

Lumbini in State Policies and Programs and its Impact on Tourism Promotion

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Abstract

The state's primary responsibility is to excavate, protect, develop, and promote heritage sites. This duty is reflected in the policies and programs implemented by the government. Planned development initiatives in Nepal began in 1954, leading to the formulation of sectoral policies. In the 1960s, as international interest in Lumbini grew, the Government of Nepal initiated efforts to conserve, develop, and promote tourism in the Lumbini area. Since then, Lumbini has been consistently included in five-year plans, annual programs, and various tourism promotion initiatives in Nepal. The tourism policy and strategy of the government of Nepal have focused on positioning Lumbini as a premier tourist destination in the country. Following the establishment of Lumbini Province, the provincial government has actively promoted tourism in the sacred Buddhist sites. The collaborative efforts of both the national and provincial governments have been instrumental in establishing Lumbini as a significant Buddhist religious site globally and a prominent spiritual tourist destination in Nepal. This article aims to analyze the integration of Lumbini tourism within the policies, plans, and programs of the Government of Nepal. It will explore the impact of these initiatives on the development and promotion of tourism in Lumbini. The insights provided in this article will serve as valuable guidance for stakeholders involved in shaping policies and programs for the holistic advancement of Lumbini and tourism promotion. Additionally, it will offer valuable information for scholars interested in studying the latest developments in Lumbini.

Keywords: *Buddhist Tourism, Heritage Sites, Lumbini, Planned Development, Policy, Tourism Development*

Introduction

A national development plan is a state-driven strategy for achieving economic, social, and physical progress. It outlines the government's future actions, typically encompassing (i) an assessment of current economic conditions, (ii) a schedule of proposed public expenditures, (iii) an analysis of anticipated private sector developments, (iv) Macro-economic projections, and (v) a review of existing government policies (Lewis 11). Planning has been defined in many ways, but most authorities agree that it is, in essence, an organized, conscious and continual attempt to select the best available alternatives to achieve specific goals. Planning involves the economizing of scarce resources. It has been used for a variety of ends, by different societies and in different ways. It is not limited to totalitarian or socialistic solutions. It can be and is used by democratic and capitalistic countries. The primary objective of these plans is to maximize economic development (Waterston 26). State policies form the operational framework for implementing development plans. The development policy process is crucial for effective governance, enabling governments to address diverse challenges and manage public demands. It represents a core public policy function, as anything a government chooses to do or not to do (Dye 2).

Development policy is intrinsically linked to a nation's economic activities, translating strategic goals into actionable plans. These plans provide a systematic approach to stimulate development. By facilitating the structured management of resources towards specific targets within defined timeframes, development plans are essential for ensuring rapid progress (Shakya 9).

Following the end of Rana rule in 1950, Nepal embarked on a planned development path. To date, fifteen periodic plans have been implemented, with the sixteenth currently in execution. These plans have consistently emphasized economic growth through infrastructure development. Recognizing the tourism sector's potential, the Nepalese government has integrated tourism development concepts into each plan (Gautam 140).

Nepal's unique cultural and religious heritage forms the bedrock of its tourism industry. Among these, Lumbini, the birthplace of Shakyamuni Buddha, holds paramount religious and historical significance. Discovered in 1896, Lumbini has attracted scholars, researchers, and pilgrims. Its exceptional archaeological and religious value led to its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1997 (Rai et al. 10). Archaeological remains, excavated and preserved at the site, attest to

continuous pilgrimages since the 3rd century B.C. Lumbini not only belongs to Nepal and Nepalese people, it is very important pilgrimage destination for the Buddhists, Hindus and peace lovers around the world. Worldwide attention and focus on Lumbini not only because pilgrimage site, but because for all mankind Lumbini has special meaning as a place of meditation and spiritual renewal, a center of cultural exchange, a symbol of peace and ultimately the faithful destination (Kunwar & Ghimire 18).

As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Lumbini has emerged as Nepal's most visited domestic tourist destination, possessing the potential to spearhead Buddhist tourism in the country. Ongoing efforts focus on the excavation, development, conservation, and promotion of Lumbini. The Government of Nepal has consistently prioritized Lumbini in its plans, policies, and programs, which have played a crucial role in establishing it as a significant spiritual and tourist center.

This article analyzes the policies and programs implemented by the Nepalese government over the past 65 years to develop Lumbini within its periodic plans and assesses their impact on Lumbini's tourism. By examining past initiatives, this analysis provides valuable insights for policymakers and planners in formulating future strategies for Lumbini's sustainable development and tourism promotion.

Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to analyze how the Nepalese government has viewed Lumbini and its surrounding Buddhist sites in terms of policy and the impact of state policies on the development and promotion of tourism in these places. It is a qualitative descriptive analysis of the periodic plans implemented in Nepal and the annual policies and programs of the federal government. Various documents and data published by the National Planning Commission, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Tourism, and Nepal Tourism Board have been used for this study.

Limitation

This study mainly focuses on the plans and policies announced and implemented by the Government of Nepal. It has been analyzed based on periodic plans, annual policies, and programs since 2014. The Visit Nepal Year campaigns conducted by the Government of Nepal at different times have been analyzed and included in the periodic plans and annual policies. The budget allocated by the government and the expenditures incurred in implementing the plans and policies have not been the subject of this study.

Findings and Discussion

A. Lumbini in Nepal's Periodic Planning

The modern era influenced Nepal's economic system in the 20th century. While Prime Minister Juddha Shamsheer formulated a 20-year plan during World War II, it was never implemented. Similarly, a 15-year plan proposed by a National Planning Committee under Prime Minister Mohanshamsheer in 1946-47 was also abandoned. Following the 1950 revolution and the establishment of a democratic system, the government focused on developing the administrative and infrastructural prerequisites for planned economic development. This culminated in the launch of the First Five-Year Plan (1956-1961).

The First Plan aimed to establish a progressive welfare state by fostering public participation and focusing on sectors with high public enthusiasm, thereby promoting nationwide development (Timilsina 3). This plan marked a significant turning point, envisioning a socio-economic environment enabling Nepalese citizens to lead dignified lives (Srivastava 1). While its priority was increasing production and national income through natural resource utilization, it did not explicitly address tourism or culture. However, the planned tourism development commenced after 1956 with the initiation of the First Five-Year Plan and the subsequent establishment of the Tourist Development Board in 1957 (Badal 15).

Following a year without a plan due to the introduction of the Panchayat system, the Second Three-Year Plan (1960-1963) was implemented. Recognizing the growing interest of foreign tourists, the government aimed to extend tourist stays by enhancing facilities and developing key destinations. This plan specifically targeted Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Lumbini. Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, was identified as a site of significant religious and tourist importance. In this plan, the government had made policy arrangements to develop rest houses and other necessary facilities in Lumbini.

Third Plan aimed to attract 20,000 annual tourists to Nepal through enhanced tourism facilities and promotion. Recognizing the importance of archaeological studies for tourism, this plan prioritized the protection of historical sites, with Lumbini and Kapilvastu receiving top priority. Key programs included immediate tree plantation in Lumbini and establishing a library and museum with support from international Buddhist institutions. During this period, UN Secretary-General U

Thant visited Lumbini in 1967, and a UNDP team-initiated infrastructure development in 1968. In 1970, the International Committee for the Development of Lumbini, which was composed of 13 Buddhist countries, was formed to support Lumbini's development. These national and international efforts marked a milestone in the planned development and promotion of Lumbini. In 1970, the government established the Lumbini Development Committee, which was later transformed into the Lumbini Development Trust in 1985.

The Fourth Plan (1970-1975) did not explicitly focus on Lumbini. However, initiatives like tourism promotion, information centers, and airport development indirectly included Lumbini. Notably, the Kenzo Tange Master Plan was prepared in 1978. Even before the draft of this master plan was released, the Government of Nepal had announced the Lumbini Development Project and initiated the process of acquiring land in 7 villages and settlements located in the area where the project would be implemented. Initially, a notice was published in the Nepal Gazette on 19 Chaitra 2030 BS (DoP 1-4) and 385 bighas 7 Kattha 5 Dhurs (261 hector) of land in the villages located in one square mile around the Ashoka Pillar was acquired. The land acquired during this period forms the basis for current development and promotion activities.

The Fifth Plan (1975-1980) emphasized preserving and promoting Nepal's historical, cultural, and geographical features, maintaining authenticity in tourism development, and expanding tourist destinations beyond Kathmandu. This plan specifically aimed to develop necessary facilities and promote Lumbini as an international tourism hub. During this period, the Government of Nepal and the UN approved the Kenzo Tange Master Plan, with a completion target up to 1985. In 1975, the government formalized the Lumbini Development Committee through the Lumbini Development Committee (Formation) Order 1975. Additionally, Nepal's first tourism master plan was introduced during this plan period.

To make tourism infrastructures more effective where they exist, to make the existing touristic spots more eye-catching, to develop new tourist resorts, and to maximize the use of domestic products in the tourism industries while proportionately reducing the use of imported goods—these were the basic policy guidelines for the development of tourism in Nepal during the Sixth Plan (1980-1985) period. The Sixth Plan aims to prepare the second tourism master plan.

