

Cultural Heritage Tourism in Bhaktapur

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Abstract

This study explores how Bhaktapur has preserved and promoted its cultural heritage while adapting to modern life. It also examines how these efforts support long-term cultural tourism. It focuses on both tangible and intangible aspects of culture, including buildings, festivals, traditional crafts, etc. Special attention is given to the role of the local community and tourism in this process. The research paper employs a qualitative approach, incorporating field visits, the examination of historical records, and a review of relevant books, articles, and government reports. It also includes direct observation and talks with local artisans. The findings show that Bhaktapur's success in heritage preservation is mainly due to strong local leadership. Important efforts include training programs for traditional craftsmen and the opening of technical schools. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Bhaktapur remains rich in Newar traditions and festivals like Bisket Jatra, Navadurga Jatra, Gai Jatra, Indra Jatra, etc. Despite the growth of tourism, the city has largely preserved its historic buildings and cultural practices. Bhaktapur, a beautiful cultural city, is a good example of how heritage can be managed well. Its approach helps protect cultural identity, supports tourism, and benefits the local economy. This case may serve as a guide for other historic cities with rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Heritage Tourism, Preservation, Community, Participation

Introduction

“Bhaktapur is the world's largest living museum” - Niels Gutschow

Bhaktapur is widely regarded as one of the most culturally rich and well-preserved cities in Nepal, dating back to the ancient period. It was reorganised, systematised, and established by King Ananda Deva in 1147 AD ([Vajracharya & Malla, 1985](#)). Today, the city is shaped like a flying pigeon, covering an area of 6.88 square kilometres at an altitude of 1,401 meters above sea level. It is found that human settlements have existed in this area since the beginning of settlement. This city has been rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage since the ancient period ([Prajapati, 2024](#)). Unlike its neighbouring cities, Kathmandu and Patan, Bhaktapur has maintained its historical

authenticity and remains largely untouched by modern alterations (Budathoki, 2024). The city is predominantly inhabited by the Newar community, known for their deep-rooted traditions in art, culture, and craftsmanship, making Bhaktapur a vibrant living heritage site and an essential stop for tourists seeking to experience Nepal's ancient urban culture.

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979, Bhaktapur includes two of the Kathmandu Valley's seven recognised Cultural heritage sites: the Changunarayan Temple and Bhaktapur Durbar Square (Nyaupane, 2019). While Changunarayan, the valley's oldest temple, sits in a rural setting, most other heritage landmarks are concentrated in the heart of the city. Bhaktapur Durbar Square, the former royal palace of the Malla kings, features iconic monuments such as the Golden Gate, 55-Windowed Palace, and numerous temples, reflecting the city's medieval greatness and religious inclusivity.

Situated in Taulachhe, also known as Taamadhi Tole, the Bhairav Temple and the iconic five-tiered *Nyatapola* (Nyatapolhan in Newari) Temple are prominent landmarks of the area. These sites serve as the starting point of the Bisket Jatra festival, marked by the chariot रथ procession of deities Bhairav and Bhadrakali, celebrated annually during the Nepali New Year or early Baisakh. On the eastern side of Bhaktapur, other significant attractions include the Dattatreya Temple, Bhimsen Temple, the Priest's House (a museum of wooden art), and the renowned Peacock Window (Bohara, 2024). Collectively, these cultural assets (skills) preserve the city's rich heritage in history, religion, and architecture, establishing Bhaktapur as a key destination for heritage tourism in Nepal.

To protect and promote local art and cultural traditions or heritage, the municipality consistently offers training programs for traditional craftsmen such as *bricklayers* (Dakarmi) and *woodcarvers* (Sikarmi). This initiative has played a vital role in maintaining the area's distinctive architectural heritage (Gutschow & Gellner, 1997). To further strengthen these efforts, the municipality has established its own engineering campus and technical school to educate and prepare local engineers and technicians. Currently, Bhaktapur municipality is home to over 1,700 trained bricklayers, more than 2,000 skilled woodcarvers, and upwards of 1,000 engineers. A significant number of these professionals have conducted comprehensive research on the city's cultural heritage (Bohara, 2024). When including technicians operating independently in the private sector, the total number of individuals engaged in heritage construction and conservation in Bhaktapur exceeds 8,000.

