:

*Most of the training I attended was based on lectures, and there were very few practice sessions. Even in the practical sessions, there were no adequate materials for every participant to learn through individual practice. For example, in a training program, there were more than twenty participants in a seven-day 'Cooking and Baking Training'. We could not understand many lectures due to our educational level and language barriers. And while doing practical sessions, we had very few opportunities to try everyone's skills. In such a case, our sir (trainer) cooked and demonstrated. We were standing and*

*watching his activities in the classroom. We continually watched and tasted the food items he prepared. There were different types of soups and other items. We only had to see the process and describe the step-wise step, but we had less chance to participate in the cooking process. According to him, It was due to limited materials, more participants, and limited time for the training program.*

The key meaning of Mangala Devi's experience was that the methodologies and approaches used in the sessions were inadequate. Adults' concerns were not adequately taken into consideration, and the materials were also limited for practical sessions. It seemed that the practice sessions she attended were just like demonstration sessions, not practical sessions in the real sense. This process cannot fulfil the expectations of the participants. The quality of training depends on the available materials and methods the trainers use in the training session(s). The quality and efficiency of trainers also depend on the time and resources allocated.

Further, the number of participants also noticeably affects the nature and processes of practical, demonstrational, or theoretical sessions. In Nepal—generally



(Too many participants © Author)

speaking— in every training, a

maximum number of participants is

adjusted to minimize the per-participant cost of the training or workshop sessions.

There is also a general trend that the "size" of the participants is justified from the cost point of view, not the quality and effectiveness point of view.

In the same connection, I also spoke to a tourism trainer in Kathmandu, who travelled throughout the country to run such rural-area-focused mobile tourism training courses and had taken some sessions in different training programs conducted in the area. The trainer expressed that the course organizers and the trainers would also be compelled to entertain an unexpected number of participants in a single training, which reduces the efficacy and quality of the training because an individual practice or practical session won't be possible in such a large group. Later, he also

gave an example from Myagdi's Annapurna-8, Karbakeli's recent homestay training, where forty participants were compulsively adjusted.

He said that there was too much or an overwhelming level of interest from the participants poured into the training from different places along the newly developed trekking trail in the MH; thus, they faced difficulties in adjusting the participants in that single training. Thus, he said, "Only the trainers or training institution(s) are not blamed for such limitations." Later, as a follow-up query, in a short telephonic *kurakani*, he further shared with me that the training organizers/sponsors are always concerned with the target matters rather than the genuine quality of the training, and in such cases, the trainers can not do anything; they are compelled to make a compromise with the methods and resources since reducing the number of participants would become almost impossible in those circumstances.

Regarding the number of participants, as a professional trainer, another trainer also shared his insightful experience and opinion that, generally, a maximum of twenty participants are expected in a classroom for practical-oriented sessions; nevertheless, with compulsion, sometimes, they need to adjust up to 30/35 participants. Further, according to him, they need to make a compromise with the methods and resources available for the course assigned. Finally, he conclusively said, "There is no other alternative; this is the reality of our context".

This vignette gives an immense sense that only the trainers, educators, or facilitators can ensure or fix the appropriate size of the participants, good methods, adequate resources, and the participants' satisfaction. As far as the quality of the training is concerned, in some cases, the outsourcing of the training programs also makes a compromise with the duration, the number of participants, materials to be used, the venue and other numerous matters associated with the overall training management. Thus, as Blanchard et al. (2012) also state, internal and external sources greatly impact training programs. In this context, they also suggest that—in most cases—mixed strategies, mixing both internal and vendor trainers, are effective ways to produce good results of the training(s) and reduce training/participant costs. Similarly, Bhurtel and Bhattarai (2023) also suggest that the instructors' peer-level communications, mutual support, and sharing culture can also enhance the learning and transfer of KSA and overall performance among participants.

In the study area, I also found that internal and external sources are heavily used to manage training courses and workshop events to enhance learning processes. Nevertheless, participants of the training and workshops do have fewer concerns with the trainers/facilitators or resource persons, no matter where they come from, if they use understandable language and suitable methods and ensure sufficient learning materials based on the nature of the training course/workshop. Regardless of who the trainer is and where he/she comes from, trainers and participants express some limitations from methodological and material perspectives. Several challenges may arise unless individual practice (through practical sessions) can not be ensured in such technical and vocational-related teaching-learning events. Training methods and class size are critical and challenging factors in the teaching-learning process.

### **Low Level of Formal Education and Functional Literacy**

In my research, the participants were from different capacity backgrounds, as depicted in Chapter III. Accordingly, their experiences and opinions differ. As Tarik (2018) provokes, people with higher capacities can learn better and more effectively. Those learning capacities may be attributed to the learner's age, educational/literacy level, language proficiency, writing skills, listening/reading and oral power, etc. For instance, in a *bhalakusari*, research participant Mangala Devi expressed that "knowing difficult words used by sirs and madams was hard to learn and remember". Similarly, she had difficulty understanding English words, so knowing the meaning of some tourism-related words used by her trainers also became problematic for her. Accordingly, as expressed in the FGD, participants Aaita Kumari and Shukrikala felt that good learning was impossible due to the low level of formal educational attainment of the participants. They also blamed the trainers as they did not care much about their existing capacity to learn and grasp new things. In a *bhalakusari*, Mangala Devi more elaborately shared:

*I attended a training course about 'small hotel and lodge management' at the beginning of the homestay initiative, which was six days' duration. There were many trainers, say at least five trainers, who were mostly from Kathmandu. They taught us many things related to homestay management. They taught us theoretically and practically many things at a time. However, practising with every participant in the practical sessions was very difficult. Not every participant got a chance to take part in the process. Some of us were just*

*observing the activities from a distance. Some even did not get a good chance to see the key steps of food preparations as they were busy cutting, cleaning, washing, etc. Sirs did not give proper attention to all participants. Some active participants got all the chances, and some did not get even a little chance. This was not good for the less spoken and shy (introverted) participants. I was also one of the less spoken and 'less educated' persons; thus, I had less chance to learn through practical sessions/practices. Our low level of literacy, less exposure to the world, and shyness need to be understood and considered by the trainers.*

There is a world-famous saying: 'A head in every bed' (Vogel, 2001, p. 93). (which can be in Nepali like this: (एउटा गीत यस्तो गाऊँ, हरेक बेडमा पाहुना पाऊँ). It simply means that all hoteliers or homestay operators expect 100 per cent occupancy each night. In this regard, a homestay owner says, "For round the year, getting hundred per cent occupancy is far from our dreams. There are many homestays, hotels, and resorts in the country. They have quality compromises, price competitions, and also seasonal and other effects on tourist arrivals; thus, getting a head in every bed is not possible".

It is suggested that the government and other actors may develop training packages on identifying and utilizing the sources and ways of "entrepreneurial knowledge and skills" (Rai, 2019, p. 284). Similarly, Sahu and Das (2014) suggest that content and training style need to be appropriate when viewing many perspectives, such as short-term future, imaginative, exciting yet flexible and efficient in terms of time and effort; also, as they urge, this needs good coordination and communication among the stakeholders of capacity development efforts. According to prominent literature by Patnaik and Prasad (2021), coordination is the interaction among the actors that "should lead to the achievement of the desired goal" (p. 525). As it suggests, and a local leader laments, there is an urgent need for more interactions and communications among the stakeholders in the locality. NPC (2021) also states that several developmental problems can be solved by enhancing communication and coordination mechanisms.

Relating to this context, one day, I attended a meeting in the Ward office as an observer. The locally elected representatives and other officials of the Ward office were the key participants. I was just an outsider observing their meeting with

permission from the ward chairperson. He was trying to clarify that *"the ward office has also given priority to the local tourism development process."* Following his statement, I asked them whether there were any planned activities and budget for the running year's tourism priorities. But he said, *"There is no specific activity besides local road improvements and small-level maintenance works."*

While observing those moments, I noticed that local governments have lagged in properly planning, programming, and budgeting for tourism development initiatives, including homestay promotion. Although, rhetorically, they say that tourism is a priority of the local government, including the Ward, in reality, the priority is almost in shadow. I also realized that the local leaders' developmental awareness and commitments are still not at par with the local people's expectations and aspirations, and even the anticipation of the local political cadres (lower-level activists or position-holders) is somehow neglected. They are not dynamic enough to lead the local work. On this front, I remembered the conclusions made by Khanal (2021), who claims that Nepali politics and parties have limited dynamism, strategic thoughts, and contextualism. Whether they are capacitated and empowered to do so is also a big question.

Similarly, for effective and participative leadership, Pandey (2017, 2019) also emphasizes women's new learning and capacity development to enhance their political participation in Nepali politics. She points out that the enhanced participation of Nepali women in politics will make "a better contribution in the process of achieving substantive equality for the nation's prosperity" (2019, p. 203). Despite this reality, however, she criticizes political parties' less focused attention on it. Thus, effective local planning and development processes, including local learning and capacity development endeavors have been limited. The lack of CLC in the area was also indicated by the locals in an FGD and by the social mobilizers I interacted with.

Moreover, bringing the voices from the MH, it can be postulated that in any political party, the developmental perspectives of political leaders are not satisfactory. They are not very aware, capacitated, dynamic, or vibrant. They have not been able to address the issues of the present generation and are also not able to provide a clear vision for the future. In this context, particularly, one local lady, the Ward member, who represented the women's voices, said:

*We are really in the dark, in the cloud, like 'kuhiro ko kaag' (a lost crow in the thick cloud). We have not received any developmental or political management training. We are elected, but there is no proper training and orientation on doing good politics and performing good developmental works.*

Her voice infers that a good understanding of key developmental issues and appropriately prioritizing them based on needs, potentials, resources, feasibility, etc., is very important in the local governance system. Khanal's (2021) findings may equally apply to all political parties in Nepal. Based on his empirical research, he urges that the "politics for development" motto is often forgotten. In the same perspective, the Ward chairperson reiteratively stated, *"Yes, we know understanding politics and development rightly and managing local developmental interventions are our daunting tasks; nevertheless, we need more support."* He also reminded the locals that, for a long time, local development processes have failed to address the issues of cultural and religious practices preservations. Additionally, an elder Chepang (70), during the meeting said:

*We are Hindu and celebrate all festivals and rituals other people in this locality celebrate. We also pray to the nature god ('prakriti'). We pray for our sun, moon, stars, sky, air, water, soil, plants, animals, etc. But I am not sure whether it is 'Dharma' or not. However, recently, many locals are changing their religions and being converted to Christianity" (locally called 'Bishwashi').*

I could not make any remarks then since I wanted not to express my ideology or religion in the field. I just noted their voices and feelings. But, later, I visited their temples, churches (locally called '*Mandali*'), and other religious places without hesitation since my gatekeeper and some local key informants encouraged me to observe the villages' cultural and religious spots and assets. Interestingly, many churches in the area converted "Bishwashis" to Sunday and Tuesday to make a common prayer at the churches from 7 am to 9 am. Likewise, local Hindus visit their temples mostly on Saturdays and during festival times, starting very early morning. The festivals mostly fall in April, July, August, September, and October. Some tourists, mostly domestic, can also be seen during such festivals.

Dawson (2013) and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) have noted that ethnographic field trips always have ups and downs. In my field research, too, as ups

moments, I tried to observe and explore all aspects in real-life situations, such as in which group of learning styles my adult research participants fall?; and what type of teaching/learning processes these adults have adopted in their homestay businesses?; and how the training organizers/trainers/facilitators are helping them to develop their KSAs, to sustain the outputs/results and impacts? And, as downs, it was very hard to grasp the ideas as anticipated. From various literature as mentioned above, I was aware of the applications of different training styles, such as largely three styles: trainer-guided learning, observation-based learning, and self-guided experiential learning. Nonetheless, in the absence of real training observation during my field stays, drawing the sense only from observations, FGDs, and *bhalakusari* was hard for me. Additionally, in this connection, some scholars (e.g. (Fleming & Mills, 1992; as cited in Seyal, 2015; Pritchard, 2009) have also claimed that there are visual, auditory, verbal, logical, and kinesthetic learning styles. Again, observing my research participants without actual observation of trainer-learner interactions or actions became hard for me.

I observed their social interactions, cultural attractions, and economic transactions in the field. Interestingly, one day, in the morning, I was just walking around the village to observe the early-morning activities of the locals; and I encountered an old Chepang (male) who was carrying two chickens (cocks) in his hands for selling in a local shop. I initiated an informal "hello talk" (*kurakani*) with him by saying "Namaste Dai". He was happy to talk to me after that greeting; perhaps he had not expected that type of greeting from me. I was a stranger (a new tourist to the village) to him. Walking together, we informally talked about various aspects of local development and livelihoods of the Chepang people, especially the elders' economic activities in the area.

As a researcher, I also observed his fresh mood and frankness. We continued our talking for about ten minutes. At one point, he seriously said, "*Sir, garib bhayerai janmim haami, ani garib bhayerai marne bhaiyo; sir haami Nepalkaa abhaagi munchhe rahichham...*" (Sir, we were born poor and die poor as well; we are poor, we are always in margins, and we are unlucky). I asked him, "Why don't you grow green vegetables in your farmlands"? In short, he said:

*Sir, when there is no water for green vegetables, how can we grow them? We want to grow, but this village has no irrigation facility. They even have*

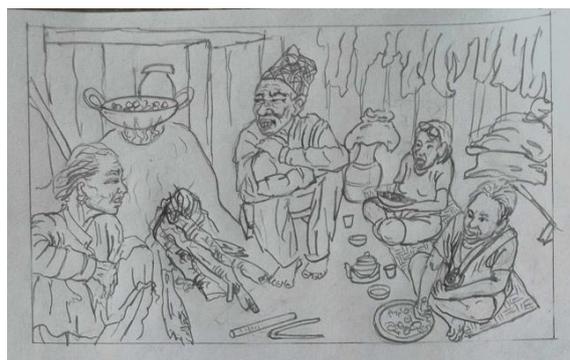
*difficulty getting drinking water in taps during winter times. Some plastic tunnels provided by some development institutions do not work in this dry season. Thus, nowadays (winter season), we use our local vegetables like buckwheat vegetables, nettle plants, fermented, dried vegetables made of radish and other broadleaf vegetables, mostly using leaves and roots, yams, etc.*

His expressions indicated that in the absence of irrigation facilities, too, there is the possibility of getting *raithane* (local/traditional) vegetables even in the dry season. Tourists prefer these *raithane* vegetables, too. Thus, the facilitators' facilitation towards these "local" (but nutritious) issues is also crucial. The trainers also need to address this challenge by addressing *raithane* concerns in the localized homestay curricula or training package(s).

### **Language and Communication-related Barriers**

Any learning programs or initiatives have different types of people or audiences with varied language, education, and communicational capacity backgrounds. These factors also affect their learning-related interests, needs, opinions, and thoughts. Language background greatly affects the training or workshop program (Talbot et al., 2010) since different learners might have learning difficulties and disabilities, including the local learning environment. However, local experiences tell us that program designers need to understand these facets of our societies to accommodate such barriers and hurdles as possible. It is well experienced that satisfying everyone from a single

program or endeavor may be hard. Similarly, means of communication, level of language, use of words, and emphasis on visuals rather than words are some of the measures that one trainer could think of before going to the classroom or training hall.



