

Interdependence of Tibetan Buddhist Tourism and Sustainable Development in Nepal

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Tibetan Buddhist tourism and sustainable development in major Nepali pilgrimage sites (Lumbini, Boudha and Svayambhū). Using a mixed-methods approach with 140 participants including monks, local businesses, pilgrims, Tibetan refugees and community members, the study analyzes quantitative and qualitative data to explore tourism's impact on the economy, culture and religion. The findings show that Buddhist tourism supports local livelihoods, entrepreneurship, and intercultural exchange while promoting cultural heritage. However, challenges such as cultural commodification, environmental degradation, and unequal economic benefits remain. Monastic communities and the Tibetan diaspora play a vital role in preserving traditions and managing religious practices. The study highlights the need for balanced governance, community-based programs, and sustainable tourism policies to ensure both cultural preservation and economic development.

Keywords: Buddhist tourism, sustainable tourism, Tibetan Buddhism, monastic communities, community-based tourism.

The relationship between Tibetan Buddhist tourism and sustainable development in Nepal is closely linked to the conservation of cultural heritage and the economic well-being of local communities. Tibetan Buddhist heritage tourism in Lumbini and Khumbu patronizes the local economy and promotes a certain set

of spiritual values and a communitarian spirit. This relationship emphasizes the need to appreciate both the cultural and economic value while ensuring sustainability and preserving cultural integrity. While tourism in these regions advocates livelihoods and entrepreneurial ventures, it also spends the value of culture and brings great economic inequality and other such liabilities (Shinde, 2021; Spoon, 2012; Kushwaha, 2024). Thus, community-based and ecotourism development focuses on and initiates culture-preserving tourism with integrated economic development (Suh, 2023). This introduction is designed to shed light on the relationship between Tibetan Buddhist tourism and sustainable development in Nepal. This highlights the importance of fostering such a relationship to support the lives of local people and preserve their cultural heritage.

A prominent feature of Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Nepal, such as Lumbini, Boudha, and Svayambhū, is the strong presence of Tibetan Buddhism. The character and attractiveness of these sites have developed through the forms and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhist establishments, including monasteries, nunneries, and cultural centers, are well developed in these regions (Lumbini Development Trust, 2025). These communities of monks and nuns safeguard and coordinate the performances of large-scale rituals and festivals, daily pujas (offerings and prayers), and custodianship of ritual sites decorated with iconography, prayer wheels, lamps of clarified butter, and other ritual structures (Kopan Monastery, n.d.). The extensive iconography of these sites enhances the ambience of the sites but also makes Buddhist philosophy and practice accessible and approachable to pilgrims and tourists. The Tibetan Buddhist ritual of offerings and markers of pilgrimage circumambulation are festively and regularly performed during auspicious days, which are also a testament to the livingness of the heritage that is embedded with values and ideas that vastly influence the experience of pilgrimage. These performances provide pilgrims with the spiritual experience these sites are meant to offer (ECS Nepal, n.d.). They also nurture the compassion and mindfulness symbolized by the sites. These pilgrimage sites are characterized by Tibetan monasteries and their fascinating architectural styles, fine murals, thangka paintings, and stupas. These sites attract people with an interest in culture, history, and spirituality (The Wonder Nepal, n.d.)

Most Tibetan communities dispersed throughout the Kathmandu Valley have contributed to the history of these traditions and institutions while in exile. Tibetan settlement centers have also contributed to the advancement of the administration and governance of pilgrimage sites (Shechen Monastery, n.d.). The Tibetan exile