Tourism is closely related to travel, and travel is a natural human characteristic. Human beings need change, and travel provides a catalyst for that change. Travel has always fascinated humans. People have been travelling throughout the ages (Neupane, 2024). In earlier times, travel existed, but the concept of 'tourism' did not, because travel was not understood as an activity for pleasure, nor was it meant as a break from routine work (Bhatia, 1995). The primary motives for travel in those times were trade, commerce, pilgrimage, or exploration. Its importance is evident from the fact that it deeply influences society, politics, tradition, and, above all, contributes to significant economic growth (Pradhan, 1997). The basic concept of tourism as 'pleasure at leisure' did not exist back then. Thus, tourism refers to the movement of people from one place to another during their leisure time for pleasure.

The word *tourism* is a modern term. It did not appear in the English language until the 19th century. This word comes from the French word *Tourisme*, which comes from the Latin word *Tournus*. The meaning of *Tournus* is "turner's wheel". So, the original meaning of tourism is moving or travelling from one place to another (Dixit & Gyawali, 2019). In 1942, Professors Hunziker and Krapf from Berne University defined tourism as "the total of all activities and relationships that arise from the travel and stay of people who are not residents, as long as they do not become permanent residents and are not involved in earning money" (Bhatia, 1996). Tourism is a growing service industry with great potential. It has become an important issue for individual countries and the international community (Kreiner, 2018). It is also an easy way to learn about the culture and traditions of a place.

The ongoing debates around the definition of heritage and its related concepts have created challenges for scholars, particularly due to the absence of a widely accepted theoretical foundation. Heritage, whether categorised as tangible or intangible cultural or natural, genuine or artificial, is often examined through varying lenses, revealing its inherently complex and contested character (Ahmed, 2006; Hall, 2007). This discussion proposes that a more effective way to understand heritage and its societal value is by exploring how individuals personally relate to it. Specifically, attention should be given to the meaning people assign to heritage and the benefits they derive from their engagement with it. It is essential to recognise that heritage is experienced and interpreted through the distinct values, attitudes, and life experiences of each person. Furthermore, emphasising values in heritage research, rather than merely attitudes, is important, as values are considered to shape both attitudes and behaviours (Crick & Prentice, 2000). Values are generally more enduring and fundamental within an individual's belief system compared to attitudes.

Heritage tourism consists of visits to places that embody the past/or to places related to intangible heritage manifestations. It forms part of cultural tourism and includes more specific types of tourism, such as archaeological tourism or archaeotourism (Ahmad, 2006). It is a very popular tourist activity among both tourists who are genuinely interested in culture and also those who seek a more superficial experience. Currently, one of the principal tasks of heritage management is to adapt the sites for public visits and to ensure the conditions necessary for an optimum tourist-heritage experience. This management faces different problems depending on the site's attractiveness to tourists, with some heritage sites becoming icons of mass cultural tourism.

Heritage tourism is a collaboration between conservationists and commercial promoters (Marmion, Calver & Wilkes, 2010). In heritage tourism, our goal is to harness people's fascination and sense of connection to the past and turn it into a commodity. It is often an uneasy association because the motives of these respective groups are not always compatible. While there is general recognition that heritage tourism can work to promote preservation of communities' historic and cultural resources, and also educate tourists and residents about the resources, the effects are not always viewed as beneficial, especially from those of us on the conservationist side of the fence. Nevertheless, because heritage tourism is a growth industry in almost every part of the world, the issues it conjures up, its pros and cons, must be addressed.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to explore the diverse elements that constitute Bhaktapur's cultural heritage tourism, including its historical architecture, festivals, traditional craftsmanship, and community practices. It also examines the efforts made to preserve these culturally valuable sites amid the pressures of modernisation and tourism.

