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Religious Tourism and Cultural Heritage Preservation: A Sociocultural Analysis of Pilgrimage Sites in South and Southeast Asia

Anand Mohan Tripathi [1], **Fatimah Az-Zahra Sulaiman** [2] **Tahmid Rahman Chowdhury**[3,]

1 *Department of Anthropology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi 221005, India*
2 *Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Ciputat 15412, Banten, Indonesia*
3 *Department of Anthropology, University of Dhaka, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh*

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***Corresponding author:**
a.tripathi@bhu.ac.in

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A B S T R A C T

Religious tourism has grown rapidly across South and Southeast Asia, generating substantial economic benefits while raising urgent questions about cultural authenticity, community welfare, and heritage preservation. Drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2022 and March 2024 at six pilgrimage sites — Varanasi and Bodh Gaya in India, Borobudur and Prambanan in Indonesia, the Shah Jalal Dargah in Sylhet (Bangladesh), and Angkor Wat in Cambodia for comparative purposes — this study analyses the sociocultural dynamics that shape contemporary pilgrimage and the conditions under which heritage preservation succeeds or fails. The qualitative inquiry combines 90 semi-structured interviews with pilgrims, 45 with heritage and tourism stakeholders, sustained participant observation, and analysis of management plans, government policies, and UNESCO documentation. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four overarching themes: (1) ongoing negotiations between sacred and profane uses of pilgrimage space; (2) tensions between economic benefit and perceived cultural erosion; (3) community agency and resistance to top-down management; and (4) the role of governance frameworks in shaping outcomes. The study contributes to pilgrimage and heritage scholarship by providing a directly comparative multi-site account, by extending Victor Turner's communitas framework and Eade and Sallnow's contested-space framework into 21st-century mass pilgrimage, and by translating findings into policy recommendations for sustainable religious tourism management.

Keywords: Religious tourism; pilgrimage; cultural heritage; sociocultural analysis; sustainable tourism management; South Asia; Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

Religious tourism is among the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, encompassing an estimated 600 million international and domestic journeys annually undertaken for primarily devotional purposes (UNWTO, 2023). South and Southeast Asia, home to major centres of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian pilgrimage, occupy a particularly important position in this global landscape. Varanasi has received pilgrims for more than three millennia and now welcomes an estimated 8 million visitors per year. Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, hosts pilgrims from across the Buddhist world. The Indonesian temple complexes of Borobudur and Prambanan, both UNESCO World Heritage Sites, attract visitors with intersecting cultural, religious, and touristic motivations. The Shah Jalal Dargah in Sylhet is among the most important Sufi shrines in the Bengali-speaking world. Angkor Wat, while no longer a primary pilgrimage destination in the traditional sense, retains profound religious significance for Cambodian Buddhists and Hindus across the Indian Ocean diaspora.

The growth of religious tourism brings both opportunities and challenges. Economic benefits include employment for guides, hospitality workers, vendors, and transport providers; revenue for local and national authorities; and investment in conservation. At the same time, mass tourism can produce stress on physical sites, displacement of traditional ritual practices, commodification of sacred objects, and tensions between pilgrim and tourist expectations. The literature on religious tourism, while

substantial, has tended to focus on individual sites or on macro-level statistical analyses, with comparative ethnographic accounts comparatively rare. The present study addresses this gap by providing comparative multi-site evidence on the sociocultural dynamics of pilgrimage and heritage preservation in South and Southeast Asia.

Three research questions guide the analysis. RQ1: How do pilgrims, residents, and other stakeholders negotiate the multiple uses of pilgrimage space, particularly the tension between religious devotion and tourist consumption? RQ2: How are the economic benefits of religious tourism distributed, and what perceptions of cultural change accompany this distribution? RQ3: What governance frameworks and community practices contribute to successful heritage preservation, and what conditions undermine such efforts? The study contributes in four ways: (i) it provides one of the few directly comparative multi-site ethnographies of major Asian pilgrimage destinations; (ii) it extends pilgrimage theory by engaging both Turnerian communitas and Eade-Sallnow contested-space accounts in light of contemporary algorithmically mediated mass tourism; (iii) it integrates pilgrim, stakeholder, and policy perspectives within a single framework; and (iv) it derives policy recommendations grounded in empirical observation.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature. Section 3 details the ethnographic research design and analytical strategy. Section 4 presents the four overarching themes and their site-specific manifestations. Section 5 discusses theoretical and policy implications. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pilgrimage scholarship: communitas to contested space

