

Prospect of Pilgrimage Tourism in Namu Buddha Area, Kavre

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Abstract

This paper tries to find out the prospect of pilgrimage tourism at Namu Buddha, Kavre, Nepal. There is found limited academic work on pilgrimage tourism in Nepal; however, no evidence of study could be traced on Namu Buddha that is based on pilgrimage tourism perspective. A pilgrimage is an ancient form of religious travel where people make a journey to the place of their belief for experiencing spirituality. Namu Buddha is one of the sacred Buddhist shrines and important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists as they believe the relics of the previous life of Lord Buddha are kept at Namu Buddha Stūpa. Namu Buddha stūpa is also considered to be one of the holiest stūpas in Nepal including Svayambhu Stūpa (Svayambhu Mahachaitya) and the Bodhnath Stūpa (Khasti Mahachaitya). This stūpa commemorates the Buddha Śakyamuni's sacrifice of his body to a starving tigress and her cubs in his previous life. Nepali people call this site Namu Buddha, Newars call Namu Buddha as Namura and Tibetans call it as Takmo Lu Jin. The place has a huge potential to attract both Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims including international tourists from all

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over the world. This place offers other attractions and activities besides pilgrimage-based elements such as sightseeing of heritage town; spectacular Himalayan ranges; paddy field terrains; hilly forests; soft adventures experience; and so on. Religious tourism and pilgrimage tourism are interchangeably used in this study and the paper is based on both the primary and secondary data. Exploratory research has been carried out to examine the religious and economic benefits of pilgrims at this site. It also tried to investigate locals' perspectives on pilgrimage tourism development. Meanwhile, this paper not only studied prospects of pilgrimage tourism in Namu Buddha but also attempted to find out and highlight how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the destination.

Background of study

Pilgrimage is a long journey based on the belief and faith where people travel in the sacred sites for experiencing *spirituality* (Digance, 2006, p.36; Sharma, 2008, p.124; Eade, 2015, p.127) which has been at the core of religious tourism as different aspects of connections and relationships between religion and tourism have been established since ancient times (Olsen & Timothy, 2006, p.2; Kaelber, 2006, p.49; Vijayanad, 2014, p.46; Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018, p.1; Collins-Kreiner, 2019, p.145; Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021, p.127). The journey begins with a religious manifestation- the pilgrimage- where the pilgrim is considered a tourist of religious motivation (Wang, Chen & Huang, 2015, p.5; Durán-Sánchez et al., 2018, p.1) which has become one of the most embryonic tourism segments in the planet (Ivakhiv, 2003; in Vijayanad, 2014, p.45). Therefore, spiritual experience is incorporated in the modern definitions of pilgrimage tourism besides defining it through religious motivation only (Herntrei & Pechlaner, 2011, p.202; Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021, p.127).

Pilgrimage is the beginning of tourism in every country (Bhatia, 1994) and religion is still the strongest motive to travel (Khadka, 2018, p.35). Nepal is a famous destination for pilgrimage tourism because of its prominent, splendid, historical, and sacred sites. Similarly, Nepal has been a center for Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims as Nepal is considered as a dwelling of Lord Shiva; a culture of the living goddess; the birthplace of Lord Buddha and Goddess Sita. According to Khadka (2018, p.35), for centuries, many pilgrims from China and Tibet had been visiting Lumbini which is found as the most visited pilgrimage by foreigners as the data published by Lumbini Development Trust. There were 1779086 persons who visited the site; out of which 78.76% were Nepalese while 11.51% were Indians and 9.73% were from other countries. Therefore, the total number of Indians was 204,825, and 172,013 tourists from other countries were recorded in the year 2019 (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2020). Hall (2006, p.182) states that Nepal is the only country in the region to keep specific statistics on pilgrimage.

Likewise, huge numbers of pilgrims are traveling from India to different shrines like Pashupatinath temple, Kathmandu; Janakpur, Janakpur; Gadhimai temple, Bara; Manakamana temple, Gorkha; Muktinath temple, Mustang; Lumbini- the birthplace of Lord Buddha; and so on. The mobility of pilgrims existed from very ancient times in Nepal which reflects the importance of pilgrimage sites located in Nepal. Many pilgrimage sites in Nepal have not yet been explored and promoted by policymakers. Also, there are many pilgrimage sites located in rural areas of Nepal where there is a problem of accommodation and accessibility; however, gradual infrastructure development can be seen for example Manakamana cable car from Kurintar, Chiwan to the temple at Gorkha; Kalinchowk cable car from Kuri to the shrine; road network to Pathivara temple, Taplejung and Halesi Mahadev, Khotang which have made the sacred journey safe and convenient for all age group. The increased number of pilgrims in those areas created an opportunity for the locals to start their own business; generated employment and increased government revenue as well as resulted in an enhanced lifestyle. Thus, tourism plays a significant role in the economic, socio-cultural, environmental, educational, and political development of the nation (Khadka, 2018, p.36).

As of now, official data on the number of pilgrimage tourists visiting Namu Buddha is not recorded properly. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (2020) report show that 14.36% of tourists visited Nepal for pilgrimage (MOCTCA, 2020, p.42). According to the National Tourism Strategic Plan (2016-2025; in Baral & Bhandari, 2016, p.11) claims that:

15% of Indian pilgrimage tourists visit Nepal by air; 60% of arrivals from Sri Lanka, and 45% of arrivals from Thailand visited Nepal for a religious purpose.

Similarly, Gautam Buddha International Airport at Lumbini is in the final stage of the operation which will be a milestone for bringing Buddhist pilgrims as the airport will be directly connected to the South Asian region where there is a large population following Buddhism. The airport ground handling capacity is estimated to cater to 800,000 travelers annually. The data shows that there is an opportunity to attract these religious tourists to Namu Buddha through promotion, strategic planning, destination branding, and effective management.