(Sorry, what you said? © Author)

However, my research participants have gained varied experiences regarding the use of language and communication by their trainers. Below, we see some of the cases and voices.

Research participant Mangala Devi has a unique experience with language difficulty in most of the training events. She lamented:

*When we sit in a training course in the village or outside, we cannot understand the language of the trainers from cities and towns to teach us. They mix English words and sentences abundantly in their conversations, so we cannot follow them. Rather, we nod in the classroom even though we don't follow them or fall asleep on the tables for the whole period. Even learning the Nepali language is difficult for us. How do we know English-mixed Nepali? Isn't it possible to bring trainers from our area who could speak either Nepali or our local language?*

They know that good English is required to hold *kurakani* when tourists come to their homes. But learning English words and language in the classrooms is very difficult. They also blame the teachers/trainers for their inadequate focus on the participants and their level of education/literacy. Such trainers often use jargon words, too. This shows that language is a key barrier to the learning process. In this connection, Buddhi Maya also complained that even in the English language training, "We need simple words, only a few words for day-to-day use, not the difficult words and difficult sentences." Her sharing in a *bhalakusari* about the English experience with (foreign) tourists was also worth noting:

*We start talking and chit-chatting more and more, and we also remain in proximity with the 'mann milne' or preferred tourists. Before they leave, we enthusiastically ask them for their telephone number and other mailing addresses, including asking for their visiting/business cards. However, a barrier arises in maintaining communication with international tourists due to poor English.*

Connecting the contexts immediately, research participant Mangala Devi also shared that she had more than twenty phone numbers and other details of foreign tourists, and some of them were still in connection. However, talking to them in English became very difficult for them. She also explained that she could say just "hello sir/madam", "yes yes", "no no", "ok alright" etc., which was insufficient to be in good conversational contact and to have regular communication with them.

In such cases, knowing the target participants and their language proficiency level is crucial, and according to Cranston (1989), the idea also supports that audience

description is a must before designing any training course, viewing that the right course is delivered to the right participants(s). In this perspective, five major aspects are suggested to consider while describing the audience or training participants for any adult education/training programs: age range, educational level, prior knowledge of the subject, previous experience, and mother tongue.

In the same vein, Mohanty (2007) advises that all adult education and training efforts are considered "life-long education". According to him, "life-wide education" is also important. Furthermore, formal, informal, or non-formal educational practices play fundamental roles in such cases. Mohanty (2007) further states that the life-long dimension is non-problematic since every human learns throughout his/her life because "the life-wide dimension refers to the fact that learning takes place in a variety of different environments and situations, and it is not confined only to the formal educational system; it covers formal, non-formal and informal learning" (p. 139). Long ago, Illich (1970) also pointed out that learning would be possible through more "informal learning webs" since, from the childhood; many things are learned from communities, workplaces, and families at any time. Baral (2022) also stated that informal skills learners have both opportunities and challenges in developing skills and progressing their occupational journey. And, notably, a skills learner's socio-cultural environment creates opportunities and challenges for the person.

Also, the facilitators are expected to consider the learning problems and disabilities in the training rooms (Talbot et al., 2010). Considering the adult-focused educational and training principles, the Nepali homestay operators mostly fall under "adult learners", and from the andragogical perspective, training providers or facilitators have to take into consideration the values of formal and non-formal training. These events can also include exposure trips or observational visits. This process helps boost the participants' courage and enthusiasm to indulge in new businesses, makes them ready to take more risks, and facilitates them through an enhanced take-home message. Usually, such field visits are expected to take to the places of good practice or "best practice sites" for such wider and motivating learning. These processes can energize the participants to take immediate action.

### **Participants' Interest and Motivation**

To bring a case from the field, one day, sitting on a *gundri* (rice-straw-mat) in the courtyard, I talked to research participant Som Maya regarding her interest and

motivation in participating in the training/learning programs. She shared that, although the training they attended was only two days' duration, they had a good chance to visit the district headquarters Narayanghat Bazaar, the religious site Devghat Dham, and many more nearby interesting and scenic places, especially in the mornings and evenings of the training days. They made those "extra" trips to nearby areas from the training venue at their own expense and efforts due to their keen interest in maximizing the opportunity they received from the supporting organization. She further shared that she would still remember those days as "very entertaining days" rather than the actual subject matters of the training course they attended. She further said, *"I almost forgot what was taught there, but I never forget where we made the off-the-session trips; it was a very enjoyable and memorable time for us."*

All training programs—in one way or another—embrace the value of overall capacity development and empowerment. However, field experiences also justify that teaching and learning in the adult world is challenging. According to the research participants, a low level of literacy also barred participants' learning processes in the study area. Additionally, several other factors, including language barrier, less exposure to new technologies/technological words, etc., hampered their learning. However, governmental policies, plans, and programs reflect the thrust of developing local capacities, particularly women and poverty-stricken marginalized families, to give a shot in the arm to actively engage in the homestay/local tourism sector.

During a *bhalakusari* time with the research participant Shanishchara, I noted in my scratch note: "Her views were symbolizing that every training is not equally important from learning perspectives, but for some participants, those types of training and workshops could tend to be an "extra opportunity" for more exposures, touring, and for entertaining too. Perhaps this is common human nature. Sometimes, even participants get confused about whether it is better or not to conduct the training in the village since there are both pros and cons for them."

In another *bhalakusari*, Shanishchara was saying:

*One day, one social mobilizer came to our house and said that a training program for homestay operators would be conducted in Kathmandu. He also mentioned why Kathmandu was chosen as a training venue instead of conducting the same training within the village. He informed me that the*

*training would be conducted in Kathmandu so that locals would get more exposure to Kathmandu's urban tourism development and other social, cultural, developmental, and marketing opportunities. After listening to the social mobilizer's convincing statements, I was glad. His 'kurakani' motivated me to leave the village for training and exposure opportunities, like 'two fishes in one hand' or 'sweets in both hands'.*

Even a lady who was a local tourism stakeholder but was not involved in the homestay, one day, shared with me that "getting training opportunities for them was also like a '*bhagya*' (fate) for three reasons: going out, getting allowances and good foods during the event(s)". At the same time, I noted her "fate" word when she shared that getting training won't be possible for everyone in the village. According to her, only active persons and lucky persons get training opportunities.

Like these informants, I had similar types of experience while being in the UK, USA, Thailand, Iran, and India for academic as well as short training/workshops, where I was also actively seeking more "additional trips" after the course-work-hours for more personal exposures, experiences, and entertainment. It is, as I believe, indeed human nature. In the same line, in a short *kurakani*, a local leader in the study site mentioned that several agencies conducted numerous training and workshop events targeting the locals; however, these courses were just as (rituals, and they were not as effective as claimed and reported in their shiny documents.

His comments and dissatisfaction gave us the meaning that the real match of the training needs and training deliveries was a matter of great concern for all stakeholders. In that sense, I suddenly remembered the words of veteran development philosopher of Nepal, Dr. Dor Bahadur Bist, because "fatalism" was also deeply embarrassing to the local participants (Bist, 1991). One of my field insights from this study was that leaving the village for many days could be impossible due to loss of work and loss of regular income. This concern denotes that training allowances, such as cash, also become a matter of facilitating and motivating the training participants.

According to them, not all the training programs provide allowances; rather, they provide only food and accommodation facilities. In such cases, they are not motivated to go for training programs since household incomes for daily living would be lost; thus, for low-income families, training and exposure visits can not always be a boon, as anticipated. Then, I realized those local expressions were also telling us that

low-income and marginalized people need more village-based training rather than a compulsion to spend two or more days travelling only in the name of taking part in a two-day training course far away.

In this context, a responsible officer from an NGO working in the area, in a brief talk, shared his experience that all participants would not acknowledge the value of training and learning equally; some are hugely concerned about allowances, some are interested in delicious foods (meat and bitten-rice), some are for entertainment and off-hour-visits to nearby areas, and some trainees participate for making new friends and build relations or developing social connections; and, only very few participants focus on contents or teaching-learning aspects of such training/workshop opportunities. He further adds:

*When there are provisions of allowances in training, they are never serious about the new learning or the contents. Still, they are only concerned about money matters and food items served during the training or workshop events. It is, additionally, very difficult to run effective training in rural areas where literacy and formal educational levels are extremely low. Getting good trainers is also difficult for us. Further, locals give less value to education and training (knowledge and skills). Rather, they give more attention to materialism and/or 'bhattaa' (money matters or allowances).*

Opposing the above views, nevertheless, research participant Shanishchara mentioned that such training must bring real learning, and also a little earning, and entertainment for the marginalized and deprived people, who always seek exposure- and income-oriented support from the supporting organizations. From such local voices and reflections, it can be implicated that participants from low-income households need both "learning" matters and a little bit of "earning" opportunity during the same period. All these are attributed to the low-income level and limited alternative sources of livelihood for the locals. Thus, some participants (even if it implies the employees of GOs/NGOs) are always more concerned with 'bhattaa' and other facilities during the training and workshop events. As far as the material-oriented or allowance-related (*hardware*) concerns are there, it could also be interpreted that low-income and marginalized people's first interest (by compulsion—we can say) might be in such material-oriented matters rather than in knowledge-

oriented matters (*software*) because the hand-and-mouth solution is always the priority in the poverty-stricken areas.

In Nepali, there is a common and famous saying: "भोको पेटले सारंगी बज्दैन" (*bhoko pet le saarangi bajdaina*: ["A hungry person or starved person cannot sing"]). This fact could be a pertinent concern while designing pro-poor or marginalized people-focused programs/activities; rather than repeating the same rhetorical blaming game as the above official reiteratively said, "*They do not focus on training or new learning; rather they only wait for good food and good allowance in any training or workshop programs.*" These concerns are associated with the motivational aspects of capacity development and learning facilitation programs. Major concerns related to this context, along with challenges, are also discussed in Chapter VII.

### **Grasping, Retention, and Memorization Capacity**

One day, I was having a *bhalakusari* with the research participant, Buddhi Maya, regarding her learning experiences, particularly focusing on her "capacity" to grasp and memorize the taught or discussed matters. She gently said:

*I have attended several training programs, but my problem is that I forget everything that I learn in the classrooms; I 'eat' everything with my 'daal-bhaat' (lunch-dinner; it is very hard to grasp and remember. Is it due to my low level of educational qualification, sir? Or, what's the reason, sir? I know I have no memory power, no power to remember. What I am taught in the training programs, I just leave in the classroom. There are only a very few to take home with me. Why is this happening to me, sir?*

Her concerns were serious. Every trainee may feel so because grasping and memorizing is a big challenge for adults, particularly those with low formal education or literacy skills. In this case, Sahoo (2011) also asserts that "memory is part of the broader cognitive system" (p. 159). Furthermore, a world-famous quote adapted from China (Confucian teaching) says: "*I hear, I forget; I see, I remember; and, I do, I learn.*" In Buddhi Maya's learning experiences, it was clear that an individual who learns only by "HEAR"ing, can forget things easily, and persons who get a chance to "SEE" the objects or process tend to remember the things for longer periods. And, individuals who get a chance to do it, can only be full learning or real learning. In this respect, Jensen (2000) also adds that there is an enormous difference between memorizing a few key facts and having an authentic grasp of a subject, and authentic

as well as meaningful learning requires the learner "to process information in her/his way, along her/his timeline, and concerning her/his perceptual maps" (p. 275) to increase the pace of learning, learning retention and also the usability of the training program or, precisely speaking, the learned matters.

In the same perspective, Sahu and Das (2014) also claim that proper education and learning can develop optimism, positivism, universalism, and shared prosperity. They further suggest good ties among education, learning, and enterprising. The SMEs have been serving the local needs and cultural demands, preserving local/ethnic cultures in reality and broadly preserving the identity of Nepali society. In the same context, Rai (2019), depicting the case of SMEs, criticizes that SMEs are facing shortages of human resources because of the attraction of foreign employment despite the known fact that the promotion and preservation of the SMEs create opportunities for the livelihoods of the low-income and traditionally marginalized communities to achieve sustainable local economy, which further energizes for more educational and literacy advancement connected with multiple dimensions of capacity development.

Linking this, Brahm (2014) also claims that sustainable local economies and grassroots community development are a basis for water and food security prevention of ethnic violence and terror—in both the developing and the developed world. As we continue to explore and discuss, the low level of grasping power and memorization skills is attributed to low literacy and educational attainment, among others. As locals share, diversity in teaching/training methods and materialistic multiplicity by the trainers and facilitators could help grasp and memorize the learned matters in the classrooms.

### **Coordination, Collaboration and Management**

In the field, it was also observed that some managerial and coordination-related problems, or we can say gaps, were also prevailing, which were noticed as detrimental to training programs' effectiveness. In the same vein, in the study area too, the Ward Chairperson's voice is worth noting here:

*It is very hard to invite women for longer periods as they have to indulge in many household chores and other day-to-day drudgeries within their households. Neither morning nor evening and even 'whole day modalities fit them. What to do?*

His reflective experiences have indicated that women entrepreneurs generally face more barriers, limitations and challenges than men do. In this regard, based on her experience, Golchha (2023) also hints that "time management becomes a crucial challenge for women entrepreneurs" (p. 74). As a result, minimal effort to expand marketing and promotional links along with networking, nominal partnerships and collaborative efforts are limiting the tourism/homestay development processes and expected benefits.

This scenario has also prevented the growth of homestay enterprising and tourism development in the MH. In the third FGD, women entrepreneurs expressed that some of the training events that focused on women were mostly duplicated, some participants were repeated, and some training courses had different rules and norms based on the nature of the organizations not suitable for local participants; and, all these tended to create confusions amongst participants. In the same context, in a separate *kurakani*, one local leader of the Ward (lady member) opined that due to poor communication and coordination among different organizations involved in the local development processes, there are always mismatches in the training course design and misunderstandings on the parts of trainee selection, trainer selection, venue selection, and also other associated matters. These may include allowances, facilities, grants, or numerous other factors that become barriers to entrepreneurship development through homestay. McKenzie and Woodruff (2014) also note that due to the heterogeneous nature of participants, the effectiveness of training programs fluctuates. Likewise, Bray (2006) also draws attention to training course designers to "best meet the various diversity needs" (p. 102). I could not stop exploring such matters in my field. For instance, further, in the same regard, another community leader and the former SM of the MH in a *bhalakusari* stated:

*Proper coordination is lacking in our rural municipality. Many officials and leaders do not know about coordination, collaboration, and partnerships. Due to this, we are losing many opportunities, such as more training, capacity-related planning and development processes, the right selection of training participants, monitoring of such participants, and so on. Several direct benefits and leverages could be generated through the district coordination committee (DCC), parliamentarians, and the provincial and federal governments. Nevertheless, we are not trapping such opportunities and*

*potentials. Also, local capacity development programs are not mainstreamed; they are always seen as isolated 'business' and 'official progress'.*

He shared such an important reality based on his personal experience since he (as he shared) had numerous chances to receive training during his work on the local project. As an ethnographer, I could easily make sense of his expression and frustration since he had many expectations from his local government, the rural municipality, and the new federal system in Nepal.