community in Nepal manages and operates multiple prominent monasteries, administers annual religious ceremonies and community festivals, and participates in volunteer charity activities. This community also shapes the socioeconomic characteristics of new Buddhist tourism (Shechen Monastery, n.d.). The diaspora in the Kathmandu Valley, as an authoritative religious community, constructs Nepal's Buddhist heritage sites, enhancing and revitalizing the sites undergoing commodification and cultural conservation (Himalayan Nepal Trek Pvt Ltd, n.d.). The Nepalese government has promoted Buddhist tourism in Nepal. The emphasis is on sustainable development and cultural preservation in the region. These policies aim to develop Lumbini and Buddhist circuits. Connecting and improving tourism infrastructure is a primary objective. Promotional events, such as the BITM, and community and heritage tourism are also included (Nepal Tourism Board, 2025). The limits of the policies and sustainable tourism actions as set out in the "Lumbini Declaration" lie in the quadruple pillars of sustainability, local empowerment, and international cooperation. These efforts aim to make Nepal a leading country in Buddhist pilgrimage tourism. The tourism aspect is not purely economically motivated. (Lumbini Development Trust, 2024).

Multiple research studies have shown that an increase in tourism positively impacts the local economy. However, the overwhelming number of tourists in the area brings challenges in maintaining the local 'cultural paradox' and 'green paradox,' particularly due to inadequate preservation of cultural heritage and the environment. Concerns regarding cultural commodification and the loss of ancient practices, or their alteration into more marketable forms, often accompany diminished archaeological remains and a shift to the inactive archaeological state of ancient sites. Sustainable tourism may raise the local population's quality of life and overall progress, and does not lead to the loss of the distinctive attributes of their cultural identity. Tourism studies concerning the interplay between Buddhism and sustainable tourism may focus on economic potential, cultural interaction, or the environment. Learning opportunities result from interactions between diverse communities. Insufficient infrastructure, negative environmental impacts, and the commodification of culture are often the results of tourism. Responsible and sustainable practices should involve respectful collaboration and genuine engagement with and honouring of cultural legacies, while encouraging the full participation of local communities, rather than their exclusion. This pertains to the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist pilgrims, and sustainable development in Nepal. This aims to assess the economic potential of Buddhist

pilgrimage tourists at the principal sites of Lumbini, Boudha, and Svayambhū. These include the benefits of tourism in terms of economic growth and employment opportunities, and the prevailing social inequalities in the development of the tourism sector. Moreover, this concerns the emerging demands of tourists in the region and the cultural and economic impacts of the demand. This considers tourism as the primary means through which cultural expression is modified and/or appropriated. This includes the transformation of rituals and practices with respect to commercial spirituality, souvenirs, and festive alterations.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This research focuses on exploring how Tibetan Buddhist tourism interacts with the principles of sustainable development in Nepal, especially regarding the three main pilgrimage sites: Svayambhū (Buddha's birthplace), Boudha

(Buddha's first place of worship), and Lumbini (Buddha's birthland). Each of these sites serves three functions: as a physically sacred space for worship, a cultural heritage landscape representing thousands of years of history and culture, and an international tourist destination. Because of this, these sites create a complex combination of socio-cultural environments where spiritual traditions, local livelihoods, tourism development, and environmental sustainability converge. To better understand how these systems affect one another, we need a more comprehensive theoretical approach that includes insights from tourism studies, cultural heritage, diaspora studies, and sustainable development theory. Many religious tourism sites are recognized as changing sociocultural systems in which spiritual practices, economic activities, and communities' identities interact and evolve (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In addition, tourism development in the context of Buddhist pilgrimage has an influence on religious practices, cultural preservation, environmental management, and governance structures, while also creating revenue to support local economies. Therefore, four complementary theoretical perspectives are adopted in this study to assess how sustainable development of Tibetan Buddhism religious tourism occurs in Nepal. These include heritage tourism theory, authenticity theory, diaspora studies, and community-based tourism (CBT). Through these theoretical frameworks, an integrated approach to the impact of tourism is provided for assessing how tourism influences both the preservation of cultural heritage and the three pillars of sustainable community development (economic viability, environmental viability, and social viability) at Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

Heritage Tourism and the Concept of Living Heritage

Cultural heritage tourism, or "division" of Heritage tourism, has been established in the research literature to explain the motivations behind tourist participation in tourism activities related to both cultural and religious heritage sites. Specifically, Timothy (2011) defined cultural heritage tourism as the journey undertaken by tourists to visit actual places, objects, and traditions that are representative of both the current and historical cultures of society, for them to have a "cultural experience" and to establish a "cultural bond" with that heritage. With the increase in tourist interest in experiencing and establishing a "cultural bond" with various forms of cultural heritage, cultural heritage tourism has rapidly gained popularity as one of the most widely experienced tourist segments worldwide.