The Seventh Plan (1985-1990) aimed to develop religious, youth, and

domestic tourism within regional tourism frameworks to expand the tourism sector. Policies were implemented to encourage private sector promotion of tour packages encompassing Kathmandu, Pokhara, Palpa, Lumbini, and Chitwan National Park. The latter part of this plan period saw the transition from the Panchayat system to a multi-party democracy, easing travel for foreign tourists and contributing to increased visitor numbers. A key achievement was the establishment of the Lumbini Development Trust through the Lumbini Development Trust Act, 1985. Due to the political transition, a year passed without a formal plan.

Data regarding tourist arrivals in Nepal during the first plan period is unavailable. In 1962, for the first time, the Tourism Department started keeping the statistics of the foreign tourists coming into Nepal. However, tourist numbers steadily increased from the second to the seventh plan period of the Panchayat era. This growth was inconsistent; while the annual growth rate was notably strong during the third to fifth plan periods, it significantly declined during the sixth. The seventh plan period, however, saw a resurgence in tourist growth. Government data indicates that increased international air services and active tourism promotion programs correlate with higher tourist arrivals. Conversely, periods of political instability and natural disasters in Nepal saw a decrease in tourist numbers.

Table 1: Tourist Arrival in Nepal and Average Annual Growth Rate (1956-1990)

Plan	Average No. of Tourist arrival	Annual Growth Rate (%)
First	-	-
Second	7275	17.7
Third	18114	30.9
fourth	61339.8	21.38
Fifth	129055.2	12.84
Sixth	171210.6	1.78
Seventh	231639.4	6.88

Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2013 (Retabulated)

The Eighth Plan (1992-1997) reflected the aspirations of the democratic movement (Pokhrel 2012). It prioritized tourism sector research and international promotion, aiming to develop major Buddhist religious sites—Tilaurakot, Lumbini, Devdaha, and Ramgram—as religious tourist destinations. This plan also sought to

create a tourist circuit connecting Lumbini with key national destinations like Pokhara, Gorkha, Kathmandu, and Chitwan. The Lumbini Festival was organized during this period.

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) adopted a policy of developing tourism activities compatible with the social, natural, religious, and cultural environment, promoting tourism as a vital component of the national economy. In line with the government's strategy to aggressively promote Nepal's tourism internationally, foster domestic tourism, and build public awareness, "Visit Nepal Year 1998" was launched.

"Visit Nepal Year 1998" marked the first national campaign dedicated to tourism development. It was crucial in raising tourism awareness, attracting investment, highlighting new destinations, expanding international tourism contacts, and revitalizing Nepal's tourism image. During this period, the World Buddhist Conference was held in Lumbini, and various construction and reconstruction projects were undertaken at the site. Furthermore, in 1997, Lumbini was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This period was pivotal for the promotion and development of Lumbini.

The Tenth Plan (2002-2007) prioritized preserving historical, cultural, religious, and archaeological heritage, emphasizing their practical utilization for tourism. Policies included archaeological surveys, exploration, protection, and excavation of nationally significant areas, as well as fostering local, non-governmental, and private sector participation in heritage protection and promotion, thereby promoting self-reliance and income generation. These initiatives directly benefited the Lumbini region. The Nepal Tourism Board's role in tourism promotion was expanded, and specific budgets were allocated for excavation and development in Lumbini, Kapilvastu, and Ramgram.

During this period, the reconstruction of the Mayadevi Temple was completed and opened to the public. In 2004, the Second World Buddhist Summit, held in Lumbini, issued a 10-point declaration advocating for Lumbini's development as a city of world peace. The Destination Nepal campaign (2002-2003) also contributed to promoting tourism in Lumbini.

The Eleventh Plan, implemented as the Three Year Interim Plan (2007-2010), focused on promoting Nepal's UNESCO World Heritage sites internationally. The government prioritized the Lumbini Development Master Plan through budget allocations and emphasized religious and spiritual tourism, heritage conservation,

and sustainable tourism development programs. In 2011, “Nepal Tourism Year” was launched with the goal of attracting one million tourists. The Lumbini Area Tourism Promotion and Development Committee was established to enhance tourism in Lumbini. The Nepal Tourism Policy 2065 was introduced, contributing to the advancement of Nepal’s tourism sector. Additionally, in 2009, the government introduced Vision 2020, which aimed to attract two million tourists annually by 2020.