Pilgrimage scholarship has developed across several intersecting theoretical traditions. Victor Turner's (1973; Turner and Turner, 1978) influential analysis cast pilgrimage as a liminal experience in which everyday social structures are temporarily suspended in favour of communitas — a shared bond of equality and spiritual orientation among pilgrims. Turner's framework emphasised the transformative potential of pilgrimage and its role in religious solidarity. Eade and Sallnow (1991), in their edited volume Contesting the Sacred, offered an influential corrective: pilgrimage sites are best understood as contested spaces in which multiple religious, political, and economic actors pursue divergent agendas, and the meaning of pilgrimage emerges from these contests rather than from any underlying unity. MacCannell's (1976) analysis of the tourist gaze and Urry's (2002) subsequent development of the concept provide complementary tools for understanding how the tourist mode of attention interacts with religious devotion.

More recent scholarship has built on these foundations to develop frameworks attentive to globalisation, media mediation, and the political economy of heritage. Reader (2014) traced the worldwide expansion of pilgrimage in the contemporary era; Stausberg (2011) examined the entanglement of religion and tourism; Coleman and Eade (2018) developed approaches that consider pilgrimage as both sacred journey and material practice. Within Asia, scholarship by Bhardwaj (1973), Singh (2018), Tan and Wijesinghe (2020), and Hochwartner (2022) has examined specific sites in considerable depth. The present study draws on these traditions while contributing comparative multi-site material that allows examination of patterns across cultural and religious boundaries.

2.2 Heritage tourism and the politics of preservation

Heritage tourism scholarship intersects with pilgrimage studies at multiple points. Smith (2006) and Timothy and Boyd (2003) provided foundational treatments of heritage tourism, emphasising the constructed nature of heritage and the political dynamics through which particular pasts are made authoritative. Critical heritage studies, exemplified by the work of Smith (2006), Harrison (2013), and

Logan and Reeves (2009), has problematised the assumption that heritage preservation is an apolitical technical exercise, arguing instead that decisions about what to preserve, how to preserve it, and for whom are deeply political. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention, while a powerful instrument of international recognition, has been critiqued for privileging monumental and visual heritage over living cultural practices (Labadi, 2013).

Empirical work on heritage management in South and Southeast Asia has revealed both successes and ongoing tensions. The Borobudur conservation project, initiated by UNESCO in the 1970s, is often cited as a major heritage success. The management of Varanasi has been more contested, with the recent Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project reorganising the spatial fabric around the principal temple in ways that have drawn both praise and criticism. The Angkor Wat conservation programme, initially supported by an international consortium and now coordinated by the Apsara National Authority, has produced substantial improvements in conservation while raising questions about community displacement. The Shah Jalal Dargah, while less heavily mediated by international heritage frameworks, has been the focus of local debates about modernisation and tradition.

2.3 Research gap

Three gaps in the existing literature motivate the present study. First, comparative ethnographic analysis across multiple sites and religious traditions is uncommon; most pilgrimage ethnographies focus on single sites or single traditions, limiting the development of cross-cultural insights. Second, the integration of pilgrim, stakeholder, and policy perspectives within a single analytical framework is rare; existing work tends to privilege one perspective. Third, contemporary scholarship has insufficiently engaged the role of digital media and algorithmic curation in shaping pilgrimage practice, despite the growing role of social media in advertising, route planning, and post-visit narration of sacred journeys. The present study addresses these gaps through a multi-site comparative design and explicit attention to the contemporary mediation of pilgrimage.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research design is a qualitative multi-sited ethnography, drawing on Marcus's (1995) methodological framework for following circulating cultural objects and meanings across multiple settings. The 18-month fieldwork period (September 2022 to March 2024) was distributed across six sites: Varanasi (4 months), Bodh Gaya (2 months), Borobudur and Prambanan (4 months, jointly), the Shah Jalal Dargah in Sylhet (3 months), and Angkor Wat (3 months, for comparative perspective). The principal researcher and a team of two assistant researchers conducted the fieldwork, with site-specific cultural and linguistic competencies informing the assignment of personnel.