In a separate *bhalakusari*, research participant Bihi Devi also said that there were many programs and many invitations from different organizations at the same time, and, in such cases, they were also confused about "where to go" or "whether to go or not to go". She also added that whatever the things, *"something is better than nothing; at least we have got such training opportunities, and we do not like to miss any of them. And, from our home also, we go turn by turn"*.

Different experiences and expressions slated here indicated that local training programs had not been well thought-out, and the courses were organized without proper coordination and planning, causing less effectiveness of the capacity development programs in the area (Bray, 2006). In the same perspective, one trainer in Kathmandu, who was involved in some of those training events, expressed that such phenomena are common in Nepal and can be found in any part of the country, not only in the case of Mahabharat Hills. However, in the later part of the *kurakani*, he mentioned that the local municipalities have limited (good) human resource managers or officers to strategically think, plan, coordinate, collaborate, and execute the capacity development needs. He also suggests a proper analysis of human resources requirements and subsequent actions in an integrated and holistic manner, considering local people's needs and expectations. Now, it can be summarized that the training and workshop events targeted at local communities can be conducted with more coordination and focus on more specific subjects with local perspectives so that they can be made effective and result-oriented.

### **Monitoring, Mentoring, Follow-Up, and Evaluation**

In learning processes, post-event monitoring, mentoring, follow-up of the participants, and systematic evaluations are considered crucial tasks. However, all these actions rarely happen in any training or learning event. To what extent the knowledge (K) is gained, how many skills (S) are learned, and how the attitudes (A)

have changed are the major concerns of any evaluative actions. In such cases, Buckley and Caple (2012) have provided a detailed analytical framework for studying and observing KSA in any trained (capacitated) persons, whether they can demonstrate the behavior based on the different classifications.

According to them, knowledge is measured through memorization (recall of facts and sources; recognition) and comprehension (understanding). Similarly, skills are measured through three key observations: intellectual (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation), manual (bodily actions and movements, the skill of hand and eye/hand and ear, etc.), and social (oral and appropriate non-verbal behavior in one-to-one and group situation-based interviews, meetings, etc.). In the same manner, attitude is measured through three actions: accepting (responding willingly), valuing (showing commitment), and being receptive (following rules and procedures) (Buckley & Caple, 2012). However, in the real sense, these—very often—are neglected.

Training design parts normally cover the delivery part, starting from training needs assessment, objective setting, and training design. Normally, evaluation falls at the fifth stage of the training cycle—needs assessment, objective setting, training design, training delivery, and training effectiveness evaluation) (Bray, 2006; Sangurde, 2019; Tarik, 2018), which is often neglected by many organizations since this action also demands lots of budget, time, and human resources. Tarik (2018) also emphasizes the active participation of the concerned stakeholders in all the processes for successful and effective training program design and implementation. Regarding homestay training evaluation in the field, I found that most training programs have limited follow-up and monitoring from the concerned institutions and the trainers/facilitators.

As the chairperson of the homestay group expressed, training follow-up and monitoring by the project or other organizations could not happen on time, which is why homestay participants did not get the opportunity to be backed up on the major KSA matters regularly. The chairperson also repeatedly stressed that the project did not develop local-level mentors or local resource persons (LRPs). He was also urging for a "community learning center" (CLC) to make community members' learning processes better. Therefore, there was a felt gap in the mentoring and backstopping processes as desired by the homestay participants. In the same context, local SM also

mentioned that training participants in any training program hardly receive such opportunities and privileges. Almost every organization feels that the training delivery part is the prime task, and after that, the training provider's job ends. From a holistic training perspective, this is not good practice. The SM was also advocating for a continuous learning mechanism (like lifelong training) in the village(s). He cited some examples from other districts' CLCs.

In observing the training event (live) and/or post-training activities and events, we need to see the factors of the participants, whether local reactions are positive or negative, or neutral toward change after having the KSA. In some cases, however, it may take a long time to see the effects and impacts of the training courses (Bray, 2006). In such cases, the perceptions, attitudes, and immediate behavior of the trained person(s) also play crucial roles in ensuring the effectiveness of any training courses or programs to devise effective strategies and policies. In the same context, Neupane's (2020) experience is worth sharing here. He mentions that socio-cultural barriers, financial barriers, infrastructural barriers, mental, physical, and other health-related barriers (e.g., disability) are major barriers to the education and learning process in Nepali contexts. Likewise, in Arunachal, India—in the case of tribal tourism—Yaja et al. (2022) found four major barriers to enhancing local tribes' engagement and participation, including- socio-cultural, infrastructural, operational, and personal. Unlike other studies, however, they found that socio-cultural barriers impacted the participatory learning and action process less. They also state that women cannot participate in developmental activities and community-gathering due to the heavy burden of household chores. In brief, in the Mahabharat Hills, regular "mentoring" and "monitoring" activities are also limited, barring the overall capacity development and homestay enterprising practices of the participants.

### **Chapter Essence**

In this chapter, I presented major learning challenges and associated issues experienced by homestay operators in the Mahabharat Hills of Bagmati province in Central Nepal. Whatever style or approaches are adopted in the overall learning processes, the homestay operators have been facing several challenges. The challenges primarily faced are the low level of education of the participants, inappropriate and contextualized curriculum, and unfamiliar trainers/educators with no knowledge of local languages and cultures/sub-cultures.

Challenges are also associated with resource constraints, limited training methods, and materials with less flexibility in the teaching-learning processes. While analyzing these gaps and challenges, it has also indicated that Nepal's tourism sector has several problems related to effective training and educational programs since the fundamental things are not well developed, planned, and executed. Fundamentally, the local needs-based curriculum matters first, as "most training courses and programs need strong curricula/course designs" (Bray, 2006) to streamline the learning processes, enhancing the effectiveness.

Our findings importantly indicate that the research participants have also experienced content-related difficulties followed by methodological and language-related challenges. Their low literacy level and less exposure to new technologies (including digital) have also obstructed the overall learning processes. And, especially as compared to their male counterparts, women participants have been facing such challenges during their capacity development and learning processes. Also, educational and training delivery and management processes (from pedagogical to andragogical) are also blamed for such continuing challenges and issues. Limitations in local-level planning, coordination, collaboration, timely monitoring, follow-ups, and evaluations are also immensely felt by the research participants.

## CHAPTER VII

### KEY INSIGHTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this chapter, I present overall field insights and related discussions on major interconnected issues about community homestay initiatives in the MH, along with homestay operators' local practices of learning and capacity development processes. Equally, more particularly, I discuss the learning experiences, their empowerment, and associated issues of women operators engaged in homestay enterprising. Likewise, I bring my insightful discussions on the implications of the theories I have used in this study, including the Experiential Learning Theory, and Capability Approach, in the context of homestay tourism learning and practice. At the end of this chapter, I also discuss briefly my personal experiences with the *bhalakusari* way of ethnographic exploration in the context of Nepal.

#### **Homestay Initiation through Multiple Learning and Supportive Efforts**

Experiences from the MH show that several initiatives are required to conceptualize and develop community homestay tourism in remote and rural parts. These initiations may begin from a facilitative process by development agencies or an active village leader. For example, in Sirubari (Syangja), "an active local leader (Capt. Mr Rudra Man Gurung) initiated the initial facilitative (convincing the locals) and administrative processes" (TGDB, 2024, p. 2). Likewise, the famous homestay destination Ghalegaun (Lamjung) was also initiated by a local leader (Prem Ghale). Then, gradually, other organizations went there to support making a renowned "South Asian Model Village". There are other examples from other parts of Nepal, too.

However, in the case of the study area, it was found that, due to an extremely low level of literacy, awareness, and exposure, initial facilitation was done by external organizations, including the DDC, donor-supported special tourism projects, and local NGOs. Those organizations jointly organized several step-wise programs and facilitated the local learning processes for overall capacity development and empowerment endeavors, including local infrastructure development activities. Nevertheless, due to fewer benefits from homestay tourism activities, local initiations have stagnated lately. Bastola (2012), Kunwar and Barmashkha (2014) and Poudel (2019) also assert that—so far—in the rural and remote parts of Nepal, benefits from tourism and homestays have been minimal (Kanel, 2019b). It is against the

background that homestay tourism, although increasing every year, takes up a small share of Nepal's overall tourism. My field insights reveal that learning and capacity development initiatives, linking with "local cosmology" (Awasthi et al., 2022) and traditional good practices to develop homestay tourism are also not adequate, and there are limited communication and coordination at present.

Furthermore, since my study's effort was to link the nexus between homestay operation and learning processes, in this face, it was found that traditional skills-based local enterprises (such as agri- and forest-based products, handicrafts, etc.) have less focus on the residents and also on the supporting development organizations. Unless local residents' concerns, mutual benefits and well-being are cared for and supported, tourism development interventions are less accepted by the local community (Andereck & Nyaupene, 2011; Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). They claim that "residents' perception of tourism's impact is influenced by the degree of their involvement with tourism and their economic dependence on it." (p. 256). Also, in our research context, problems are being experienced with holistic course designing and effective implementation of such capacity development activities, which is more practically demanding close interdisciplinary coordination and collaborations among different stakeholders, including funding projects, local government, NGOs/civil society, as well as local cooperatives and private/corporate sector. The locals actively seek regular monitoring, feedback, and backstopping support from the facilitating organizations. From some parts of Nepal (for example, Sirubari, Amaltari, Ghalegaun, Shree Antu, Dallagaun, etc.), culturally and comparatively, rich homestay tourism's best cases reveal that homestay initiatives can substantially contribute to the overall socio-economic development of the local area and the empowerment of rural women, along with low-income families and marginalized sections of the communities.

### **Empowering Communities through Integrated Tourism and Capacity Development**

Integrated community-based tourism development encompasses various disciplines, including education, tourism, infrastructure, health, agriculture, micro- and meso-industry, and local trades. The ethnographic explorations also reveal that local community participation and deliberate engagement support the endeavors of the locals to develop their overall capacity. For such processes, facilitating organizations' efforts has been fruitful because they are facilitating the communities and homestay

operators for awareness raising, strengthening group cohesiveness, visioning, planning, enterprising, and capacitating the local actors and stakeholders. Equally, minimal emphasis is placed on promoting local traditional knowledge and skills.

The capacity development efforts are more focused on technical skills, and partly managerial and leadership development skills are also focused. In the study area, the economic activities mainly involve micro-enterprises such as homestay services, green vegetable production, poultry farming, bee-keeping, mushroom farming, grocery shops, restaurant (tea-shop) management, and local resources-based handicrafts making (e.g., bamboo-based, *babiyo* [thatch]-grass-based, etc.), etc. Bamboo (locally called '*chyas*' in Chepang) is very commonly available but very important in the area. In my observations, I also found many varieties of bamboo. These bamboo products are used for different purposes, including '*taamaa*' (bamboo shoot vegetable, which is very nutritious and is considered a traditional food item), '*choya*' (strips), pole, grass, etc. Tourists, especially domestic, also prefer bamboo-based hand-made crafts.

Equally, as per the locals, the project had given cultural choreography training to the locals—both homestay owners and non-owners—to preserve local traditional songs (like *dohori-geet*)/*bhajan* and dances through various performances for tourists. Due to such social, cultural, technical, and financial activities, in some parts, homestay can be the mainstay of livelihoods if full facilitation, motivation, and material-based support are provided. For this—as my research participants also expect and urge—proper orientation, training, exposure visits, and continuous facilitation are required.

Homestay management and cooking-baking (tourism) trainers in Kathmandu and in Chitwan, in various consultations and *kurakani*, also emphasized and advocated that for overall capacity enhancement of the villagers, incorporation of gender and social inclusion issues into the process of community development through the use of such disciplines and discourses. These can further support the initiatives of developing homestays and multiple capacities of the locals. Analysis of the efforts indicated that gender balance or reduced "gender inequality" (Mitra et al., 2023) is sought in most of the activities and endeavors through equal (if not equitable) selection and participation in all opportunities, programs and activities. On some occasions, homestay operators have good networks with district, provincial, and

federal connections and search for opportunities from other sources to get more training and exposure. Nevertheless, less initiative in such external networking is observed at present.

### **Navigating Challenges and Transformations in Homestay Tourism and Community Learning**

Research participants' different experiences, non-formal, informal and formal learning, views and opinions have contributed to broadening my empirical knowledge. Kolb (2014) emphasizes the connection between education and employment or tasks. It is considered helpful for enhancing an individual with the necessary skills and supporting them in transitioning from the world of education to the world of work. In our case, the homestay operators of the MH have learned a lot from their own experiences and other training and participatory community actions. Nevertheless, they face numerous challenges too during the learning and practicing processes.

Some learning challenges are associated with language, yet some are with methods and materials, and some are with even the level of the participants themselves and their understanding and comprehension. From the field, it was also realized that getting the same meaning or sense and connotations from every person is not possible, particularly on these words: empowerment, participation, sustainability, equity, gender, etc. Equally, the quality issue of the developed matters and materials for training and workshops has also been a grave concern. The subject matter of the texts, the facts, the language, and the figures or illustrations are also frequently criticized by locals and other users. Sometimes they are too difficult to understand, and sometimes irrelevant too, to some extent.

The time (temporal) and the space (spatial) concerns are yet to be reflected in the training- and workshop-focused resource materials. Developing training and educational materials in local languages (e.g. in Chepang, Magar, etc.) has been a far cry. While planning and executing any training, a thorough thought on developing appropriate resource materials for trainers as well as participants is essential. All training programs may require well-developed materials, whether made locally or imported, considering local needs and features. In the study area, many institutions are failing to use adequate and locally suitable materials for enhancing training effectiveness, effects, and impacts.

According to local entrepreneurs, for instance, proper marketing of the local products and services has also been a challenge. Thus, based on local experiences, irrespective of their low level of returns, it is provocative that homestay marketing could be sustained through local efforts; although in the initial stages, some external support might be required, like in Barauli Community Homestay in Chitwan (Poudel, 2019). In Barauli, local Tharu people operate the homestays, and the marketing parts are managed by a private company called "Royal Mountain". According to the company, which helps the local people under the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR), it supports the local communities until they become ready to take over the marketing efforts with full capacity and confidence (Poudel, 2019). Poudel and Nyaupane (2013) also emphasize understanding local residents' priorities and satisfaction with tourism activities so that more participation and commitment would be possible.

Their study revealed that individuals' perceived personal benefits from tourism influenced how economic factors, interactions with tourists, and "employment in tourism" (Kanel, 2019c) shaped their views on tourism's economic role in their locality. Despite these realities, long-term commitments and real actions are yet to be observed and realized in the study area, which is comparatively remote and inhabited mostly by marginalized people. In such cases, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches also play crucial roles. A multidisciplinary approach is important because tourism inherently draws from multiple disciplines (Strasdascher, 2009). Likewise, an interdisciplinary perspective seeks to integrate these disciplines for a more comprehensive understanding (Repko, 2008). Then, the "transdisciplinary approach" (Khokhobaia, 2018) promotes the participation of diverse stakeholders for "sustainable tourism" (Kanel, 2019a), including the inclusion of non-academic stakeholders. However, the interface of these perspectives is rarely taken care of in many sectors.