Religious heritage sites differ from traditional heritage sites because they serve as living sites of cultural heritage. Living cultural heritage sites represent areas of the world where people actively utilize their cultural and spiritual beliefs through social, cultural, or religious activities and rituals and therefore continuously recreate their heritage (UNESCO, 2013). Religious heritage sites recreate heritage through their annual rituals or through the regular cultural practices of their respective communities daily.

Nepal has numerous Buddhist pilgrimage sites, which are a clear example of living heritage. Boudha and Svayambhū are two examples of sites that are not just monumental architecture but are still used as places of worship by monks, nuns, and people daily, including performing daily rituals, meditative practices, and ceremonies. Therefore, every day, pilgrims do kora (circumambulation of stupas), light butter lamps, recite mantras, and participate in various festivals such as Losar and Buddha Jayanti. These activities maintain the spiritual energy of the sacred landscapes and reinforce their cultural significance within the global Buddhist community (Shakya, 2015).

Heritage tourism can also significantly contribute to local economic development. Pilgrimage tourism attracts international visitors, spiritual seekers, and cultural tourists who contribute to local economies through hotels, restaurants, handicraft markets, and guiding services (Nyaupane, Timothy, and Poudel, 2015). Therefore, tourism revenues can provide funds for heritage conservation and community development.

As noted by scholars, heritage tourism has the potential to produce an individual's paradoxical experience of culture. Heritage tourism generates economic resources to sustain heritage sites; however, excessive tourism can jeopardize cultural authenticity and religious/spiritual aspects of sacred places. Some examples of such impacts include overcrowding at the site, commercializing rituals, and developing tourism-based facilities that change the original meaning and experience of sacred places over time and/or restrict the accessibility of devotees to visit those places. The theory of heritage tourism offers a framework for understanding both the opportunities and challenges faced by Buddhism in the development of tourism in areas considered sacred by Buddhists.

Authenticity and the Commodification of Ritual Practices

A significant theoretical perspective employed to analyze the nature of religious tourism is the concept of authenticity. A significant contribution to the literature on the authenticity of tourism experiences comes from MacCannell (1973), who introduced the notion of staged authenticity to examine how cultural experiences at tourism destinations are often constructed and developed for tourists, yet they are still perceived as authentic. In addition, Mac Cannell (1973) notes that many modern-day tourists desire to engage in authentic cultural experiences; however, industrial societies do not provide them. The tourism industry will typically create events or physical settings that will create the appearance of genuine cultural experiences. According to MacCannell (1973), each cultural setting has a front stage and a backstage environment. The front stage is the area bound by cultural tourists in attendance at an event to view the cultural performance, whereas the backstage is the private, or sacred area of the cultural performer(s), in which they normally engage in their authentic culture. As a result, many tourism destinations present a select number of backstage items on the front stage to satisfy the curiosity and expectations of tourists.

This theoretical viewpoint is particularly applicable to Buddhist pilgrimage destinations located in Nepal, where religious events and festivals routinely attract international tourists. Many international tourists seek authentic spiritual experiences. However, the influx of international tourists can significantly affect the way Buddhist religious ceremonies are performed and interpreted. To cater to the interests of international visitors, some ceremonies may undergo slight modifications or have their schedules adjusted to align with the tourism calendar.

