

Sustainable Religious Tourism: Unlocking the Potential of Buddhist Heritage in Pakistan

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Abstract:

This study looks at how Pakistan can promote sustainable religious tourism by making better use of its Buddhist World Heritage Sites, especially Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi. To explore this, the research combines different methods such as literature review, case studies, surveys, and interviews with key stakeholders. The aim is to understand both the opportunities and the challenges in positioning Pakistan as part of the global Buddhist pilgrimage network. The findings show that there is strong international interest, particularly from countries with large Buddhist populations. However, several barriers hold back progress, including poor infrastructure, weak branding, and fragmented policies. By learning from successful global practices, the paper suggests that developing sustainable Buddhist religious tourism in Pakistan could not only boost the economy but also help preserve cultural heritage and strengthen international cultural ties.

Keywords: Religious Tourism; Buddhist Heritage; Sustainable Tourism; Gandhara Civilization; Pakistan

1. Introduction:

Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing industries globally, contributing to cultural exchange, job creation, and economic growth. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019), international tourist arrivals exceeded 1.5 billion in 2019, generating revenues of over USD 1.7 trillion. Among the many forms of tourism, religious tourism is one which involves journeys to sacred places for spiritual, cultural, or heritage purposes and remains one of the oldest and most resilient form of tourism. Each year, more than 300 million people travel for religious reasons, making pilgrimage one of the largest global tourism sectors (Raj & Morpeth, 2007).

In this context, Buddhist tourism is emerging as a vibrant and fast-growing sector. With nearly 520 million followers worldwide, Buddhism carries a long and deeply rooted tradition of pilgrimage, making heritage sites especially meaningful for spiritual travelers. Sites associated with the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha such as Lumbini in Nepal, Bodhi Gaya and Sarnath in India, and Kushinagar forms part of the core Buddhist circuit, drawing millions of pilgrims and cultural tourists annually (Keown, 2013). Other destinations, including Borobudur Temple in Indonesia, Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar, and the Temple of the Tooth in Sri Lanka, highlight how Buddhist heritage can be integrated into thriving tourism industries (Wijesinghe, 2015).

In the global landscape of Buddhist tourism, Pakistan remains largely overlooked, even though it holds one of the richest and most remarkable Buddhist legacies in the world. The Gandhara

civilization, thriving between the 1st and 5th centuries CE, stood as a vibrant hub of Buddhist thought, art, and architecture, leaving behind a legacy that still inspires the world today. The influence of Gandhara reached far beyond its borders, shaping Buddhist traditions in China, Korea, and Japan. Today, sites like Taxila in Punjab and Takht-i-Bahi in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which are both UNESCO World Heritage Sites containing many stupas and monasteries scattered across Swat and Gilgit-Baltistan, stand as living reminders of the region's profound historical and cultural significance. Yet, unlike India or Nepal, Pakistan has struggled to position these sites within global Buddhist pilgrimage routes, leaving much of its rich heritage under recognized.

A number of factors help explain why this rich potential remains underused. Infrastructure deficiencies including limited transport, inadequate accommodation, and lack of visitor facilities have restricted tourist flows (Ali & Parveen, 2019). Because of weak marketing and branding, Pakistan's Buddhist heritage remains largely invisible to international pilgrims. In contrast, India has developed a well-promoted "Buddhist Circuit" that attracts millions annually (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Security perceptions and restrictive visa processes further discourage international tourists (Kazmi, 2017). At the policy level, heritage conservation and tourism development are divided among multiple agencies, leading to fragmented and uncoordinated efforts.

The challenge deepens with sustainability concerns, as tourism can bring much-needed revenue but also risks damaging fragile archaeological sites, offering lessons of both inspiration and caution from global heritage destinations. For instance, Borobudur in Indonesia demonstrates that sacred and touristic functions can coexist under strong management frameworks (Wijesinghe, 2015). Conversely, Machu Picchu in Peru and Angkor Wat in Cambodia show how uncontrolled growth can jeopardize cultural authenticity and conservation (Winter, 2008; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006).