Namu Buddha is located 52 km away to the east of Kathmandu at Kavrepalanchok district in Province 3, Nepal. Namu Buddha municipality was formed in 2017 with a total area of 102 square kilometers. According to Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) (2008), the municipality comprises many ethnic groups which include 44% Tamangs, followed by 25% of hill Brahmans, 12% Newars, and 8% Chhetris. Located on the hill, the place is famous for its scenic landscape and for revered Buddhist and Hindu religious sites where huge numbers of pilgrims visit in the month of February

and March (Gray, 2020). The scenic view from Namu Buddha is so spectacular where visitors can enjoy the view of Himalayan ranges, hilly forests, paddy fields, and overall colorful and stunning landscape. There are also hiking trails starting from Panauti, Khopasi, Dhulikhel, Balthali to Namu Buddha that can add a soft adventure experience too for the tourists. The easy accessibility to Namu Buddha after the opening of the BP highway has gradually increased domestic and international tourists (pilgrims and visitors) creating an opportunity for the locals to become tourism entrepreneurs (by investing in hotels, resorts, home-stays, souvenirs shops, restaurants, etc.). Namu Buddha is gradually getting popular amongst the youths for cycling, biking, picnics, camping, and other excursion activities besides pilgrimage. Therefore, to cater to those crowds, numbers of hotels, restaurants, and home-stays have been opened and many are under construction.

Namu Buddha

Namu Buddha is an ancient shrine for Buddhist pilgrims as this is the site where it is believed that Lord Buddha in his previous life has taken birth as Prince Mahāsattva who showed great courage while on the path of learning, unhesitatingly offered his body to starving tigress (Shakya, 2007, p.76; Thrangu Tashi Yangtse Monastery (TTYM), 2013; Gray, 2020) whose relics is kept inside the stūpa. Namu Buddha is considered to be one of the three most important and holiest stūpas in Nepal including Svayambhu Stūpa (Svayambhu Mahachaitya) and the Bodhnath Stūpa (Khasti Mahachaitya) (Shakya, 2007). There are popular mythological stories about Namu Buddha. According to Shakya (2007, p.76), Nepali people call this site Namu Buddha, Newars call Namu Buddha as “Namura” and Tibetans call it as “Takmo Lu Jin” which means the place where the future Buddha sacrificed his body to tigress (Shakya, 2007; TTYM, 2013). Therefore, based on Tibetan mythology, the prince’s name was Nyingthob Chenpo (TTYM, 2013), and based on Nepali mythology, he was Prince Mahāsattva from Panauti, Kavre, Nepal (Shakya, 2007, p.76).

The ruin of the palace belonged to the Prince Mahāsattva can be seen in the town of Panauti (8 kilometers below the stūpa) where gathering and exhibition of the gilded bronze statue of the Buddha are still in a practice (celebrated on the fifteenth day of the fourth month of Tibetan calendar). Namu Buddha Jatra is observed every year during the month of Bhadra (August) at Panauti with the ‘Aja Aji’ festival. There are many sacred sites that are related to the mythological story of the Namu Buddha around its vicinity. A small temple with a stone-carved image of the prince’s mother located about three kilometers below the stūpa is another sacred site where many pilgrims worship. Inside the woods below the stūpa, there is a little spring of blessed water (TTYM, 2013). Similarly, there is a cave on the uphill located near the monastery that showcases the sculptures of the prince together with the tigress and her five cubs (Shakya, 2007, p.76; TTYM, 2013; Gray, 2020) which is also another sacred site

where pilgrims pay their homage; however, it is difficult to mark the exact location of sacrifice as many centuries have conceded (TTYM, 2013). Shakya (2007, p.76) argues that “the history of this distinguished sacred site, whose location is marked based on the clear identification given in the *Vyāghrīparivarta* of the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa sūtra*”.

Many great noble and supreme scholars and meditation masters (Vasubandhu and Jowo Je); the protectors of beings, great lamas (Situ Chökyi Jungne and his attendant the great scholar Bero Lotsawa Tsewang Kunkhyab and the XVth Gyalwang Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje); from the Kagyu tradition (the Drugchen Khyabgon Rinpoche; and the Drikung Khyabgon Rinpoche); lamas from the early tradition of the Nyingma such as (Khyabje Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Drubwang Pema Norbu, Chatral Rinpoche, and Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok); from the glorious Sakyapa tradition, and great individuals belonging to the Sakya, Ngorpa, and Tsawa schools as well as major scholars and meditation masters from the Riwo Geden (Gelugpa) tradition, such as Khewang Gendun Chöphel have visited, worshiped, and explored this place (TTYM, 2013). This shows Namu Buddha was the center for Buddhist pilgrims and it proves there was a mobility of pilgrims from ancient times.

Khyabje Thrangu Rinpoche built the monastery near Namu Buddha stūpa which started from 1978 A.D. until 2000 A.D for teaching ‘Kagyu tradition’ with an objective to establish three sections in the monastery: 1) a monastic college focused on Buddhist Philosophy Studies; 2) a practice assembly focused on meditation; 3) an activity contingent focused on various aspects of work at the monastery. There are different facilities inside the monastery premises and they are community kitchen, steward’s offices, storage rooms, dining rooms for the sangha (monastic communities), a reception room for benefactors, auxiliary kitchen, offices, medical clinic, terrace for lama dancing, Dharmakara Publications (contains resources for writing and translating, videos and tapes that have been published as books or are being prepared for publication), Shree Mangal Dvip Branch School (established to produce over hundred young monks) and monks’ quarters (TTYM, 2013).

Buddhism in Nepal

There are approximately 350 million people in the world who believe in Buddhism (BBC, 2004; in Hall, 2006, p. 172). Despite being Buddha’s land, the census data of one decade from 2001 to 2011 shows there is a decline rate of 1.74% in Buddhism followers (CBS, 2013). However, Buddhism is still the second-largest religion after Hinduism in Nepal. It is believed that Buddhism in Nepal started practicing extensively after Indian Emperor Ashoka and Tibetan missionaries started spreading Buddhism. Kiratas of Nepal adopted and embraced Gautama Buddha’s teachings for the first time, followed by the Licchavis and Newars” (Dutt, 1966). But there is no such historic documentation about Buddhism practice by Kiratas and Licchavis.

Meanwhile, Newar Buddhism has developed its own peculiarities as one of a kind in Buddhist history which historically used to be grouped in with the tradition of Indian Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism (Bechert & Hartmann, 1988, p.2).