Tourism studies have built on previous debates about authenticity. Cohen (1988) considered authenticity to be dynamic and socially constructed between tourists and the local community. Wang (1999) included the term "existential authenticity", indicating that tourists can be emotionally or spiritually authentic in nature, even in staged cultural situations.

While these ideas have expanded the philosophical landscape of authenticity in tourism, there are concerns about the commodification of religious rituals/practices. As sacred rituals change into entertainment or commercial attractions, their spiritual significance can erode among local practitioners over time. Ultimately, the real concern is when religious traditions become cultural performances for tourist consumption rather than being sacred expressions of culture. Therefore, the various forms of authenticity help to better understand the tension between adherence to religious tradition, preservation of culture, and commodification of the tourism experience.

Diaspora Studies and Cultural Preservation

A different lens to gain insight into Tibetan Buddhist tourism in Nepal comes from diaspora studies. The term "diaspora " describes an immigrant group that resides outside its birthplace but retains strong cultural, social, and emotional ties to its heritage (Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994). The diaspora plays a significant role in preserving the cultural and religious traditions, as well as the collective identity of a group. The Tibetan diaspora is a noteworthy example of the way that diaspora communities can maintain their cultural heritage while living far from home. Numerous Tibetan refugees who fled Tibet following political instability in the mid-20th century settled in Nepal and India. The Tibetan refugees brought with them many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, including monastic education, artistry, and ritual practices, that made up their rich cultural heritage.

There are many Tibetan refugees in the form of refugee communities throughout Nepal that have developed different kinds of places of cultural continuity, including monasteries/institutions, schools, cultural institutions, and settlement areas. Tibetan monastic institutions hold religious events, preserve sacred writings, and pass down Buddhism to younger generations (Gellner, 2001), thereby helping to preserve Tibetan Buddhist heritage. Many Tibetan refugee communities throughout Nepal have developed various places of cultural continuity, including monasteries and other institutions, schools, cultural institutions, and settlement areas. Tibetan monastic institutions hold religious

events, preserve sacred writings, and pass down Buddhism to younger generations (Gellner, 2001), thereby helping to preserve Tibetan Buddhist heritage.

Additionally, the diaspora also supports the preservation of their traditions through transnational networks connecting their local pilgrimage sites to global Buddhist communities. Members of the diasporas support the preservation of their heritage through financial contributions, advocacy for the culture and increasing awareness around the world. Diaspora communities see themselves as cultural stewards and promote the establishment of regulations that will protect the sacred traditions from over-commercialization or exploitation by tourism. Their participation in tourism regulations illustrates the impact of transnationalism on the development of sustainable heritage and the protection of the sanctity of religion (Reinfeld, 2001).

Community-Based Tourism and Sustainable Development

Community-based tourism (CBT) is a theoretical perspective guiding this study. CBT focuses on rural community participation in the planning, decision-making, and management of tourism systems while also distributing tourism benefits fairly among all stakeholders (Murphy 1985; Scheyvens 1999). Tourism development cannot be sustainable without the active involvement of local communities in all stages of creating and delivering the local cultural experiences (Baral, 2024). CBT was developed as a counterweight to conventional wisdom about tourism, in which outside investors capture most of the profit from the tourism experience, leaving very little for local communities. CBT creates local ownership of tourism systems, preserves cultural heritage, and promotes environmentally responsible practices.

Examining CBT through case studies of CBT in Nepal's Buddhist tourism areas can provide insights into how local businesses, monastic institutions, and the diaspora engage in various forms of tourism. For example, local entrepreneurs run guesthouses, restaurants, craft shops, and guide services, while monasteries offer visitors meditation retreats, spiritual teachings, and cultural programs (Bhattarai 2021). CBT also contributes to the mitigation of environmental sustainability issues associated with the rapid growth of the tourism industry. Rapidly growing numbers of tourists put pressure on local infrastructure, waste management systems, and fragile ecosystems around tourism sites. Sustainable tourism initiatives, such as eco-lodges, community-based accommodations, waste reduction programs, and heritage conservation programs, help minimize the negative impacts of tourism

