

Pilgrimage Tourism: Potentiality and Trend in Nepal

Dhal Bahadur Gurung

Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid-West University, Nepal

Email: dgurung81@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: Dhal Bahadur Gurung, ✉: dgurung81@gmail.com

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Abstract

The study examines recent trends, potential, key destinations, and emerging dynamics of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal using secondary data from Nepal Tourism Statistics 2024, National Population and Housing Census. (2021), academic journals, news articles, and relevant literature. Finding show that pilgrimage tourism remains a significant and steadily expanding sector of Nepal driven by the rich religious diversity of sacred sites of different Hindu deities, tribal deities, Buddhists monasteries, stupas, ritual practices, and dedicated spiritual practice centers such as Lumbani, Pashupatinath, Janakpurdham, Muktinath and Halesi etc. Although the 2015 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic caused sharp declines, the sector demonstrated strong resilience with rapid recovery beginning in 2022 and nearing pre-pandemic levels by 2024. Increasing domestic mobility, cross-border flows, particularly from India and role of Nepal as a transit corridor for Mount Kailash-Manasarovar further strengthen its growth potential of pilgrimage tourism. However, there are many challenges such as inadequate infrastructures, weak site management, poor tourism-friendly policies, safety issues and political instability that continue to hinder sustainable tourism development, so if government addresses such challenges to provide quality facilities and link nature and religious-cultural diversity can maximize pilgrimage tourism potential in Nepal.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Visitors, Tourism, Tourism trends, Deities

Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism is one of an important component of tourism industry in Nepal. It is travel motivated by religious or spiritual purposes, where individuals journey to sacred or culturally significant sites to fulfill religious practices, seek spiritual enlightenment or gain personal transformation. Tourist visits religious sites and shrines like temple, stupa and sacred landscapes for devotional, ritual and cultural reasons ((Thapa-Parajuli & Paudel, 2018; Badal & Kharel, 2019). Historically, Nepal is sacred land, abundant with numerous deities and shrines. The land is notably recognized as the birthplace of Lord Buddha and Goddess *Sita* where both domestic and international pilgrims visit different religious sites for long time. Major pilgrimage sites of Nepal are Pashupatinath (Kathmandu), Lumbani (Rupandehi), Muktinath (Mustang), Halesi (Khotang), Janakpurdham (Janakpur) and many other tribal shrines. Nepal is also transit of cross-border pilgrims to Mt. Kailash and Lake Manasarovar which can play huge economic benefits in Nepal.

Pilgrimage tourism, also known as religious tourism, involves travel to sacred sites with the intent of spiritual fulfillment, religious devotion, or cultural connection. It includes visits to sacred sites and places of worship such as temples, churches, mosques, shrines and monasteries and participate in rituals, festivals or meditative practices. Pilgrimage journey serve as a means to connect with divine entities, seek blessings and experience spirituality. They often embody a deep sense of faith and devotion to link past traditions with present religious practices. This form of tourism fosters cultural exchange, reinforces religious identity and contributes to the preservation of sacred landscape and heritage (Gurung, 2025).

Pilgrimage represents one of the most ancient and fundamental forms of population movement in human civilization consistently carrying significant political, social, cultural and economic implications throughout history. This practice is deeply intertwined with tourism, attracting a substantial number of 'local visitors' primary to sacred sites. Pilgrimage tourism plays a crucial role in travel marketing, where religious travel increasing importance in contemporary times. It is a tradition with a long-standing history across many global regions, particularly in Indian societies where spiritual values are highly esteemed, leading to frequent visits to holy places. These pilgrim centers often host various ceremonies and offerings, believing to atone for sins. Over the past three decades, tourism scholars have increasingly focused on pilgrimage tourism to explore its fascinating in different political, cultural, behavioral, economic and geographical dimensions. Ultimately, pilgrimage tourism is recognized for its vital contribution to socio-economic growth (Awasthi & Nain, 2023).

Literature Review

Theoretical review

Tourism is fundamentally a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that involves the movement of people to locations outside their typical environment for various personal, business or professional reasons. These individuals are referred to as visitors and their activities which, often include tourism expenditure. Such travel typically extends beyond a consecutive year and encompasses purposes like leisure and business, as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (Kheral, 2019). Religious tourism is recognized as a significant and long-standing area within the field of tourism. It encompasses the act of visiting sacred places to observe and practice religious activities, driven by a heartfelt faith. This form of tourism is characterized by the combination of travel to a holy site and the engagement in religious or spiritual practices. Modern religious tourism is broadly classified into pilgrimage and intellectual learning excursions and further divided by motivations such as scientific understanding in religious-cultist events (Ijaz, 2021).