3.2 Data sources

Data sources included three principal streams. First, 90 semi-structured interviews with pilgrims sampled to capture variation in country of origin, age, gender, religious tradition, and frequency of pilgrimage; interviews lasted 35-90 minutes and were conducted in the respondent's preferred language. Second, 45 interviews with heritage and tourism stakeholders, including site managers, religious authorities, conservators, local government officials, tour operators, hospitality workers, and community representatives. Third, sustained participant observation in ritual settings, hospitality establishments, and management contexts. A fourth supplementary stream consisted of document analysis covering UNESCO management plans, national tourism policies, archaeological reports, and media coverage.

3.3 Analytical strategy and trustworthiness

Analytical strategy followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic approach, conducted across all data sources in NVivo 14. Initial coding generated approximately 240 first-order codes that

were subsequently refined into 28 second-order categories and four overarching themes. Member checking with selected interviewees enhanced the trustworthiness of interpretations. A reflexive research diary maintained by each fieldworker documented positionality, evolving interpretations, and analytical decisions. Triangulation across interview, observational, and documentary data sources strengthened the analytical claims. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review boards of the three principal authors' institutions, and informed consent procedures were adapted to the cultural settings of each site.

3.4 Researcher positionality

Researcher positionality merits explicit acknowledgement. The principal author, a Hindu scholar from north India, brought particular reflexive sensitivities to the Varanasi and Bodh Gaya fieldwork; the second author, an Indonesian Muslim scholar from Jakarta, led the Borobudur, Prambanan, and Shah Jalal components; the third author, a Bangladeshi scholar of mixed religious heritage, contributed cross-cultural perspective throughout. The diversity of researcher backgrounds was treated as an analytical resource, with regular team meetings used to surface assumptions and to triangulate interpretations.

4. Results

4.1 Sacred-profane negotiations

The first overarching theme, sacred-profane negotiations, captured the ways in which pilgrims, residents, and visitors navigated the multiple meanings of pilgrimage space. At Varanasi, where ghats accommodate ritual bathing, cremation, and tourist photography in close juxtaposition, daily negotiations between sacred and profane uses were constant. A 64-year-old pilgrim from Mathura described his unease at the proliferation of selfie-taking tourists during the morning rituals: 'I have come here to wash away my sins, not to be the background of a holiday photograph.' At Borobudur, the introduction of high-priced timed entry tickets for the upper stupa terraces in 2023 attempted to balance heritage protection with religious access; reaction among Indonesian Buddhists has been mixed, with some welcoming the protective intent and others objecting to the financial barrier to ritual access. The Shah Jalal Dargah hosts simultaneous devotional, social, and commercial activities, with the boundary between sacred and profane often negotiated through architectural threshold rituals.

4.2 Economic stakes and cultural erosion

The second overarching theme, economic stakes and cultural erosion, captured tensions between the economic benefits brought by religious tourism and concerns about cultural authenticity. Local interview participants in all sites acknowledged the income, employment, and infrastructure benefits associated with tourist flows, while expressing concerns about the displacement of traditional crafts by mass-produced souvenirs, the inflation of land prices around sacred sites, and the encroachment of commercial signage and lighting on ritual spaces. A 41-year-old shopkeeper near the Varanasi ghats observed: 'I sell more pieces now than my grandfather did in a year. But the carving traditions in my family are weakening.' At Angkor Wat, debates about the relocation of villages from within the protected zone have generated sustained controversy, with some residents expressing economic gratitude for new housing while others lament the loss of ancestral landscape relationships.

4.3 Community agency and resistance

The third overarching theme, community agency and resistance, captured the active responses of local communities to top-down management decisions. At Varanasi, neighbourhood associations have organised both in support of and opposition to the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project; the discussion has surfaced tensions between modernisation, religious accessibility, and the preservation of dense built heritage. At Bodh Gaya, monastic communities have negotiated assertively with government and corporate actors over the management of the temple complex. In Sylhet, descendants of Shah Jalal's

original murid lineages have maintained involvement in dargah governance through informal mechanisms that complement formal government oversight. At Borobudur, local Javanese communities have engaged through the Borobudur Conservation Authority and through community-led initiatives addressing the management of pilgrim flows during the annual Vesak festival.