development while maximizing the benefits of tourism for the community. By integrating economic development with cultural preservation and environmental protection, community-based tourism provides a comprehensive framework for achieving sustainable tourism development at Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Nepal.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This research establishes a conceptual framework for assessing how cultural preservation, economic development and environmental sustainability are interconnected in places where people visit to experience Buddhism. The theory of heritage tourism provides an understanding of sacred landscapes as continuously lived heritage sites. The theory of authenticity focuses on the process through which religious rituals become commodified via tourist experiences. The field of diaspora studies emphasizes the role of Tibetan refugees in maintaining the Buddhist tradition and influencing tourism governance. The theory of community-based tourism supports the idea that all stakeholders should participate in tourism development and the benefits derived from tourism must be equitably shared.

The combination of these perspectives produces three main outcomes related to sustainability: (1) cultural preservation, (2) economic development, and (3) environmental sustainability. The way in which these three components interact and influence one another determines the future sustainability of Tibetan Buddhist tourism in Nepal.

Methodology and Study Area

This study employed a descriptive research design using a parallel convergent method to explain the interdependence of Tibetan tourists on sustainable development in Nepal. In the study's computational components, 140 people were selected using purposive sampling techniques of the non-probability sampling method. The sample included a diverse range of people in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and roles in the tourism economy, such as members of the monastic community, local business pilgrims, and tourists. Using purposive sampling, this study selected respondents who were mainly engaged in the tourism sector and especially focused on Tibetan tourists and collected data from the respondents on Buddhist pilgrimage, which included the research sites, namely, Lumbini, Boudha, and Svayambhū.

The sample was collected from July to September 2025. The participants were chosen based on their modern and historical significance, the availability of

active Tibetan Buddhist institutions, the presence of places that attract both tourists and locals, and diverse geography. The sites were chosen as they have substantial historical connections to one another.

Data was collected from two sources: a questionnaire survey and key informant interviews (KIIs). The questionnaire survey consisted of closed-ended questions and was conducted between July and September 2025. Similarly, 15 KIIs were conducted as the researcher did not obtain new information after interviewing 13 respondents; thus, after 15 interviews, the researcher achieved the point of saturation.

Descriptive statistics (tabular presentation) were used to summarize data, which was collected through a questionnaire using SPSS version 20, and for analysis of qualitative data, reflective thematic analysis was conducted. For reflective thematic analysis, at first, the obtained data was transcribed and read several times at first. After that, the codes were assigned, and the categories were derived based on the similarity of the codes. The themes were developed from the categories, which were based on the dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental).