Pilgrimage tourism is an ancient form of travel regarded as a journey to sacred, holy, divine or religious sites. The primary motivations for these journeys include seeking blessings, fulfilling religious vows, expressing personal faith, belief and affinity with a deity or divine entity. Beyond its spiritual core, pilgrimage destinations are recognized for their crucial role in rejuvenating the mind, body and spirit of the tourist as a result, pilgrim enhance peace, tranquility, health and overall well-being. This form of tourism also has broader societal implications like contributing economic growth, inclusive development and sustainable practices, that ultimately benefiting local communities and various stakeholders in regions (Vinayagamurugan, 2025).

Empirical Review

According to Collins-Kreiner (2019), pilgrimage tourism as the original form of tourism mobility rooted in ancient practices, fundamentally a 'search for meaning' involving 'deep and enduring' transformation. They analyzed the development of the pilgrimage phenomenon over recent decades, advocating for a re-examination of contemporary terminology to broaden interpretations within tourism studies, aligning with calls for post-disciplinary rethinking. Their major finding was the prediction that pilgrimage will re-emerge in significance, despite a recent decline, by re-

identifying similar segments like spiritual, heritage, religious, dark and secular tourism as forms of pilgrimage. Their discussion emphasizes that the nexus between pilgrimage tourism and other motilities is undergoing tremendous and ongoing transformation and suggesting a return to its historical perception as a profound human experience.

Shrestha and Shrestha (2012) have analyzed a detailed overview of tourism development of Nepal that highlights its historical roots, particularly mountain tourism which gained prominence after the 1950s with the successful summits of Everest and other peaks. Their study underscored the significant contribution of tourism sector to socio-economic growth through employment creation and development of remote areas. Although tourist numbers have generally increased from 6,179 in 1962 to over 600,000 in 2010 where growth has been irregular and affected by political and infrastructural challenges. The document emphasizes that tourism potential of Nepal remains underexploited due to insufficient resource utilization and policy shortcomings, despite rich natural and cultural assets. It advocates for dynamic tourism-friendly policies and stronger government-private sector collaboration to fully harness resources to promote sustainable growth and alleviate poverty. Overall, tourism is identified as a vital sector that can foster national development, if priority is given to strategic planning and resource management of the country.

Dhakal (2013) has highlighted that Nepal is rich in natural and cultural attractions, noting a steady increase in tourist arrivals since the post-1951 after democratic process mainly in two seasons spring and autumn. It emphasizes diverse heritage, natural sites and historical landmarks as key motivators for tourism growth in Nepal despite short average stays. His paper also underscored the importance of government policies and infrastructural development in fostering tourism. These findings align with this research on 'Pilgrimage Tourism: Potentiality and Trend in Nepal' as both emphasize the spiritual and cultural sites as vital tourist pull factors in Nepal. Understanding overall tourism trends provides a contextual foundation for analyzing pilgrimage-specific visitor patterns and seasonal influences in Nepal.

Sutihar (2013) examined the time series data (1992-2010) for ratio of religious tourists to total tourist arrivals. The major finding is that the annual growth rate of this ratio is statistically significant. The initial analysis showed a 0.8 percent annual growth, but after transforming the data to remove the existence of positive auto-correlation among error terms, the revised and independent growth rate was found to be 0.46 percent.

In his study, Dhakal (2024) addressed the research gap concerning the specific local level opportunities and challenges hindering the development of pilgrimage tourism at individual religious sites in Nepal. Focusing on Haleshi which is a prominent trio-pilgrimage site for Hindu, Buddhist and Kirat. The major findings reveal that while the area possesses great potential due to natural caves, beautiful scenery and religious harmony despite the growth is undermined by significant challenges. Among these obstacles are poor infrastructure (including roads, communication, markets and accommodations), inadequate security services, lack of public awareness/publicity and issues with quality food, water and sanitation. This analysis is highly relevant to 'Pilgrimage Tourism: Potentiality and Trend in Nepal', validating that while about 13.1 percent of tourists already visit Nepal for pilgrimage. The sustainable development and positive trajectory of this overall national

trend depend critically on addressing these severe infrastructural and service deficiencies at the local level.