Ongoing developmental and learning practices have contributed to raising awareness of the local people in many contexts. For example, it was the matter of almost two-and-a-half decades ago, and the '*baasi khana*' (left-over/stale food) practice has significantly reduced in recent years due to increasing educational awareness, health consciousness, better estimation skills of cook/kitchen-workers, and practice of confirming by the invitees' about their presence in the event or in the case

of compulsive inability to be there. In my research, people in the MH have also hugely left the practice of eating stale food. If we call this "awareness" due to modernization, we also accept that "modernization" also helps remove (unhealthy) bad practices, which used to be considered as "culture" or "sub-culture" in the past.

Despite ups and downs in the socio-cultural perspectives, it is clear that tourism interventions need to be cautious for their continuity without much compromise for local and traditional tangible and intangible cultural promotions (UNESCO, 2007). It is not age-old and static but rather a dynamic phenomenon, part of living cultures (Janua, 2022). UNESCO (2007) also claims that not only do songs and ballads, proverbs and riddles, phrases and idiomatic expressions, and art and crafts transform over time and space, but knowledge, skills, products, and performances are also constantly being adapted. Thus, local people's attention and active participation are vital to preserving both tangible and intangible heritages through cultural tourism.

If proper care is given from the beginning, they could be managed without much loss and compromise, and this process will encourage the local communities to participate in cultural activities or heritage-focused events. For instance, as Janjua (2022) highlights, Malaysian homestays often engage in unique practices, such as organizing and showcasing "mock weddings" for tourists staying in their community homestays. Similarly, based on an empirical study, Dhungana et al. (2022) report that the Chepang community in Nepal utilizes indigenous knowledge embedded in their societal functions and cultural rituals for disaster risk reduction, and this traditional wisdom passed down through generations, encompasses mitigation and preparedness strategies that serve as practical and experience-based solutions to minimize natural hazard risks. However, according to them, challenges such as inadequate transmission methods and limited engagement from the younger generation threaten the preservation of this valuable (indigenous) knowledge. Modern training and capacity development efforts have also been incapable of trapping their intergenerational and experiential knowledge, skills and practices.

As mentioned above, many authors have cautioned that westernization and modernization could bring rapid changes in any culture or religion; these facets also need to be considered while conceptualizing or proposing any developmental interventions, especially in the culture and heritage-based tourism development,

"removing the violence-based cultural and social practices" (Uprety, 2014, as cited by Das, 2014). Such issues are also linked to kitchen management and hospitality services because kitchen hygiene practices are of paramount importance in the tourism sector/homestay management. More importantly, as we noted above, in homestay tourism, tourists can easily observe and experience the cooking and food-serving activities of the host family.

Under these kitchen practices, in recent years, changes in behaviours in the use of the improved stove, cleaning and placing of utensils, preparation, and storage of foods have notably improved since many areas have got some interventions of water and sanitation and hygiene (WASH) related activities throughout Nepal. For example, the change in household food covering behavior after preparation increased to 36.2% (Das, 2014; p. 51). The homestay operators' learning and behavioral changes in such actions are worth further observing, documenting, and sharing since most of the homestay-related activities are run by women. Their awareness, knowledge, skills and informed practices are vital for effective homestay management and subsequent capability/empowerment.

In the Indian case, Kalam and Pillai (2013) also emphasized human resource empowerment with the right knowledge. They write, "...in a knowledge society, the most important commodity is the human resource....." (p. 40). Thus, it is critically discussed and provoked that proper education and need-based skills-oriented training are vital for exploiting the hidden talents and potentials of the locals. Similarly, TVET opportunities can significantly boost KSA in terms of enterprise development and employment creation for local women, men, and youth (Paudel, 2024). The modernization of any society compromises some traditional practices and values, which could be "right" or "wrong" in the present context. The positive practices need to be scaled up and widened. For example, although there are no tourism activities in the Darai communities in the Tanahun district, Pradhan (2017) found that "many songs and dances are gradually degraded for the last few years" (p.48). Furthermore, Darai youths are leaving the villages, and they pay less attention to traditional Darai culture and language.

It denotes that the culture of any site in Nepal is seriously affected by "modernism" rather than "tourism". Even Ghalegaun of Lamjung, Nepal, which is a famous village culturally and naturally, and also signifies as 'SAARC Village', has

been much influenced by modernism (Ghimire & Neupane, 2022). In such concerns, the focus of all stakeholders is essential for enhancing collaborative efforts so that multiple perspectives of rural development and empowerment will be possible, "allowing opportunities to determine and monitor each others' works" (Riley, 2002, p. 186). The practice which was common in the past, remaining as a culture or habit, could be considered "wrong practice" in later times. Thus, critical thinking and practice is required.

For example, Pradhanang (2000) writes that the Tharus of Chitwan have a variety of dishes of cuisine, and during their festivals, so many dishes of foods are prepared, and they cannot consume all in a day, which are eaten the next day also; because they eat *baasi khana* (stale food) because "practically Tharus have a popular culture of eating *baasi khana*" (p. 31). Like Tharus, this practice is common in many ethnic groups or geographies depending on the food type, season, occasion, and timings. However, this *baasi-khana* practice is decreasing in many parts of Nepal due to modern quick-cooking facilities and escalated knowledge, awareness, and attitudes. In the same way, the area is also witnessing several cultural practices that are on the verge of loss, such as the culture of *parma* (labour exchange), *paincho* or material loans (or reciprocity in terms of Ember et al., 2007), community participation in social actions, etc. According to locals, these are attributed to growing capabilities, monetization, commercialization, modernization, etc. In the MH, these challenges are also closely observed and realized.

### **Learning, Capability and Sustainable Tourism**

Experts advocating for quality education and training indicate the crucial roles of trainers, participants, methods, resources, and the environment (Mohanty, 2007). In such cases, issues related to long-term and short-term training are also different and diverse. Thus, understanding the key elements of effective training/educational programs is vital for the training designers and executors (Bray, 2006). It is also equally important to consider the societal needs of the learner.

Sen's Capability Approach (theory) emphasizes three important aspects. First, freedom to achieve well-being (he emphasizes that development expands people's freedoms, enabling them to achieve what they value in life rather than focusing solely on income or resources. He also argues that the true measure of development lies in people's ability to make choices and pursue lives they have reason to value. Second,

capabilities over resources (he distinguishes between having resources and having the capabilities to use them effectively. It's not enough to have wealth or goods; what matters is whether individuals can convert these resources into opportunities that improve their well-being, such as access to education, healthcare, and a safe environment). Third, human diversity and social context (he highlights that people's abilities to convert resources into valued outcomes depend on their personal characteristics and social circumstances, such as age, gender, health, and societal norms; he also stresses the need to consider these factors to ensure fair and meaningful opportunities for all individuals). In this perspective, Mohanty (2007) further claims that in addition to societal needs for blended learning, special institutional and organizational needs are important to address while designing and conducting the programs.

From the field study, I also came to realize that organizational needs and plans play important roles in the training and educational designing programs rather than only considering the participants' immediate and expressed needs. These institutions are more concerned with their budgets, targets, timeliness, etc. Local interactions and reflections also reveal that the participants do not have the chance to fix the duration and contents of the training. Rather, they are fixed based on organizational interest, available resources, and, more importantly, time. It is also revealed that the community's expectations and needs are unlimited, and they must be compromised or negotiated based on institutional goals/programs, resources, and plans. These are more relevant from the concept and perspective of "sustainable tourism development" (Kanel, 2019a; NTB, 2022), including community homestay development and SRT. The SRT approach considers the local community, culture, environment, and biodiversity (Pandey, 2014; UNDP/TRPAP, 2007). SRT comprises several niche tourism types, including community homestay tourism.

Lately, green tourism, "voluntourism", eco-tourism, health and wellness tourism, and CBT approaches are gaining more popularity in the tourism landscape. In the post-COVID situation, the importance of wellness tourism has increased further (He et al., 2021; Sugathapala, 2024). In Nepal, health, wellness, and leisure tourism markets are also expanding (MoCTCA, 2023). Increasing tourists' health consciousness is the latest phenomenon. Under homestay tourism, local communities, through exposure and empowerment, initiate themselves to develop homestay-based

tourism activities in their settlements. Hospitality services are provided to the visitors at their homes on a cost-basis or profit-making basis. Nonetheless, in Nepal, these homestays are usually much cheaper than the rates of hotels/resorts, although the homestays provide food and accommodations with local/new tastes and comforts. It is asserted that tourism would bring positive changes in local cultures (Holloway, 1989; cited in Franklin, 2003). Gurung (2024), Kandel (2016), and Kanel (2019a) also report that sustainable tourism/homestay concepts are always expected to bring positive impacts on local culture and heritages, including other factors, such as economic, social, environmental, etc. (Bhutia et al., 2022; Subedi, 2019; Subedi, 2016). While reading the lines, at this stage, I was also hit by the findings of Nigam (2002)—referring to an Indian tourism case of Garhwal—he highlights that the traditional folk dancers and folk musicians of Garhwal play an important role in the customs and traditions of the place, which they have yet preserved. According to him, the traditional drumming in Garhwal, known as "Naubat", is still played each day at the gates of Kedarnath, Badrinath, and other prominent temples of the region.

The *Kedar dance*, *Devnritya* dance, *Ras Lila* dance, and *Pandavnryitya dance* are regularly performed in the region. It is also claimed that—despite the mixing of the tribes of Garhwal with the outer world—modernization processes have not affected their behavior, lifestyles, and customs (Nigam, 2002). Likewise, Nepali scholar Pradhanang (2000), showing the case of Chitwan district, reports that mass tourism may bring some changes in the local traditional practices and, if serious attention is not paid from the very beginning of the culture-based tourism, localness, and authenticity may deteriorate soon. Internationally, similar cases have been reported by Abdullah & Stringer (1999), Macedo (1999), and Quiroz (1999). These authors have emphasized preserving local knowledge, culture, skills, and so on to reduce dominance from outsiders dominance/hegemony/colony.

In reality, Pradhanang (2000) further shows his concerns that some cultural values in the Tharu society of Sauraha—one of the prime destinations of Nepal—have been diminishing in the past few years. He explains that the Tharus of Sauraha are rich in their traditional rituals and cultures, and they used to wear more than thirty-two types of ornaments, festivals, foods and dances, and songs. They are rich in their culture. Thus, Tharu cultural tourism in the Terai area has been promising recently. However, according to him, over-modernization (westernization) is threatening the

cultures of all parts of Nepal. Kandel (2022) also blames some so-called civilized and learned people for bringing such threats to indigenous cultures and practices.

Supporting the facts, Poudel (2014) also reports significant changes in local cultural practices due to influences of mass tourism and their imported "guest cultures". These all are attributed to rapid modernization, urbanization, and increasing touristic activities. Considering all such concerns, many recent tourism projects and programs, however, have attempted to examine potential threats related to local participation, environment, culture, social integrity, heritage, natural resources, etc. Accordingly, they try to address those concerns with special priority to women and low-income households, such as by UNDP/TRPAP (2007). Social mobilization processes have been fundamental for injecting new learning and concerns into local initiatives. Local social mobilizers believe that "Learning by seeing (observation) has been the more prominent trigger for the local learning activities." Like famous Indian politician Mahatma Gandhi, the local social mobilizers also believe in the saying, "Gently, you can shake the world"- Gandhi). But, in an actual sense, in the absence of concerted and integrated development efforts, all social mobilizations have not been result-oriented since most of them are seen as project works only.

In community homestay destinations, locally guided visits are arranged, cultural shows are performed, and guests are given chances to observe or participate in farming, social, and household chores to gain a new experience. These provisions make mutual learning and sharing possible. These homestay operators invest some money to develop various facilities within their homestay units. But in the beginning, they got grants from GOs, NGOs, INGOs, or other organizations/projects. These grants have been used mostly for economic purposes, but some cultural and social activities are also being supported. Sure, "investment should be for profit, but it can also be for a wider social good" (Brahm, 2014, p. 57) and "community welfare" (Lama, 2013). Brahm further advocates that businesses with the right focus can help preserve communities, empower the marginalized, and protect the environment. From a tourism economy perspective, as suggested by Vogel (2001), in rural-area-based tourism systems, investment and returns (e.g., internal rate of return- IRR) are rarely calculated; profits and losses are hardly analyzed, and household-based annual incomes and expenditures are hardly ever estimated.

Thus, the homestay operators in the MH also don't calculate the services or materials (for example, fruits, *dahi/mahi* (yoghurt/lassi, etc.) they provide to the guests. At that time, they also remembered the value of "*atithi devo bhava*" (Guests are like gods. Trans.). As I discussed in earlier chapters, these traditional Nepali practices imply that rural tourism is done not only for economic reasons but also for several other purposes, such as social, cultural, environmental, and so on. Despite all these realities, the homestay operators' prime objective is to earn money from homestay (Baral, 2024). Vogel also states that local productivity and tourist utility play significant roles in the economic gains from tourism. They believe that economic and knowledge transformations are possible through sustainable rural tourism. According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning begins when individuals encounter a disorienting dilemma—an experience that challenges their current beliefs or perspectives. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning focuses on how adults fundamentally change their understanding of the world through critical reflection and re-evaluation of their experiences.

This dilemma prompts them to critically reflect on their assumptions, leading to a process where they question long-held beliefs and consider alternative viewpoints. Through this self-reflective process, learners develop a deeper awareness of themselves and their worldviews, which can lead to a significant shift in perspective. The transformation that Mezirow describes isn't just about gaining new information but involves a profound change in the way individuals see themselves and the world. This process of transformation often leads to a more open, inclusive, and reflective way of thinking. Mezirow emphasizes that transformative learning involves both rational discourse and emotional experience; it's a holistic process that includes not just intellectual understanding but also emotional and social changes. Ultimately, transformative learning empowers individuals to become more autonomous, self-aware, and open to diverse perspectives, which can improve their ability to make thoughtful and well-rounded decisions in their personal and professional lives.

In this context, Fleming (2018) offers a critique of Mezirow's transformative learning theory by challenging its emphasis on rationality and individual reflection as the primary drivers of transformation. Fleming argues that Mezirow's framework is too focused on cognitive processes and overlooks the critical role of social, cultural, and emotional factors in transformative learning. He contends that transformation is

often influenced by communal and relational dynamics rather than purely individual reflection.

Additionally, Fleming suggests that transformative learning accounts for the impact of power structures and social contexts, which can shape and sometimes limit the ways people interpret and respond to disorienting experiences. Parajuli et al. (2019) also criticize that the "elite-based power structures" play several roles in shaping/re-shaping the local communities, including governance, education, culture, etc. This broader perspective calls for a more holistic approach, recognizing that transformative learning is not just an intellectual process but also deeply embedded in social and emotional contexts. Likewise, Bray (2006) also emphasizes creating an appropriate learning environment for better cognitive development, "which mainly requires five aspects: attention, memory, language, reasoning, and problem-solving" (p. 104). His further stresses are on designing the training environment to meet the individual learning traits of learners.