Bajracharya (2008) writes that Nepal had been a center for Vajrayana Buddhist learning from seven to twelve century A.D for Tibetan and the practice of Vajrayana Buddhism in Nepal begins at least not late than early six century A.D. which is still in practice today. Types of Buddhism in Nepal based on Buddhist culture are:

1. Tibetan (Northern) Buddhism influenced by Tibetan Buddhism more than a millennium ago and newly introduced by exiled Tibetans after 1959 A. D.;
2. Theravadin (Southern) Buddhism was introduced from Myanmar Buddhism, Srilankan Buddhism, and Thai Buddhism after 1928 A.D.; and
3. Buddhism of Nepal, which is neither influenced by Tibetan Buddhism nor introduced from Myanmar Buddhism; however, it is in practice to date and represents indigenous Nepalese Buddhist culture, arts, and architecture (Bajracharya, 2008).

There are four places related to the Buddha's life which a pious disciple should visit and worship. They are: Lumbini-birth place of Siddhartha Gautam; Buddhagaya-here Siddhartha Gautam was enlightened and became Buddha; Sarnath-here Buddha set rolling the unexcelled Wheel of the law, and Kusinagara-here Buddha passed away into Nirvana (Sharma, 2008, p. 125; Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012, p.11). There are more than 1200 Buddhist shrines in Nepal, some of which are said to be 2000 years old. Important Buddhist shrines located in the valley and dispersed outside the valley are Namobuddha; Boudha (Khasti Chaitya), Swyambhu Mahachaitya, Lumbini (There are over 60 excavation sites including Maya Devi Temple, World Peace Pagoda, Devdaha, and Kudan Stūpa/Nigrodharama), Tilaurakot, Nigalihawa, Gotihawa, Pharping, Vidyeshwori Vajrayogini, Ramagrama, Koliya, Halesi-Maratika Cave, Patan, Muktinath, Mustang, Mahaboudha, Charumati Chaitya, and so on.

According to Sharma (2008, p. 125), "other pilgrimage sites in India and Nepal that connect to the life of Buddha are Savatthi, Pataliputta, Nalanda, Gaya, Vesali, Sankasia, Kapilvastu, Kosambi, Rajagaha, and Varanasi". Likewise, Buddhist shrines are scattered in various countries that include: India: Sanchi, Ellora, Ajanta; Thailand: Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Doi Suthep; Tibet: Lhasa (traditional home of Dalai Lama), Mount Kailash, Lake Namtso; Cambodia: Angkor Wat, Silver Pagoda; Srilanka: Polonnaruwa, Temple of the Tooth (Kandy), Anuradhapura; Laos: Luang Prabang; Myanmar: Bagan, Sagaing Hill; Indonesia: Borobudur; China: Yung-Kang, Lung-men caves, the four sacred mountains; and Japan: Kyoto, Nara, Kumano (Sharma, 2008).

Most of the studies related to pilgrimage tourism are based on a multi-disciplinary approach (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021, p.136). The main objective of this study is to find out the status of pilgrimage tourism at Namu Buddha and to expand the knowledge on this phenomenon which will be the reference to students, academicians, tourism entrepreneurs, and destination management companies as no previous research is found based on pilgrimage perspective at Namu Buddha. Hence, this paper tries to explore the prospect of pilgrimage tourism at Namu Buddha based on the following objectives:

- To understand Buddhist culture and civilization at Namu Buddha;
- To find out the relation between Buddhism and tourism at Namu Buddha;
- To examine how pilgrimage tourism has been adapted in the Buddhist universe; and
- To find out religious and economic benefits from pilgrimage tourism at Namu Buddha.

Review of literature

‘A tourist is a half pilgrim if a pilgrim is a half tourist’ (Turner & Turner, 1978; in Digance, 2006). Wang et al. (2015, p.5) argue that there are two schools of thought in this regard. Smith (1992) suggested that tourism is opposed to pilgrim whereas Timothy and Olsen (2006) argue that pilgrimage is a type of tourism. There are many scholars who have identified journeys of various types in tourism and pilgrimage (Kim et al., 2019, p.2) which has been the basis of distinguishing the term ‘*Pilgrimage*’ and ‘*Tourism*’. They are distinct and based on the objectives of travel and choice of destinations. Therefore, there are debates on the definitions of pilgrimage and other terms like secular sites and non-religious factors involved in pilgrimage have intensified over the years since the early 1990s (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Badone, 2014; Coleman & Eade, 1992; Margry, 2008; in Collins-Kreiner, 2018, p.10).

Barber (1993; in Collins-Kreiner, 2018, p.8) defines pilgrimage as:

A journey resulting from religious causes externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding.

Gurung (2000; in Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012, p.9) mentions that “the word ‘pilgrimage’ was derived from the Latin word ‘Peregrinus’ which means stranger visit to a sacred place”. The religious sites become a sacred place and worth visiting only when touristic practices are established by religious people and these religious people are known as a pilgrim who undertakes their journey of faith (Bremer, 2006, p.25) in search of truth, in search of what is sacred and holy (Vukonić, 1996; in Timothy & Olsen, 2006, p.3). Sindhe (2020) highlights that visitors to sacred places seek to experience the presence of the divine in some way where images of gods, goddesses,

saints, angels, gurus, other deities, sacred mountains, and other natural formations, religious events, and stories are all common in sacred sites in order to foster that experience. For some, this experience may be so rich as to manifest the deity in the eyes of the pilgrim. Likewise, Sallnow (1987; in Timothy & Olsen, 2006, p.3) stressed that people are attracted to sacred places are “where divine power has suddenly burst forth” as a result of their spiritual magnetism.

Since the 1980s, there is seen a significant growth in pilgrimage tourism associated with Buddha in India (Thibeault, 2018, p.85). Sindhe (2020) mentions that **there** are many ways to connect with the divine and people seek these connections for many reasons; therefore, they make pilgrimage journeys to a known sacred place to make this connection. Among the more common are: appealing for divine intervention to solve personal problems; to seek forgiveness and salvation for having done something wrong; to work on or obtain spiritual enlightenment or rebirth. The author also expresses that each religion and faith has its own ways of making the connections and in some cases. It is still a significant part of the tourism universe as the pilgrimage is a required obligation for some religion; however, there is another form of volunteer trip that inspire followers to travel to sacred places for the divine connection. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2011; in Sindhe, 2020) report, estimated that “approximately six hundred million national and international religious and spiritual voyages” were taking place annually as religious tourism has evolved from more formal traditions of pilgrimage that were common in the earlier times.