Pakistan's Buddhist heritage presents both a challenge and an opportunity its underdevelopment has shielded many sites from the harms of mass tourism, yet also restricted their cultural and economic potential, making sustainable religious tourism a path to preservation, community empowerment, and a stronger global image. Moreover, Buddhist tourism could serve as a tool of cultural diplomacy, strengthening ties with Buddhist-majority nations such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, South Korea, and China, all of which share historical links to Gandhara (Wijesinghe, 2015).

This study aims to examine how Pakistan can unlock the potential of its Buddhist heritage through sustainable religious tourism. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Assess opportunities and challenges in promoting Buddhist heritage sites as international tourism destinations.
2. Analyze how sustainability principles can be applied to balance heritage preservation with tourism growth.
3. Evaluate the role of Buddhist tourism in fostering cultural diplomacy and enhancing Pakistan's global image.

A mixed-methods approach—including literature review, case study comparisons, surveys of domestic and international audiences, and stakeholder interviews—was employed to address these objectives. The findings suggest that while significant obstacles exist, there is also strong potential for Pakistan to reposition itself as a vital participant in the global Buddhist pilgrimage network. Ultimately, this paper argues that sustainable religious tourism offers Pakistan a pathway to transform its Buddhist heritage from an underutilized cultural asset into a driver of economic growth, intercultural dialogue, and international goodwill.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Religious Tourism: Global Perspectives

Religious tourism—often called pilgrimage tourism—remains one of the oldest and most enduring ways people have traveled across the world. Scholars define it as journeys motivated primarily by faith, spirituality, or cultural identity (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). However, pilgrimage sites increasingly attract secular travelers interested in architecture, history, and heritage (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

Globally, more than 300 million people travel annually for religious purposes, making it a multi-billion-dollar industry (UNWTO, 2019). Religious tourism is more than just travel—it helps shape a country’s image and fosters cultural diplomacy. As Olsen and Timothy (2006) observe, sacred sites often serve as “arenas of intercultural exchange,” creating spaces where diverse groups can meet and engage in dialogue. In regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe, governments have used pilgrimage destinations not only for economic gain but also for heritage preservation and soft power projection (Eade & Sallnow, 2000).

2.2. Buddhist Tourism and Pilgrimage

Buddhism, with over 520 million adherents worldwide, has cultivated one of the most extensive pilgrimage traditions. The “Four Holy Sites” of Lumbini (Nepal), Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar (India) form the heart of Buddhist pilgrimage, while sites such as Borobudur (Indonesia), Shwedagon Pagoda (Myanmar), and the Temple of the Tooth (Sri Lanka) demonstrate how Buddhist heritage can underpin thriving tourism economies (Keown, 2013; Wijesinghe, 2015). Scholars highlight that Buddhist pilgrimage sites are multifunctional, catering not only to religious devotees but also to heritage tourists, scholars, and casual visitors (Cohen, 1992). As Shackley (2001) highlights, successful Buddhist tourism depends on careful visitor management, with infrastructure, interpretation, and policies that balance economic benefits with the preservation of spiritual authenticity.

2.3. Heritage Tourism and Sustainability

Heritage tourism, closely linked to religious tourism, involves travel to sites of cultural, historic, or symbolic significance. According to Timothy and Boyd (2003), heritage tourism enhances cultural identity, generates economic opportunities, and fosters education. Yet it also faces sustainability challenges. Goeldner and Ritchie (2006) caution that over-commercialization may erode authenticity, while excessive visitation risks damaging fragile monuments.

The concept of **sustainable religious tourism** integrates three pillars:

- **Cultural preservation**, ensuring heritage remains intact for future generations (Olsen, 2006).
- **Economic benefits**, where local communities gain livelihoods from tourism (Raj & Griffin, 2015).
- **Community participation**, involving residents as stakeholders in tourism planning (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Case studies provide useful lessons. Machu Picchu in Peru generates vast revenue but faces overcrowding and degradation, prompting UNESCO warnings (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). Angkor Wat in Cambodia demonstrates the risks of excessive commercialization, where heritage has been overshadowed by mass tourism (Winter, 2008). By contrast, Borobudur illustrates a more balanced approach, integrating religious ceremonies with tourism while retaining spiritual value (Wijesinghe, 2015).