As discussed earlier, homestay in Nepal is considered a part of the community-based homestay (CBT) model. The CBT and sustainable tourism development (STD/SRTD) models (Lo & Janta, 2020) are considered alternative tourism models globally. Ghimire (2015) also discusses the role of social tourism as an alternative tourism in Nepal, citing an example from Lumbini. He claims that social tourism could bring social prosperity, especially in the marginalized communities in the destinations, but it requires prioritized marketing. It is said that "marketing begins from the product", and the product-related factual information should reach the right targets (guests). Kalam and Rajan (2005, p. 84) state, "... there is no point in higher productivity if the goods produced do not reach the markets (consumers) in time". All types of products indeed need to be taken/sent to the markets for timely and better profitability. These have been critical issues in many destinations to discuss, plan, and execute further.

### **Bridging Generations: Sustaining Homestay Tourism in Nepal Amid Evolving Challenges**

Through effective learning and knowledge transfer, overall tourism development in the area would be possible, including homestay development as a part of the local tourism system (TGDB, 2016). However, intergenerational issues in homestay tourism are vital in viewing the sustainability of such enterprises in Nepal.

Locals are always concerned about the continuation of such practices by the new generations. Since homestay tourism is linked with many other tourism sectors, it also fits everywhere: rural, urban, mountain, Terai, water, wildlife/eco-tourism, and/or many other types and avenues.

Low literacy and outer knowledge levels can impede individuals from expanding communications and networking due to language-related proficiency and conversational efficiency. Different eco- and geo-regions and provinces have seen homestay tourism as a promising tourism product in their areas, not only from accommodation provider views but also a good platform for cultural heritage tourism in all the provinces of Nepal—from the East (Koshi) to the Far-West—with the possibility of developing some niche tourism products (Sharma, 2012). These products can offer various rural and urban experiences in different regions of Nepal where greater opportunities exist for developing and expanding, and they can also help maintain the service ecosystems of both areas. Intergenerational engagement can also ensure a better possibility of sustaining the efforts.

Nevertheless, a homestay trainer in Kathmandu opines that the new generation is not paying any attention to indulging in such businesses; they consider the homestay business as the "parents' business". Likewise, in a national radio talk (20 July 2021), the Chairperson of the Homestay Committee of Amaltari hinted that the engagement of the youth generation in homestay initiatives has always been a priority issue for every homestay destination in Nepal. According to him, the new generation may come to such enterprise differently. But their concerns are yet to be addressed. To support this further, Moilasa (2017), in her ethnographic study-based finding of Gurung culture in the Gilung (Kinlung) village of Lamjung district, states that accelerating youth's migrations to urban areas and foreign countries have challenged to sustain local songs and dances (*natch*) such as *Ghantu naach*, *Krishnacharitra naach* and many types of youth-club dances.

Similarly, despite the keen interests of the locals to maintain the environment, preserve forests, protect soils, reduce wastes, and also the green/organic concepts in the farming system, they have not been as successful as anticipated due to some paradoxical practices by themselves and by the development organizations. For example, in my field observations, I realized that balancing these elements has been

crucial because of the area's fast, aggressive, and competitive economic and infrastructural developmental activities.

These open facts have seriously threatened ecological, socio-cultural, and environmental concerns. Local green resources are depleted, and cultural aspects are also at great risk. Based on field studies, Lama and Job (2014) also raised such concerns with a special title, "Development with roads or without roads?" Likewise, Bhattarai (2022) also raised serious concerns by asking Nepali professionals: "Agriculture with chemical fertilizer and pesticides or without them?" "Priority for white water rafting, or electricity production?" These are some of the notable endless debates in our societies, which need longer times to go green in real terms. Locals of the MH also expressed that it would take a long time to be a real eco-worker since there is a dearth of knowledge, attitudinal limitations, and the inadequacy of appropriate technologies, tools, and alternative measures/resources.

Normally, from a cultural point of view, homestays are for longer periods of stay. Nonetheless, in Nepal, a one-night stay is considered "OK" for many tourists/guests. In a *kurakani* with a journalist (tourist) in the area, I learned that he usually does not prefer to stay many nights in homestays of the same place; rather, he prefers to stay in homestays of different places and cultures. He also feels better about changing each night with a different experience—sometimes homestay and sometimes "hometel" or hotel-stay. His expressions made a sense that unless and until there is an urgent need to stay in the homestay, some tourists prefer variability and diversity in their stays. Some tourists may arrive in the area as "hedonic" visitors (Kunwar, 2017) who have less interest in local culture but more interest in pleasure, relaxation, fine food, maximum joys, etc. The homestay operators also developed this narrative with the same type of understanding. In the area, they have faced several types of tourists.

Research participant Som Maya said that youth who come to this area as visitors in a big group usually do not like to stay at a homestay; rather, they prefer hotels and guest houses for their free nightlife. Present youngsters would like to have full enjoyment when they are out of home, which is not possible in homestays due to strict family rules or "codes of conduct". Like Yang's definition of sub-culture, as mentioned above, I suddenly remembered a context discussed by Suresh Gautam in his PhD thesis depicting the phenomena of present youths growing in urban areas

(Gautam, 2017) and becoming like free independent tourists. He has used the term 'playfulness' for such joys. He used that concept to describe something which creates the meaning of fun and relaxation, such as telling jokes, chatting, singing and dancing, and so on (Cole, Ronan, & Taussig, 1996; as cited in Gautam, 2017). Describing the nature of independent tourists, Hyde and Lawson (2003) and Tsaur et al. (2010) also state that such travelers desire to experience the unplanned, an important trend in modern tourism and becoming a growing worldwide tourism sector. In such cases, according to Kunwar (2017), authenticity may vanish in local cultural tourism, and as Butler (1985) says, from a tourism area life cycle perspective, "rejuvenation or decline" is possible.

Localizing the context may infer the meaning that local destinations need to be able to provide both (or many) types of accommodations to cater to different interest groups. When the number of tourists increases in any area, existing homestays are gradually converted into hotels or guest houses open for tourists 24 hours a day. Thus, homestays' transformation into "hometel" resorts or hotels is considered a normal phenomenon when homestay businesses keep flourishing. In a *bhalakusari*, an executive member (male) of the HOSAN also opines that the renowned homestay sites are rapidly changing towards hotels and resorts, such as Ghandruk, Bandipur, Gavar Valley, etc.

Although Nepal's homestay tourism initiatives have engaged mostly adults and elderly people, they are still unplanned from an ageing perspectives (Kanel et al., 2025). Their needs, aspirations, concerns, and issues have not been reflected in homestay development plans and capacity development endeavors. According to Bihi Devi, running homestays could be challenging if the coming generation or the youths do not notice or care about its continuity. The mobilization of youth is a difficult and global challenge; however, Kalam and Pillai (2013) criticize the youth population's inability to think deeply, take part, lead, and be critical. In the same line, Kalam's and Pillai's poetic lines in the same book (2013) are worth reading, realizing, and re-amplifying:

*Courage to think different*

*Courage to invent*

*Courage to travel into an unexplored path*

*Courage to discover the impossible*

*Courage to combat the problem and succeed*

*These are the unique qualities of the youth. (p. 277)*

Interestingly, as in the above lines, Bihi Devi shared her views that there were no special programs to attract youth and adolescents in the farming world and also in the homestay and local cooperative-related concerns. She also noted that due to educational development and regular schooling of local children, adolescents, and youth, evening cultural activities were also affected by less participation of those groups owing to school homework and other engagements related to formal educational gains.

She also mentioned that some youngsters have gone outside the village for studies and work, which also affected the participation of local youth and adolescents due to their migration. In the literature, Chandra (2010) also states that migrations are fueled by not only employment reasons but also many other factors, such as "political and social instability, economic incentives, conflicts, and the like" (p. 82). Nepali rural settlements have numerous factors that fuel and "push" for out migrations, despite some "pull" factors from a globalization perspective.

These different experiences bring many meanings to us. If the situation is like this in every village where homestay tourism is gaining momentum and popularity, how will these businesses survive after the first generation? Will the new (youth) generation love to continue the business? This is a critical issue of community-based tourism (TGDB, 2016, 2024)'s continuation, which also relates more to homestay tourism. In my observations, intergenerational engagement and continuity of homestay enterprising in rural areas have been of great concern in recent times. Likewise, according to Adhikari (2024) and Sedai (2018), though some efforts have been made to tackle the issues and problems of youth engagement, most have remained unfocused and unsolved. When considering the capacity development of homestay operators, they are also closely linked with family members of different generations and other stakeholders.

### **Building Capacity for Homestay Tourism: A Stepwise Model for Sustainable Development in Nepal**

From the findings, I came to realize some possibilities for deconstructing/reconstructing and re-packaging the homestay tourism teaching/learning processes are there. Some step-wise procedures for community homestay and capacity development

do exist there. Under this, there could be five key stages: stage 1: Needs assessment, objective setting, and capacity development plan design; stage 2: awareness creation; stage 3: exposures; stage 4: skills (technical and management) training emphasizing local/traditional practices; and, stage 5: monitoring, follow-up, evaluation, and mentoring.

And, for the effective completion of all these five stages, there can be crucial roles of the facilitators/social mobilizers or local resource persons (LRPs) and, equally, leveraging and networking with various organizations and individuals in the locality would also be essential. Any organization devoted to facilitating the locals and aiming to develop local homestay/tourism development capacities could implement this step-wise process or model. As per local interests, in this process, local community learning centers can also serve for better training/continuous training opportunities, which can be managed locally with little facilitation but with wider funding opportunities. Utilizing multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches in the local tourism and capacity development processes can be useful for these areas, too.

To further elaborate on the skills training component, here the participants are given different types of skills training focusing on the subject matters of homestay opening, operating, and management on the key topics identified during the training needs assessment (TNA) process, as well as some managerial skills such as book-keeping, billing/accounting, group management, leadership skills, communication skills, etc. Likewise, leverage generally means generating more resources through effective coordination, communications, and collaborations with different organizations directly and indirectly involved. Most importantly, all the capacity development efforts are focused on the key actors, such as the homestay groups/committees, users' committees, saving and credit groups, cooperatives, cultural groups, particular enterprise-focused special groups, and many more.

Homestay operators' practice starts only after the technical and managerial know-how. They indulge in the commercial community homestay enterprise. The operator's technical know-how is further streamlined and strengthened by financial resources for developing homestay facilities, amenities, and different types of services, which might include the sources, like own money or self-financed grant money provided by various GOs/(I)NGOs and private sectors/diaspora; or loan-

money managed from different sources including local saving and credit group(s), cooperative, finance companies, and/or development/commercial banks. Similarly, with technical and financial foundations, the entrepreneur is facilitated by supporting the organization for constructing, renovating, designing, and developing homestay rooms and beds with other facilities, including dining, toilet and bathroom, and other basic facilities as illustrated in the "Homestay Operation Directive" issued by the GoN/provincial/local governments.

In this process also, leverage and networking development are crucial. To be more contextualized, under the overall capacity development practice, the holistic facilitation process—along with "technical and vocational skills" (Paudel, 2024)—incorporates various activities and interventions. These interventions primarily include tourism product enhancement, product packaging, promotion/branding, marketing, and timely reviews and reflections. All these efforts help re-design the homestay services in the area as well as capacity development processes.

To summarize this section, from the field, I found that all capacity enhancement and learning processes at present are not going satisfactorily. However, based on participants' lived experiences, reflections, and field observations, local facilitating organization(s) and resource persons' roles become vital for creating synergies in the overall learning and capacity enhancement processes as a lifelong learning initiative (Evans, 2003). Continuation of such efforts would better ensure the need-based capacity development and help gain homestay's sustainable, profitable, and acceptable management.

### **Balancing Tradition and Modernity: Challenges in Women-Led Homestay Tourism and Cultural Preservation in Nepal**

In Nepal, homestay is considered to be a women-led family business, although it engages almost all family members in a household. Local interactions and understandings also indicate that homestay is mostly mothers' business, although supportive parts could be played by father, son(s), daughter(s), daughter-in-law(s), etc. In this context, Rind (2015), illustrating the case of Pakistan, also emphasizes that the assumptions and practices of gender roles shape female learners' needs, ventures, and actions.

The exploration also suggests that there have been haphazard openings of homestays occurring everywhere, which cannot ensure proper recording, registration,

and facilitation. It was also revealed that Nepali tourism destinations, mostly homestays, are being opened in an unplanned way, or we can say only in '*rahar*' (imitating interests) and *lahar* (short-sighted waves), due to which proper visioning, planning, implementation, and promotions have been minimal. It was also revealed that the three-tier governments have not been able to pay even basic attention to local capacity development, proper monitoring, and timely mentoring. Also, "fundamental facilitation" is deficient (Adhikari, 2024). The MoCTCA (2016), in the national tourism strategy, also states that if properly implemented, our policies and plans are well crafted, internalizing and accommodating the main principles of sustainable tourism practices adopted universally and locally.

However, in reality, there have been limited practices, like in the MH (Kanel, Bhattarai, & Gnawali, 2024). Local women also raised the issue of intergenerational participation and commitment. Arguably, intergenerational engagement in homestay businesses and the transfer of traditional cultural and technical know-how from an older generation to the coming generation has been a serious challenge for the sustainability of homestay tourism in the area. According to the locals, this scenario demands the proper attention of all actors or stakeholders.

As far as heritage-related issues are concerned, locals are gradually losing traditional arts and crafts, including different artefacts, in the absence of intensive cultural awareness and commitment. Inter-ethnic differences also exist since some of the ethnic groups have already lost so many artefacts that existed in the past. In my observations, I was very much concerned about acquiring knowledge about how the locals are paying attention to preserving old arts and crafts (tangible/intangible). I got only very few such items and resources. As per my observation, Magars have more rich artefacts in the study area than other ethnicities/castes. I had a chance to see their arts and crafts in the building constructions (in old houses), photo frames on the walls and above the doors, photo albums, personal note-book and some registers, old types of kitchen utensils, agricultural equipment, local traditional musical instruments such as *maadal*, *dhyangro*, *damphu*, *khainjadi*, etc.

These old materials also helped me grasp some local knowledge of traditionality and modernity. New types of utensils, musical instruments, and several types of agricultural equipment (e.g. hand-tractors, sprayers, cutters, etc.) are also dominating the old tradition. Nevertheless, irrespective of the value of traditional

things, especially youths prefer modern things, including lots of plastic materials. For instance, in the name of modernity, these youth prefer plastic furniture, such as chairs and tables, instead of local bamboo-based *mudha*, chairs and tables. In this case,

Gautam's (2017) finding is worth quoting here: "... the youth are attracted towards the Western lifestyle, culture, and tradition" (P. 112). Such matters, however, could create problems in the process of developing cultural and eco-friendly tourism. This applies to many destinations. For example, in Himachal Pradesh, India, also similar cases have been observed as Agrawal and Mehra (2020) warn, "..... because of the greater inflow of tourists in certain months, local youths are attracted towards the Western culture ....." (p. 196). These phenomena are major concerns of most homestay/tourism destinations and need serious attention from the very beginning.