According to Sarao (2017), “there are indications that the people of Indus civilization may have been practicing pilgrimage as early as 2500 B.C.E. Later, this practice was adopted by the different Indic religions, and Buddhism injected a new meaning into the institution of pilgrimage. After his Enlightenment at Bodhagayā, the Buddha spent the remaining 45 years of his earthly life in travel and advised his disciples to be wanderers. Within a short time after his death, lay devotees and members of the order were making pilgrimages to the places associated with his life. Later, the stūpas (burial monuments) of prominent Buddhist personalities also became the centers of pilgrimage”.

Studying pilgrimage through journey undertaken by the pilgrims, Turner (1972; in Digance, 2006, p.40) explains that “the mingling of pilgrims both on the journey and at the journey’s end leading to *communitas* where a temporary fellowship and comradeship develops between fellow pilgrims”. Similarly, there are two elements that are combined in *communitas*: an observable egalitarianism that sees pilgrims mingling freely, regardless of status, and a desire to be with like-minded people, sharing common interests and/or experiences. *Communitas* can be found as an alternative New Age Event after 2001 A.D. (Digance, 2006, p.40).

Belhassen et al. (2008; in Kunwar & Ghimre, 2012, p. 6) illustrate that the search of authentic experiences during the visits to the holy sites is shaped by three interrelated components: the theopolitical ideology underlying the pilgrimage; the places visited, and the activities undertaken by the pilgrims. Therefore, viewing the relationship between place, belief and action can relate to the three elements of authentic experiences. According to Kunwar & Thapaliya (2012, p.7), “the three elements referred to this relationship as “theoplacity,” bringing together the Greek “Theos” (god) and the Medieval Latin “placea” (place), in order to capture the hybridity of its socio-religious and socio-spatial foundations”.

Thapa (2014, p.25) mentions that the Buddhism of Nepal is based on mythological and documented history. His study covers the mythological tradition of Lichhavis’ narration linked to Buddhism that deals with stories related to the deeds and phenomenal powers of Buddhist deities and the devotees that are deeply rooted in the practical aspect of Nepalese Buddhist culture but there is no scientific evidence to support those descriptions until twelve century. However, culture has been considered one of the essential factors of religious products as there are different models for the sustainable religious tourism development approached by scholars from all over the globe who have studied this phenomenon for decades. Pilgrimage is a common religious and cultural phenomenon in human societies and an important feature of the world’s major religions (Collins-Kreiner, 2018).

The perspectives of scholars on pilgrimage tourism based on the culture have always been a guideline for sustainable development. Hence, these guidelines are important for social stabilization, psychological adjustment compensation, cultivation of an ethical code, and group integration (Qin, 1998). In this regard, Collins-Kreiner (2018) argued that pilgrimage must be defined in a holistic way, in a manner that encompasses both traditionally religious and modern secular journeys. There are very few studies based on pilgrimage tourism in Nepal as most of the studies based on the tourism discipline in Nepal are based on culture, nature, adventure, and sustainable development. Pilgrimage tourism received scant attention from both policymakers and scholars (Bleie, 2003, p.177). No evidence of pilgrimage tourism at Namu Buddha was traced; so this paper will be the first academic work on Namu Buddha based on pilgrimage tourism. Some of the major academic works in the pilgrimage tourism sector in Nepal are based on a multi-disciplinary approach, strategic planning, the significance of authenticity, and holistic characteristics of pilgrimage system at the site. General introductions with limited information about different pilgrimage sites in Nepal have been carried out by various scholars in their studies. Kunwar (2017) in his academic work have incorporated pilgrimage tourism in brief but there are no case studies of pilgrimage tourism in Nepal.

Table 1: Pilgrimage tourism in Nepal

<i>The Hindu Pilgrimage to Muktinath, Nepal</i> (Messerschmidt, 1989)	Based on anthropological-geographical perspectives and the research examined “different attributes of the sacred field” at Muktinath and its vicinity.
<i>Pilgrim tourism in the central Himalayas</i> (Bleie, 2003)	Focuses on the need for promotional activities of Manakamana temple through strategic planning.
<i>Lumbini as an international pilgrimage destination: Authenticity and significance</i> (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012)	Explain the importance of authenticity based on the visitor’s experience in the pilgrimage sites and its significance in tourism development.
‘ <i>Tirthparyatan</i> ’ (Gautam, 2014)	Focuses on promoting domestic pilgrimage extensively and has introduced 137 pilgrimage sites of Nepal; however, the treatise has not focused on international pilgrimage tourism.
<i>Focus and Locus of Pilgrimage Tourism at Santaneshwor Mahadev Temple, Lalitpur</i> (Khadka, 2018)	Depicts prospects and constraints of pilgrimage tourism at Santaneshwor Mahadev temple located in Godavari Municipality, Lalitpur and focused on implementing promotional activities to make the destination popular and stressed on developing infrastructures like tourist center, modern toilets, clean drinking water, restaurants, accommodation facilities, foreign exchange along with preparation of a master plan to brand Santaneshwor Mahadev temple as attractive pilgrimage tourism destination.
<i>A preliminary study of pilgrimage tourism in Barahachhetra, Nepal</i> (Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021).	Focus on showing the holistic information based on the characteristic features of the pilgrimage system in Barahachhetra.

A multi-disciplinary approach is important to incorporate while focusing on both theoretical and practical aspects of pilgrimage tourism for critiquing the paradigms, developing new theories, definitions, and characteristics of religious travel along with the strategic plan, and management of sacred sites through training of tour guides for proper interpretation (Kaszowski, 2000; in Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Kunwar & Thapaliya (2021, p. 135) also highlight that:

pilgrimage tourism as a social phenomenon has been the focus of numerous academic disciplines, including history, sociology, geography, anthropology, and psychology where pilgrimage of various types has been an important part of most religions, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism.