2.4. Pakistan’s Buddhist Heritage

Pakistan’s Buddhist legacy is concentrated in the Gandhara region, which flourished from the 1st to 5th centuries CE. Sites such as **Taxila**, **Takht-i-Bahi**, and the stupas of Swat reflect a fusion of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian traditions, producing a distinctive Gandhara art style (Behrendt, 2004). These sites played a pivotal role in transmitting Buddhism to Central and East Asia, influencing Buddhist traditions in China, Korea, and Japan (Marshall, 1951; Dani, 1986). Despite its global significance, Pakistan has struggled to harness its Buddhist heritage for tourism due to poor

infrastructure, weak branding, limited promotion, and security concerns. Although rich in Buddhist heritage, Pakistan has yet to unlock its tourism potential, held back by weak infrastructure, limited promotion, poor branding, and security challenges

2.5. Opportunities for Sustainable Development

Several scholars emphasize that Pakistan has significant potential to integrate its Buddhist heritage into regional and global circuits. Wijesinghe (2015) notes rising interest among Sri Lanka, Thailand, and South Korea in Gandhara sites, viewing them as vital to the early Buddhist world. With an estimated 2.9 million international Buddhists expressing potential interest in visiting Pakistan (Gallup survey cited in Ali & Parveen, 2019), the economic potential is substantial. Beyond economics, Buddhist tourism can foster **cultural diplomacy**. Olsen (2006) argues that sacred heritage can function as a soft power tool, enabling states to project pluralism and inclusivity. For Pakistan, promoting Gandhara heritage offers a means of countering negative global perceptions and strengthening diplomatic ties with Asian partners.

2.6. Challenges in Implementation

Nevertheless, challenges remain significant. Infrastructure gaps, including poor road networks and lack of visitor amenities, limit accessibility (Ali & Parveen, 2019). Policy fragmentation between federal and provincial departments hampers coordination. International perceptions of insecurity and restrictive visa regimes deter potential visitors (Kazmi, 2017). Moreover, local communities often derive minimal benefit from heritage sites, weakening incentives for preservation (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Conservation challenges are also pressing. Encroachment, neglect, and environmental degradation threaten many Gandhara sites (UNESCO, 1980). Without sustainability frameworks, increased tourism could exacerbate these risks, replicating the problems faced by Machu Picchu and Angkor Wat.

2.7. Conceptual Framework

Drawing from the literature, a framework for **sustainable symbiosis** between religious tourism and heritage management can be proposed. This includes:

- Integrating conservation with tourism planning.
- Engaging communities as active stakeholders.
- Leveraging heritage for international cultural diplomacy.
- Learning from best practices such as Borobudur's balanced model.

This framework will guide the analysis of Pakistan's potential role within global Buddhist tourism.

3. Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods approach** to explore how Pakistan can develop sustainable religious tourism based on its Buddhist heritage. The design was structured in three phases.

Phase 1: Literature Review and Case Studies.

An extensive review of academic literature on religious tourism, heritage management, and sustainability was conducted. Global case studies, including Borobudur (Indonesia), Angkor Wat (Cambodia), and Machu Picchu (Peru), were examined to identify best practices and lessons relevant to Pakistan (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006; Wijesinghe, 2015).

Phase 2: Surveys.

Two structured surveys were conducted. The **domestic survey** (n = 142) targeted Pakistani respondents to assess awareness, visitation patterns, and perceptions of Buddhist sites. The **international survey** (n = 75) focused on Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Korea, Vietnam, and China, investigating interest in visiting Pakistan, perceived barriers, and expectations. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends.

Phase 3: Stakeholder Interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with officials from archaeology, tourism, and government sectors. These explored institutional perspectives on opportunities, challenges, and policy gaps. Responses were thematically analyzed to identify recurring issues such as infrastructure deficits, weak marketing, and preservation concerns. By triangulating data from surveys, interviews, and literature, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities in developing sustainable Buddhist tourism in Pakistan. This approach ensures both quantitative insights into demand and qualitative perspectives on institutional and policy contexts.