4.4 Governance frameworks and policy outcomes

The fourth overarching theme, governance frameworks and policy outcomes, captured how the formal management arrangements at each site shaped substantive heritage outcomes. UNESCO World Heritage inscription has provided both resources and discipline for the Borobudur, Prambanan, and Angkor Wat sites, but the on-the-ground implementation has been uneven. National frameworks vary: India's Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act provides one set of tools, the Indonesian Heritage Law (No. 11/2010) another, the Cambodian Apsara National Authority a third, the Bangladeshi Department of Archaeology a fourth. The comparative analysis suggests that the most successful conservation outcomes arise where international frameworks are complemented by strong national institutions, active community participation, and adequate funding — a combination that varies in completeness across the sample.

5. Discussion

The four overarching themes identified through the multi-sited ethnography enrich existing pilgrimage and heritage scholarship in several ways. The sacred-profane negotiation theme extends Eade and Sallnow's (1991) contested-space framework into the contemporary mass tourism context, demonstrating that the contests are not merely between religious traditions or political agendas but increasingly between devotional and touristic modes of engagement within the same physical space. The economic-cultural erosion theme contributes to ongoing debates about commodification (Cohen, 1988) and authenticity (MacCannell, 1976), suggesting that the relationship between economic benefit and cultural erosion is more nuanced than either celebratory or alarmist accounts would suggest. The community agency theme aligns with broader literature on community-based heritage management (Su et al., 2019) and suggests that even in the face of top-down decision-making, local actors retain significant capacity to shape outcomes. The governance theme reinforces the importance of institutional capacity and multi-level coordination in heritage outcomes, complementing comparative studies of UNESCO World Heritage management (Labadi, 2013).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings invite an updated reading of Victor Turner's communitas framework. The conditions under which communitas emerges among contemporary pilgrims are more constrained than Turner's classic accounts suggested, in part because of the increasing social differentiation among pilgrims (international and domestic, religious and secular, traditional and youth, monastic and lay). Yet moments of communitas remain observable — for example, in the collective response to dawn rituals at Varanasi or in the meditative atmosphere of certain hours at Borobudur — even as the broader social environment is increasingly fragmented and mediatised. A productive theoretical synthesis might frame contemporary pilgrimage as alternation between liminal moments of communitas and structured intervals of differentiation, rather than as a single sustained liminal phase.

Policy implications follow directly from the empirical findings. First, sustainable religious tourism management requires deliberate accommodation of multiple modes of engagement (devotional, scholarly, touristic) within the same physical site, with thoughtful design of spatial separation, temporal scheduling, and entry policies. Second, the economic benefits of religious tourism should be distributed in ways that strengthen rather than weaken traditional crafts and cultural practices, perhaps through certification, mentorship, and supply chain support for local artisans. Third, community participation in

heritage management should be substantive rather than tokenistic, with formal mechanisms for community voice in management decisions. Fourth, governance frameworks should integrate international (UNESCO), national, and local institutions in ways that combine resources and authority while preserving community agency.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The 18-month fieldwork period, while substantial, captures a particular moment in the rapidly evolving landscape of religious tourism; longitudinal extensions would strengthen the analysis. The selection of six sites was deliberate but not exhaustive; major pilgrimage centres such as Mecca, Jerusalem, Kandy (Sri Lanka), and Lourdes (France) are not represented and would add important comparative perspective. Interview sampling, while purposive and diverse, cannot fully represent the heterogeneity of pilgrim populations. The principal researchers' insider/outsider positions vary across sites in ways that shape access and interpretation. Despite these limitations, the multi-sited design and the integration of multiple data streams provide a coherent and comparatively grounded account of contemporary religious tourism in the region.

A particularly noteworthy cross-site finding concerns the role of digital media in shaping contemporary pilgrimage. Pilgrims across all six sites used social media platforms for pre-trip route planning, in-trip documentation, and post-trip narration. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook prominently featured pilgrimage content, with algorithmic curation directing pilgrims to particular practices, locations within sites, and consumption choices. Interviews with younger pilgrims at all sites revealed a strong influence of digital media on expectations of the pilgrimage experience and on the practices undertaken at the site. At the same time, several elder pilgrims expressed concern that the digital documentation imperative was disrupting traditional contemplative practices, with the imperative to capture the experience competing with the imperative to experience it. The intersection of pilgrimage, digital media, and contemplative practice is a productive site for further research.

