

# SUSTAINABILITY OF BUDDHIST TOURISM IN NEPAL A CASE STUDY OF ASURA CAVE

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## ABSTRACT

*People love to travel for various purposes such as meditation, yoga, peace, and spiritual tourism is a dimension. Demand is rising for meditation and spirituality because of the hassle time by different types of pandemics and their effect on mental health, on the other hand, the tendencies, and specialties of Buddhism and Buddhist tourism create a great opportunity in the tourism sector. This paper tries to find out the sustainability of Buddhist tourism. The area for investigation is Asura cave, Pharping, Kathmandu, Nepal. The cave is an ancient form of religious travel where people make a journey to the place of their belief for experiencing spirituality. Asura cave is one of the sacred Buddhist shrines and important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists has evidence of that, Guru Padmasambhava and Guru Rinpoche are mediate and enlightened. The place is attractive and has a huge potential to attract both Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims including international tourists from all over the world. The paper is attempted to study the scope of such spiritual tourism promotion concerning the issues related to its sustainability. This paper examines the interdependencies of tourism, Buddhism, and sustainability that have been done combined from the pilot study/ observation of sites, in-depth-interviews with Buddhism experts, observation of visitors and activities, and in-depth interviews with the managers/ in charge of the monastery as well as local people in a descriptive approach. In conclusion, Buddhist temple tourism shapes the landscape in the tourism sector which incorporates sustainability in tourism in Nepal.*

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Buddhist temples, Buddhist tourism, Sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

The World Commission on Environment and Development issued the report “Our Common Future” in 1987, which defined sustainable development as ‘development that can fulfill the requirements of present people without jeopardizing future generations’ ability to meet their own needs’. And tourism is the best alternative. Buddhist tourism is thriving in Asia, particularly in India, Nepal, South Korea, and Thailand, as a form of religious tourism. Social, political, and cultural life in these countries has been profoundly affected. With

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the continued ascent of the Asian economy, most worldwide attention is focused on China and India's rapid growth and industrialization, while less attention is devoted to India's large religious tourism business. Tourism is one of the most significant economic drivers in Nepal. Tourism requires moving the body through space to reach a destination, Buddhism offers a journey to the inner self (Smith, 2006) without the need to move at all. Practitioners also travel like tourists in order to participate in retreats or workshops at specific locations as a special form of spiritual tourism. Both Buddhism and tourism are linked to sustainability since sustainable behavior is inherent in Buddha's teachings, and tourism must turn more and more towards sustainable alternatives (Thimm, 2021).

Buddhist tourism especially includes several temples, guest houses, and archeological sites related directly to the life of Buddha and the teaching of buddha and its activities related to Buddhism such as yoga, meditation, etc. it has of great importance to tourism because of the presence of magnificent temples and archaeological sites of Buddhist heritages highly attracts non-pilgrims too. The economic effect of Buddhist tourism cannot be disregarded. Buddhist temples in promoting and enhancing the cultural, spiritual, and natural heritage values of religious and sacred places and to provide management recommendations on how to maintain and enhance the features and attributes of Buddhist temples for heritage conservation and preservation of cultural and religious traditions. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was used to explore how inner peace, religious tourism and cultural heritage conservation can be integrated in a sustainable manner (Boonmeerit, 2016). Buddhist tourism is directly linked with mindful tourism, spiritual tourist seeks some kind of personal or social transformation during their journey and would not refrain from spiritual tourists at all both spheres have a reciprocal relationship, and they could not be complete without each other. They reinforce each other. The most effective strategy to address the issue of religious tourist development is to enhance the direction of developmental decision-making, raise people's environmental literacy, and empower decision-makers and the public to move toward sustainable development (He, 2022). Buddhist tourism is regarded as one of the earliest and oldest forms of tourism, contributing to the development of a tourism sector that is one of the world's most significant economic contributors. Furthermore, Buddhist tourism is one of the most significant segments of the business, and it is rapidly increasing as more visitors travel overseas. The United Nations World Tourism Organization reports that between 300 and 330 million travelers visit the world's largest religious sites each year. As a result, Buddhist tourism contributes significantly to socioeconomic development and long-term sustainability (He, 2022).

