Targeted Interventions for the Preservation of Traditional Himalayan Buddhist Culture: An Evaluative Case Study of Ananda Sangh, Kathmandu, Nepal

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Abstract

This paper analyses the selected intervention initiatives that the Ananda Sangh has undertaken to conserve the traditional Himalayan Buddhist culture as well as to meet the educational and social demands of the marginalized groups of people in Budhanilkantha-11, Kathmandu, Nepal. A case study design based on mixed methods was used to collect primary data in the form of key informant interviews (n = 12), focus group discussions (n = 3), and structured surveys of monk students between September and November 2023. The 46 monks (20% of 230 beneficiaries overall) were chosen as the stratified random sample of participants in the survey component. The secondary data included project reports, evaluation documents of the Social Welfare Council and other literature. It has been found that the interventions of Ananda Sangh were effective to offer quality education to 230 monks representing the most remote marginalized communities, as well as residential facilities, nutrition, and healthcare services. The program has proven to have positive effects in three main areas namely education, health and preservation of the culture. The evaluation of the program demonstrated that it is in line with constitutional goals, efficiency in program operations, and effectiveness in producing short-term educational results. Nevertheless, there are still crucial weaknesses in the alignment of policy and practice, especially as it pertains to social auditing procedures and adherence to gender equity. This research is relevant to the realization of ways in which faith-based organizations can be able to combine the hope of cultural preservation and goal of social welfare within the Nepal constitutional framework of secularism and religious freedom.

Keywords: Cultural preservation, monastic education, targeted interventions, Buddhist heritage, organizational effectiveness, program evaluation, Nepal

Introduction

Buddhism has profoundly influenced Asian societies across social, political, and cultural dimensions. In contemporary Nepal, Buddhism represents the second-largest religious tradition, with 2,396,099 followers comprising 9.0% of the population according to the 2021 Census (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The preservation of Buddhist cultural heritage faces significant challenges from modernization, urbanization, and socioeconomic marginalization of traditional communities. As the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, Nepal holds a unique position in Buddhist history, with numerous monasteries working to preserve and propagate Buddhist culture through local and international support.

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal defines the country as a secular and inclusive federal state, guaranteeing freedom of religion while allowing individuals to profess, practice, and protect their religious convictions. The Constitution grants religious denominations the right to maintain religious sites and Guthi (traditional trusts). This constitutional framework aligns with the National Cultural Policy, which recognizes diverse cultural groups defined by religion, geography, ethnicity, and historical heritage as integral to Nepal's cultural identity (National Planning Commission, 2020).

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Recent scholarship emphasizes the role of faith-based organizations in achieving sustainable development goals, particularly in education and social inclusion (Buchy & Shakya, 2023; Sharma & Poudel, 2022). Program evaluation frameworks must systematically assess whether interventions function according to evidence-based practices while maintaining cultural authenticity (Lipsey & Cordray, 2000). This study applies a comprehensive evaluation model examining relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability, analyzing organizational legitimacy and strategic decision-making through institutional theory (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). Ananda Sangh, a non-governmental organization registered with the Social Welfare Council, operates with the mandate to preserve and propagate Buddha Dharma through monastery management, educational programs, publications, and social welfare initiatives. The organization implements an integrative strategy combining Buddhist cultural conservation with social welfare programs serving marginalized communities in health, education, environmental conservation, and traditional culture preservation.

This study evaluates the project 'Preservation of Traditional Himalayan Buddhist Culture and Customs and Social Benefits' conducted by Ananda Sangh from July 17, 2022, to July 16, 2023, under agreement with the Social Welfare Council with an approved budget of NPR 38,784,916.64. The implementation centered on six major interventions: monk-focused programs, regular and emergency healthcare, religious ceremonies, educational programs at Rigpe Dorje Institute, construction and maintenance, and social projects. Despite substantial scholarship on Buddhist educational systems, empirical assessments of contemporary monastic intervention programs in Nepal remain limited. This study addresses these gaps by providing methodological analysis of Ananda Sangh's specific intervention programs, examining: (1) How effectively Ananda Sangh preserves traditional Himalayan Buddhist culture through its interventions; (2) What impacts targeted programs have on educational, health, and social welfare needs of marginalized communities; and (3) What policy implementation weaknesses exist in cultural maintenance and social welfare programs.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design conducted at the Ananda Sangh complex in Budhanilkantha-11, Kathmandu, Nepal, during the Nepali calendar period 2080/09/01 to 2080/09/29. The case study methodology was selected for investigating contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts where boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear (Yin, 2014). The research combined descriptive and exploratory methodological orientations, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to investigate changes resulting from Ananda Sangh's cultural preservation and social benefit programs.