Figure 1. Location map of the study area

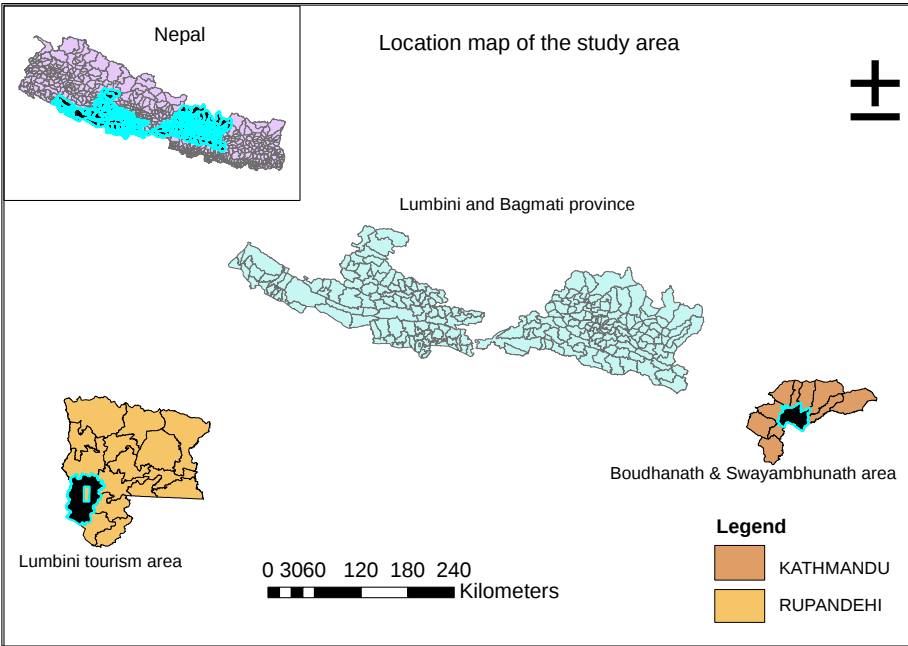


Figure 1: Location map of the study area, GIS data, Nepal's Survey Department.

Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from survey responses, interviews with key informants, and field observations conducted at major Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage destinations, including Lumbini, Boudha, and Svayambhū. The results highlight the economic, cultural, environmental, and governance dimensions of Buddhist tourism and its relationship with local communities and the Tibetan diaspora.

Economic Contributions and Opportunities

The findings indicate that Buddhist tourism plays an important role in local economic development at pilgrimage destinations, such as Lumbini, Boudha, and Svayambhū. Quantitative and qualitative evidence shows that increasing tourist arrivals have created employment opportunities in hospitality, guiding services, transportation, handicrafts, and small-scale businesses. Tourism activities also support local enterprises, stimulate infrastructure development, and expand markets for traditional handicrafts and local food products.

This type of tourism is therefore vital as it determines the varying levels of benefits generated by different forms of tourism. In many cases, communities located closest to pilgrimage sites have experienced the greatest benefits, even within mainstream tourism. In addition, other forms of tourism generate different levels of benefit, with the most remote or marginalized communities experiencing very little growth in benefits.

Additionally, the results of the survey of retailers in Svayambhū provide evidence to support the previous conclusion. The survey indicated that the change in living standards for the respondents was a very strong indicator of their perceived level of benefit from tourism, with 72% of respondents indicating that their living standards have improved, while only 28% of respondents indicated that tourism has been equally distributed among members of their communities.

Furthermore, the interviews provided additional evidence to support the initial conclusion. A guesthouse owner in Boudha indicated that their income had increased by approximately 40% and that they had hired more employees. Similarly, a senior monk in Boudha reported that in the past five years, the number of tourists had doubled. Respondents also indicated that while the number of

tourists had increased, it was accompanied by a corresponding rise in the cost of living and, in some locations, higher rental costs associated with tourist-oriented accommodation.

Cultural Preservation and Commodification

According to the research findings, the growing interest in religious tourism, specifically that of Tibetan Buddhism, can also serve as a medium for cultural exchange and broader engagement with Tibetan Buddhist traditions worldwide. For example, Buddhist tourists often take part in rituals and pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with Tibetan Buddhism and participate in local cultural festivals such as Losar. These activities contribute to a broader global awareness and appreciation of the cultural heritage and spiritual traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

However, interviews with residents, monks, and pilgrims suggest that increasing tourist interest has contributed to the commodification of certain cultural practices. Several respondents indicated that some festivals and rituals have been modified to accommodate tourists' expectations. Interview participants reported that approximately 40% of rituals had been altered in response to tourist demand.

Residents also expressed concern about the commercialization of religious festivals. One long-term resident of Boudha noted that Losar celebrations are sometimes conducted more as public performances for visitors rather than as purely religious ceremonies. Similarly, a visiting pilgrim reported that certain rituals appeared to be staged for tourism purposes.

Monastic institutions continue to regulate many aspects of religious practice. Monastery councils and senior lamas oversee major ceremonies, such as Losar, Mani Rimdu, and Chöd pujas, and determine which rituals are accessible to visitors and which remain restricted to monastic communities.