Comparative reflection on the four study religions reveals both common patterns and tradition-specific dynamics. Hindu pilgrimage at Varanasi emphasises continuity with three millennia of practice, ritual purity, and intergenerational obligation. Buddhist pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya and Borobudur emphasises commemorative reverence for sites associated with the Buddha's biography, meditative absorption, and cross-national pan-Buddhist solidarity. Sufi pilgrimage at the Shah Jalal Dargah emphasises devotional petitioning, the cultivation of barakah (blessing), and the construction of spiritual genealogies linking pilgrim to saint. The Khmer Buddhist and Hindu engagement with Angkor Wat combines national identity narration with religious devotion. The cross-religious comparison highlights both the universal features of pilgrimage as a religious practice and the tradition-specific cultural materials through which those features are realised.

Gendered dimensions of pilgrimage practice emerged as a productive cross-cutting theme. Women pilgrims at all sites described both the special meanings that pilgrimage holds for them (in some cases, the lifting of customary domestic responsibilities; in others, the expression of religious authority typically denied in everyday settings) and the constraints they navigate (safety concerns, dress code expectations, separation of ritual spaces). The interplay of religious tradition, gender, and pilgrimage practice merits dedicated investigation, particularly given the growing volume of solo women pilgrims documented across South and Southeast Asia.

6. Conclusion

This study has analysed religious tourism and cultural heritage preservation across six pilgrimage sites in South and Southeast Asia, drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September 2022 and March 2024. The findings identify four overarching themes: sacred-profane negotiations, economic stakes and cultural erosion, community agency and resistance,

and governance frameworks and policy outcomes. The comparative analysis extends existing pilgrimage and heritage scholarship by integrating perspectives across religious traditions, by providing directly comparative material, and by deriving policy recommendations grounded in empirical observation. The findings suggest that the future of religious tourism in the region will depend on deliberate management of multiple engagement modes, equitable distribution of economic benefits, substantive community participation, and coordinated governance across international, national, and local levels. Future research could productively extend the analysis through longitudinal designs, additional sites, deeper engagement with digital mediation of pilgrimage, and explicit comparison with religious tourism settings outside the region.

Detailed site narratives illustrate the four overarching themes in greater depth. At Varanasi, the dawn ritual along the ghats remains a centrepiece of the pilgrim experience. Tens of thousands of pilgrims gather each morning to participate in or observe the ritual ablutions and the Subah-e-Banaras programme launched by the Ministry of Culture in 2014. Field observation revealed striking spatial choreography: pilgrim families occupy specific positions assigned by hereditary right or by long-standing custom, while organised tourist groups occupy adjacent positions assigned through commercial arrangements with local boatmen. The orchestration of these flows requires considerable everyday negotiation among priests, boatmen, hotel concierges, and tour guides. The Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project, which reconfigured a substantial portion of the urban fabric around the principal temple, has shifted these spatial dynamics in ways that are still being absorbed. Interview material gathered between November 2022 and April 2023 captured a wide spectrum of views, from enthusiastic endorsement by visitors who appreciated the improved access and security to expressions of mourning from displaced shop owners and residents who described the loss of older bodily routines and intimate familiarities of the alleyways now demolished.

At Bodh Gaya, the Mahabodhi Temple Complex hosts pilgrims from across the Buddhist world: Sri Lankan, Thai, Burmese, Tibetan, Bhutanese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, and increasingly Western devotees. The diversity produces a mosaic of devotional practices, languages, and dress codes within a single site, and field observation revealed sustained mutual accommodation among groups. A particular point of interest is the management of meditative space: certain hours of the day are conventionally observed as quiet hours during which the recitation of Pali, Tibetan, and Sanskrit liturgies coexists with silent meditation. The site management has worked progressively to maintain this contemplative atmosphere while accommodating the substantial volume of pilgrims and tourists. Interviews with Tibetan-tradition pilgrims revealed a particularly elaborate set of ritual circumambulations, prostrations, and offerings centred on the Bodhi tree; the maintenance of physical conditions for these practices has been a recurring management challenge.

At Borobudur, the management of the upper terraces and stupas became a high-profile issue when the Indonesian government, citing structural concerns about the cumulative impact of millions of visitors, introduced a tiered pricing structure in 2023 that placed access to the upper terraces at a price point significantly higher than general site admission. The decision precipitated public debate within Indonesia about the appropriate balance between heritage protection and democratic access. Field interviews with Indonesian Buddhist pilgrims revealed a divided response: some welcomed the protective intent and observed that earlier crowding had made meaningful ritual practice difficult, while others described the financial barrier as an unjustified privatisation of national heritage. The Vesak festival, which annually transforms Borobudur into a focal point of Indonesian Buddhist communal life, raises particular challenges for management, as the volume of pilgrims and the religious importance of upper-terrace access are simultaneously elevated.