4. Findings

The findings of this research are based on three key sources: (i) domestic and international surveys, (ii) stakeholder interviews, and (iii) comparative analysis of global case studies. Collectively, they highlight the untapped opportunities and structural barriers to developing sustainable religious tourism around Pakistan's Buddhist heritage.

4.1. Domestic Survey Results

The domestic survey (n = 142) revealed that awareness of Pakistan's Buddhist heritage is **moderate but shallow**. A majority of respondents (66%) recognized that Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi are associated with Buddhism, yet fewer than 30% had visited these sites independently. The majority of visits occurred through **school or college trips**, framing heritage engagement more as an educational obligation than a tourism activity. This confirms Timothy and Boyd's (2003) observation that heritage sites in many contexts are treated primarily as academic resources rather than vibrant tourism destinations. Economic participation at these sites was notably low. More than half of respondents (56%) reported that they had **never purchased souvenirs, food, or other services** during visits. This finding illustrates the underdevelopment of local tourism economies, echoing Ali and Parveen's (2019) argument that Pakistan's religious tourism potential is undermined by weak infrastructure and minimal community integration.

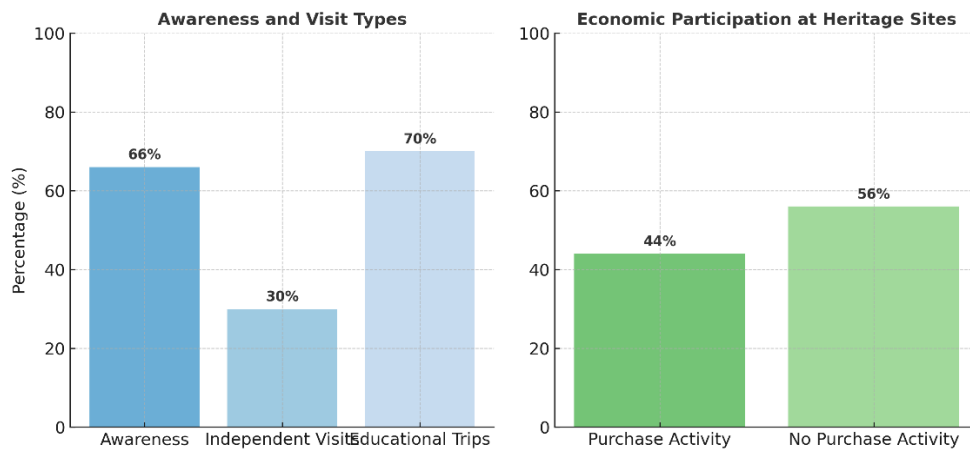


Figure 1: Domestic Survey Insights on Buddhist Heritage Awareness and Tourism Engagement in Pakistan.

Visitors also pointed to inadequate **visitor facilities**, including rest areas, restaurants, signage, and interpretive materials. Respondents indicated that the absence of trained guides or multilingual information further limited their ability to engage with the spiritual and cultural value of these sites. This suggests that Buddhist heritage in Pakistan lacks the visitor-centered infrastructure necessary for sustainable tourism.

4.2. International Survey Results

The international survey (n = 75), which included Buddhists from Sri Lanka, South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Thailand, revealed both **latent interest and significant barriers**. While 41% of respondents expressed potential interest in visiting Pakistan's Buddhist sites, a majority (59%) indicated they had **no current plans** to do so.

The most frequently cited barriers included:

- **Security concerns** (72%), reflecting persistent global perceptions of Pakistan as an unsafe destination.
- **Restrictive visa policies** (65%), which made travel planning difficult.
- **Lack of awareness** (54%) about Pakistan's Buddhist heritage, as most respondents were unaware that UNESCO-listed sites such as Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi exist.

