

The Impact of Religious Tourism on Local Economic Growth: A Qualitative Study at Buddha Ko Mawoli Devdaha

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Abstract

This research examines how religious tourism influences local economic growth, with a particular focus on Buddha ko Mawoli in Devdaha, Rupandehi, Nepal - a site deeply tied to the early life of Lord Buddha and rich in cultural and spiritual significance. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study delves into the ways religious tourism affects income levels, job creation, and infrastructure development within the community. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with local residents, business owners, tourism professionals, and government officials, along with on-site observations. The results show that religious tourism has spurred economic progress, especially in sectors such as hospitality, traditional crafts, and transportation. Nonetheless, the research also points out key challenges, including subpar infrastructure, insufficient marketing, and the absence of long-term planning strategies. The study highlights the promise religious tourism holds for inclusive local development, while stressing the importance of well-thought-out initiatives and supportive policies to ensure sustained benefits. It adds valuable insights to ongoing conversations about sustainable tourism and regional advancement in culturally meaningful locations.

Keywords: Economic, growth, religious and tourism

Introduction

Religious tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, attracting millions of visitors to sacred sites, pilgrimage destinations, and culturally significant locations each year (Nana, 2024). In many developing countries, religious tourism is increasingly recognized not only for its spiritual and cultural value but also for its potential to stimulate local economies, generate employment, and encourage infrastructure development (Budovich, 2023). Nepal - known worldwide for its spiritual heritage, cultural diversity, and long history of pilgrimage - offers fertile ground for exploring how religious sites contribute to grassroots economic transformation. While destinations such as Lumbini have received considerable academic and policy attention, many emerging religious sites remain under-studied despite their rising influence on local livelihoods and community development.

Buddha ko Mawoli in Devdaha, believed to be the maternal home of Lord Buddha, holds profound historical and spiritual importance for Buddhist followers and cultural tourists alike. In recent years, the site has witnessed a gradual increase in visitor flows, sparked by growing interest in Buddhist heritage and the cultural narratives associated with Devdaha. Local communities, entrepreneurs, and municipal bodies have begun to engage with these opportunities, yet the broader economic effects of religious tourism in this area remain insufficiently documented. Understanding how tourism interacts with local economic

activities - such as hospitality, transportation, small businesses, and traditional crafts - is therefore essential for designing informed development policies.

Despite its potential, religious tourism in Buddha ko Mawoli faces several systemic constraints, including inadequate infrastructure, limited promotional efforts, and the absence of coordinated planning. These challenges raise important questions about sustainability, equitable benefit sharing, and the long-term viability of tourism-driven growth. Accordingly, there is a need for research that not only identifies the positive economic contributions of religious tourism but also critically examines the structural gaps that may hinder its full development. This study seeks to fill that research gap by exploring how religious tourism shapes local economic growth in the context of Buddha ko Mawoli, Devdaha. Adopting a qualitative approach, it investigates the perceptions and lived experiences of local residents, business owners, tourism professionals, and government officials. Through semi-structured interviews and field observations, the research uncovers both the opportunities created by religious tourism and the challenges that limit its sustainability. By focusing on a site of emerging importance within Nepal's broader tourism landscape, it contributes to ongoing discussions about sustainable tourism, community development, and the economic potential of culturally significant destinations.

Literature Review

Religious tourism has been widely recognized as an important catalyst for socio-economic development, particularly in regions endowed with spiritual, historical, and cultural heritage. Scholars generally define religious tourism as travel motivated by faith, spiritual practice, cultural identity, or interest in sacred sites (Rashid, 2018). Over the past decades, research has shown that such tourism not only enhances cultural exchange but also contributes substantially to local economies through employment creation, increased consumption, and community-based entrepreneurship (Mtapuri et al., 2022). Reviews focus on three major themes: the economic significance of religious tourism; its role in community development and heritage preservation, and challenges facing its sustainable growth.

Economic Significance of Religious Tourism

Literature shows that religious tourism plays a vital role in regional economic development. According to Ali (2025), religious sites attract consistent flows of visitors throughout the year, generating stable economic opportunities for host communities. Income is commonly derived from accommodation, food and beverage services, transportation, local retail, and the sale of traditional crafts. Studies conducted in India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand indicate that pilgrimage destinations often become micro-economies, providing livelihoods for both formal and informal sectors (Latif, 2022).

In the South Asian context, religious tourism is closely intertwined with cultural heritage (Nyaupane and Budruk, 2009). Research on Bodh Gaya, Varanasi, and Lumbini illustrates that spiritual sites function as economic hubs that stimulate both direct and indirect employment (Acha-Anyi, 2018). The development of supporting infrastructure - roads, sanitation, communication networks, and market facilities - further strengthens local economic systems. These findings align with global trends showing that tourism contributes to multiplier effects that extend beyond immediate service industries (Glocker and Haxton, 2020).