### **Problem Statement**

Research is needed at other religious sites to examine the role of social distance and motivations with a broader population and other religious groups (Nyaupane, 2015).

It is deemed necessary for the local and religious institutions to strategically plan the promotion of religious tourism having as a driving force the

promotion of the prefecture under the contemporary conditions of COVID-19. Potential research that could be conducted in the future would have to be addressed solely on religious tourists and thus, specific conclusions about religion and especially pilgrimage tourism and its development could be drawn, so religious tourism can finally become the competitive advantage of the prefecture (Noriah Ramli, 2021).

A few scholars took note and discussed the risks of the “touristification of religious sites” (Ross S. L., 2019) that can run the risk of causing dramatic environmental, social, and spiritual impacts if not well supported with infrastructure and programming (Kaplan, 2010). The above synthesis of temple activities about well-being is based on a review of existing documents from limited sources, particularly empirical research focusing on the nexus of ‘well-being’ and ‘Buddhist temple’. Thus, further research is suggested to examine the interaction between using temple space and well-being outcomes to investigate how to raise the existing capacity of temples (Kwanchit Sasiwongsaroj, 2012).

The travel and tourism industry could not avoid the negative impacts and consequences of these events (Berki, 1986). Moreover, some of these events manifested the vulnerability of tourism both on global and regional levels. Therefore, this fact necessitates the research and study of the relationship between security issues and tourism, including the creation of a new, up to date definition of the notion security and safety in tourism (Kunwar, 2012). To invite global Buddhist tourists Nepal must develop a smart policy including smart security. At present there are 535 million Buddhists population and it is worlds the 4th largest religion. What should be the best policies and strategies to invite such big pools of Buddhist people around the globe? To find out the appropriate policies and strategies the study has to prepare. Buddhist sustainability tourism and Buddhist heritage tourism which introduces nuances to the literature on religious and pilgrimage tourism that arise from Chinese practices and proposed scales that may help to develop further research using modes of confirmatory factor analysis. Currently, this study fails tests for such an analysis as recommended by (Westland, 2010). Due to inadequate numbers in the sample, but this too opens future opportunities for researchers interested in the topic of religious tourism in China who may wish to use this study for comparative purposes (Westland, 2010).

### **Objectives**

The main objective of the study is as follows:

- To find out the status and concept of the Buddhist tourism in Nepal.
- To find out the advantages and importance of spiritual tourism for tourist.
- To find out the sustainability in tourism sectors from the Buddhism and its activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Buddhist heritage tourism and its sustainability in tourism sectors of Nepal. Observation and key informants' interview tools are used to gather data. This chapter discussed the research design, source of data, population size and data collection tools and techniques. Research design is a set of logical and systemic planning as well as direction of the study. This study is about the Buddhism, Buddhist temples, its benefits to the nation and sustainability in tourism sector the research design is descriptive in nature. This research is based on field work in selected site.

### **Research Design**

The research design is descriptive in nature. The research described Buddhist heritage tourism and motivation for tourist to visit sites and contribution of tourism for sustainability. This research is based on field work in selected site.

### **Sources of Data**

**Primary Data:** Primary data collected through tourist, manager/ in charge, local people and concerned person's interview by unstructured questionnaire and, observation of different activities on cave.

**Secondary Data:** Secondary data obtained from various published and unpublished sources, i.e., relevant literature, library study, newspapers and journal of tourism, research report and annual report of NTB, brochure of the cave/ monastery etc.

### **Population size and Data collection tools and techniques**

Key Informants Interview and Field Observation methods applied in collecting data in research area.

### **Key Informants Interview**

This technique is used to obtain pith information about the status of tourists and their interest from the interview with 1 manager/ in charge of the cave, 1 Priest of Gumba, a person concerned with management. The techniques are applied on a basis of the movement of tourists in a day to know the importance of the place and why they are here and their objectives, faith, and motivations to be here. I have taken a sampling of 40% of tourists and 20% of local people around the cave, to find out how the cave helps in the sustainability of tourism sectors as well as advantages to the locals.