Moreover, Kunwar and Thapaliya (2021) focused their study on the status and potential of this major Hindu pilgrimage destination. The major findings confirm that Barahachhetra offers an authentic pilgrimage tourism experience and holds immense potential due to its deep scriptural foundation, unique hospitality and religious tolerance. Nevertheless, this potential is severely restricted by pervasive management issues, including poor tourism infrastructure (roads/transport), lack of promotion and inadequate governmental coordination. This study reinforces that national trend requires urgent, coordinated efforts to overcome these identified infrastructural and management deficiencies at critical regional sites like Barahachhera.

Khadka, Ojha and Basnet (2020) examined the high affiliation and mobility of pilgrimage tourism using trend analysis between Nepal and India. Their major finding was the confirmation of high sustained pilgrimage tour potential and mobility between the two nations driven by shared Hindu and Buddhist destinations value and an open border. Data showed that in Nepal, pilgrimage was the second largest purpose for tourist arrivals by air in 2018 (187,692 visitors), next only to leisure/pleasure. The huge number of Indian arrivals by land (1,298,708 in 2014) suggests most of them are religious tourists but their purpose is currently unrecorded.

Bora and Rout (2023) focused on the concept of pilgrimage tourism acknowledging its sacred significance and substantial potential for revenue generation, foreign exchange earnings and job creation. It identifies a critical research gap: the inconsiderate approach of tourism bodies that have not taken significant measures to understand the specific needs and requirements of pilgrims, despite the industry's continuous growth. The method involved a systematic investigation of 'grey areas' where pilgrims encounter challenges, particularly concerning the physical infrastructure of sacred sites. Major findings categorize these problems into on-site/on institution premises and destination level issues. The discussion highlights a significant dearth of interpretive and reflexive approaches to address pilgrim' needs and emphasizing the necessity improvements religious site development.

Awasthi (2023) addressed the research gap stemming from the lack of dedicated studies on pilgrimage tourism specifically at this major site. Major findings establish the "Head of Jyotirlinga" is supreme spiritual status of the Pashupathnath and also confirm that motivations are primarily driven by faith in God and spirituality (Dharma/Moksha). Consequently, the site has seen rapidly increasing pilgrim flow (annually estimated over 8 million) and growing economic income. However, this trend is undermined by the 'too difficult' management and insufficient quality services (e.g., inadequate capacity and poor water/toilet facilities) during peak periods. This study relates to the 'Pilgrimage Tourism: Potentiality and Trend of Nepal' by pinpointing crucial infrastructural and management deficiencies threatening the sustainability of this nationally positive growth.

Ghimire (2013) addressed that, research gap stemming from the inability of stakeholders to effectively prioritize and professionally develop Lubbini, despite status as a decent destination for pilgrimage tourism in Nepal. The major findings establish Lumbini as a top-class pilgrimage destination and a synonym for the world peace center, holding immense economic potential.

However, this potential is severely hampered by the untimely completion of the Lumbini Master Plan (LMP) and continuous instability/poor security, leading to fluctuating tourist arrivals. This analysis highlights that while Nepal possesses strong pilgrimage assets, the successful "Pilgrimage Tourism Trend in Nepal" depends on resolving core issues like planning delays (LMP) and persistent political/security instability.

Finally, the literature review shows that pilgrimage tourism is an ancient, growing form of tourism contributing to cultural and economic development of Nepal. Pilgrimage tourist arrivals is increasing in Nepal due to its significant various religious and pilgrimage sites however its various challenges like poor infrastructure and management. The research is focused the pilgrimage tourism trend analysis, trans-boundary pilgrimage tourism potential in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake and COVID-19 pandemic but existing studies focus mainly on pilgrimage sites.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design to examine existing patterns, trends, and potential of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal. The descriptive approach was used to present the present situation of pilgrimage tourism and the analytical approach helped to analyze its changes over time. This study is primarily based on the secondary sources of data which were obtained from Nepal Tourism Statistics 2024, National Population and Housing Census 2021. These data were used to identify recent status and trends of pilgrimage tourist arrivals and sacred sites visited by pilgrims and to assess the scale and growth pattern of pilgrimage tourism in relation to demographic and tourism indicators. In addition to official statistical reports, the study was also reviewed various secondary literature from different peer-reviewed articles, books, dissertations, research reports, and credible news articles, etc. These sources provided theoretical insights, contextual understanding, and comparative perspectives on pilgrimage tourism, religious travel behavior, and the cultural significance of sacred destinations in Nepal.