### **Empowering Rural Tourism through Experiential Learning**

Kolb's "Experiential Learning Theory" posits that learning is a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1994). According to him, learning is most effective when it involves a cycle of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As we discussed earlier, this cycle begins with a tangible experience, followed by reflection on that experience, leading to the formation of abstract concepts, which are then tested in new situations. Kolb (1984) further emphasizes that learning is not a passive intake of information but an active process requiring engagement and adaptation. Experiential learning encourages learners to integrate theory and practice, promoting deeper understanding and the ability to apply knowledge in varied contexts. By actively participating in and reflecting on experiences, learners construct subjective knowledge and develop critical thinking, adaptability, and a more personalized, practical understanding of concepts. Such reflections help develop and organize new thoughts.

From this exploration, it has been clear that in the research area, homestay participants continuously develop their capacities through different learning ways and strategies, most importantly, through the "learning-by-doing" approach (Kolb, 1994), which we call the experiential learning approach. For all the homestay destinations, learning by doing has been a prime method in Nepal (Kanel et al., 2024; TGDB, 2024). In this connection, Bist (1991) also asserts that various skills practiced at the working people's level continue to come from family-based learning, which further

fuels a person to adopt an informal learning-by-doing practice to gain certain skills (Baral, 2022; Pasa, 2021). As an experiential learner, the homestay operator families continue advancing existing knowledge and skills, producing better results every day. In my study, with this practice, the practitioners are becoming more confident. The tales and voices from the field also support the idea that the homestay operators' trial-and-error-oriented practices have also helped enhance their capability and empowerment processes.

The field exploration also illustrates that women-focused homestay development programs have tried to teach the values and perspectives of feminism to uplift women's exposure and status. As feminism mainly deals with the key perspectives, life experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and efforts being made to enjoy the full rights provisioned by the government as well as by society, the women participants of the area have taken some benefits from the interventions. They have been able to gain new knowledge and skills, gain more exposure than before, and have the opportunity to participate in different local activities/events and decision-making processes. Owing to these, as compared to the past, these participants are also enjoying better rights within the household and in community affairs with different types of linkages, coordination and support. More linkages are expected in the days to come.

Along the same line, Bhandari (2013) and MoCTCA (2016) also come up with some solutions for better forward- and backward linkages since there are already backward linkages between specific goods suppliers (such as handicrafts and food items on the trekking trails) for homestays and tea-houses (small restaurants). In this vein, Ghimire (2024) emphasises the local production system with an enhanced and guaranteed market mechanism with locally-led developmental practices. He believes that these processes can ensure the bringing of "community socialism" in Nepal, where local communities always stand at the front. There are also forward distribution linkages for all tourism enterprises in Nepal. These forward and backward linkages help fulfil the tourism aspirations locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. Such types of linkages are more demanded by homestay entrepreneurs as producers and service providers.

There can also be horizontal linkages between enterprises in the same value chain segment, such as local tour operators and guides. In this connection, Sedai

(2018)—citing cases from the Mid-Western and Far-Western Nepal—also emphasizes noting that local homestay entrepreneurs are actively seeking effective forward and backward linkages for homestay development processes and mechanisms in the area. Bhattarai (2020) also expressed similar views. He expresses that a well-thought-out program and approach need to be designed and implemented to enhance multiple linkages to achieve effective and result-oriented tourism development. He also advocates for pro-poor tourism initiatives in rural Nepal, where mostly marginalized and low-income families reside. According to local leaders, it has also been a challenge to make MH tourism pro-poor since many households are not keenly and convincingly taking part in the process.

According to them, proper identification of marginalized and economically less capable people has been another critical challenge for the local governments. In the same vein, Prahalad (2017) also emphasizes that several strategies are to be taken to uplift the status of the marginalized and "poverty-stricken people", for which he simply terms the "bottom of the pyramid" (BoP). Prahalad also urges "pushing the companies to help in uplifting the BOP from civil society, governments, and non-governmental organizations" (p. 2); those people also need special markets of BOP for their overall development. Linking these people with due respect to their culture and tradition could be a crucial task (Chapagain & Rai, 2018). Haynes (1996) also noted that development is a key dimension of personal life, social relations, politics, economics, and culture, and it needs to be balanced.

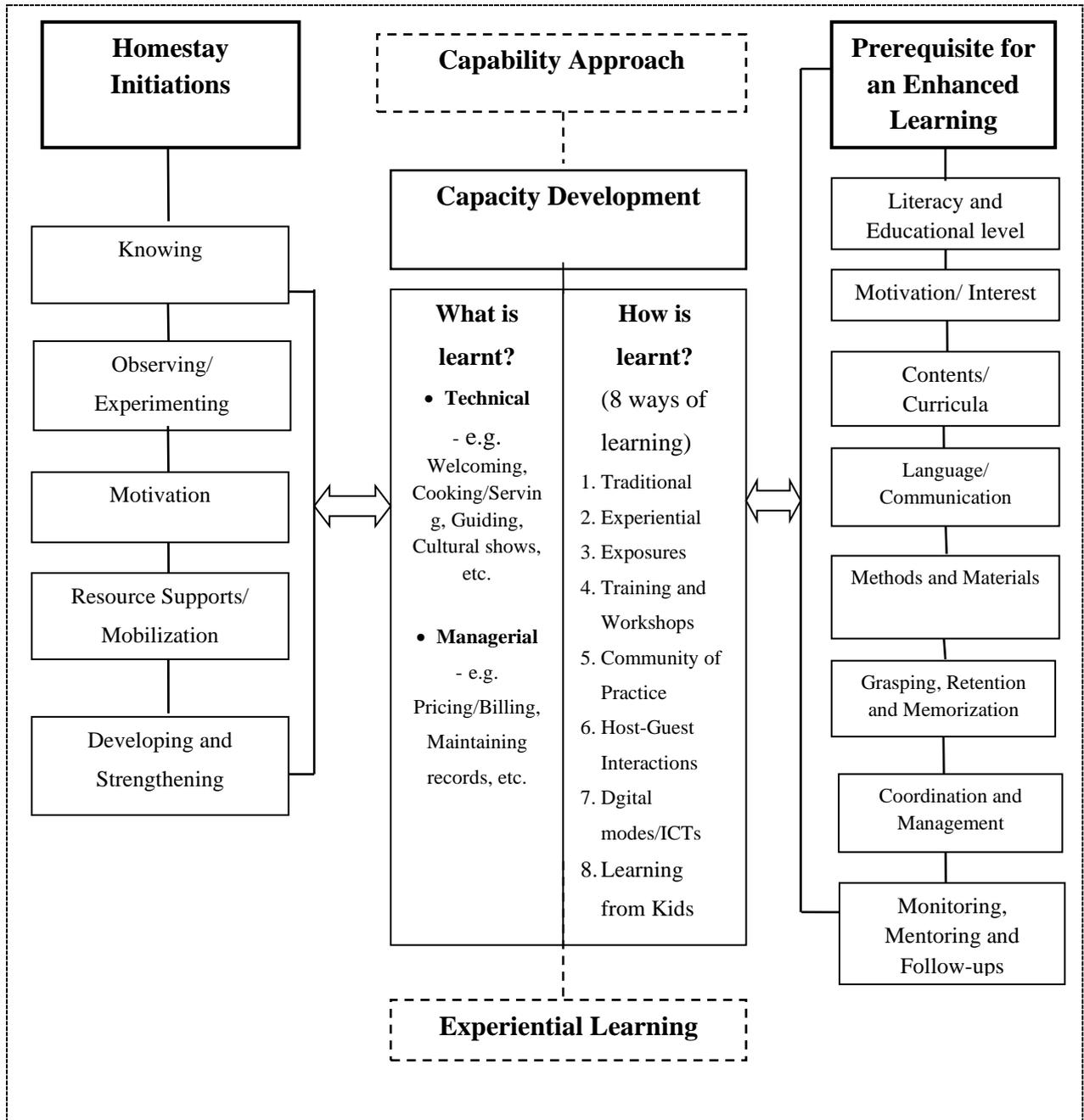
Equally, in the entrepreneurial development process, proper beneficiary mapping and monitoring of the people who are getting benefits and who are not getting such benefits is very important in pro-poor tourism initiatives (Asley & Goodwin, 2007; Harrison, 2008; Sapkota et al., 2024). These observations give us the notion that proper planning, implementation, and timely monitoring are essential actions to enhance community-oriented tourism development, which also focuses on scaling up local entrepreneurs' capability.

However, these are limited activities in the field. In this context, Pandey (2020) also asserts that they are lacking due to inadequate human resources, lesser focus on the target groups, low priority in the tourism sector, and insufficient institutional support systems, along with poor infrastructural support (Sapkota et al., 2024), despite the fact that overall servicescape is very important in tourism (Tan et

al., 2015). From the field observations, I deeply realized that local participation, in a real sense, and also linkages with markets in the pro-poor tourism development processes are still limited (Ashley & Goodwin, 2007; Harrison, 2008; Pandey, 2020; Yaza et al., 2022). Due to less recognition of traditional knowledge and skills, less value of the "transformative learning" process (Kunwar & Ulak, 2024), and low levels of scientific and modern (formal) knowledge, appropriate skills, and orientation (Kanel et al., 2025) on equitable and sustainable tourism development systems, homestay entrepreneurs are experiencing many limitations. Silva et al. (2015) also emphasize the need for green, digital, social, and cultural skills in the hospitality sector, which are also more prominent in the study site.

Moreover, as the FGD participants commented, the tourism sector's role in overall development, livelihood improvement, and peace enhancement process is also in shadow so far in the area, which demands concerted and integrated approaches to boost overall developmental capacities through education, training, exposure, infrastructural support, and more focused interventions. This is more important in the areas where community-based tourism activities, including homestays, are in more demand and strategic priorities.

As revealed in summary, homestay operators have gained practical knowledge through different means within the wider experiential learning framework. And they have also been trying to practice in their day-to-day life as an experiential learner (see Figure 3 below). Every day, they practice, but only sometimes do they fail. Most often, they succeed; sometimes, they drop the idea; and sometimes, they try again and again with the same idea. The homestay operators realize that knowing is simple, but doing is difficult, and sometimes they also feel that doing it is simple, but being is very difficult. In this perspective, Kolb's (1994) Experiential Learning Theory applies here, in which he claims that experiential learning always begins with knowing and ends at being. In this process, he also emphasizes the role of the facilitator in creating learning experiences with reflective and participatory actions.

**Figure 3***Homestay Enterprises and its Learning: A Reflective Look*

Based on our reflections, issues with learning and training venues also matter. For example, while observing and interacting in the field, one day, I noticed that the homestay operator lady's husband did not believe the proposed training needed to be conducted outside the village. However, his wife, who was supposed to participate in cooking training, said the training must be held outside the village. Her genuine reason behind this was the opportunity for further exposure. Additionally, she was

saying that if the training is conducted in the village, there will be no chance to see the outside world; thus, important training programs need to be conducted outside the village so that the participants would be able to get a good chance for seeing new places, meeting new people, and also taste some new items of foods. Tourism professionals are expected to see these perspectives while designing on-site, off-site, or other training programs and study tours as exposure opportunities. Bhutia et al. (2022) also noted similar experiences from the hills of Sikkim and Darjeeling, India.

In this context, Potter (2007) also states that the experiential learning method is important and essential in adult learning, which may demand sub-methods and techniques like role-playing, simulations, gaming, etc. He also noted that resistance could be observed in many societies following traditional religions and cultures where heterogeneity in power and social structure differ. In such cases, resistance and changes could be a natural process. Van Manen (2007) also states that "the challenge of human science research is that the experiential situations may be drastically different" (p. 166). Thus, as suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), in this research, participants' behavioral demonstrations and personal expressions and reflections were very important for deeper understanding and insights.

Therefore, for better insights, I collected stories and voices of their own experiences and made key issues/themes out of them based on my observational participation in their daily activities and performances. In such cases and phases, I was more focused on "rural life from grassroots perspectives" (Chauhan, 2009) from multiple arenas of community development and capacity building, including settlement structure, ethnicity, well-being, education, daily life, relations, works, production systems, incomes, employment, infrastructural development, governance, etc. These are mostly done through the learning-by-doing approach rather than attending formal classes on how to use mobiles and gadgets. Learning by doing is the foundation of experiential learning. For example, with this research, participants have had a very good experience learning how to use (smart) mobile phones.

### **Chapter Essence**

In this chapter, based on the field outputs and key insights, I discussed and reflected on various aspects of community-based homestay-related learning and capacity development endeavors and achievements. Also, I put some insightful discussions linking theoretical perspectives related to training, experiential learning

and overall capability enhancement. These insightful and discussed issues are also associated with the growth and stagnation of homestay enterprising in the area, linking multiple perspectives, including gender dynamics, cost-benefit scenarios, intergenerational engagement, and other interconnected issues. The discussions addressed key factors influencing effective learning and backstopping and mentoring processes; as well as highlighting the crux and dilemma of effective marketing of local homestay attractions and services. I also well elaborated on the experienced challenges in continuing the traditional, indigenous and experience-based intergenerational knowledge and skills transfer mechanisms, due to the encroaching dominance of "modern" cultural, religious and developmental practices in the Mahabharat Hills. Overall, the chapter underscored the complexities of sustaining community homestay enterprises in the area.

## CHAPTER VIII

### RECAPITULATION, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND WRAPPING UP THE JOURNEY

In this chapter, I recapitulate the key highlights and essences of my research work, from the introduction of the topic to the key findings and discussions, as well as portray my concluding versions based on my observations, analyses, interpretations, and reflections on the overall study. Additionally, I present some implications of the research covering different sectors like policymaking, implementing agencies, community, academic sector, and others. And, at last, I present my personal experiences, feelings, and reflections on the overall PhD journey, how I started, and how I came up to this stage.

#### **Recapitulation and Reflections**

Realizing the growing importance and significant space of homestay tourism in Nepal, I initiated the study focusing on the learning and capacity development processes and practices of the community homestay operators of Nepal, citing a case of MH in the Bagmati Province of Central Nepal. Many institutions are involved in teaching-learning, and capacitating the locals; nevertheless, in-depth studies on the learning and capacity development practices are limited. It was also felt that there was limited empirical knowledge of homestay operators' learning practices and associated challenges.

With this realization, I conceptualized the research to explore the experiences of homestay operators' learning and capacity development practices and developed three major research questions (RQ). The first RQ was about the "initiations of homestay operators," how they were motivated and started homestays in their area, and how they felt about the homestay enterprising. Likewise, from the second RQ, I tried to investigate what is taught and learned in homestay teaching-learning and capacity development processes through local (traditional) initiatives; as well as through various formal courses such as training, workshops, seminars, etc. Equally, the third RQ was designed to explore the challenges and constraints experienced by the homestay operators, primarily the women operators of the study area during the learning and practice processes.

My comprehensive literature reviews suggest that community homestays are growing in developing countries, and various governmental and non-governmental organizations support the initiatives. While so doing, I came to realize that Nepal is also considered one of the pioneer countries in homestay tourism on the globe. The community homestay development initiatives have taken momentum through several ways, measures, and strategies. In the area, government institutions (including bilateral/INGO projects) facilitate homestay operators through policy and guidelines formation, capacity building, infrastructural and institutional development, and product and service promotions. Through such efforts, homestay operators are encouraged to participate in different types of exposure visits or 'study tours,' special thematic training and workshop opportunities, and, occasionally, financial grants as well. Nevertheless, such efforts have been ad hoc in nature.