Literature Review

Bhatia (1995), in his book *International Tourism: Fundamentals and Practices*, explores the foundational concepts and practices that shape the global tourism industry. While the book does not focus solely on heritage tourism, it underscores the increasing role of historical and cultural landmarks in drawing international tourists. Bhatia discusses how such heritage resources contribute not only to travel motivation but also to broader objectives like economic progress, cultural understanding, and the strengthening of national identity. Importantly, he addresses the need for sustainable tourism approaches that strike a balance between preserving heritage sites and utilising them for tourism purposes. In the context of heritage tourism, this work offers essential insights into how

cultural heritage can be effectively managed and promoted without compromising its integrity or longevity.

Macdonald (2006) looks at how people understand and deal with heritage from the fascist period in Nuremberg, Germany. She shows that it is hard to manage "undesirable heritage", things from the past that are linked to pain, conflict, or shame. The study explains that decisions about what to keep or hide from history are often affected by politics and emotions. While the research gives useful ideas about how societies remember difficult pasts, it does not talk much about how these places are shown to tourists. This creates a gap in understanding how such sensitive heritage is shared with visitors, how tourists react to it, and how it can be presented carefully and respectfully.

Sharma (2000) offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of Bhaktapur's rich heritage and cultural identity. The work presents Bhaktapur as one of Nepal's most prominent cultural cities, tracing its development as a heritage-rich urban centre since the ancient period. Notably, the text highlights Bhaktapur's significance during the medieval period when it served as the capital of the Nepal Mandala. The book emphasises the city's uniqueness through its abundance of traditional architecture, including temples, monasteries, sattals (traditional shelters), palaces, viharas, ponds, parks, etc., along with vibrant festivals, music, and dance traditions. Rather than being a single-authored narrative, the publication is a collection of edited articles exploring different aspects of the city's culture. Despite its broad cultural scope, the book reveals a scarcity of dedicated sources that focus solely on Bhaktapur's cultural heritage. This identified gap has inspired further academic inquiry, forming the basis for research that aims to explore and document Bhaktapur's cultural legacy in greater depth.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative methodology to explore the cultural heritage of Bhaktapur. The qualitative research paper is grounded in observations and mostly secondary document analysis. This research is grounded in the belief that reality is not fixed but is created through social and cultural experiences. The heritage of Bhaktapur, ranging from physical structures like temples and woodwork to traditions like festivals and craftsmanship, is understood as something that gains meaning through how people live, interact, and participate in these cultural elements. Heritage is seen not just as objects, but as active, evolving practices shaped by the community.

Taking an interpretivist view, this study aims to explore how individuals perceive and give meaning to Bhaktapur's cultural heritage. Knowledge is built through close interaction between the researcher and the related material. The study values personal

stories and interpretations from residents, heritage workers, and experts, focusing more on lived experiences than on fixed truths. The research recognises that both the researcher and participants bring their values and perspectives. It emphasises ethical engagement, cultural respect, and the importance of local traditions. The researcher reflects on the position and works to present the findings in a respectful and culturally aware manner.

This study follows the Interpretive paradigm, which fits the goal of exploring the meanings and values people attach to their cultural heritage. Instead of trying to be objective and detached, it seeks to understand the rich, complex views of different people involved in heritage preservation. A qualitative case study approach was used, focusing on Bhaktapur as a specific and historically rich location. This design allows for a deep and detailed study of how cultural heritage is understood, practised, and challenged within the community.

Data Collection Methods

- **Library Research:** Books, academic journals (e.g., *Nepalese Culture, Tourism Geographies*), and research papers were reviewed to gather background and theoretical context.
- **Municipal Documents:** Official records such as renovation plans and artisan training reports (e.g., Nhu Pukhu Renovation Report, 2022) from Bhaktapur Municipality were analysed.
- **Online and Digital Sources:** Articles and reports from platforms like Research Gate, JSTOR, and heritage organisations were used to support the analysis.