### **Field Observation**

Buddhist heritage sites' important features objectives and activities observed. To know the types of tourists, the status of tourism their interest in the cave which helps to gather more information without any doubt? That ultimately helps to understand the development of tourism.

## DISCUSSION

### Asura Cave

Pharping is a sacred site of Yanglesho where Guru Padmasambhava attained level of a Mahamudra Vidyadhara. Pharping town is a thriving Newari town that's ancient Buddhist pilgrimage sites have been taken over by large numbers of Tibetans. However more specifically it is referring to two caves in which Guru Rinpoche is said to have meditated that is Asura cave and Yanglesho cave, both blessed by Guru Padmashambhava. A cave sacred to Guru Rinpoche, located above the village of Pharping, 20 kilometer south from Kathmandu, Nepal. It is also known as the 'Upper cave of Yanglesho'. On the upper left side of the entrance door is the imprint of a hand in the rock is of Padmashambhava and footprint of Gorakhanath is in front of asura cave which represent the site is important pilgrimage sites for both Buddhist and Hindu.

Ngagyur Nyinmapa Rigzin Phodrang Monastery in Pharping at the entrance gate of Asura cave. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche explains: that in the innermost recesses of the Asura Cave is a tunnel that connects this cave to the Yanglesho Cave also called Shesh Narayan Hindu temple down below, about half a mile away. It is not a big hole. Wind passes through this passage and you can feel the draft when sitting near it. Although Padmasambhava could traverse freely through solid matter, he used this narrow tunnel to move between Yanglesho Cave and the upper Asura Cave.

Tulku Tenpo writes: In the past, in the Asura cave at the border of India and Nepal, Padmasambhava, the great master from Orgyen, and Langchen Palgyi Sengé, one of his main disciples, opened the mandala of the great and glorious Dreka Kundul. They gave the spirits the Vajrayana empowerments, and bound them under oath to obey their command. When the twelve Tenma made their pledge and promised to protect Tibet, Guru Rinpoche and Langchen Palgyi Senge poured samaya water on the tongues of the Tenma and placed a symbolic crown, corresponding to their particular buddha family, on each of their heads. Then they placed the unchanging vajra in their hands and entrusted them to protect Tibet, and particularly to prevent the tirthikas from ever entering.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche restored the cave in the late 80s, early 90s, and built a monastery and three-year retreat center for the practice of the Chokling Tersar called Pema Osel Ling, which surrounds the cave. The three main images enshrined inside the cave are those of Guru Rinpoche, Yangdak Heruka and Vajrakilaya. The place where Guru Rinpoche is said to have attained enlightenment, and so is one of the most sacred sites associated with the great yogi baba Gorakhanath. Varjayogini temple lies near the gate of the second way of the staircase leading up to Asura cave. This is one of the four or five Vajrayoini temples of the Kathmandu valley. The others are located in Sankhu, near Swaymbhunath, below the hill of Pashupatinath (Guhyeshwari), and in Chapagaun. Vajrayogini statue is found on the first floor of temple, it is said that Marpa Lotsawa visited this temple in total three times on his way from Tibet to India and back. The cave has an ancient history as it was here the tantric master

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Padmasambhava attained realization. The retreat center in the area around the cave houses traditional three-year retreatants, pilgrim guests and other short-term retreats.

In this cave regular 35 people are sitting and have food and practice spirituality and learn Buddhism. 8 people are sitting and regularly mediated for 3-4 years continuously for enlightenment. The monastery belongs to the tantric education center. The monastery starts a retreat center 50 years back especially Buddhists came here for treatment and medicinal purposes and they come to the doing puja for dead people. Most of the tourists are come for doing puja for the remembrance of dead people. The information given by the manager/in charge of the cave monk Karma Rajdrol and there is another in charge also whose name is Thamba Lama. This is a Tibetan monastery related to Mahayana and Vajrayana to the practice, preservation, and dissemination of the Buddha's teachings. From his interview I knew the asura cave is the branch of Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling monastery which has several affiliated monasteries, nunneries, and retreat centers in Kathmandu, Lumbini and the Himalayas as well as many projects in Tibet, Europe, America, and Asia. One of the visitors who is just around 14-15 years she came to meet his brother who is leaving in this cave as a Buddhist learner. She hesitated to talk about herself later I found she is also leaving in a nunneries monastery and learning Buddhism. This also clearly identifies that most of the visitors came here for religious/spiritual and learning purposes.