The Twelfth Plan (2010-2013), another three-year initiative, prioritized promoting religious and tourist destinations internationally, specifically highlighting Pashupatinath and Lumbini. It also included a program to review and expedite the completion of the Lumbini Development Master Plan. The first year of this plan saw the celebration of Visit Nepal Year. While the target of one million tourists was not achieved, the campaign successfully increased international awareness of Nepal’s cultural sites, including Lumbini. Notably, 2012 was designated Visit Lumbini Year, the first state-level program dedicated to promoting Lumbini tourism, which contributed to increased visitor numbers and enhanced Lumbini’s profile.

The Thirteenth Plan (2014-2016) identified insufficient funding for timely project completion and inadequate protection and promotion of archaeological sites as key challenges in the tourism sector. To address these issues, the plan outlined a program to finalize the Lumbini Master Plan and to implement a Visit Nepal Year campaign by 2020. Under its cultural policy, the plan also emphasized the protection and restoration of UNESCO World Heritage monuments and the identification, preservation, development, and promotion of other historical, religious, and cultural heritage sites.

The Fourteenth Plan (2017-2019) aimed to stimulate economic growth and employment through tourism development, with policies to celebrate 2015/16 as Domestic Visit Year and 2018 as Visit Nepal Year. Under its cultural policy, the plan introduced a strategy to develop and implement a master plan for Buddhist-related sites in Rupandehi, Kapilvastu, and Nawalparasi districts, following the Buddhist Circuit’s concept and promoting these sites internationally. Furthermore, the plan included a study and research program to identify potential sites for inclusion on the World Heritage List. Consequently, final preparations are underway to nominate Tilaurakot for UNESCO World Heritage status.

The Fifteenth Plan (2020 – 2024), guided by the national vision of “Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali,” included a strategy to celebrate Visit Nepal Year 2020 and develop the Buddha Circuit within a regional tourism network. Notably, the Lumbini

Development Trust was designated a national pride project, ensuring budgetary support for the completion of the Lumbini Development Master Plan. However, the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted these plans. Visit Nepal Year 2020 could not proceed as planned, and the Lumbini Visit Year 2019/2020 program, initiated by the Lumbini Provincial Government, was also negatively impacted. The pandemic's effects persisted throughout the Fifteenth Plan period, hindering Lumbini's tourism development and promotion.

The Sixteenth Plan, currently in effect, aims to increase the tourism sector's contribution to the gross domestic product. Policies have been established to promote tourism, develop infrastructure at tourist destinations, enhance service quality, and ensure tourist safety. While specific policies for Lumbini are not explicitly outlined, the plan includes a program to integrate cultural heritage with tourism, connecting major cultural areas with other tourist destinations.

While tourists, pilgrims, and researchers have visited Lumbini for over a century, systematic tourist records have not been maintained until recently. The Lumbini Development Trust began recording passport-holding foreign tourists in 1994. Records for domestic, Indian, and other foreign tourists commenced after 2010. In 1996, foreign tourist arrivals in Lumbini increased by 26.85 percent.

The Ninth Five-Year Plan period was significant for excavating and identifying Lumbini's historical sites. During this period, an average of 13,228 foreign tourists visited annually. However, tourist arrivals experienced negative growth in all other years within the plan, except for 2000 A.D.

The Tenth Five-Year Plan period witnessed a substantial increase in foreign tourist arrivals. This surge was attributed to several factors, including the completion and reopening of the reconstructed Mayadevi Temple, hosting the World Buddhist Conference, and implementing the "Destination Nepal" campaign (2002-2003). During this period, the average annual foreign tourist arrival reached 45,227, with an average growth rate of 63.67 percent. The ratio of visitors to Lumbini was increasing each year. However, due to internal conflict, violence, and unlawful activities, international visitors were not encouraged to visit Lumbini and its peripheral area in the past. After the ceasefire of the Maoists, the flow of visitors has increased per year (Giri 174).

Following 2010, the Lumbini Development Trust began recording all domestic and foreign tourist arrivals. While the annual tourist arrival rate experienced a slight decrease during the Eleventh and Twelfth Five-Year Plans, the overall number of

domestic and foreign tourists continued to rise. During the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, despite a negative growth in tourist arrivals in 2015 due to the Madhesh movement and the Nepal earthquake, Lumbini averaged 1,074,709 visitors annually. In the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, Lumbini surpassed 1.5 million tourist arrivals for the first time.

The Government of Nepal’s “Visit Nepal Year 2020” and the Lumbini Provincial Government’s “Lumbini Visit Year 2019/2020” initiatives were anticipated to boost tourism further. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan severely impacted the global tourism sector, including Lumbini. Tourist arrivals in 2020 plummeted by 81.22 percent compared to 2019.