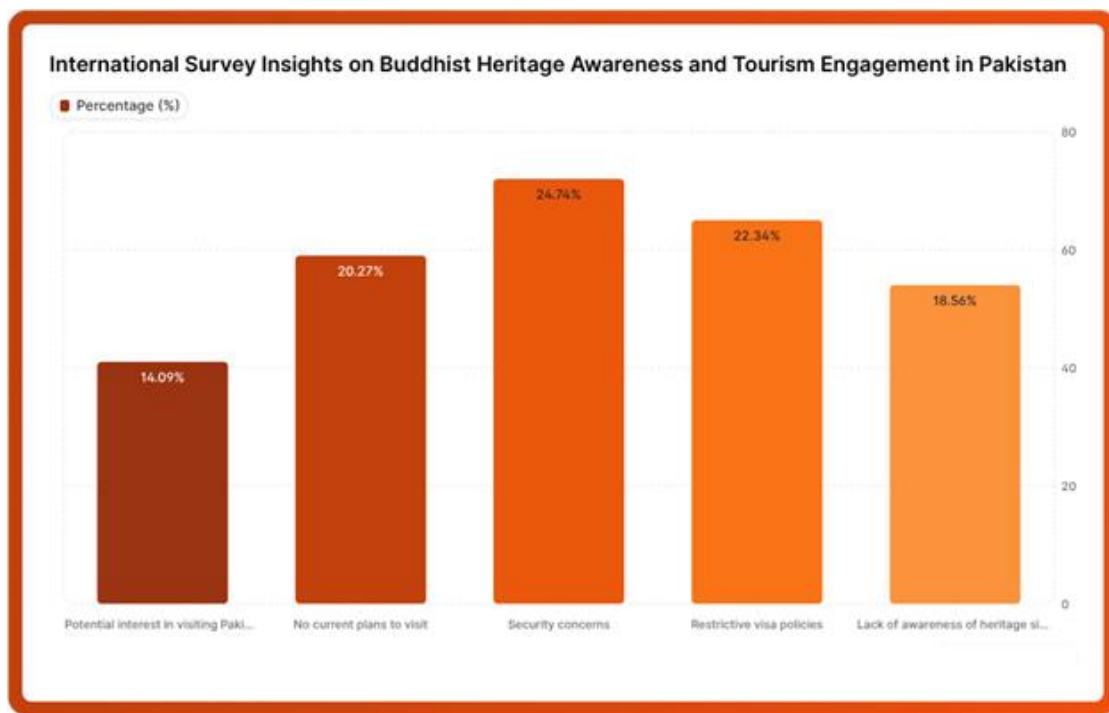


Figure 2: International Survey Insights on Buddhist Heritage Awareness and Tourism Engagement in Pakistan.

Despite these challenges, international respondents acknowledged the historical and spiritual value of Gandhara. Several participants noted that visiting Taxila or Takht-i-Bahi would provide a unique opportunity to connect with the early expansion of Buddhism into Central and East Asia. This finding suggests that Pakistan could play a distinct role in completing the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit, provided barriers are addressed. This aligns with Wijesinghe's (2015) argument that Buddhist-majority nations in South and East Asia regard Gandhara as essential to Buddhist history but remain deterred by access and image issues.

4.3. Stakeholder Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with officials from archaeology, tourism, and government sectors reinforced survey findings and provided institutional insights.

- **Tourism authorities** admitted that Pakistan has not actively marketed its Buddhist heritage internationally. They pointed to weak coordination between federal and provincial bodies, limited budgets, and insufficient branding as reasons for low visibility.
- **Archaeologists and conservation experts** highlighted preservation concerns, noting that sites face threats from encroachment, vandalism, and environmental degradation. However, they also recognized that carefully managed tourism could generate much-needed revenue for conservation.
- **Government officials** acknowledged policy gaps, particularly the fragmentation of responsibilities across departments. Heritage conservation often falls under archaeology departments, while tourism promotion is managed by separate bodies. This division has led to uncoordinated and underfunded initiatives.

A recurring theme was the **absence of community involvement**. Local populations living near

Buddhist sites derive minimal economic benefit from tourism, resulting in limited incentives to support conservation. This finding resonates with Timothy and Boyd's (2003) and Raj and Griffin's (2015) arguments that sustainable heritage tourism requires direct community participation and benefit-sharing.