The study found from the exploration and importance of the cave, and flow of national and international visitors the place is highlighted increase the business of food as well as the local products which automatically seen in inflation the lifestyle of people from the strong economic improvement employment.

In Nepal Lumbini's Thousand Buddha Temple, officially known as Pal Thubten Shedrub Ling is a monastery being built at the UNESCO heritage site where Buddha Shakyamuni was born in Lumbini, Nepal. It will have thousand Buddha statues to signify the thousand Buddhas of our time and to provide inspiration and a place for study and practice for many pilgrims. Nagi Gompa Nunnery nestled in the hills of Shivapuri National Park, was Kyabje Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's main seat for many years. Now it serves as a place to live, study, and engage in short and long-term retreats for nuns and lay sangha. In Tibet Drong Gompa located about 150 miles northeast of Lhasa, Drong Gompa is Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche's seat in Tibet. In recent years, it has been restored to its previous glory mostly based on the efforts of local devotees and generous benefactors.

Kathmandu the capital city of Nepal is famous as a touristic hub in the world. This city carries own historical, cultural as well as spiritual back ground. This city is also known as city of temples and monasteries. With the hectic pace and demands of modern life, many people feel stressed and over-worked. It often feels like there is just not enough time in the day to get everything done. A Buddhist temple or Buddhist monastery is the place of worship, meditation and spiritual practices for Buddhists and the followers of Buddhism. They include the



structures called vihara, chaitya, stupa, wat and pagoda in different regions and languages. Temples in Buddhism represent the pure land or pure environment of a Buddha and Asura cave is one of them. No voices or sounds while visiting were heard; we maintained the mindfulness of mindfulness that was found in the monastery. Visitors felt from in-country gain satisfied by being in nature, experiencing self-growth, and relaxation, while international guests are gained fulfillment through aspects of the stay that involve nature and relaxation (Chun, 2017). Traveling to the Inner Self: spiritual tourism, Buddhism, and sustainability tourism from asura cave is the best example to explore, learn and perform the sectors.

### **Buddhist Tourism**

Tourism etymologically is meant for an action or process of leaving a point, traveling around, and returning to the same point again (Rizzi, 1997). The Buddha taught the Middle Way, a path of spiritual development that avoids both extreme asceticism and hedonism. The Seven Factors of Awakening are seven mental capacities on which Buddhist tradition places significant value. Known within the religion as “inner wealth”, these factors are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. The concept of travel in Buddhism is seemed to have initiated by the Buddha himself. Pilgrimage got much importance as the Buddha treasured it as a sacred act for the followers of Buddhism. Buddhism focuses on personal spiritual development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. Buddhists regard him as an enlightened teacher who taught to free other beings from suffering. His teachings aim at eliminating ignorance by understanding the law of dependent origination, which is the root cause of sufferings (Rai, 2020). Michael Jerryson's, (2017) strident remarks about the changing nature of Buddhism are an apt introduction to this special issue on spiritual tourism, especially his references to change, and the extent to which Buddhist contemporary practice remains in keeping with its founding tenets. Whether Buddhism is a religion, philosophy, or way of life has been debated, and in many ways, it mirrors the broader debates around spiritual tourism and what comprises its constituent parts - irrespective of religiosity or secularity. Defining spiritual tourism is naturally prone to contestations, especially whether underlying motivations for travel have spiritual or religious drivers, if not both. Thus, any attempt at defining spiritual tourism must arguably make allowance for travel that is motivated by and abides with, either or both religious and secular narratives and the plethora of variegations in between. Nepal has a wide variety of tourism-related activities such as hiking, trekking, mountaineering, heritage/ pilgrim, sightseeing, nature, pleasure activities, extreme activities, sports activities, etc. among them Buddhist pilgrimage and trekking are famous in Nepal. The purpose paper is the study of Buddhist heritage site Asura Cave for sustainable tourism.