Environmental Impacts

The findings highlight several environmental challenges associated with an increasing number of visitors to Buddhist pilgrimage sites. Field observations and interviews reveal that locations such as Boudha and Svayambhū are increasingly facing challenges related to waste management, sanitation, and environmental degradation.

Research conducted during this study showed that the amount of waste produced by tourists had grown by approximately 60 % in Boudha over five years, while the waste management systems created to manage that waste only grew by

roughly 20 % during the same period. Surveys conducted on 45 local residences show that 66% of the respondents felt that their sanitation had deteriorated, while 53% of those same respondents reported higher noise levels during peak tourist season compared to previous time periods.

Some of the interviewees also pointed out that the problem of overcrowding at the sacred sites has added to the environmental pressure on the area and has resulted in a decline of the infrastructure in these same areas. Several local programs have been started (community clean-up programs; waste reduction programs) to help; however, these programs have not made a significant impact on solving this issue.

Infrastructure and Community Capacity

The findings also reveal that tourism development in many areas is constrained by inadequate infrastructure. According to the respondents interviewed, the major challenges they face include bad road conditions, unreliable electricity, and limited water supply. This all leads to a negative impact on both local tourism and local economies. When asked about the barriers to tourism growth, the majority (70%) of the 20 local entrepreneurs interviewed identified poor road conditions and inadequate infrastructure as major challenges, while 55% stated that there was insufficient assistance from the government for tourism- related training and skills development.

Despite these barriers, some communities have found ways to be innovative and resilient in response to tourism development challenges. For example, after the 2015 earthquake, the community of Langtang rebuilt eco-lodges, created heritage walks for young community members, and ran community-based training programs to facilitate the recovery of tourism. This shows local communities' potential to adapt and innovate in overcoming the challenges associated with developing their tourism industry.

Climate Change Impacts

Additionally, data show the impacts of climate change on both Buddhist sites and pilgrimage routes located in the Himalayas. The individuals interviewed had observed an increasing risk of environmental hazards (e.g., glacial retreat) affecting Buddhist sites and pilgrimage routes due to environmental degradation and a changing climate. According to participants, changing weather patterns pose a risk to rural monasteries and pilgrimage activities. Traditional pilgrimage activities are

being affected by flooding and landslides, which have damaged infrastructure and disrupted established traditional pilgrimage routes. Furthermore, about half of the rural monasteries have been abandoned because climate change has decreased the availability of reliable water supplies.

Community-Based Tourism Initiatives

A few sustainable tourism activities have been identified as part of this initiative's Community Tourism initiative, including eco-lodges, community-managed homes for tourists, monk-led heritage trails, and volunteer conservation opportunities. The local community is engaged in activities involving the local Tibetan diaspora as well as the Gurung and Tamang communities. Environmental education and waste management activities, as well as cultural workshops, are included in some of the programs. The surveys show that around 30% of community tourism initiatives receive sustained external support; however, many of these initiatives remain limited in scope due to insufficient financial resources and a lack of supportive policies.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings in relation to the existing literature on religious, heritage, and sustainable tourism development.

Economic Implications of Buddhist Tourism

According to the findings of this research, Local Economic Development (LED) has increased significantly in areas where Buddhist tourism has expanded. The rise in tourist numbers has generated greater demand for employment in the hospitality sector (including hotels), the production of handmade goods, guiding services, and small-scale businesses. These effects match with previous literature, including *The Economic Impact of Religious Tourism in Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review (SLR)* (2025), which shows that pilgrimage tourism can stimulate the local economy by increasing tourist spending, generating income, and creating employment. Studies of pilgrimage sites around the world, including Indonesia and Nepal, show similar patterns of economic contributions through tourism-related activities.