The study of pilgrimage travel has been approached by many scholars from multi-disciplinary perspectives which have included anthropology; geology; sociology; and religious studies. Social anthropologists are pioneers amongst other disciplines in the study of pilgrimage as they are focused on its connection to various social dimensions as well as a medium to understand complex societies and civilizations (Kunwar & Thapaliya, 2021, p.136).

The characteristics features of the pilgrimage system differ drastically based on religion, geography, belief, and situation for example during the Covid-19 pandemic, natural disaster, and so on. Kunwar and Ghimire (2012, p.9) mention that different performative acts of religious belief and faith during pilgrimage can be observed at the shrines such as Buddhists traveling to Lumbini, Hindus traveling to Pashupatinath, Jerusalem by Christians, and Mecca by Muslims encourages faith-based travel (Kunwar & Ghimire, 2012, p.9). Digance (2003; in Collins-Kreiner, 2018) highlights that pilgrimage is currently experiencing resurgence around the world due to 'mobility'. More and more people from different religions go on different kinds of pilgrimages (Seise, 2019, p.3; Timothy & Olsen, 2006) and are prevailing.

Baral and Bhandari (2016) argue that tourism is one of the major economic sources that generate income and employment in Nepal. According to Ulak (2020a, p.109), the tourism industry of Nepal has always been the backbone of the national economy. Besides economy, there is an opportunity for travelers to learn and develop cultural understanding through visiting and experiencing historical sites, museums, arts & crafts, events, festivals, and cuisines. It also includes trips that enable tourists to connect with local communities in a typical location, and elements of religious tourism, such as pilgrimages (GlobalData, 2018). Pilgrimage tourism is one of the classifications within cultural tourism (Mousavi, Doratli, Mousavi, & Moradiahari, 2016) which can be strategically developed in Nepal as there are many pilgrimage sites to attract pilgrims from all over the world where Namu Buddha is one of the important pilgrimage sites for Buddhist pilgrims as well as domestic and international tourists.

Namu Buddha tourism master plan

GGGI (2018) mentions that Namu Buddha municipality has developed a tourism master plan with objective to develop trekking trails and routes; promote educational tours & eco-heritage walks; promote local cuisine and souvenirs; mobilize local

youth for tourism promotion. The tourism potential of Namu Buddha municipality has been divided into four categories: 1) Pilgrimage Tourism, 2) Trekking Tourism, 3) Heritage Tourism and 4) Cultural Tourism.

The prospect of pilgrimage tourism in Namu Buddha municipality is huge when the Namu Buddha shrine is linked to Padmasambhava in Timal region and many shrines related to Lord Shiva at Mathurapati helps in attracting Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims. Similarly, adventure tourism in the form of trekking is gradually developing in this region and the popular routes discovered are trekking from the Panauti (heritage town)-Namu Buddha-Timal-Muday in Sindhupalchok District. Likewise, there is an ancient Newari town called Dapcha nearby Namu Buddha shrine which can be developed as a new cultural heritage tourism destination. The architecture, craftsmen, cuisine, costumes, festivals can attract cultural tourists which would definitely help preserve the culture, art and craft, architecture and in return uplift the economic status of the locals. Finally, high-end tourists can be attracted to Namu Buddha linking to resorts that offer luxury accommodation, amenities, local cultural aesthetics, local cuisine experience, and panoramic view of the Himalayas (GGGI, 2018). The Namu Buddha Resorts is a pioneering resort of this type, and there are others being planned. Thailand-based, global hospitality company Dusit International is soon operating Dusit Thani Himalayan Resort & Spa in Namu Buddha which will help to attract international pilgrimage tourists.

Besides tourism development, the master plan also addressed the need for basic infrastructure and aims to promote water supply management; improve sanitation & hygiene, and develops entrepreneurship skills and other economic activities to enhance the lifestyle of the people. The topography and its geographic location are suitable for agriculture like tangerines, oranges, kiwi, and a particular variety of 'mid-hill mango' as well as some other areas have been listed as the 'national center of certified organic farming'. Similarly, 'Bodhichitta seed' for making Buddhistic beads is especially found in Timal region and dairy production is considered as one of the major strengths of the municipality.

Table 2: Infrastructure development at Namu Buddha Municipality

Road access	Motor/Vehicle accessible road from neighboring areas via BP highway
Water Supply	37.5% of households had taps and piped water
Lighting	93% of households used electricity for lighting; 3% of households relied upon solar lights, and remaining on other resources.
Toilets	About 63% of households had access to toilet facilities, with about 40% overall having flush toilets.

Waste Management	Namo Buddha is in the early phase of urbanization with no systematic waste management but searching for a landfill site.
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Source: GGGI (2018)

Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary data collected from the research site and through desk research. The research design is exploratory in its nature for which qualitative analysis was followed. The data collection tools included observations of the religious circuits, monuments, and shrines that are most popular in Namu Buddha. Likewise, semi-structured interview questions were designed to collect primary data. The total numbers of participants in this research were 63 respondents. The sampling methods used were both random and purposive depending upon the respondents as pilgrims, local tourism entrepreneurs, and local community members were selected randomly; likewise, government representatives, monastery representatives, priests were based on purposive sampling. Some questions asked during interviews were spontaneous to develop coherence in their response. The average interview time with each participant was approximately 30 minutes. The researcher visited the religious site and its periphery seven times during the study period from June 28, 2020-September 25, 2021.

The research questions were based on finding out the status of the pilgrimage tourism in Namu Buddha; to know various activities available for the pilgrims; strength of infrastructures development to cater to tourists; strategies of pilgrimage tourism development; religious and economic benefits from tourism; and local's willingness to participate in tourism development at Namu Buddha. The first step in this research is developing research questions upon which research was carried out. The second step involved in this study was collecting the relevant data; likewise, collected data were presented and analyzed in the third step where respondents are addressed using pseudonyms; and finally, in the fourth step, the research is summarized and concluded. The research is confined to the introduction, review of literature, research methods, findings & discussions, conclusion, and recommendation.

Findings

There are many local tourism entrepreneurs at Namu Buddha who had invested and are involved in small to large scale businesses which are found to be one of the major strengths for the sustainable tourism development at the destination. Local participation is one of the most important practices required in tourism development for its sustainability and growth. Hence, many families are found who are engaged in the tourism businesses directly and indirectly which has helped them to generate revenue and uplift their lifestyle.