Data Analysis Method

A thematic analysis was carried out to identify key patterns and ideas. This involved:

- **Familiarisation:** Reviewing transcripts and field notes carefully.
- **Coding:** Marking repeated ideas, such as “authenticity,” “community participation,” “tourism impacts,” and “heritage knowledge transfer.”
- **Theme Development:** Grouping codes under broader categories like Identity, Preservation, and Challenges.
- **Interpretation:** Connecting themes with theories on cultural heritage and tourism.
- **Limitations:** The study is limited to Bhaktapur and may not reflect wider trends in Nepal. Some historical records were difficult to access due to language issues or poor preservation.

As a qualitative study, the findings are context-specific and not meant to be generalised to all settings.

Finding and Discussion

Bhaktapur Durbar Square is traditionally referred to as "Khwap Layaku" in the local Newari (Nepal Bhasa) language. The ancient name of Bhaktapur city was "Khopring". The word "Khwap", commonly used today in Newar or Nepal Bhasa, is derived from the ancient word "Khopring". This is supported by an inscription of King Manadeva found in Deopatan. Similarly, in an inscription from the time of Amshuverma, dated 621AD, the term "Makhopring" and related words are mentioned. In this context, "Khwa" means the main place or centre connected by boundaries, and "pa" means small sacred settlements. From this term "Khwap", the name "Bhaktapur" is believed to have evolved, "Bhakta" meaning rice (in the local context) and "pur" meaning settlement, referring to a prosperous human settlement where rice is abundantly grown and easily available, or a place free from hardship (Sharma, 2000). In this way, the name "Bhaktapur" evolves from this, with "Bhakta" meaning rice and "pur" meaning settlement, reflecting a prosperous place abundant in rice.

Since ancient times, this area has been a land of abundant agricultural production. As a result, the people living in this place did not have to spend the entire year working in the fields. They had ample free time beyond their agricultural duties. During that leisure time, they engaged in the creation of various artistic works. Therefore, Bhaktapur has continued to be recognised as a centre of cultural heritage to this day. Bhaktapur is the oldest city in the Kathmandu Valley (Budathoki, 2024). In 1204 BS (around 1147 AD), King Anandadeva established Bhaktapur as the capital of Nepal Mandala. Following this, Bhaktapur developed into a religious and cultural centre of the country. The city was constructed based on Hindu architectural principles and designed in the mystic geometric form (Yantra) as prescribed in the *Tantric* texts. This *yantric* form consists of combinations of shapes such as triangles and octagons. According to this tantric concept, various natural and cultural powers were symbolically established in the city, including Tripura Sundari, Trikunda Ganesh, Ashta Ganesh, Ashta Siddhi, Dasa Mahavidya, Ashta Matrika, Ashta Bhairav, and the guardians of the four directions. During the founding of the city, both geographical and tantric considerations were harmoniously maintained (Dhaubanjari, 2024). Because of this, the central deity or deities were placed at the core centre, and other deities and their divine families were installed in protective layers around them based on their attributes and powers.

Bhaktapur city was designed in the shape of a conch shell (shankha). At its centre, the principal goddess Taleju Bhawani Siddhilakshmi was enshrined. Surrounding this central point were the royal palace, the king, the chief priest (guru purohit), and high-ranking officials, all arranged in a triangular layout. Settlements were also organised according to caste. As one moved toward the riverbanks, the fierce-tempered deities were placed, and although the castes settled there were considered lower in status, they were often physically strong (Sharma, 2000). This layout was intentionally designed to ensure that the city remained secure and protected.

Major Heritage Sites of the Bhaktapur Area

Taleju Temple Complex: The Taleju Temple complex includes the Taleju temple located within the *Golden Gate (Suvarnadwar)* and the surrounding courtyards, stone sculptures of various deities, water spouts (dhara), ponds (pokhari), and raised platforms (dabali). The Golden Gate, which serves as the entrance to this sacred area, was constructed in Nepal Sambat 874 (1754 AD) by King Ranjit Malla.