Regarding ethical considerations, the study followed standard ethical protocol. All data used in the study were obtained from publicly available and reliable source such as government reports, census data, academic literature and reliable news sources. All sources are properly cited using the APA manual to maintain transparency reliability, and academic integrity thought out the study.

Results

Religious Diversity in Nepal

Nepal Population and Housing Census 2021, shows 142 distinct caste and ethnic groups including Chhetri, Hill Brahmin, Magar, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, and many others. Religiously, about 81.19 percent are Hindu, 8.21 percent Buddhist, 5.09 percent Muslim, 3.17 percent Kirat, 1.76 percent Christian and others like Bon, Prakriti, Jain, Bahai and Sikh. Due to its rich cultural and religious plurality of Nepal has diverse pilgrimage tourism sites like Pashupatinath, Lumbini, Janakpurdham, Barahakhetra, Muknith, Halesi that draw Hindu, Buddhist and Kiratis alike where, blending of multiple traditions into shared sacred spaces. Here, the following table shows the religious plurality of Nepal:

Table 1: *Religious Diversity of Nepal*

Religions	Population	Percentage (%)
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Hinduism	23,677,744	81.19%
Buddhism	2,393,549	8.21%
Islam	1,483,066	5.09%
Kirat (Kirant)	924,204	3.17%
Christianity	512,313	1.76%
Others	173700	1.50%
Total	29,164,578	100.00%

Sources: National Population & Housing Census, 2021

The above table shows religious composition, according to the National Population and Housing Census (2021), where Hinduism is the overwhelmingly dominant faith followed by 81.19 percent of the total population. Buddhist accounts for 8.21 percent, while Islam represents 5.09 percent, Indigenous Kirat traditions make up 3.17 percent, Christian comprises 1.76 percent and others represent 1.50 percent. Altogether, these figures reflect a total population of 29,164,578 in Nepal. The table highlights the religion of Nepal is predominantly by Hindu identity, alongside notable religious minorities that contribute to the cultural and spiritual diversity of country.

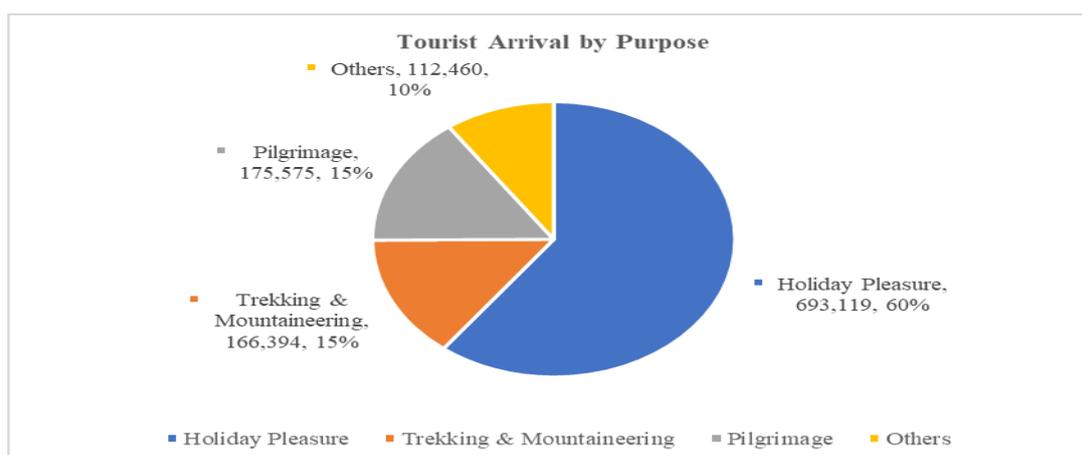
Tourist Arrival by Purpose in Nepal in 2024

Tourist arrivals by purpose reflect its diverse appeal in Nepal. Most visitors come for holidays and leisure, among the total tourist arrivals, pilgrimage tourist comprises in second position and mountaineering is in third position and other various purpose attracted by natural beauty, culture, religious significance and others, which is shown in following figure:

Figure 1: Tourist Arrival by Purpose in Nepal in 2024

Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2024

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of tourist arrivals by purpose in Nepal in 2024 where, holiday and pleasure tourists dominate 60 percent of total tourist arrival in Nepal. Pilgrimage travel



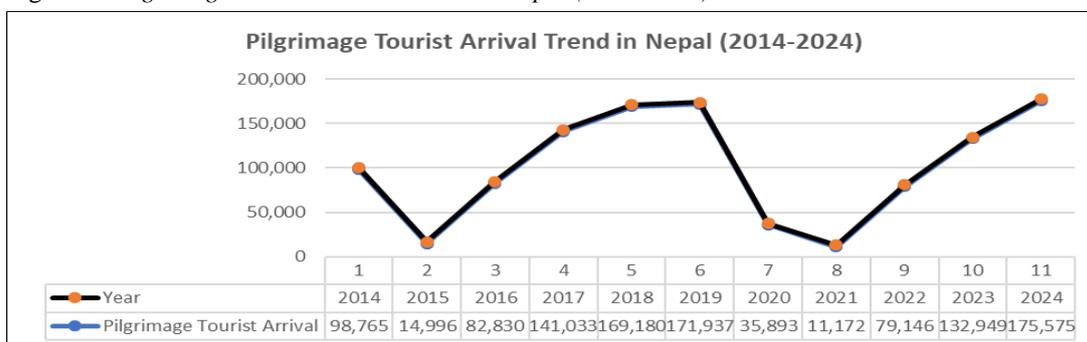
in Nepal attract 15 percent of total tourist arrival which shows the huge potential of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal. Trekking and mountaineering also attract 15 percent of the total tourist arrivals in Nepal. The remaining 10 percent tourist under the other category, which includes various additional

travel motives. Overall, the figure highlights that leisure related travel is the primary driver of tourism where religious and adventure activities also playing significant roles in tourism sector of Nepal.

Trend of Religious (Pilgrimage) Tourist Arrivals in Nepal (2014–2024)

The trend of religious or pilgrimage tourist arrivals are seen in dynamic pattern between '2014 to 2024' in Nepal. The pilgrimage tourist arrivals is strongly influenced by natural disasters, government policy initiatives and global health crises in Nepal. The pilgrimage tourist arrivals trend is shown in following figure:

Figure 2: Pilgrimage Tourist Arrival Trend in Nepal (2014-2024)



Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2024

Figure 2 shows pilgrimage tourist arrivals trend of Nepal from 2014–2024. In this graph, the tourism sector experienced a major setback in 2015 due to the devastating earthquake that triggered a sharp decline in pilgrimage tourist as well as overall tourist arrival. After that pilgrimage tourist as well as overall tourist arrivals strongly recovery by 2016 due to the country's rebuilt and promotion of tourism in Nepal. After that, sustained upward trend from 2017 to 2019, supported by campaigns and infrastructures upgrades tourist arrivals strongly recovered and peaked record high in 2019 in tourist history of Nepal. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused falling drastically in 2020 and 2021, a sharp decline occurred in 2020 and 2021 due to worldwide travel restrictions. After that tourism industry has demonstrated strong resilience, with a dramatic rebound starting in 2022. The tourism sector strengthening through 2023 and 2024, nearing pre-pandemic levels and then rebounding steadily afterward. Overall, the graph highlights strong long-term growth interrupted by the pandemic, followed by a resilient recovery in tourism industry. Despite these major disruptions, Nepal achieved a resilience and a robust rebound in tourism and making Nepal an increasingly attractive destination in the global tourism market.

Most Visiting Pilgrimage Sites in Nepal (2024)

Nepal is a popular pilgrimage destination known for its rich history, culture, and sacred sites of Hindu deities, Buddhist monasteries, stupa and different tribal deities. Its diverse religious traditions and amazing natural beauty attracts both pilgrims and other tourists. Lumbinia, Pashupatinath, Janakpurdham, Muktinath, Boudhanath, Swayambhunath, Manakamana temple, Pathivara, Halesi Mahadev Cave, Sworgadwari, Gosainkunda and Barahakshetra are most important

pilgrimage sites of Nepal. These sacred sites are drawing thousands of domestic and international visitors around the world each year.