Spiritual sites as well as organizing spiritual services at these places are still scattered and lack strong linkages between spiritual tourism sites a travel agencies as well as local tourism companies. In fact, it is easy to identify that there is a lack of the detailed planning of spiritual tourism sites, which are

relevant and legal for exploitation. Compared with the availability of the local potential, the number of religious or sacred sites exploited is only a limited figure and their value of spirituality is not fully perceived in terms of services. In general, the exploitation of spiritual tourism is still untapped with its potential (Huong, 2019).

Spirituality is one of the new concepts in tourism. Despite its complexity, it has always existed in the human mind and has been related to human beings in various ways. Spirituality is an abstract subject and is not limited to religious concepts but is related to the immaterial dimension of human existence and is understood in all journeys. The goal of spiritual tourism is to explore the elements of spiritual life beyond oneself and contribute to the balance of one's body, mind, and soul. These elements may or may not be related to religion. Spiritual tourism can include visiting religious and historical sites or monuments, spiritual landscapes, pilgrimage centers, etc. (Shirmohammadi, 2021).

Spirituality answers profound questions such as 'who am I?' and 'why are we here?' Learn about the expansive science of spirituality governing the universe and all life. Spirituality is a broad concept that goes beyond religious or cultural boundaries. It has been used and misused in many situations that confuse the common meaning, and now appears to have as many definitions as persons defining it. Spirituality may manifest in various degrees influenced in part by the social and cultural environment. Spirituality for many involves faith or the willingness to believe, a search for meaning and purpose in life, a sense of connection with others, and a transcendence of the self, resulting in a sense of inner peace and well-being. A strong spiritual connection may improve one's sense of satisfaction with life, or enable accommodation to disability. It may be a powerful resource for holistic care (Cheryl Delgado & MSN, 2005). Buddhism is a unique opportunity to experience tourism in Nepal as spiritual tourism as its daily lifestyle, rituals, and spirituality. Spirituality reflects a series of the deification of the human's self. Meaning that it is a search for basic, deep-rooted human values, and a relationship with a universal source, power or divinity going beyond the material well-being, spirituality helps people turn to the deeper layers of the self. It is posited that spirituality has not been attached to traditional dualistic religions in the modern approach. Accordingly, the practice of rituals or ceremonies or religious activities is no longer limited within each religion's framework. It has become a popular and widespread movement all over the world and is accepted as the human's spiritual needs. Spiritual tourism or pilgrimage or religious tourism is thus differently categorized. At the most basic level, pilgrimage is defined as a person's journey derived from religious causes to sacred sites for their purposes of spirituality and internal understanding as well (Huong, 2019).

Meditation is another side of the spirituality. Meditation is a technique which enables us to relax our body and our mind and, besides, to free our mind of unnecessary thoughts and brain activity. For us Meditating is not an end in itself or a special experience, but just a very efficient technique, which helps us to control our mind and to relax our body (Pathath, 2017). Meditation is popularized



as a practicing technique for centuries. The term meditation refers to “a family of mental exercises that generally involve calmly limiting thought and attention”. Meditating also brings our mind to a level of consciousness that promotes healing or what is known as the alpha state. Achieving the alpha state can help decrease anxiety, depression and other mental, psychological, or emotional problems. Thus, meditation process is good to induce relaxation response (Pathath, 2017). Meditation is an umbrella term, which subsumes a huge number of diverse practices. It is still unclear how these practices can be classified in a reasonable way (Sedlmeier, 2019). According to country and practices there are different types of meditation among them Zen Meditation called Chamseon, which is one of the ways to reach enlightenment (Ross, Hur, & and Hoffman, 2019). There are three main components of this meditation retreat program:

- The first is that you will have teaching sessions with a Khenpo (The Monastery Abbot) on some essential points on the Buddhist doctrine.
- Secondly you will be given an introduction to basic meditation techniques and will have regular meditation sessions that will be led by the student monks.
- Finally, you will be able to be involved in discussion sessions with monks and other Buddhist students from the monastery. (Ross, Hur, & and Hoffman, 2019).