Durbar Square: Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Durbar Square is located at the heart of Bhaktapur city. It includes historic palaces such as the Fifty-Five Windows Palace built by King Bhupatindra Malla, along with the *Thanthu Palace, Basantapur Palace, Chaukot Palace, Singhdhwakha Palace, and Yuthunium Palace*. However, many of these structures have either been destroyed, are in a dilapidated condition, or are undergoing reconstruction. In front of these palaces lies a pavilion known as Chyasimandap, which was reconstructed in 1989 AD with the support of the government of Germany.

Chardham Temples: Since not all devotees were able to travel to visit the four major pilgrimage sites (*Char Dham*) in India, the Malla rulers built replicas of these sacred temples within the Durbar Square area of Bhaktapur to honour the religious sentiments of the people. These include:

- Jagannath Temple, located near Khauma Gate,
- Rameshwar Temple, covered by a dome and situated on four stone pillars in front of Jagannath Temple,
- Badrinath Temple, located at the corner to the right of Rameshwar,
- Krishna Temple (Dwarka), built in a two-storied pagoda style, and
- Kedarnath Temple, located near the Bal Temple (Prajapati, 2023).

These temples represent the four principal Chardham of India, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Rameshwaram, and Jagannath Puri, and were established to symbolically fulfil the spiritual pilgrimage for the local devotees.

Changu Narayan: The Changu Narayan Temple, located on the top of a hill 6 kilometres north of Bhaktapur, is a historical heritage site. Built in pagoda style, it is believed to date back to the Licchavi period. However, due to damage caused by various earthquakes over time, it has been renovated repeatedly. The main deities in this area include Garuda Narayan, Chhinnamasta Narayan, and Changu Narayan (Shrestha, 2023). In addition, Bakupati Changu Narayan in Sujamahi Tole and another Changu Narayan in Nasamana Tole, in the centre of Bhaktapur, are also well-known Changu Narayan shrines (Joshi, 2023).

One of the remarkable heritage sites in Bhaktapur is the Nyatapola Temple, located in Taumadhi Tole. Built in Nepal Sambat 822 during the reign of King Bhupatindra Malla, it stands 108 feet (or 33.23 meters) tall and is a five-story structure (Prajapati, 2020).

Bhaktapur is an important cultural heritage centre in Nepal because of its beautiful palaces, temples, and historical sites. The Taleju Temple complex shows the rich art and religious traditions of the Malla period with its detailed sculptures, water spouts, and raised platforms. The Durbar Square, recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, is the heart of Bhaktapur, featuring impressive palaces like the Fifty-Five Windows Palace and other historical buildings that tell stories from the past. The Chardham Temples are also a big attraction; they are replicas of the four major pilgrimage sites in India, built by the Malla kings so that locals could perform their rituals close to home (Shilpakar, 2024). All these historical and religious sites help keep Bhaktapur's culture alive, making it a popular place for tourists who want to learn about Nepal's rich history.

Renovation and Preservation of Heritage

The heritage sites in Bhaktapur that were damaged by the 2015 earthquake are being renovated by Bhaktapur Municipality, and interest to other organisations like Bhaktapur District, Bagmati Province, the Government of Nepal, and other national and international organisations. There are 47 restoration projects in total; 27 of them have been completed, and the municipality plans to complete the rest within a year (Gwanga, 2024). These projects are carried out by consumer committees, which are vigilant and directly involved in conserving their heritage (Shilpakar, 2024). The municipality avoids employing contractors from outside, as they may lack knowledge of the local heritage, compromise on quality, or transfer funds out of Bhaktapur (Guragain, 2024). Instead,

employing community members helps employ locals and strengthens their sense of ownership in preserving their cultural heritage.