The key actors of community-based tourism development have put some effort into enhancing the capacities of the locals to initiate, engage, and advance their entrepreneurial and managerial knowledge and "hospitality skills" (Silva et al., 2025), along with some motivational support through exposure, infrastructural/investment ventures, and so forth. However, less effort is being put into systematically developing human resources at the community level. Less importance is given to local/traditional and network-based (CoP) learning practices. Although there are several studies on homestay tourism, the studies have also missed the in-depth exploration of contexts of learning avenues, contents, and styles in practice in community homestays. Thus, in this study, I focused on exploring the missing areas of previous empirical studies done by various researchers, as elaborated in Chapter II.

While doing the exploration, I used two theoretical lenses: the Experiential Learning Theory, and the Capability Approach. Through the lens of experiential learning, local practices of self-capacity and confidence development through various self-initiations and practices are examined. Moreover, through the Capability Approach, how different initiations and efforts help develop local capacities and efficacies in carrying out various tasks associated with community-based homestay enterprising. Equally connecting the issues, women's empowerment process through community homestay tourism was also explored. In the study, philosophically, I applied qualitative and interpretive paradigms. Methodologically, I adopted an ethnographic approach using participant observation, *bhalakusari*, *kurakani*, FGDs,

and study of artifacts locally available. The *bhalakusari* way of interacting with research participants has been my major source of information generation for inductive exploration. As a research participant, I have been able to bring personal stories, voices, and experiences of the community homestay operators of the study area, which has been running for many years.

Based on the three key research questions, my ethnographic exploratory study reveals that many formal, non-formal, and informal learning-oriented activities have enhanced local capacities and experiences and local traditional knowledge transfer practices. This experience further exemplifies that homestay operators' reflexive and experience-based learning and sharing have played significant roles in action-oriented learning practices. Additionally, and very importantly, homestay operators can refine existing traditional knowledge and skills and learn new knowledge and skills, including green, digital, social and cultural (Silva et al., 2025) through exposure visits and attached training/workshop events organized by various supporting institutions.

Equally, classroom-based andragogical training, workshop events, and peer-learning practices through their groups and networks also play dominant roles in enhancing local capacities through sharing and reflective learning events and practices such as CoP (Wenger, 2004). Similarly, homestay operators are gradually increasing their use of ICTs to enhance their learning and day-to-day practice. Sometimes, these ICTs have been used as an alternative approach to self- and facilitated learning and information-sharing activities. The study, however, also found that locals are experiencing several types of challenges and constraints while engaging in the learning processes, including a low level of literacy and education, less focus on organized training events on the practical and individual exercise parts, communication, and language barriers, short duration of the training and workshop events, motivational challenges, and so on.

Based on the findings, the study provides some implications that local practices of experience-based learning and capacity-building can be valuable approaches in homestay operators' overall capacity development endeavors caring for local culture, tradition, environment, gender, inclusion issues, and intergenerational linkages. Likewise, CoP can be useful for continued learning and sharing if regularized and mainstreamed in the overall learning and capability-strengthening endeavors. The research participants also seek increased facilitative roles from key

local resource persons or social mobilizers. And, as local social mobilizers showed concerns, establishing a community learning center (CLC) can be a model work for homestay destinations like Mahabharat Hills. Kolb (1994) also emphasises the role of the facilitator in such processes, who is able to create a learning environment through different actions like reflective discussions and participatory actions.

### **My Reflections on the Ethnographic Way of Exploration**

In my ethnographic study, homestay operators' daily life and their interactions with tourists were studied in detail through an extended stay in the community (Goode & Hatt, 2006). Reflexivity is one of the major quality standards of any qualitative research, and it is more related to one's subjectivities. It tries to reflect critically on the research process, context, and product, which is rooted in a critical perspective (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2017). The researcher's reflexivity plays a significant role in qualitative research. Due to this, reflexivity becomes an important ethical dimension and a "crucial strategy in the process of generating knowledge" (Berger, 2015, as cited in Crabtree, 2019, p. 927). In such cases, writing and thinking creatively, qualitatively, and narratively, and, on some occasions, thinking culturally and poetically (Saldana, 2015) were my special interests.

I started writing something (like a field note/daily diary) about my observations, conversations, and interactions (*bhalakusari/kurakani*) on my first field research day. I was also encouraged by my professors' words. For example, at KUSOED Hattiban, one day, one of my two supervisors said, "Whatever comes, write every day at least four to five pages so that you will become a professional ethnographer". I was convinced, inspired, and energized. I was also convinced by a statement made by Hammersley and Atkinson (2017), who said ethnographic analysis is not just a cognitive activity but a form of writing. Accordingly, especially in the evening and morning, I started writing something in my diary, sometimes sitting on *gundri* (rice-straw-mats) and sometimes on *mudha* (locally made bamboo- stools). But every day, as advised, crafting four/five pages could not be possible since there were some days/hours where no specific moments were found as a "new" or "aha" moment or activity/incidence/action to document the action or even the local voices.

I had a very good shareable experience about how to mobilize local gatekeeper(s) in the qualitative inquiry processes. Here, I would like to reflect on some of my personal feelings and experiences. It is well discussed in the previous

parts that in the qualitative study process, generally, a field is approached through a reliable gatekeeper (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). According to prominent literature (e.g., Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Goode & Hatt, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009 and 2019; Yin, 2009), using the gatekeeper facilitates easing the researcher's access, and rapport-building process. There is limited literature from Nepal focusing on ethnographic methodological practices and the gatekeeper's associated roles, although numerous research works use the ethnographic method (e.g., Dahal, 2017; Adhikari, 2020; Hamal, 2020; Pun, 2022). These reports have also missed the contexts of the gatekeeper and the experiences of working with him/her. This is a prime but less documented experience in Nepal. Thus, I prepared a reflective article targeting a journal in joint authorship with my supervisors to fill the gap during the research process. Detailed discussions on this perspective are in the journal article recently published (Kanel, Bhattarai, & Gnawali, 2023). I learned from the field that meeting the expectations of the gatekeeper and the research participants on a mutual basis (reciprocity) is also very important.

Likewise, community perceptions and community support towards the gatekeeper and his/her roles need to be well understood from the initial stage of the research. Finally, understanding major ethical issues associated with the research process and their tactical management becomes crucial, but effectively working with the gatekeeper and the research process is possible through these eight important actions and considerations (all with – "ty" suffix): intentionality, neutrality, conformity, familiarity, mutuality, reciprocity, anonymity, and sustainability. Based on this empirical experience, in the Nepali rural context, I can suggest that any (particularly ethnographic) researcher can take these 8-"ty" word-based actions in mind while carrying out ethical ethnographic field research using a reliable gatekeeper. Working balanced and ethically with the gatekeeper can be considered a vital supportive process for effective and successful ethnographic exploration through close observations, intimate *bhalakusari/kurakani*, specific issue-based FGDs, and informal interactions with the locals.

I go back to my note-taking exercises and habits again. While being in the field, note-taking remains a prime task. However, while there were repeated activities and rituals, I had nothing to note/write about; I only had to relax and make self-

reflections on particular events or impressions. I was without my computer while in the fields because there was no electricity facility in the area during my research period. Only solar power was used by most households for lighting and mobile-charging purposes (while writing and finalizing this thesis, the homestay destination of MH has a hydroelectricity facility through a central transmission line). As far as possible, based on different observations and my feelings and views, I also tried to maintain my daily diary while in the field. Writing in a diary usually takes 30 to 45 minutes each night before going to bed. If I sometimes missed something, I would write on the very morning of the next day. For such, I was much convinced by Van Manen (2007) that "..... keeping a journal, diary or log can be very helpful for keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, for reflecting on previous reflections, for making the activities of research themselves topics for study, and so forth." (p. 73). Similar views have been expressed by Dawson (2013), Campbell and Lassiter (2015), and others too. The daily diary usually covered just a half to one full page in an A4-size notebook (I say field diary) I took to the field. I used to write mainly about four aspects of my daily life in the field: what I did in the last 24 hours, whom I met, what I shared with them, and what my overall impression/feeling was. Those diaries' specific reflections/insights or highlighted parts were utilized in developing themes/sub-topics as well as the chapter-writing process of the thesis. The diaries greatly supported me in crafting the thesis.

In my ethnographic exploration, through an inductive process, I was trying to construct new knowledge using my research participants' day-to-day activities and experiences, as well as my reflections. The interpretations of the voices and experiences of the research participants have greatly helped to bring elaborative thoughts on marginalized communities' capacity development and empowerment processes. I was also a domestic tourist (paying guest), and I was not a short-stay tourist, but I was a longer-stay tourist. In these moments, not only I but also the locals or the hosts of the homestays were trying to hold maximum conversations with me. It was very hard to balance the *bhalakusari* with all the core participants (the main operators of the homestays) since some women operators were very shy, less exposed and had very little formal educational exposure. In such cases, I added my repeated *bhalakusari* with them and also put in persistent observations with those shy and less

exposed homestay operators. Their actions worked better than they voiced. This was also good learning for me.

On every visit of mine, the homestay operators wanted to know whether I was satisfied with their hospitality services. They also wanted to talk more with me about the potential of tourism development and homestay promotion in the area. I referred to Smith (2017) here as he notes hosts' learning from the guests is a regular phenomenon in tourism. This was what got translated. Every time, they mentioned the famous saying: "*atithi devo bhava*" (guests are like gods!). I was a paying guest, but the inner value of hospitality as "*atithi devo bhava*" does not count as money-matter only. I realized it in that way. During our interactions, they also got some feedback from me. Not only from me, but they also tried to get such feedback from other tourists, which was a regular phenomenal practice in rural tourism. Such a process helped the homestay operators and their family members know more about tourists' likes and dislikes or preferences so that future interventions or improvements could appear.

Based on my prolonged observations and self-reflection, I have come to raise a serious question: even one and a half decades later, the number of homestays in the area is almost the same as during the establishment phase; why? Finally, I came to the conclusion that both inner and outer factors are connected to this issue. Several driver- and puller- factors are associated there. Explorations of details of such contexts have been possible through ethnographic inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

Homestay endeavors have supported local entrepreneurs, especially women, and their families by providing multiple opportunities for advantageous engagement, wider learning prospects, and, to some extent, economic benefits. Although a low level of economic benefits due to the slow pace of homestay development have been experienced locally, homestay tourism has been realized as a platform for sustainable development owing to its contributory nature in the areas of skills development, cultural sensitiveness, and many potential direct and indirect economic returns,

From the homestay development process point of view, ethnically and culturally, this is a rich area where mixed communities have sustained social cohesion. However, this importance is hardly realized when trapping tourism development opportunities until the external organizations/projects reach there. With

the motivation and facilitation, the locals start homestay enterprising. The institutions, along with local government entities, further motivate the local communities and provide them with other support materials. Such developmental organizations include government bodies, NGOs/INGOs, local cooperatives, and others. In the process of enhancing local knowledge, skills and multifaceted capacities, a number of organizational efforts have been helpful for the homestay operators for which entrepreneurship and enterprise-related skills in the form of orientation workshops, formal training, exposure trips, and occasional sharing meetings are held. Moreover, in the local capacity development processes, the contribution from the formal education system is limited. Despite this, informal educational/awareness attainment, such as intergenerational knowledge transfer, self-reflection of self-experience, learning from formal sessions and their community of practice. Equally, locals learn through exposure and observations, host-guest interactions and feedback, digital means, and also from their kids.

As such, their experience-based learning has also helped transfer knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, local/traditional learning practices and practical experience-based capacity-building efforts are less recognized or undervalued by the formal institutions of training and capacity development programs. These limitations affect the involvement and participation in different activities, including learning and enhancement of overall capabilities for handling economic interventions and sociocultural, environmental, and natural asset management. Even though experiential learning and tailored capacity building play vital roles in skill transfer across generations, less importance is given to such self-initiated and situated learning.

In the learning and capacity development processes, several ways and means of learning help the homestay operators develop their multiple capacities associated with homestay establishment, development and management. As well as, these learning practices support day-to-day household chore activities and additionally helping ensure environment-friendly livelihoods and sustainable development. Equally, in the process of homestay tourism development, local cultural—both tangible and intangible—aspects, as core essences, are also given more priority in the homestay development program and homestay management practices. However, lately, religious and cultural beliefs in the local communities are changing; thence,

there are threats to preserving local cultural/religious integrity and maintaining traditional values, which are good assets for culture-based homestay tourism, with unique beauties in the Mahabharat Hills. This dimension is pertinent because religion and culture are closely associated. If the local religion is changed and traditional/indigenous practices are abandoned, those who visit to experience cultural products and traditions do not feel comfortable.

Although those cultural heritage conservation related training and orientation activities are expected to revitalize local songs, including *dohori-geet/bhajan* and many traditional dances of all the ethnic communities, low levels of cultural sensitivity in certain communities have lately produced modern tradition in the area. The developmental organizations and local governments have also failed to adequately sensitize the residents on such matters despite the fact that local residents' issues and aspirations are very important in sustaining tourism initiatives (Poudel & Nyaupane, 2013). As a result, cultural performances, which are part of the homestay system, are slowly diminishing in the area, losing their unique cultural selling point and sense of pride. In this context, locals of Mahabharat Hills are pessimistic from cultural preservation and development point of view. Nowadays, they are less hopeful of promoting local culture for tourism purposes. Transformation in westernized culture in any Nepali settlement is hardly compatible with traditional cultural beliefs. Owing to this, cultural heritage-based homestay tourism has not been conceptualized in the local setting.

The homestay operators are barred by different obstacles and persisting challenges. The extent of rural community-focused teaching (andragogy), learning, and practice opportunities have been narrowed down because facilitating organizations hardly connect those practices to governmental interventions. Similarly, in the absence of local resource persons or local facilitators, local community homestay operators' better learning and continuous mentoring/monitoring opportunities are less trapped. The locals also feel the absence of CLC. Additionally, the use of local language in the teaching-learning process is also limited, causing a low level of grasping and understanding, as many participants reflected.

Localizing or customizing national curricula and resource manuals related to homestay training are realized as an important means for developing special need-based local capacities for various purposes with higher learning outcomes. However,

there are limited strategic efforts in developing local resource person(s) in the homestay villages. The CLC approach, which links with local/traditional knowledge systems, is also absent. This is barring the local stakeholders from furthering the institutionalization of the initiatives and also creating new avenues for sustaining the capacity development effort of community homestay operators and associated actors in the area. In addition, enhancing women's practical learning and training opportunities facilitates the empowerment process, helping sustain local efforts. Because of less access to formal education and inappropriate and inadequate skills and training related to tourism development, women entrepreneurs of this homestay site demonstrate confidence in making essential and timely decisions. Consequently, the women feel incapable of risk-taking, and they feel marginalized.