Nevertheless, Lumbini has witnessed a promising resurgence in tourist arrivals in the final year of the Fifteenth Five-Year Plan. This recovery is attributed to the diminishing impact of COVID-19 since 2021 and the implementation of promotional programs by both the government and private sector.

Table 2: Tourist Arrival in Lumbini and Average Annual Growth Rate (1994-2024)

Plan	Average No. of Tourist arrival	Annual Growth Rate
Eighth	22419	3.49
Ninth	13228	-12.75
Tenth	45277	63.68
Eleventh	88000	12.21
Twelfth	744228	14.05
Thirteenth	1074706	24.94
Fourteenth	1548347	7.05
Fifteenth	775917	19.7

Source: Lumbini Development Trust, 2024

B. Lumbini in Nepal’s Annual Policies and Programs

The Government of Nepal implements annual policies and programs aligned with its periodic plans. The annual budget is formulated following parliamentary approval of the government’s presented policy and program. Over the past decade, Lumbini has consistently been included in the government’s annual policies and programs.

The policy and program for the fiscal year 2014/15 established a target of completing the Lumbini Development Master Plan within the subsequent five years. However, a major earthquake at the end of that fiscal year significantly impacted numerous tourism programs. Consequently, the 2015/16 policy and program, focused on post-earthquake reconstruction, did not introduce new tourism initiatives. Instead, it emphasized international promotion to convey Nepal's safety to potential visitors.

In the fiscal year 2016/17, the government's annual policy and program emphasized identifying and developing new tourist destinations, enhancing infrastructure, implementing the ten-year national strategic tourism plan, celebrating 2018 as Visit Nepal Year and 2073 BS as Domestic Tourism Year, and integrating Lumbini with Pokhara and Damak within the international Buddhist circuit.

The fiscal year 2017/18 saw the inclusion of policies promoting religious tourism and continuing the development of religious sites, including Lumbini, Pashupati, and Janakpurdham. The 2018/19 policy and program focused on constructing tourism infrastructure, enhancing tourist-friendly services and facilities, and commissioning the Gautam Buddha Airport within the same year. The 2019/20 program emphasized completing and operationalizing the remaining work on the Gautam Buddha International Airport and launching the Visit Nepal Year 2020 campaign; however, both objectives were hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Lumbini region received significant priority in the 2020/21 policy and program. The government outlined policies to complete and operate a 5,000-capacity meditation center and assembly hall, implement the Greater Lumbini concept for regional expansion, execute the Ramgram Master Plan, and advance Tilaurakot's nomination for the UNESCO World Heritage List. Policies to develop Lumbini, Pashupati, and Janakpur as religious tourism hubs and to include Tilaurakot in the World Heritage List were reiterated in the 2021/22 and 2022/23 fiscal year programs.

The 2023/24 and 2024/25 federal policies and programs continued the previous years' tourism policies, emphasizing developing and promoting the Buddha Circuit as a religious-cultural circuit to expand the tourism network.

Table 3: Tourist Arrival in Lumbini and Average Annual Growth Rate (2014-2024)

Year / Nationality	Nepali	Indian	PP holder	Total	Annual growth rate (%)
2014	902621	154216	133308	1190145	40.13

2015	488852	130262	129180	748294	-37.12
2016	1015158	134269	136253	1285680	71.81
2017	1251346	155444	145814	1552604	20.761
2018	1170571	193635	169904	1534110	-1.19
2019	1178140	206171	174015	1558326	1.57
2020	210033	37206	45329	292568	-81.22
2021	463963	43732	1197	508892	73.93
2022	649078	230863	23942	903883	77.61
2023	656218	266510	76210	998938	10.51
2024	759990	300889	114425	1175304	17.65

Source: Lumbini Development Trust, 2024

Conclusion

Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautam Buddha, holds profound religious significance for Buddhists worldwide and serves as a vital historical and religious site in Nepal. Rediscovered in 1896 after a long period of obscurity, Lumbini suffered from state neglect for the subsequent 70 years, hindering its excavation, conservation, development, and promotion. While planned development in Nepal commenced in 1956, Lumbini was not initially prioritized.

The government began integrating Lumbini and other Buddhist heritage sites into its periodic development plans and annual policies as international interest in Lumbini grew. Until the Seventh Plan, emphasis was primarily placed on excavation and site promotion. Post-Panchayat system plans shifted towards promoting tourism in Lumbini. The focus on excavation, conservation, development, and tourism promotion of the greater Lumbini area in plans implemented after 2000 has contributed to a steady increase in tourist arrivals. Furthermore, Lumbini has benefited from all government-led tourism year campaigns and state tourism policies.

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