The study site encompassed the Ananda Sangh premises in Budhanilkantha-11, Kathmandu, targeting Pullahari Monastery and neighboring communities. The target population consisted of 230 monk-students enrolled in Ananda Sangh educational programs, organizational staff, local residents, government representatives, and other stakeholders. Purposive sampling methods selected the study site and key informants based on research objective alignment and information-rich perspectives. A stratified 20% random sample (n=46) of the monk population (N=230) participated in structured surveys, achieving sufficient representation for descriptive statistical analysis while maintaining feasibility for in-depth qualitative exploration.

Primary data collection employed methodological triangulation through multiple techniques. Key informant interviews (n=12) involved semi-structured discussions with senior lamas, subject experts, teachers, board members, administrators, and local officials, covering organizational structure, program implementation, perceived effects, challenges, and sustainability. Focus group discussions (n=3) engaged program beneficiaries, Ananda Sangh staff, and community members to examine shared experiences and program efficacy. Direct observation systematically documented program activities, educational facilities, residential

arrangements, and community interactions. Structured surveys collected quantitative data from 46 monk-students regarding demographics, educational experiences, satisfaction levels, and perceived program impacts. Secondary data sources included project reports, Social Welfare Council evaluation documents, audit records, financial statements, academic literature, constitutional documents, and census data. Data analysis involved translation and transcription maintaining semantic integrity, systematic data cleaning and verification, thematic coding using constant comparative techniques, quantitative analysis using SPSS version 20 with descriptive statistics, and triangulation integrating multiple data sources. The study adhered to conventional ethical standards including informed consent, confidentiality through anonymization, and cultural sensitivity regarding Buddhist practices. Limitations include single-case design limiting generalizability, cross-sectional nature preventing long-term effect examination, potential social desirability bias in self-reported data, and possible researcher positional effects.

Results and Discussion

Results are organized according to research questions and evaluation criteria including relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact. Findings are discussed within Nepal's constitutional framework of religious freedom and secular governance, examining alignment with Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Program Relevance and Constitutional Conformity

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) establishes a secular and inclusive federal state ensuring religious freedom, permitting individuals to profess, practice, and defend religious convictions while granting religious denominations rights to maintain religious sites and Guthi. Ananda Sangh programs demonstrate strong alignment with these constitutional provisions by preserving Buddhist culture while addressing marginalized population social welfare needs. This dual emphasis reflects the National Cultural Policy's pluralistic approach recognizing diverse cultural groups as collectively representing national heritage (National Planning Commission, 2020), thereby enhancing program relevance within Nepal's legal and policy framework.

Targeted Intervention Programs

Table 1 provides an overview of targeted intervention programs implemented by Ananda Sangh during the project timeframe (July 17, 2022, to July 16, 2023), designed to address cultural conservation and social wellbeing simultaneously.

Table 1
Summary of Targeted Intervention Programs

Intervention Area	Key Components	Primary Beneficiaries
Education	Quality education, Rigpe Dorje Institute programs, library resources, traditional Buddhist studies, contemporary subjects	230 monk-students from marginalized communities
Health	Regular healthcare, emergency services, specialized treatment (Tilganga partnership), preventive monitoring	Students and community members
Cultural	Meditation training, regular/special ceremonies, building maintenance, social projects	Monks, local/international participants

Source: Field Survey, 2023; Project Agreement, 2023

Table 1 demonstrates Ananda Sangh's multidimensional intervention strategy covering education, health, and community development. Educational interventions form the program core, providing 230 monk-students with comprehensive residential education combining traditional Buddhist studies with modern academic subjects, enabling cultural continuity while developing contemporary skills valued in modern society. Healthcare interventions operate through dual mechanisms: direct service delivery via Pullahari Medical Center and community outreach through specialized facility partnerships. Residential support addressing accommodation, nutrition, and secure learning conditions fulfills fundamental effective learning requirements, particularly for students from remote regions where poverty and geographic isolation severely limit educational access. Community development programs including meditation training generate revenue supporting program sustainability while propagating Buddhist teachings to wider audiences, consistent with recent literature on faith-based organizational contributions to sustainable development (Sharma & Poudel, 2022).