Lately, local actors' less activeness in approaching the local and provincial government(s) toward developing and supporting community homestay as well as rural tourism in the area is narrowing down the possibilities of further facilitation. These facts challenge the overall capacity enhancement with due recognition of local/traditional practices, active leadership development, and further networking with various organizations, including elected representatives of the area, with greater accountability. As a result, the transformative potential of rural community homestays in supporting local entrepreneurs, particularly women and their families, demands lots of new efforts with cultural sensitiveness and more localized and sustainable approaches to homestay development. This dimension is pertinent because the cultural places are being converted into "hometels"/hotels.

### **Implications of Study**

This research implies that, in rural areas like Mahabharat Hills, several sources and styles for learning and capacity building have been in practice for a long time, and with even small support, these practices can be further boosted and widened. Without adequate facilitation and motivation, timely support, and the absence of active leadership of local actors, the homestay development process experienced a downfall over the last few years. This may stop at any stage or at any time. In the study area, the homestay operators have been deprived of such opportunities in the latter parts of the homestay initiative after the post-quake and post-COVID-19 situations. Thus, the study proposes implications for different levels of authorities and stakeholders to

enhance the learning and capacity-building processes for developing, promoting and sustaining culturally rich community-based homestay enterprises, as described below.

### **Implications for Policy-Makers and Capacity Developers**

The study implies that proper program design and close interdisciplinary coordination among relevant stakeholders are crucial. Thus, rethinking those crucial aspects and re-aligning with indigenous cultural values can enhance the quality of homestay tourism and the capacity of the concerned actors and stakeholders. In this context, further re-formulating and re-polishing the existing "Homestay Operation Directive" can be an important task to revive and revitalize homestay tourism. In this process, the Homestay Federation of Nepal can further help to consolidate the real needs of the homestay entrepreneurs. In the same way, synchronization—which is limited at the moment—of the provincial and local guidelines or legal provisions can reduce or avoid confusion and duplications among the stakeholders. It can be in line with the intent of federalism as well. Thus, strengthening the partnerships among the GOs at different levels, INGOs, NGOs, cooperatives, the private sector, the academic sector, and the media sector can create better synergies in the process of developing sustainable and model homestays in Nepal.

Similarly, along with the Taragaon Development Board, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) and CTEVT's increased roles in the development, improvement, and implementation of the training curricula, manuals, and instructional guidelines to mainstream the homestay teaching-learning (formal, non-formal) processes are keenly anticipated by the stakeholders. Likewise, revision of local codes of conduct in a participatory and inclusive way can further enlarge the gender- and social-sensitiveness, ownership, internalization, capacity, and implementation of such codes (local rules/ethics), thereby making timely advancement of community homestay tourism in Nepal. This will help address the changes created by new developments in the world, e.g., post-COVID situation, economic downturn, people-centric development, climatic changes and much-awaited long-term impacts, etc.

Thinking from female entrepreneurs' capacity development and empowerment point of view, gearing the homestay program's motive to bring more marginalized groups and more female members to the forefront of community capacity development and empowerment through an enhanced environment of perennial (life-

long) educational and training support-based endeavors can produce better results. Since the study has indicated that the efforts relating to integrated and concerted capacity enhancement programs are minimal or below the anticipation level, appropriate institutional mechanisms, provision of local government-facilitated resource persons or subject-matter specialists, and projected human resources development with real needs and prospects can provide a conducive environment for bettering community homestays in Nepal.

### **Implications for Homestay Practitioners**

Homestay quality enhancement issues mostly remain in the hands of homestay operators, although other factors may also noticeably contribute. Thus, quality issues in a homestay, which are much-talked themes and subjects in the CBT and rural tourism, are to be reflected in the regular meetings of the local homestay committees/groups because responsible tourism starts from the self, and this can provide multiple opportunities.

Likewise, considering women's higher involvement in homestay development and management activities, increasing their concerns regarding more awareness (sensitization) programs, exposure visits, and skills enhancement with frequent monitoring and mentoring support further help the initiative. Realizing the low level of homestay operators' conversations with visitors and other stakeholders, equipping them with more conversational and communicational skills, and language proficiency (local, Nepali and foreign language—particularly the English language) can further develop the confidence of the key actors of the community homestay program.

Similarly, homestay entrepreneurs' enhanced engagement in local plans, targets, and activities can help ensure greater ownership and commitment for better and more effective management of the homestays. Thus, linking with the overall "Local Destination Development Plan" and shaping a common vision for at least 10-20 years will be a fundamental task for homestay tourism development initiatives to make the local community-oriented actions more participatory, inclusive and sustainable. For this, the communities themselves may require financial support and technical backstopping in response to continued deliberate and planned efforts. Concerned organizations can facilitate them with a more congenial environment and full motivation.

Similarly, as environmental degradation/climatic changes and tourism development are directly connected issues, an integrated and well-thought approach can further facilitate and ease the process of tackling the effects/impacts of climate change and other types of disasters and pandemics so that tomorrow's tourism world depends upon balanced ecological conditions following the "green tourism" or "smokeless industry" principles in real terms (KC et al. 2021). For all these, enhancing the learning environment through the "Community of Practice" and collaborating for further participatory or joint actions among the practitioners and other stakeholders can help translate the dreams and plans. Equally, managerial skills and performance, group cohesion and dynamics, youth roles and intergenerational engagement strategies, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms within the group/committee are very important things to consider to make the homestay destination profitable, equitable, ecologically- and culturally balanced, and sustainable.

### **Implications for Future Researchers**

Homestay, being one of the key components of sustainable rural tourism development, demands more research, particularly focusing on the intensively associated issues of gender and social inclusion. Homestay, a community-owned initiative, is only possible through an enhanced and empowered section of the homestay operators. Thus, tourism research for development (TR4D), which is one of the narrowly discussed themes in the tourism sector, is also advocated to realize the importance and rationale of the subject. Generally, in developing countries, where resource constraints are a regular phenomenon, TR4D is deliberately getting less priority. For this, the good link between academic research and community-focused developmental concerns/issues is also important. In such TR4D initiatives, trans-disciplinarity and, multidisciplinary learning, and reflections for overall capacity building are crucial approaches to consider. Rural tourism practitioners, capacity developers, and policy-makers can utilize such outputs more flexibly to produce locally initiated fostered cultural and economic returns.

In the same context, quantitative and qualitative research focuses further on the traditional and indigenous practices of learning and sharing, as well as the utilization of homestay tourism packages/manuals and materials that can be important to better understand suitability, quality, usability, and sustainability. There is also a

possibility of developing close partnerships among the researchers and development planners because the active participation of each stakeholder can produce better synergy in tying up the research endeavors with community-focused developmental initiatives. Thus, emphasizing quality research outputs, systematic planning, and incorporation of the latest concerns of the local communities in the developmental processes can support the sustainable and authentic cultural tourism development process.

Timely research actions on homestay tourism to provide empirical data and a comprehensive understanding for better planning of homestay development programs in Nepal are essential. Equally important for the researchers is a close examination of the new normal (post-COVID) situation in the tourism/homestay sector to cope with the emerging challenges of economic, ecological, and socio-cultural implications of the concerned operator/actors. As homestay tourism can be an important part of the local tourism and overall development process, including SDGs, intensive orientation, action research, and subsequent planning activities for sustainable homestay/human resources development can be important supportive actions to achieve the intended targets and goals. In addition to the human resources and capacity issues, future researchers can also focus their research on the cost-benefit analysis of homestays—both community and private homestays—direct and indirect/induced benefits from economic/social/cultural/environmental, and other issues associated with sustainable community homestay development in the Mahabharat Hills, and similar sites of other parts of Nepal.

### **Closing the Journey of this Study**

I have been working in the development sector, particularly in the field of community-based tourism development, for the last two decades or more. I always prefer using participatory approaches and tools in the communities for information generation, learning, and teaching /knowledge-sharing purposes. Now, I have realized that several participatory approaches, methods, and tools are available for such inquiries and sharing, which also help learning and capacity enhancement processes. In my career, I learned much from these tools and processes. My PhD journey has become a milestone to change my perspectives. I realized the importance of creating collaborative knowledge among those with whom I worked. Local communities became very good counterparts against my earlier understanding of bringing my own

knowledge to academia. I also learned how to try to get immersed in the communities for the development of homestay tourism and related research initiatives.

During the study, also through numerous kinds of literature, I had many chances to learn about the research contents, methods, and procedures—including associated theories and principles regarding homestay and learning practices. I worked with two distinct theories—Experiential Learning Theory and Capability Approach—which were most closely associated with my research topic and the methodology—ethnography. In the study of a community using ethnography, I realized the importance of engaging deeply in discussion with community *bhalakusari* to explore insightful information. In this context, I was also able to carry out research and produce some academic research-based papers. I have repeatedly emphasized rethinking the indigenous/traditional learning practices as there are so many practices in daily use, but these are less explored matters from Nepali/Eastern perspectives. My feet, heart, and head have jointly contributed to scratch the notes on the new insights from the field. All the processes have allowed me to extend, broaden and deepen my understanding through learned skills, knowledge, and experiences from the "living world" of community homestay operators of the Mahabharat Hills.

Many scholars tell me, "PhD is not a product only, but a process too". I agree with this statement very much, and also very truly. At this moment, I also feel that I was heavily engaged in the process rather than just bringing out a "PhD product". Thus, this PhD process taught me many things from thematic perspectives and paradigmatic research scholarship. I have explored the connections among three dimensions of development: educational and learning philosophies, community-based participatory tourism development philosophies, and advanced research methodological philosophies. My confidence after accomplishing this path has certainly increased. I am ready to take on more responsibilities in tourism and homestay, capacity development through education and training, and conducting exploratory qualitative research using different techniques in the field. The study has changed my mindset to be more critical, ethical, and practical, too.

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## APPENDICES

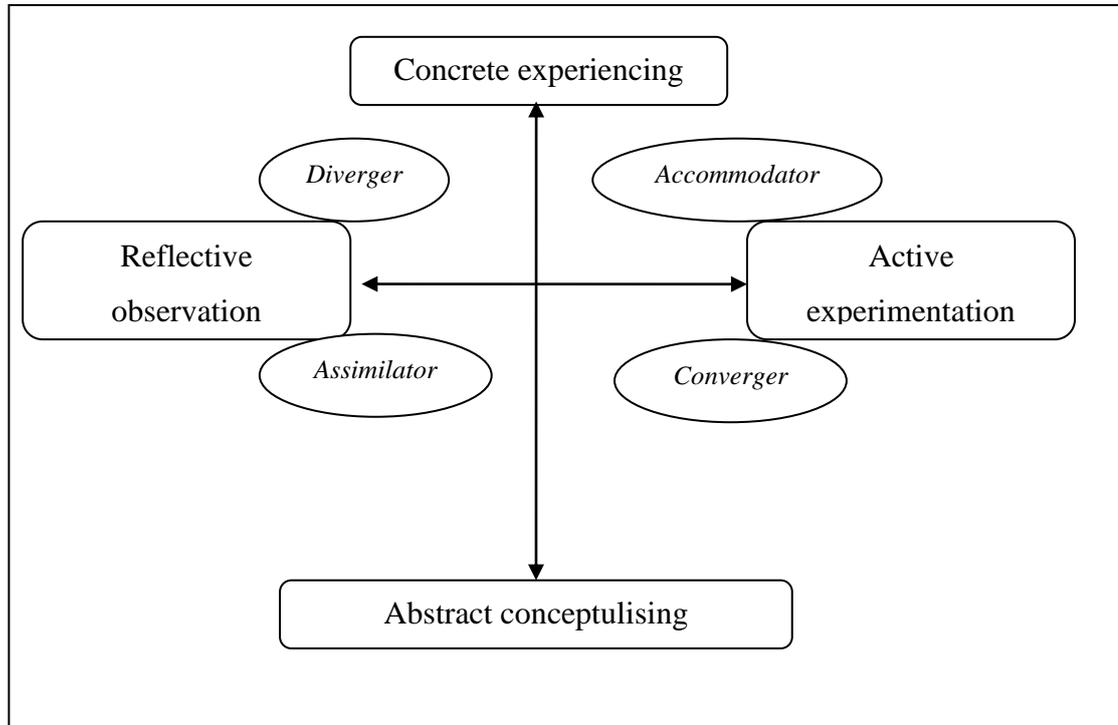
**Appendix 1. A trajectory of homestay development trends in Nepal**

Time-Line	Major milestone
1997	Nepal's first commercial community homestay in Sirubari village, Syangja district, started
1998	Visit Nepal 1998 Campaign organized, which encouraged Sirubari's homestay tourism as well
1998	Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) established
1999	Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) Regulation (BS 2055) promulgated
1999	Ghalegaun Community Homestay (Lamjung) started
2000	Shree Antu Community Homestay (Ilam) started (officially registered in 2009)
2001	The Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (UNDP/TRPAP) project was launched in 6 districts of Nepal by GoN/UNDP/DFID and SNV-Nepal which gave emphasis on homestay tourism in many destinations
2003	NTB established Sustainable Tourism Development Unit (STDU) to look after rural-area based products, including homestays
2003-2006	Community Homestays in Briddhim (Rasuwa), Hattibang (Chitwan), Fortse (Khumbu region), and Mamankhe (Taplejung) established through TRPAP's facilitation
2007	UNDP/TRPAP project completed/phased-over; which developed homestays at least at four sites-Talejung, Solu, Rasuwa, and Chitwan (mentioned above)
2008	Nepal's new Tourism Policy (BS 2065) formulated which, for the first time, covered rural tourism and homestay tourism in detail
2009	Tourism Vision 2020 announced setting a quantitative goal of 2 million annual arrivals by 2020
2010	Homestay Operation Directive ( <i>Karyabidhi</i> ) BS 2067 released by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA)
2011	Nepal Tourism Year (NTY) 2011 celebrated with more focus on

	Homestay Tourism/Rural Tourism
2011	Dallagaon Community Homestay in Bardiya district started
2011	Nepal's First National Homestay Summit held in Kathmandu (Kapan)
2013	Nepal's Second National Homestay Summit held in Pokhara
2013	The Homestay Association of Nepal (HOSAN) formed
2015	Nepal's first Dalit community homestay established in Aampswara, Tanahun district
2015	A devastating earthquake (Barpak Gorkha epicenter) took place, which also affected homestay tourism in many places, including Mahabharat Hills of bagmati Province
2016	Nepal's Tourism Strategic Plan (2016-2025) developed giving priority to homestay tourism as well
2019	For the first time in the tourism history of Nepal, the tourist arrival record reached about 1.2 million (12 lakhs); a good contribution from homestay tourism also acknowledged
2020-2021	COVID-19 global pandemic (Nepal also started lockdowns after March 2020); tourism/homestay tourism seriously hampered
2022	Post-COVID tourism revival started including gradual opening of homestays with special health protocols
2022	Nepal Homestay Association (HOSAN) converted into the Homestay Federation of Nepal (HOFEN) in Mar. 2022; the Central Office in Kalimati, Kathmandu inaugurated in July 2022.

(Source: Poudel, 2019; with amendment and revision by the author, 2022)

**Appendix 2. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle model with four learning dimensions developed by Alan Pritchard**



(Pritchard, 2009)