#### **Sustainable Tourism sectors through Buddhism and Buddhist temples**

United Nations World Tourism Organizations (UNWTO) defined sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment and host communities”. UNWTO further elaborated the needs of sustainable tourism in tourism development. Sustainable tourism is essential to make optimal use of environmental resources through maintaining a proper ecological process and by preserving the natural heritage and biodiversity. Sustainable tourism is also necessary to respect the socio-cultural authenticity of the host communities through protecting the built heritage, cultural, traditional practices and understanding cultural diversity and furthermore ensuring long-term socio-economic benefits that are fairly distributed to all stakeholders by providing employment and job opportunities to eliminate the poverty alleviation (Risfandini, 2017).

Tourism is one of the most critical socio-economic sectors in the world, and it can be cited as one of the causes and consequences of globalization (Hjalager, 2007) and it is undoubtedly the most popular leisure activity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Claver-Cortés, 2007). Understanding the process of choosing a tourist destination is of substantial importance for governments and tourism organizations in today’s competitive global arena. The reason is that destination should distinguish itself from other contenders desirably and appropriately and should positively place itself in customers’ minds (Shahbazi, 2018). Buddhist tourism has always been complex but, at the same time, one of the most successful currents of the new era.

## **RESULTS**

The study examined the role of sustainable tourism in developing Buddhist heritage tourism offers several activities of particular economic, social, educational, cultural, and even tourist importance. The center point of attraction for visitors to the area from the declaration of the participants that the place is specially focused on spiritual purposes as well as religious purposes, meditations, and Buddhist learners for tantric Buddhism. There are many monasteries, gumbas and temples are in the area among them three important shrines around the cave Dakchinkali represents shakti pith, sesh Narayan is for Vaishnava, this is also the monastery for Buddhist and Vajragogini is of Buddhist. All three are ancient Newar shrines with specific sectarian identities and are also related and concerned with Buddhism and asura cave for tourism. The major annual procession Buddha Jayanti Jatra in spring, the Vajrayogini Jatra at the very end of the rainy season, and the Mul Jatra of Harisankar about a month later is celebrated all have their importance. This cave has a very long history as well as an interesting architect as well as its importance the cave is focused on the world in a spiritual and a tourist way. This study clearly represents in Nepal's interfaith interaction plays a vital role in the motivation of tourists to the sites and sustainability in the tourism sectors.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion and visit to the asura cave, Buddhist tourism like meditation and spiritual covers a broader range of tourist objectives than religious tourism. Tourists will not only travel to fulfill those faith-related needs that are declared by their religion, whereas spiritual tourist travels to fulfill their faith-related needs that are controlled by their inner desires of interconnectedness. A monastery tourist is both a religious and secular pilgrim. A Hindu for worship at a monastery, and a Buddhist for spiritual like meditation, chanting, etc. Both religious and spiritual tourist visit specifically for a spiritual purpose. visitors Buddhist, Hindu, as well as other religious people, also travel there partly for spiritual reasons to observe history, art, scriptures, or similar common tourism reasons. It may be said that every religious tourist is a spiritual tourist, but not vice versa in our country tourism sectors brings sustainability in sectors and contributes to high GDP. The concept of spirituality as a complete or partial tourism motive, and identifies a growing tourism market. For those countries like Nepal seeking tourism opportunities from tourism economic growth rises although having lack of infrastructure due to rich in spiritual, natural as well as heritages. Spiritual tourism may assist in economic revival in developing countries like Nepal can offer luxurious and fun-based tourism, but it can attract a significant number of spiritual tourists as well as natural, mountainous tourist who plays a great role in the sustainability of the tourism sector. The study also gives the clarity that Buddhists and Hindus are interconnected and all Hindus are Buddhist. Future research has to attain on the Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage sites to know their interconnection to each other to know the key to opening doors for the sustainable tourism sectors in Nepal.

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