Lumbini

Lumbini is the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama was born in 623 B.C. and later became Lord Buddha, it is a holy place in the hearts of millions of Buddhists worldwide. Place is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 due to its religious and archaeological significance. Lumbini is a symbol of peace, enlightenment, and spiritual awakening. The site is home to a number of significant landmarks, including the Maya Devi Temple which is spiritual heart of the Lumbini with ruins palace, the sacred Lumbini Garden, the Ashoka Pillar, and various monasteries built by Buddhist communities from around the world. The serene environment of Lumbini, combined with its deep spiritual connection, makes it the most visited pilgrimage site in Nepal by foreigners. According to Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2024, Lumbini attracted total 1,172,304 visitors, among them 759,990 are domestic visitors, 300,889 were from India and 111,425 were other third countries. Among the third countries visitors most of the them are Buddhist pilgrims and represents different countries like Srilanka, Thailand, china, Myanmar, Vietnam, South Korea and others. The numbers of visitors show the global importance of pilgrimage tourist destination.

Pashupatinath

Pashupatinath is a sacred site for Hindu pilgrims situated on the bank of Bagmati River in Kathmandu valley. It is dedicated to Hindu Deity Lord Shiva. The site is listed in UNESCO heritage site in 1979 due to its significant spiritual and cultural landmark. It is a top pilgrimage spot in Nepal where thousands of Hindu devotees' worship daily in this site as well as Buddhist, Kirat and Bonpo pilgrims also visit this site with great devotion. According to Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2024, Pashupatinath welcomed 136,139 international visitors where, domestic and Indian visitors are excluded. It is famous for unique Shivlinga, Cremation Ghats, Evening Arati, Articuture of Temple and large Bull. This place play significance role in tourism industry of Nepal.

Janakpurdham

Janakpurdham is the birthplace of Goddess Sita and later marriage to Lord Rama and part of Ramayana circuit so that it is an important cultural and religious site of Nepal. The site is dedicated to Goddess Sita also known as Janaki and the temple is known as Janaki Temple which is the largest temple of Nepal. The temple is unique as a Hindu Koiri-style architecture, intricate carving, domes and vibrant artwork. It is important pilgrimage site for Ram–Sita devotees from Nepal and India. There are thousands of domestic and Indian visitors gather to celebrate divine union of Ram and Sita in Vivah Panchami and Ram Navami in the Janakpurdham. Besides of its spiritual significance, Janakpurdham reflects the Maithili heritage through traditional art, music and customs. It is a place of glorious history and devotion.

Muktinath

Muktinath temple is one of the most sacred sites for both Hindu and Buddhists pilgrims, which is in Mustang District of Nepal and part of Annapurna Trekking Circuit. It is sacred site for Nepali & Indian devotees. It is famous for 108 water sprouts and eternal flame and also known as Mokshya Dham. According to the Muktinath Development Committee Mustang, total 454326

tourists and pilgrims visited Mustang in the fiscal year 2023/024. Among them 354927 were domestic tourist and 99,399 international tourists. (By Republica: April 4, 2025 at 11:15 am) so that Mustang and Muktinath is one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Nepal.

Boudhanath Stupa

Buddhanath Stupa is located in the Kathmandu Valley, which is one of the largest and most revered sacred sites for Buddhist devotees, particularly within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It attracts thousands of pilgrims and visitors annually due to its large dome and iconic Buddha eyes. It is recognized for its profound spiritual significance; the site was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1979 as a symbol of enlightenment and peace.

Swayambhunath Stupa

Swayambhunath Stupa is a significant Buddhist site located atop a hill in the Kathmandu valley. The site is part of the UNESCO World Heritage site listed in 1979 for its cultural, artistic, and religious importance. It attracts thousands of tourists and pilgrims annually, due to its spiritual significance, panoramic views of Kathmandu valley, distinctive dome, large Buddha's eyes, numerous shrines and prayer wheels.

Manakamana Temple

Manakamana Temple is a famous pilgrimage site in Gorkha Nepal revered in 17th-century. The site holds profound cultural and religious importance as the sacred site of the Goddesses. It is powerful symbol of faith where devotees believe offering and prayers at the local deity. It attracts a large number of pilgrims annually due to its historical prestige, spiritual significance and the wish-fulfilling Goddess. The site is easy accessible because of Manakamana Cable Car from the major highway.