Religious Tourism and Community Development

Community participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable tourism development. Numerous scholars argue that religious tourism fosters community empowerment by enabling local people

to mobilize their cultural assets and engage in entrepreneurial activities (Rahman and Baddam, 2021). For example, research from rural pilgrimage sites in Indonesia and Vietnam (Le Thu, 2020) demonstrates how residents generate income from homestays, guiding services, traditional products, and small-scale hospitality enterprises. Through these activities, religious tourism can enhance household incomes, foster skills development, and elevate local standards of living.

In Nepal, religious tourism has been linked to both cultural identity formation and local economic growth. Studies on Pashupatinath, Muktinath, Janakpur, and Lumbini reveal that pilgrimage tourism encourages infrastructural upgrades, stimulates local markets, and supports the growth of hospitality industries (KC, 2022). These developments often lead to community pride and revitalization of cultural practices. Moreover, religious sites act as spaces where local narratives and traditions are preserved and showcased, contributing to heritage conservation and cultural continuity (Singh, 2016).

Challenges and Sustainability Concerns in Religious Tourism

Despite its potential, scholars caution that religious tourism is not without challenges. Infrastructure deficits - such as poor roads, inadequate sanitation, limited accommodation, and insufficient public services - are frequently identified as major barriers to tourism-driven development in emerging destinations (Bakker, 2019). Additionally, many sacred sites suffer from weak promotional efforts, lack of strategic planning, and inconsistent government support (Dudley et al., 2009). These issues are particularly acute in developing countries where tourism governance structures may be fragmented.

Environmental degradation, overcrowding, commercialization of sacred spaces, and cultural commodification also pose significant sustainability concerns (Halafoff and Clarke, 2018). Scholars argue that without proper management, tourism may strain local resources and erode the authenticity of religious sites (Shepherd, 2016). The literature underscores the need for community-based, culturally sensitive, and environmentally responsible tourism models that balance economic benefits with heritage preservation.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Although research on religious tourism is growing, several gaps remain relevant to this study. First, there is limited empirical work on emerging religious destinations in Nepal beyond well-known sites like Lumbini or Pashupatinath. Second, few studies explore the specific economic impacts at the local level using qualitative approaches that capture community perspectives and lived experiences. Finally, little attention has been given to Buddhist heritage sites in Devdaha - despite their increasing historical and cultural significance.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the economic contributions and challenges of religious tourism at Buddha ko Mawoli, a site of rising prominence located within the broader cultural landscape of Lord Buddha's maternal lineage.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore how religious tourism influences local economic growth in Buddha ko Mawoli, Devdaha. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for in-depth understanding of community experiences, stakeholder perceptions, and the socio-economic dynamics shaped by tourism activities (De Lucia et al., 2020). The research is grounded in an interpretive qualitative design, which seeks to understand how individuals and communities perceive and experience the impacts of religious tourism (Heidari et al., 2018). This design

focuses on meanings, interactions, and local realities rather than numerical measurement. By employing this approach, the study captures the nuanced economic effects of religious tourism such as income patterns, employment opportunities, and changes in local markets through participants' lived experiences.

The study is conducted at Buddha ko Mawoli, Devdaha, located in the Rupandehi district of Nepal. The site is historically recognized as the maternal home of Lord Buddha and has recently gained attention as an emerging Buddhist heritage destination. Its spiritual value, cultural narratives, and increasing tourist flow make it an appropriate location for exploring the intersection of religious tourism and local economic development.

This study relies on primary qualitative data, supported by secondary information from relevant literature, tourism reports, and local government documents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who have direct involvement in or knowledge about tourism activities in the area. The participants include: Local residents, Business owners (hospitality, retail, handicrafts), Tourism professionals, Local government officials and Representatives of community organizations. A total of 20 participants were interviewed, ensuring diversity in perspectives and experiences. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews (Karatsareas, 2022) that allowed participants to express their views freely while enabling the researcher to explore specific topics. Field notes were taken to supplement interview data and provide contextual understanding.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is well suited for identifying recurring patterns and themes within qualitative data. The analysis followed these steps: First, transcripts and field notes were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of emerging ideas. And then, key phrases and concepts were coded line by line. Finally, related codes were grouped into broader categories, refined and connected to the research objectives, resulting in a structured interpretation of how religious tourism affects local economic dynamics. Ethical integrity was ensured throughout the research process:

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that religious tourism at Buddha ko Mawoli has had a notable impact on local economic growth, reflecting trends observed in other emerging pilgrimage destinations in Nepal and South Asia. Local residents, business owners, tourism professionals, and government representatives reported positive changes in income generation, employment opportunities, and small-scale entrepreneurial activities. This aligns with previous research showing that religious tourism often serves as a catalyst for local economic development by stimulating service sectors such as hospitality, transportation, handicrafts, and food services (Mtapuri et al., 2022; Nana, 2024).