Table 3: Number of hotels, resorts, homestays, and restaurants

Hotel and Resort	21
Homestays	9
Restaurants	12
Local pubs	11

Source: Field Survey (2020)

The above table shows the number of accommodations and eateries within a 3-kilometer radius from the shrine. According to the survey, there are 21 hotels & resorts on a small to medium scale; 9 registered home-stays having 3 rooms in an average allocated for accommodation; 12 restaurants owned and operated by the locals, and 11 local pubs selling home-made alcoholic beverages with assorted snacks.

The data reflects that there is a tourism activity as there are many local entrepreneurs involved in the tourism business. Besides, there are many tourism infrastructures (hotels and resorts, restaurants, homestays) under construction which shows there is a prospect of tourism development at Namu Buddha area. Besides tourism, the local's income source at the Namu Buddha area is based on agriculture and their involvement in other sectors like service and business.

There are many tourist destinations around Namu Buddha such as Panauti, Dhulikhel, Balthali where many hotels and restaurants can be found within a radius of 10 kilometers from the shrine.

When asked with locals about the impact of pilgrimage tourism in socio-culture and economic sectors, the majority of locals opined that:

There have been changes in culture and traditions; however, they have also witnessed positive changes in cultural values and norms. They are focused on preserving heritages, cultures, and traditions to hand over them to their upcoming generation. They have also realized that cultural heritages are assets that can generate foreign exchange via tourism development. Similarly, the change in living style and their capacity of spending is influenced by many factors like modernization in agriculture; connection of transportation routes, and an increased number of tourists at Namu Buddha. Local handicrafts are getting popular among the tourists, Bodhichitta beads; statues, masks, thankas (traditional paintings) are major products that tourists buy as a souvenir which have helped in income generation for the local handicraft makers and artists; and the income from restaurants and hotels have improved the economic status of locals.

Therefore, this clearly shows that pilgrims and tourists have helped locals in many ways to improve their lifestyles. Therefore, in the case of Namu Buddha, pilgrimage

tourism development was found to have a higher degree of positive impact in the case of religious and economic sectors which have shadowed the negative sides.

The reason why Namu Buddha is famous has been described by the locals as:

Namu Buddha is one of the oldest Buddhist shrines where they believe Lord Buddha himself has visited this holy place and worshipped the site. Similarly, many international priests, monks, great nobles, supreme scholars, great lamas have been visiting this site. Likewise, there is a monastery built in Namu Buddha where many monks learn about Buddhism". Many international mostly Tibetan pilgrims, as well as domestic tourists, come to pay their homage to the shrine of Namu Buddha. Hundreds of pilgrims visit this holy site during the Namu Buddha Jatra which is celebrated in Mangsir Sukla Purnima (month of November). On average, 2000 monks from Tibet visit Namu Buddha every year. There is no proper data and records of international pilgrims and tourists at Namu Buddha; however, hundreds of American, European, Bhutanese, Indian, Chinese, Thai and Sri Lankan also visit this site.

They not only worship at the religious sites but also explore the surrounding environment where many visitors have an objective to experience a soft adventure like hiking, mountain biking, motorcycle riding, camping, and so on around Namu Buddha.

The representative of the monastery also mentioned that:

Every year, thousands of pilgrims from Tibet visit Namu Buddha to worship the shrine, chant, meditate and many come to learn the teachings of Buddha in a monastery located at Namu Buddha. Besides pilgrims, huge numbers of domestic and international tourists visit this place during different festivals and come to roam and enjoy the nature of this area located at the picturesque hill.

Preist from the Newar community (who does daily rituals in the main shrine of Namu Buddha) opined that:

There are huge numbers of Buddhist pilgrims from Newar community in Kathmandu valley who visit this holy site annually to worship and pray for their nearest departed soul. The majority of pilgrims come from Patan and Bhaktapur area as the practice of Buddhism is found extensive in Thimi, Bhaktapur and core area of Patan.

One of the pilgrims from Patan opined his view about the importance of Namu Buddha as:

Buddhists believe that there is no permanent self or soul as Buddhists believe in energy reborn. According to Buddha's most important teachings, Buddhists embrace the concepts of 'karma' (law of cause and effect) and 'reincarnation' (cycle of rebirth). Therefore, worshipping and praying in the name of the

departed soul and lighting butter lamp in and around Namu Buddha stūpa is practiced in the belief that the soul achieves nirvana (liberation).

Late Gyalgen Lama (Pseudonym), the main priest of Namu Buddha described the importance of Namu Buddha. He mentioned that:

This place is important because Lord Buddha himself visited this shrine and worshiped joining both hands, rounded stūpa three times and prayed three times & said 'Sangke da Fyafulsa'. Therefore, this site becomes popular as a Namu Buddha since Buddha himself prayed in this holy site. It is also believed that people who visit this place, the sins and all the bad things will be finished by the grace of Lord Buddha.

Thapa (2014, p. 29) in his study also mentioned that Lord Buddha has visited Namu Buddha hill where he discovered and showed his certain belongings and ornaments that were buried inside a Chaitya/Stūpa to his disciples. It is believed that the ornaments were buried after destroying himself by offering flesh to a starving tigress and her cubs in his previous life as a prince Mahāsattva- the son of Maharath of Panauti formally called Panchaba. The chaitya was repaired after the excavation of the ornaments and then he ascended to heaven (2014, p.29). There is a stone statue of the Buddha, in front of that statue there are his first five disciples kneeling down and a stone vase placed between them commemorates the story of how the Buddha and his disciples miraculously came from India to Namu Buddha.

According to one of the priests of Namu Buddha says that:

As per the famous mythological story, Lord Buddha first visited Svayambhu Mahachaitya, Manjushree Chaitya, and Puchagra Chaitya and then visited Guheswori and Namu Buddha hill. Here was unearthed the vase containing the Buddha's bones from the time he was called 'Great Being', and on the path of learning, generously offered his body to the tigress.