The municipality also makes sure that new houses in the old town follow traditional styles, with visible brickwork, wooden elements, and tile-covered roofs. Structures that do not follow these guidelines are not approved or may even be removed. To aid homeowners, the municipality offers a subsidy of 35% of the total cost for wood, tiles, and bricks when they follow these regulations (Paudel, 2024). This approach helps keep the character of Bhaktapur alive while preserving its rich history for future generations.

Positive Aspects of Heritage Tourism

Heritage tourism has many positive aspects. It helps in the preservation of historical and cultural heritage, which strengthens the identity and pride of local communities (Liu & Novelli, 2019). Additionally, it contributes to local economic development, especially by creating employment opportunities through tourism-related businesses such as hotels, restaurants, handicrafts, and guide services (Shrestha, 2018). Heritage tourism provides tourists with knowledge of different cultures and increases mutual understanding and respect. It also inspires residents to take pride in their traditions, arts, and history, ultimately supporting social harmony and cultural revitalisation.

Heritage tourism plays a key role in preserving Bhaktapur's rich culture and historical landmarks by providing financial support for their upkeep. It also contributes to improving the livelihoods of local families, helping them enjoy a better standard of living (Suji et.al., 2020). This kind of tourism opens up employment opportunities for guides, hotel owners, restaurant workers, and artisans in Bhaktapur (Shivakoti, 2022). Visitors from different parts of the world get a chance to appreciate and explore the city's unique traditions, art, and architecture. This exchange of knowledge and culture helps promote understanding, unity, and peace, while strengthening the community's connection to its heritage.

Negative Aspect of Heritage Tourism

Despite its many benefits, heritage tourism also has several negative aspects. One major concern is the over-commercialisation of cultural sites, which can lead to the loss of authenticity and degrade the cultural value of the heritage (Smith, 2006). Excessive tourist traffic may cause physical damage to fragile monuments and historical structures, leading to long-term deterioration (Makhloufi, 2024). Local communities may also face challenges such as rising living costs, displacement, and cultural commodification, where traditions are altered to meet tourist expectations. Moreover, unregulated tourism can

strain local infrastructure, harm the environment, and disrupt the daily lives of residents (Makhloufi, 2024). Therefore, without proper planning and sustainable practices, heritage tourism can do more harm than good.

Heritage tourism can bring some challenges for the people of Bhaktapur, making their daily routines more difficult due to overcrowding (Karki et.al, 2024). The increase in tourists may drive up the prices of food, rent, and other essentials, putting financial pressure on local families. Some visitors may show little care for the community's culture or damage historical sites, affecting their authenticity. This can result in a situation where businesses prioritise tourist preferences over preserving their traditions (Neupane et al., 2013). Furthermore, the financial benefits from tourism are not always shared fairly, adding to the inequality within the community of Bhaktapur.

Conclusion

Bhaktapur serves as an outstanding example of a city where tradition, religion, urban design, and historical depth are closely interconnected. Originating from the ancient name "Khopring," the city has developed over centuries, deeply reflecting the cultural roots of the Newar community. Its urban structure, shaped like a conch shell and influenced by both Tantric philosophy and geographical considerations, demonstrates a thoughtful blend (to produce sth by mixing different types) spiritual symbolism and practical planning. Prominent cultural landmarks such as the Taleju Temple Complex, Durbar Square, and the locally constructed Chardham temples illustrate the city's rich architectural and religious heritage. These sites not only represent Bhaktapur's historical legacy but also continue to draw admiration from visitors. The growth of heritage tourism has been crucial in conserving these cultural assets while also enhancing local livelihoods and community pride. Yet, tourism brings both benefits and drawbacks. Although it encourages intercultural understanding and economic development, it may also lead to excessive commercialisation and a loss of cultural authenticity if left unchecked. Thus, sustainable tourism strategies are necessary to safeguard Bhaktapur's heritage. Through a balanced approach that promotes preservation alongside responsible tourism, Bhaktapur can continue to flourish as a vibrant cultural hub that honours its past while meeting the needs of present and future generations.

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