Pathivara Temple

Pathivara Temple, situated in Taplejung District of eastern Nepal, is an ancient and highly venerated pilgrimage site. It attracts numbers of devotees and tourists annually due to its religious significance, cultural prestige and panorama views of Himalayan range. The site is revered as a powerful symbol of faith in the wish-fulfilling local Goddess, the temple received 232334 visitors according to the Pathivara Development Committee (Republica, July 16, 2025).

Halesi Mahadev Cave

Halesi Mahadev Cave is located in Khotang district of eastern Nepal is a revered pilgrimage site. The cave is believed to have served as a meditation site for Lord Shiva and Guru Rimpoche, making it sacred for Hindus, Buddhists and Kirati devotees alike. The site is example of religious and cultural harmony. The spiritual significance is enhanced by the dramatic natural formations inside the cave, which create an atmosphere of mystery and devotion. The cave is example of religious and cultural harmony and increased wide recognition for its religious glory and attracting pilgrims seeking blessings. Recently, Halesi Mahadev cave continues to welcome an increasing number of domestic and international tourists and pilgrims making it a growing center for both spiritual tourism and cultural exploration in Nepal.

Sworgadwari

Sworgadwari is situated at hilltop of Pyuthan district in Western Nepal. It is one of the most sacred pilgrimage site of Nepal with a history deeply tied to the revered Guru Swargadwari Mahaprabhu who is believed to have performed miraculous deeds and established the site as a center of spiritual practice. The place holds immense religious significance for Hindu as symbol of gateway to heaven and express ideals of devotion, truth and selfless service. Its glory is reflected in the continuous sacred fire, peaceful ashram environment and rich traditions maintained by devotees. The area now attracting number of domestic and international visitors who come to seek blessings, tranquility and glimpse into this vibrant religious heritage.

Gosaikunda

Gosaikunda is a high-altitude alpine lake lies in the Langtang region of Rasuwa district. It has a historical and spiritual importance rooted in ancient Hindu mythology. It is believed to have been created by Lord Shiva when, he had swallowed during the churning of the cosmic ocean, he struck his trident into the mountain to sooth his burning poison. Due to the fact, thousands of devotees visit Gosaikunda as a sacred lake especially in Janai Purnima. Devotees undertake bath in its icy water for spiritual purification. Its glory lies in the dramatic natural beauty of the snow clad mountains, pristine lake and serene surroundings that inspire awe among both pilgrims and trekkers. Gradually, Gosaikunda has become a major spiritual and adventure tourism destination and drawing increasing numbers of domestic and international visitors who seek spiritual fulfillment, natural splendor and a rewarding trekking experience in Himalayas of Nepal.

Barahakshetra

Barahakshetra, located in Sunasari district of eastern Nepal, is one of the most ancient and revered religious site, with its history mentioned in sacred Hindu scriptures such as the Puranas. The site is believed to be where Lord Vishnu, in his Baraha (boar) incarnation, rescued the Earth from cosmic chaos, making it a powerful center of spiritual heritage. Its significance is further elevated by the presence of the Barahakshetra Temple, centuries-old rituals, and its role as one of the four major Dhams of Nepal. The glory of Barahakshetra is expressed through grand religious gatherings, especially during the Kumbha Mela and major festivals when thousands of devotees' flock to the area seeking blessings and spiritual rejuvenation. In recent years, Barahakshetra is an important destination for religious tourism and cultural exploration in Nepal due to its cultural values.

Trans-Boundary Pilgrimage Tourism Potential

Trans-boundary pilgrimage tourism connecting Mt. Kailash and Manasarovar through Nepal's key transit points; Hilsa, Rasuwagadhi, and Tatopani holds significant potential to evolve into a high-value, multi-faith pilgrimage circuit linking Nepal, India, and China. This sacred landscape attracts Hindu, Buddhist, Bonpo and Jain pilgrims so that Nepal can play vital role as a strategic facilitator of regional spiritual mobility. Nepal can enhance both economic gains and cultural exchange by providing itself as a safe, hospitable corridor and added-value partners. The development of pilgrimage friendly transit hubs at Hilsa (Humla), Rasuwagadhi (Rasuwa) and Tatopani (Sindhupalchowk) supported by investments in infrastructure, efficient cross-border services and conducive tourism policies would enable Nepal to benefit more effectively from flows originating from its neighboring countries.