Economic Opportunities and Employment Generation

Participants highlighted that the influx of visitors has provided new sources of income, particularly through small hotels, restaurants, and local shops selling souvenirs and religious artifacts. A local resident reported that the local shops are selling the items mostly demanded by tourists. This observation is consistent with studies in other Buddhist heritage sites, such as Bodh Gaya and Lumbini, where tourism-driven economic activity supports both formal and informal sectors (Rogerson, 2018). Employment opportunities extend beyond traditional tourism services; for example, transportation providers tour guides. The qualitative evidence suggests that these economic opportunities contribute to improved household livelihoods and create a multiplier effect in the local economy.

Infrastructure Development and Community Investment

Tourism has also encouraged incremental infrastructure improvements. Participants noted enhancements in roads, electricity, and water access near the site. A tourism professional indicated about the road to Bhawanipur from national highway converted into double lane in the last five years. Such developments are consistent with international literature indicating that religious tourism can incentivize investment in public infrastructure, thereby improving living conditions for residents while facilitating visitor experiences (Shinde and Olsen, 2022). However, the study also revealed that these improvements remain limited and sporadic, indicating a need for coordinated planning and sustained investment.

Cultural Preservation and Community Engagement

Religious tourism has fostered renewed interest in local traditions and cultural practices. Community members expressed pride in showcasing their heritage, such as rituals, festivals, and traditional crafts, to visitors. This finding resonates with the argument of Chong and Balasingam (2019) that religious tourism can enhance cultural preservation while simultaneously offering economic benefits. At Buddha ko Mawoli, tourism has stimulated local participation in heritage activities, providing both social and economic value to the community.

Challenges to Sustainable Growth

Despite the positive impacts, the study also highlights several challenges. Limited infrastructure, including inadequate roads, public sanitation, and accommodation, constrains the site's potential. Participants emphasized insufficient marketing and promotion, which affects tourist inflow and limits economic returns. A government official reported that the local body has kept the area in priority. However, he could not mention the time line for the implementation of development projects. Additionally, the absence of comprehensive tourism planning or regulatory frameworks raises concerns about long-term sustainability. These findings are consistent with the literature indicating that emerging religious tourism destinations often face structural, managerial, and policy-related constraints (Bowen et al., 2017).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The discussion suggests that religious tourism at Buddha ko Mawoli has significant potential for fostering inclusive local development, provided that supportive policies and strategic planning are implemented. Policymakers and local authorities can enhance the positive impacts by improving transportation, sanitation, and hospitality infrastructure; promoting the site nationally and internationally; supporting community-based tourism initiatives, and establishing regulations to preserve the cultural and environmental integrity of the site. Such measures can ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are equitably shared and that the site remains attractive and sustainable for both visitors and the local population.

The findings of this study reinforce the broader understanding that religious tourism is more than a spiritual or cultural activity; it is a socio-economic driver capable of stimulating local development. The case of Buddha ko Mawoli illustrates how emerging pilgrimage destinations, even with limited resources, can generate tangible economic opportunities while contributing to cultural revitalization. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of addressing infrastructure deficits, governance challenges, and marketing gaps to maximize the benefits of tourism for local communities.

Conclusion

The study of religious tourism at Buddha ko Mawoli, Devdaha, demonstrates that pilgrimage-driven visitor flows can significantly contribute to local economic growth. Findings indicate that tourism has created new income-generating opportunities, stimulated employment in hospitality, transportation, and handicrafts, and encouraged community engagement with cultural heritage. These outcomes highlight the potential of religious tourism as a catalyst for inclusive local development, echoing patterns observed in other emerging pilgrimage sites across Nepal and South Asia.

At the same time, the research identifies several challenges that constrain the long-term benefits of tourism. Inadequate infrastructure, limited marketing, and the absence of coordinated planning undermine the full potential of the site as a sustainable economic and cultural destination. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that the positive impacts of religious tourism are not only maintained but expanded over time.

Overall, the study underscores that religious tourism is both an economic and social phenomenon: it offers tangible financial benefits while reinforcing cultural identity and community participation. Sustainable development at Buddha ko Mawoli requires the integration of local voices, effective policy support, and strategic planning that balances economic growth with heritage preservation. By doing so, religious tourism can continue to serve as a meaningful driver of regional development, benefiting both visitors and the host community alike.

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