Impact Assessment across Major Domains

Table 2 presents systematic evaluation of program effects across three key intervention domains, with impact indicators measured through multiple data sources including beneficiary surveys, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation.

Table 2

Impact Assessment Summary

Domain	Key Findings	Assessment
Education	230 students enrolled; 95.7% satisfaction; improved literacy, numeracy, digital skills; enhanced confidence	Highly Positive
Health	Regular monitoring for all students; emergency care availability; community cataract surgeries; improved health awareness	Positive
Cultural Preservation	Daily Buddhist practice engagement; successful knowledge transfer; regular ceremonies; strong cultural identity; tradition-modernity balance	Highly Positive

Source: Field Survey, 2023; Student Survey (n=46); KII (n=12); FGD (n=3)

Table 2 demonstrates significant positive outcomes across evaluated domains, with strongest impacts in education and cultural preservation. Educational achievements align with recent scholarship emphasizing targeted educational access programs' contributions to sustainable development goals through youth development, social inclusion, and enhanced educational access among marginalized populations (Buchy & Shakya, 2023; Khadka & Thapa, 2021). The 95.7% student satisfaction rate and qualitative evidence of confidence development, improved self-expression, and increased social awareness indicate impacts extending beyond knowledge transfer to encompass social empowerment, consistent with theoretical models relating organizational legitimacy to stakeholder perceptions (Thomas & Lamm, 2012).

Healthcare interventions demonstrate positive effects through regular medical monitoring enabling early disease identification and treatment. The Tilganga Institute partnership represents particularly significant achievement extending healthcare benefits beyond immediate program participants to broader marginalized populations, addressing accessibility challenges documented in recent health equity research (Adhikari et al., 2022). Cultural

preservation impacts received highly positive assessment based on converging evidence sources, with daily Buddhist ritual participation and successful intergenerational knowledge transfer indicating effective cultural continuity maintenance while adapting to contemporary requirements (Rijal & Sharma, 2020).

Program Achievement Analysis and Implementation Gaps

Achievement analysis reveals strong performance in core educational objectives with 100% achievement in providing comprehensive residential education to 230 marginalized students and welfare support including residential facilities, nutrition, and essential supplies. Sociocultural programs achieved 99% implementation success through 365 daily ceremonies and 11 of 12 planned major annual ceremonies. Healthcare program implementation reached 95% success in quarterly student health assessments with functional emergency response systems. These results demonstrate robust organizational capacity for consistent core service delivery, aligning with evidence-based intervention research factors associated with positive outcomes among disadvantaged youth: housing stability, nutrition security, adult mentoring, peer support networks, structured activities, and skill development (Lipsey & Cordray, 2000; Poudel & Khanal, 2024).

Moderate performance areas (70-85% achievement) included digital learning infrastructure facing internet connectivity challenges due to remote monastery location, library resource acquisition at 84.7% due to procurement delays for specialized Buddhist texts, community cataract treatment reaching 78% primarily due to beneficiary identification and access challenges in remote areas, and construction projects at 84-85% completion affected by monsoon-related weather constraints. These implementation challenges reflect systemic issues documented in development programming contexts (Sharma & Poudel, 2022).

Critical implementation gaps include: (1) Social auditing (0% achievement) representing the gravest deficiency, as social auditing processes ensure transparent assessment of program compliance, resource appropriateness, and goal achievement, with absence indicating inadequate accountability to beneficiaries and funding sources; (2) Gender equity compliance (40% achievement) reflecting program focus exclusively on male monks, raising contemporary rights-based framework concerns despite partial gender-disaggregated data collection; (3) Financial transparency (25% achievement) through annual rather than quarterly reporting, limiting stakeholder understanding of resource utilization and organizational accountability; and (4) Monitoring and evaluation systems (50% achievement) lacking systematic frameworks with standardized indicators and routine analytical cycles, restricting organizational learning and adaptive management capacity.

These gaps, acknowledged by Ananda Sangh staff and administrators as resulting from resource constraints, competing priorities, and technical expertise limitations in social auditing and monitoring practices, require priority attention for long-term program legitimacy and sustainability as emphasized by Social Welfare Council representatives and community leaders. Similar policy-practice implementation gaps have been documented across development sectors in Nepal (Buchy & Shakya, 2023; Khadka & Thapa, 2021), suggesting systemic rather than organization-specific challenges.