According to *The Kathmandu Post* (December 2, 2024), report of pre-pandemic estimates, approximately 60,000 pilgrims transited annually through the Nepal route to Mt. Kailash and Manasarovar. More recent data reveal that between 14 May to 10 September 2024, a total of 7,523 pilgrims utilized the Rasuwagadhi route (*Khabarhub*, September 13, 2024). According to Simikot Airport Police Authority, (*Onlinekhabar*, September 16, 2025), 6,055 pilgrims travelled to Mt. Kailash and Manasarovar via Hilsa (Humla) corridor during the 2025 and also thousands of pilgrims were travelled via Rasuwagadhi (Rasuwa) but reliable data of the Tatopani (Sindhupalchowk) transit point remain sparse. By sustaining constructive cross-border diplomatic engagement and reinforcing its role as a crucial transit nexus between India and China, Nepal is poised to accrue substantial socio-economic benefits from the expansion of pilgrimage tourism.

Discussion

The findings of the study confirm that pilgrimage tourism in Nepal is growing steadily, supported by both domestic devotion and rising regional mobility particularly from India and other third countries. This trend aligns with earlier studies showing a statistically significant long term increase in religious tourist arrivals (Sutihar, 2013) and a global resurgence of spiritually motivated (Collins-Kreiner, 2019). Religious diversity and dense network of sacred sites such as Hindu deities, Buddhist Monasteries and Tribal deities of Nepal provide a strong cultural foundation for this growth. Major destinations such as birth place of Buddha (Lumbini) and Goddess Sita (Janakpur), Pashupatinath, Muktinath and Halesi continue to attract large numbers of multi-faith visitors that reflects the ritual tourism continuum described by Ijaz (2021). However, the study also highlights persistent challenges that hinder sustainable development. Literature on Halesi, Barahachhetra, Pashupatinath and Lumbini consistently identifies inadequate infrastructure, weak site management, poor sanitation and inconsistent government coordination as critical constraints (Dhakal, 2024; Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021; Awasthi, 2023; Ghimire, 2013). The uneven completion of the Lumbini Master Plan and insufficient services at peak periods underscore the need for more effective and culturally sensitive management.

The significant trans-boundary mobility documented at Hilsa, Rasuwagadhi and Tatopani confirms Nepal's strategic point within regional pilgrimage networks linked to Mt. Kailash and Manasarovar. This supports Khadka, Ojha and Basnet's (2020) argument that cross-border religious circuits represent one of the strongest growth opportunities of Nepal. The earthquake 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic lower the tourist arrival, although after that pilgrimage tourist strongly increasing hence strengthening communication, infrastructure, stable government and tourist friendly policies and community is the most essential. Overall, the pilgrimage tourism sector of Nepal is expanding with huge potential but requires sustainable planning, improved management and investments for economic and cultural benefits.

Conclusion

This study on Pilgrimage Tourism: Potentiality and Trend in Nepal examined recent patterns, key destinations and the broader dynamics shaping religious travel in the country. The primary objective is to analyze the current status, trend and potentiality of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal, using secondary data, drawing from Nepal Tourism Statistics (2024), Nepal Housing and

Population Census 2021, journal articles, dissertations, policy document and news articles. The findings show that pilgrimage tourism constitutes a significant and growing segment of tourism industry of Nepal, consistently strengthened by the country's rich religious diversity and cultural significance of major sites such as Lumbini, Pashupatinath, Janakpurdham, Muktinath and Halesi etc. Trends reveal strong resilience, with sharp declines during the earthquake 2015 and COVID-19 pandemic followed by robust recovery in 2022 to 2024. Additionally, the strategic role of Nepal as a transit corridor for Mt. Kailash and Manasarovar pilgrims' tourism present substantial regional potential. However, inadequate planning and low community participation continue to restrict sustainable growth. Despite these constraints, sacred landscapes of Nepal offer immense potential for inclusive development, cross-border spiritual circuits and experiential religious-cultural tourism that uncover the future growth of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal.

Author's Biography

Dhal Bahadur Gurung is a PhD scholar at Nepal Sanskrit University. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid-West University. His research interests primarily focus on religious tourism and indigenous cultures.

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