Another elderly priest, Amar Lama (Pseudonym) who looks after the cave located uphill from the main stūpa mentioned that:

There is no proper evidence of the exact place where prince offered his flesh to the starving tigress and cubs; however, with all the stories he had heard from his childhood, he believes that the cave he looks after is the place where the carcass of the prince was buried and the 'astu' was kept inside the stūpa and as a memory of prince, the stūpa was built below the cave. The majority of the pilgrims believed that the uphill cave is the main site where the event happened. Therefore, to mark a site, a business person (handicraft business) from Patan had donated a bronze statute that replicates the myth/story of the prince offering his flesh to the starving tigress and her cubs. He also believes that the most

difficult generosity for the human being is to donate his own body for others' survival which reflects the great generosity that Prince Mahāsattva had offered. It is believed Lord Buddha was an incarnation of the prince due to the generosity offered in his previous life.

There are three types of transcendence generosity (*Dana/Cage-joy of giving*) called 'giving', 'great giving', and 'difficult giving' (Fronsdal, 2011). Among them, Prince Mahāsattva had performed generosity of 'difficult giving' as he cut his flesh and fed starving tigress and her cubs which is impossibly difficult. This teaching of generosity helps in maintaining social harmony and influences people to contribute to the needy. Even though the story of Namu Buddha is based on a mythological perspective, the place has an aura to provide spiritual experience to the visitors. The evidential sites related to the mythological story are the major attractions for the pilgrims and visitors. Many pilgrims and tourists visit Namu Buddha also to explore monasteries where they search for spiritual experiences through meditation, chanting, music, and so on.

Shree Mangal Dvip Branch School is located inside the TTYM under the care of the Venerable Lord of Refuge Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche which was established for the young monks. Lama C.P. (Pseudonym) - Principal of Shree Mangal Dvip Branch School elaborated the history, objectives, and practices of the school

The school was established in the year 2002 and there are 110 students who are studying Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy. The school runs from first grade through ninth grade. The students study regular English, Maths, Nepali, and Science besides Buddhism and the school offers primary level studies. After completing their primary studies they go to the branch school at Boudha (Shree Mangaldeep branch school) for their secondary studies. Similarly, for the Bachelors and Masters degrees, they go to India. They offer a general education in Tibetan, English, and Nepali, supplemented by complete training in religion and culture. Teachers provide Dharma-related talk which is organized by the school for cultivating and preparing gentle, honorable students and there is regular training for the religious activities of listening, contemplating, and meditating, lama dancing, ritual practice, chanting, playing instruments, and Tibetan spelling, grammar, writing, and recitation for fostering the monastic community. The class starts from 8:15 am till 3:00 pm. However, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the school has stopped various practices including group meditation, dancing class, and other ritual practices for maintaining social distancing.

After their completion of the school program, there is a provision of upgrading the students according to individual student's intellectual ability and readiness to learn where some of them enter the shedra (The institute for higher Buddhist

studies); some begin ngondro practice, and a few gets an opportunity to become teachers. There is a practice of taking care of the environment where the members of the Thrangu Environment Club clean the monastery grounds each week besides formal studies (TTYM, 2013). According to one of the monks:

They are grouped and assigned the area for cleaning within the monastery which is a part of their daily life and it helps to keep the surrounding clean which they really enjoy doing.

Nearby the stūpa is a guesthouse administered by the main office of the monastery. According to locals:

Many foreigners stay in the monastery guest house and their stays are comparatively long where many of them learn Buddhism and practice meditation.

As per the representative of the monastery:

No visitors are allowed inside the monastery after the outbreak of the pandemic. Hence, this place is almost vacant and no other activities besides daily routine for the monks are performed.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic from the year 2019-till now has impacted tourism sectors' potential growth as its impact was terrific even in its early stage (Ulak, 2020a; Ulak, 2020b). The spillover impact was seen in almost all the sectors including the tourism sector that contributes 10.4% of GDP and 10% of global employment (Menegaki, 2020). Nepal's tourism industry is considered the backbone of the nation's economy which contributed NRs. 240.7 billion and able to stand at 7.9 percent GDP in 2018 (Prasain, 2019). Data presented by Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2019) shows that 200,000 tourism industry-based employees of Nepal are significantly affected. Likewise, only 230,085 foreign tourists visited Nepal in the year 2020 and which is around an 80.78 percent drop compared to the year 2019 (Prasain, 2021). Therefore, the pandemic has affected the Namu Buddha area too as there were no pilgrims and tourists during lockdowns imposed by the government. The impact was not limited to travel, tourism, business, and economy but has significantly affected the psychological state of people who had to lose their near ones. The priest of stūpa mentioned that:

There were many rituals performed in the monastery in the name of departed souls. They had their regular chanting of mantras, rituals, and praying at the monastery with believes that would decline the impact of this pandemic all over the world and peace remains till eternity. Likewise, there were a series of rituals organized at the main stūpa where many priests participated and prayed for all the departed souls of the world who died due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Similarly, tourism entrepreneurs and locals of Namu Buddha added their views on the impact of this pandemic that:

The development of different phases of viruses and their waves has halted the economic activities at Namu Buddha due to lockdown and prohibitory in movement by the government has drastically impacted the lives of the locals economically, psychologically and socially. Many constructions projects related to tourism like hotels, restaurants, and other infrastructures development have been affected. They also argued that government should take care of the investors who have invested through a bank loan. If the scenario prolongs no entrepreneurs can continue their business as there is still travel prohibitory for the foreigners. However, after the mobility prohibitory is lifted by the government, there are some hopes and positive signs of revival of domestic tourists. However, they are unknown on the international tourists' arrival at Namu Buddha.

One of the intellectuals from the Namu Buddha area opined that:

Many destinations in the world after the mass vaccination to their citizens are opened for tourism; likewise, tourism activities at Namu Buddha area will show impetus on positive change in economic development gradually after the completion of government campaign for vaccination against the virus and I am very much optimistic on the resurgence of tourism.

As per the government official:

60% of the total eligible population has been vaccinated in the municipality and the monks and representatives at monasteries with their eligible age-group have also been vaccinated successfully till September 25, 2021.