Discussion

Findings demonstrate Ananda Sangh's comprehensive strategy effectively achieves dual objectives of preserving traditional Himalayan Buddhist culture while providing quality education to marginalized youth. Successfully enrolling and retaining 230 monk-students from remote, economically disadvantaged communities represents significant progress in extending educational services to underserved populations, contributing to sustainable development goals through youth development, social inclusion, and enhanced educational access (Buchy & Shakya, 2023; Poudel & Khanal, 2024). The residential model addresses not only educational

access but fundamental learning prerequisites including nutrition, shelter, healthcare, and safe environments often unavailable in participants' origin communities.

Cultural preservation success reflects Buddhism's historical capacity to challenge rigid hierarchies while providing marginalized groups educational opportunities (Rijal & Sharma, 2020). The holistic curriculum integrating traditional Buddhist philosophy with modern academic skills creates pathways for cultural continuity adaptable to contemporary society requirements, addressing cultural preservation's inherent challenge of maintaining tradition relevance while ensuring viability in changing contexts. High satisfaction levels (95.7%) and positive qualitative data regarding confidence development, improved self-expression, and increased social awareness indicate impacts resonating with theoretical models relating organizational legitimacy to stakeholder perceptions (Thomas & Lamm, 2012).

However, significant policy-practice disconnections in social auditing, financial transparency, gender equity, and systematic monitoring represent critical concerns. Social auditing absence constitutes serious accountability deficiency, as these processes ensure program beneficiary targeting, appropriate resource utilization, and intended result achievement. Gender equity gaps, evident in exclusive male monk focus and limited gender-disaggregated data collection, present complex challenges given traditional Buddhist monastic gender segregation while facing contemporary rights-based framework demands including Nepal's constitutional gender equality obligations and international frameworks such as SDG and Gender Equality and Social Inclusion principles (Adhikari et al., 2022; Khadka & Thapa, 2021).

This study contributes to empirical understanding of faith-based organizational interventions in cultural preservation, demonstrating that such organizations can successfully achieve multiple objectives including cultural continuity, educational access, social welfare, and community development within consistent program frameworks. Findings support theoretical propositions regarding sustainable organizational legitimacy requiring effective integration of diverse stakeholder concerns (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). Effective service delivery has established significant Ananda Sangh legitimacy among beneficiaries and immediate stakeholders, though legitimacy with broader constituencies concerned with gender equity and transparent oversight remains limited due to implementation gaps. These tensions exemplify broader issues at intersections of tradition and modernity, religious and secular, cultural preservation and social change, requiring ongoing dialogue, negotiation, and adaptation among stakeholders rather than external norm imposition disregarding cultural and religious contexts (Sharma & Poudel, 2022).

Conclusion

Ananda Sangh's targeted intervention programs demonstrate that faith-based organizations can effectively integrate cultural preservation requirements with contemporary educational access and social welfare objectives, creating valuable opportunities for marginalized communities while maintaining cultural continuity. Successfully providing comprehensive residential education to 230 students who would otherwise lack such access represents significant achievement in individual life transformation and broader cultural sustainability. Program alignment with Nepal's constitutional framework, beneficiary needs responsiveness, and resource utilization efficiency indicate strong organizational capacity and commitment.

However, critical gaps in social auditing, financial transparency, systematic monitoring and evaluation, and gender-inclusive programming reveal that effective service delivery alone does not constitute organizational excellence. In contemporary contexts with increasing accountability demands, rights-based frameworks, and equity commitments, organizations must address not only achievements but operational transparency, accountability, participatory inclusiveness, and systematic learning. Addressing these implementation gaps requires not

merely technical solutions but sustained organizational commitment, adequate resource allocation, capacity building, and potentially supportive policy environments balancing accountability requirements with recognition of unique challenges facing faith-based cultural preservation organizations.

Ultimately, traditional Himalayan Buddhist culture preservation in contemporary Nepal requires not historical culture freezing but active, dynamic engagement preserving traditional values and practices while constructively addressing modernity's challenges and opportunities. Ananda Sangh's successes and limitations exemplify both the potential and challenges of this essential cultural endeavor, offering valuable lessons for similar faith-based cultural preservation initiatives in Nepal and beyond.

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