4.4. Comparative Insights from Case Studies

The comparative analysis of global heritage sites provides a useful lens for interpreting Pakistan's challenges and opportunities.

- **Borobudur (Indonesia)** demonstrates that spiritual sanctity and tourism can coexist when strong management frameworks are in place. With millions of annual visitors, Borobudur integrates religious functions and tourist experiences, offering lessons for Pakistan (Wijesinghe, 2015).
- **Angkor Wat (Cambodia)** illustrates the risks of over-commercialization, where mass tourism has led to overcrowding, heritage erosion, and diluted authenticity (Winter, 2008).
- **Machu Picchu (Peru)** reflects the challenges of balancing economic benefits with site preservation, as rising tourist numbers have placed pressure on fragile ecosystems and monuments (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006).

Pakistan's Buddhist sites share commonalities with these global examples. Like Borobudur, Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi hold the potential to become international pilgrimage centers. However, without a sustainability framework, they risk facing the negative consequences observed at Angkor Wat and Machu Picchu.

4.5. Synthesis of Findings

Three overarching insights emerge from the findings:

1. **Awareness without Engagement:** While Pakistanis are aware of Buddhist heritage, it is not integrated into mainstream tourism or local economies. This suggests a missed opportunity to position heritage as a source of cultural pride and livelihood.
2. **International Potential Undermined by Barriers:** Global interest exists, particularly among Buddhist-majority countries, but is constrained by security perceptions, visa restrictions, and lack of promotion. This confirms Kazmi's (2017) argument that Pakistan's broader tourism industry suffers from image and access challenges.
3. **Institutional Fragmentation:** Stakeholders acknowledged that fragmented policies, inadequate funding, and weak interdepartmental coordination hinder heritage tourism. Without integrated strategies, Buddhist tourism in Pakistan will remain underdeveloped.

These findings suggest that Pakistan stands at a crossroads. With strategic investment in infrastructure, branding, and policy reform, Gandhara sites could be repositioned within the global Buddhist circuit. However, without sustainability safeguards, increased tourism risks undermining heritage preservation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight both the **immense potential** and the **systemic challenges** in developing sustainable religious tourism around Pakistan's Buddhist heritage. When interpreted against global scholarship and comparative case studies, three central themes emerge: the gap

between awareness and engagement, the influence of perception and policy, and the need for a sustainability-oriented framework.

5.1. Awareness Without Engagement

Domestic survey results reveal that while Pakistanis are moderately aware of Buddhist heritage, this awareness has not translated into meaningful engagement or economic participation. Visits are largely confined to educational trips, with limited spending or cultural interaction. This aligns with Timothy and Boyd's (2003) observation that heritage sites in underdeveloped tourism contexts are often framed as static academic resources rather than vibrant cultural hubs. Without facilities, interpretive materials, and economic opportunities, local communities lack incentives to participate in heritage preservation. Raj and Griffin (2015) emphasize that sustainable religious tourism requires communities to be active stakeholders, benefiting economically from tourism and engaging in conservation.

5.2. International Potential Constrained by Perceptions

The international survey results underline a paradox: global Buddhists recognize Gandhara's historical importance, yet perceptions of insecurity, restrictive visa regimes, and lack of awareness act as deterrents. These findings echo Kazmi's (2017) analysis that Pakistan's tourism sector is undermined not by absence of attractions but by image and access issues. Lessons from South Asia demonstrate that perceptions can be transformed. India's promotion of the "Buddhist Circuit" has positioned it as a global pilgrimage hub, despite infrastructural challenges (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). Similarly, Nepal has successfully marketed Lumbini as the birthplace of the Buddha, leveraging its spiritual significance to attract global pilgrims (Wijesinghe, 2015). Pakistan could emulate these approaches by branding Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi as central to Buddhist heritage while addressing security perceptions through cultural diplomacy and international collaboration.