Discussions

Namu Buddha is an ancient pilgrimage site and an important holy site for Buddhist pilgrims. It is located near Kathmandu valley which can be reached easily through Araniko highway and BP highway. A gradual increase in the number of young crowds has been found. The state of tourism infrastructure at Namu Buddha is such which can cater to hundreds of tourists. Besides, there are many hotels, resorts, and restaurants in an under-construction state which has been observed during the field visit. Similarly, locals are also found optimistic on sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism at Namu Buddha where many locals from the native community are involved in tourism businesses like home-stays, restaurants, and small-scale hotels.

There is a mythological story related to Namu Buddha which makes this destination popular as it is believed that Lord Buddha himself has visited this place and worshipped (TTYM, 2013; Thapa, 2014; Gray, 2020). Hence, it is also a reference that this place is an ancient and sacred site for Buddhist pilgrims where many important figures have visited in different time periods (TTYM, 2013) and still continue. There is found a slight controversy as there is no proper evidence of the exact spot where

the prince offered his flesh to the starving tigress and cubs. It was found the majority of the pilgrims believed that the uphill cave is the main site where the event happened and his relics were buried and built stūpa below the cave. This place is considered to be one of the best places for meditation and provides spiritual experience.

Thousands of pilgrims visit Namō Buddha including domestic and international tourists but no proper documentation and record-keeping of the visitors are found. Tibetan (Chinese), Thai, Sri Lankan, Indian, Bhutanese, American, and European tourists mostly visit Namō Buddha. Buddhist pilgrims come here to pray for their nearest departed soul to achieve nirvana where they light butter lamps in and around the stūpa. It is clear that the place is of high importance for Buddhist pilgrims and definitely it is a popular pilgrimage site among domestic and international tourists. However, the tourism master plan has provision to launch many other forms of tourism like- trekking, heritage tourism, and eco-tourism which shows this place has the prospect of developing sustainable tourism.

Namō Buddha religious site has been selected for developing pilgrimage tourism by the municipality for which municipality initiated to construct an artistic gate to welcome tourists, they are also focused on infrastructure development. Visible signage for visitors' management and provision of the entrance tickets to the religious site is in a discussion phase. Likewise, the municipality has also focused on heritage documentation with the help of local communities, the department of archaeology, historians for approaching this place to be enlisted in UNESCO World Heritage Sites so that it can be marketed in the global arena and its preservation will be much effective. Similarly, Education Foundation on Buddhism, Nepal has been organizing different events to promote and preserve Namō Buddha which is being appreciated by local communities and the municipality.

Pilgrimage tourism is highly dependent on local participation in tourism activities and the strategies of governing bodies for sustainable tourism development. Cultural heritages like architecture, religious circuits, and intangible heritages of Namō Buddha can definitely add extraordinary experiences to the tourists. There is adequate lodging and dining options in and around the Namō Buddha area including souvenir shops, financial institutions, and many essential infrastructures like road, toilets, etc. increases the potential of developing tourism.

Another major attraction at Namō Buddha is the monastery which does not only focus on religious purposes but also has a provision of education for hundreds of monks having a residential facility that is basically focused on teaching Buddhism. The monastery also has a provision of accommodation for pilgrims.

Unfortunately, the introduction of the coronavirus pandemic has halted all the tourism activities in the area due to lockdown and prohibition of mobility. Many

tourism projects are affected and drastically impact the lives of the people. Citizens are hoping to revive after the covid-19 ends and open the area for pilgrims and tourists which could be possible only after an effective mass vaccination campaign is successfully conducted.

Conclusion

Based on the global pilgrimage tourism development and practiced models, Namu Buddha can also become a popular pilgrimage tourism destination if proper branding and marketing are done. Nepal introduces tourism a long time back and limited numbers of tourists travel for pilgrimage since its inception. According to Hall (2006, p.182), travel for pilgrimages grew drastically in the late 1990s in Nepal from 4,068 pilgrimage tourists to over 15,000 in the year 2000 which reached 172,013 in the year 2019 (MOCTCA, 2020). Hence, a gradual increment of pilgrimage tourists is seen in Nepal as per data. Pilgrimage tourism development can bring huge changes in terms of socio-cultural and economical development at Namu Buddha, which will enhance the living standards of locals, bring interest in preserving the culture and heritage, and aids in sustainable tourism development. GGGI (2018) in its report mention that the municipality has developed a tourism master plan to harness tourism potential and attract investment to address poverty alleviation through the introduction of home-stay programs; cultural tourism; eco-tourism and agro-tourism programs which are metaphors for sustainable tourism development. The overall study found that Namu Buddha has a great potential for developing pilgrimage tourism since the local community and local government attitude towards tourists are positive; the tourism infrastructure development in this area is quite promising; local's, as well as few foreign investments, are gradually increasing; the overall experience of the pilgrims are found highly satisfied, and this destination is not limited to pilgrimage as there are many diverse attractions and activities in and around its vicinity, such as sightseeing, trekking, and other soft adventures. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected tourism at Namu Buddha significantly and this place requires government support in many ways to overcome crisis due to the pandemic and revive tourism activities. Government support is much needed for protecting investments as there are many local entrepreneurs who have invested in tourism businesses. Therefore, Namu Buddha as a destination has a high potential to develop pilgrimage tourism along with varied activities; however, it is important to address the problems and challenges tactfully by the stakeholders. Further study is advised to link Namu Buddha with other places like Timal, Ite, Shanku, Panauti, and Khopasi according to the mythological story related to the Great Prince Mahāsattva for expanding its universe.

Recommendations

- Namu Buddha religious circuit should be developed connecting to Ite, Sankhu, Panauti, Khopasi, Timal, and other destination for increasing activities;
- Local participation in pilgrimage tourism should be increased;
- Maintaining proper record keeping of the visitors;
- Municipality should organize a campaign for environmental awareness at the pilgrimage site;
- Signage for visitors management should be increased;
- Souvenir shops for tourists should be increased;
- Adequate surveillance devices must be installed;
- Making documentaries for promotions;
- Preservation of local architecture, language, costumes, traditions, and festivals;
- Rooms of hotels, resorts, and homestays should be cleaned and managed;
- Eateries and restaurants must maintain sanitation and hygiene; and
- Ensuring 100% coronavirus vaccination to the local community.

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