While our findings highlight variation in the distribution of benefits between communities near pilgrimage sites, they are consistent with existing research showing that communities close to major tourism attractions often receive greater

economic benefits than communities farther away (Tourism and Community Development: A Holistic Perspective from the Local Community in Bodhgaya, 2025). Therefore, communities' proximity to major tourist sites may have a higher level of benefit associated with tourism than those that are more peripheral to those sites.

Cultural Authenticity and Commodification

Findings from this study reflect the continuing debate on the balance between the tourism industry's commercial value and the preservation of cultural heritage through tourism. This reflects a well-documented tension in tourism studies between preserving cultural authenticity and adopting practices for visitor consumption. Research in cultural tourism has found that over tourism often transforms rituals to meet tourists' expectations, changing meaning and performance in the process (Jumadi, E. S. H., et al., 2024). While tourism can promote understanding of religious traditions, scholars warn that excessive commercialization of cultural practices may threaten their authenticity.

Environmental Sustainability Challenges

The environmental issues associated with this tourist-based study have all been identified across a range of prior studies focused on the effects/impacts of tourism in sensitive mountainous environments (Jumadi, E. S. H., et al., 2024). An increase in tourist numbers is putting pressure on the infrastructure of pilgrimage sites and will lead to an accumulation of litter and debris, causing environmental degradation. These Issues demonstrate the need for improved Environmental Management Strategies, which include establishing better waste management systems and developing sustainable tourism management plans. Uncontrolled tourism growth at these locations may negatively affect the long-term ecological viability of Places of Pilgrimage.

Community Participation and Tourism Governance

Findings show that community participation is key to sustainable tourism development. Community-based tourism programs, such as Eco Lodges, Cultural Heritage Trails, & Volunteer Programs show the great potential to establish local methods of tourism management (The Economic Impact of Religious Tourism in Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review [SLR], 2025). Monastic Institutions and Tibetan Diaspora organizations also demonstrate the importance of multiple levels

of governance in the management of Religious Tourism. By creating a collaborative relationship between Monasteries, Local Communities, and Diaspora Networks, we can create regulations for our tourism industries to protect our cultural heritage.

Interdependence of Tourism and Sustainable Development

The results illustrate the degree of interdependence between Buddhist travel and the sustainable development of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrim sites in Nepal. The economic impacts of tourism on local communities and economies through job creation, supporting small enterprises, and generating infrastructure are all positive, as well as the contribution from Buddhist travel to intercultural interactions between cultures and an increase in awareness globally of the cultural heritage of Tibetan Buddhism (Jumadi, E. S. H., et al., 2024). Nonetheless, unmanaged tourism growth represents a threat to cultural norms and ecological balance. The commodification of religious practices, the destruction of natural environments, and the unequal benefits/distribution of tourism revenue are just a few of the issues encountered with conserving and sustaining heritage tourism at pilgrimage sites.

The findings show that the long-term sustainability of Buddhist pilgrimage tourism in Nepal depends on effective governance that balances the needs of local communities with the protection of cultural heritage and the environment. Monasteries, Tibetan diaspora groups, and residents play a vital role in regulating tourism, preserving traditions, and promoting environmentally responsible practices. Ensuring economic benefits, community empowerment, and responsible tourism policies are essential for maintaining both cultural integrity and local livelihoods.

Conclusion

Buddhist tourism in Nepal, which focuses on Lumbini, Boudha and Svayambhū, supports local economies by creating jobs in hospitality, handicrafts, guiding, and small businesses. However, the benefits are unevenly distributed, favoring communities near major pilgrimage sites. It also promotes Tibetan Buddhist culture globally, but increased visitor demand has led to some modification of the rituals, highlighting the need for monastic and diasporic oversight. Rapid tourism growth has given rise to environmental challenges, including waste, land degradation, and climate-related risks, emphasizing the need for sustainable management. Achieving long-term sustainability requires balancing

economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental protection through inclusive governance that involves local communities, monasteries, diaspora networks, and government support, ensuring that Nepal's Buddhist pilgrimage sites remain culturally authentic, environmentally sound, and economically viable.

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