5.3. Institutional Fragmentation and Policy Gaps

Stakeholder interviews revealed institutional fragmentation, with heritage conservation and tourism promotion divided between multiple agencies. This echoes Olsen and Timothy's (2006) argument that sustainable religious tourism requires interdisciplinary coordination, integrating archaeologists, conservationists, policymakers, and marketers. Without unified strategies, Pakistan risks either neglecting its Buddhist heritage or over-commercializing it without sustainability safeguards. Archaeologists' concerns about preservation are valid, as increased visitation without proper frameworks can damage fragile monuments. The experience of Angkor Wat in Cambodia illustrates the risks of uncontrolled growth, where mass tourism eroded authenticity and strained infrastructure (Winter, 2008). Conversely, Borobudur in Indonesia demonstrates that balanced management—combining spiritual sanctity with tourism—can create a sustainable model (Wijesinghe, 2015). Pakistan must learn from both examples: promoting access while safeguarding authenticity.

5.4. Toward a Sustainable Symbiosis

The findings suggest that Pakistan must pursue a **sustainable symbiosis** between tourism growth and heritage preservation. This requires:

- **Infrastructure investment** in roads, accommodation, signage, and interpretive centers.
- **Visa and branding reforms** to reposition Pakistan as a Buddhist-friendly destination.

- **Community participation**, ensuring locals benefit from tourism through employment, crafts, and services (Raj & Griffin, 2015).
- **Policy integration**, bringing together conservation and tourism authorities under a unified framework.

If implemented, this approach could transform Pakistan's Buddhist sites from underutilized assets into international pilgrimage centers. Beyond economics, it could serve as a tool of **cultural diplomacy**, strengthening Pakistan's ties with Buddhist-majority nations and projecting an image of pluralism and inclusivity (Ali & Parveen, 2019).

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Pakistan's Buddhist heritage, particularly the Gandhara sites of Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi, holds immense potential for sustainable religious tourism. The findings indicate that while domestic awareness exists, engagement remains minimal, with most visits limited to educational excursions. International interest is substantial, especially from Buddhist-majority nations such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and South Korea, yet barriers including security perceptions, restrictive visa policies, and weak branding continue to deter visitation (Kazmi, 2017; Ali & Parveen, 2019). Stakeholder insights further reveal institutional fragmentation, insufficient funding, and lack of coordinated strategies, echoing Olsen and Timothy's (2006) observation that fragmented governance often undermines religious tourism development.

Global case studies highlight important lessons. Borobudur in Indonesia demonstrates that sacredness and tourism can coexist when supported by strong management, while Angkor Wat in Cambodia illustrates the dangers of unchecked commercialization, where heritage authenticity has been compromised (Wijesinghe, 2015; Winter, 2008). For Pakistan, the challenge lies in navigating between these two extremes—promoting access while ensuring sustainability.

To achieve this, several **policy recommendations** emerge:

1. **Integrated Policy Framework** – Conservation and tourism must be aligned under a unified national strategy, bridging federal and provincial agencies (Olsen & Timothy, 2006).
2. **Infrastructure Development** – Roads, visitor centers, signage, and multilingual interpretation should be prioritized to enhance accessibility and visitor experience.
3. **Visa and Security Reforms** – Simplifying visa processes and promoting Pakistan's improved security image through global campaigns will attract international pilgrims (Kazmi, 2017).
4. **Community Participation** – Local communities should be empowered to benefit through handicrafts, guiding, and hospitality services, ensuring tourism revenue is equitably distributed (Raj & Griffin, 2015).
5. **International Branding** – Pakistan should actively promote its Buddhist heritage as part of the global pilgrimage circuit, leveraging cultural diplomacy to strengthen ties with Buddhist-majority nations (Ali & Parveen, 2019).

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a pivotal moment. By embedding sustainability into its religious tourism strategy, it can transform Gandhara heritage from an underutilized cultural asset into a driver of economic growth, cultural diplomacy, and global goodwill. Sustainable Buddhist tourism offers not only economic dividends but also an opportunity for Pakistan to project an image of pluralism, inclusivity, and shared heritage on the world stage.

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