At Prambanan, the spatial juxtaposition of the Hindu temple complex with the Sewu Buddhist temple complex creates a distinctive interreligious configuration. The annual Ramayana Ballet, performed on an outdoor stage with the temple complex as backdrop, brings the heritage site into dialogue with classical Indonesian performing arts. The integration of performing arts with monumental heritage was praised by interview participants as a productive model for keeping heritage living and economically viable, though concerns were also raised about the night-time impact on the structures and on the night-time wildlife of the protected area.

At the Shah Jalal Dargah in Sylhet, the spatial and devotional layout is markedly different from the Hindu and Buddhist sites. The principal shrine, the surrounding courtyards, the langar (communal meal facility), and the qawwali performance spaces together produce a multi-functional sacred environment where ritual, social, and commercial activities interpenetrate. Field observation revealed sustained negotiation between visitors seeking quiet contemplation and others engaged in animated devotional practice or social interaction. The Dargah administration, supervised by a committee that draws on both descendants of the saint's murid lineages and modern administrative figures, has navigated multiple modernisation pressures over the past two decades, including infrastructure upgrades, electronic ticketing experiments, and debates over the regulation of beggars and informal vendors around the site. Comparison with the larger Sufi shrines of South Asia, including the Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi, the Ajmer Sharif Dargah in Rajasthan, and the Shah Rukn-e-Alam Shrine in Multan (Pakistan), would deepen the analysis and could be the focus of subsequent research.

At Angkor Wat, the comparative perspective brings into focus several distinctive features of the Cambodian heritage trajectory. The international consortium that supported the post-Khmer Rouge conservation effort produced substantial technical successes but also generated tensions over the relationship between international expertise and local agency. The Apsara National Authority, established to coordinate domestic management, has progressively built institutional capacity and now coordinates a substantial conservation programme. The relocation of villages from within the protected zone has been one of the most controversial aspects of the management regime, with displaced residents reporting mixed experiences of compensation, new housing, and the disruption of livelihood patterns tied to the protected landscape. The annual pilgrimage flows from the broader Buddhist world, while smaller than at Bodh Gaya, are significant for both spiritual and political reasons; the relationship between Khmer national identity and Angkor Wat as a heritage site is intricately woven into post-conflict reconstruction.

A particular methodological observation arises from the comparative design. The translation of pilgrim experience into ethnographic narrative involves layered processes of interpretation that vary across the six sites. At Varanasi, the principal author's linguistic facility in Hindi and Bhojpuri enabled close access to vernacular religious commentary; at the Borobudur and Prambanan sites, the second author's Indonesian linguistic and religious background provided comparable access for Indonesian respondents but required additional collaboration with site-experienced interpreters for international Buddhist pilgrims; at the Shah Jalal Dargah, the third author's Bengali facility was central; at Angkor Wat, all three researchers worked through interpreters for in-depth engagement with Khmer respondents. The systematic team-based reflection on translation and interpretation became, over the fieldwork period, an explicit methodological discipline rather than a background condition.

Beyond the four overarching themes, several cross-cutting issues warrant further reflection. Climate change and environmental stress increasingly shape the operational conditions of all six sites. Varanasi has experienced shifting Ganges flow patterns that affect the ghats; Borobudur and Prambanan face seasonal volcanic ash and heavy monsoon rainfall; Sylhet experiences periodic flooding that intersects with shrine maintenance; Angkor Wat groundwater extraction in surrounding Siem Reap

raises concerns about subsidence under the temple complex. The integration of climate adaptation into heritage management plans is an emerging priority across the region. UNESCO and ICOMOS guidance documents have begun to address these intersections, but on-the-ground implementation remains uneven.

Economic distribution effects merit further empirical investigation. Field interviews suggested that the principal economic beneficiaries of religious tourism at each site form a relatively concentrated group, including hotel chains, large tour operators, and certain landed families, while micro-vendors, traditional artisans, and informal workers occupy more precarious positions. Detailed economic impact analyses tailored to religious tourism, which the present qualitative design did not undertake, would provide a productive complement to the ethnographic findings. The differential benefit accrual is consistent with broader literature on tourism political economy in developing countries (Britton, 1991; Mowforth and Munt, 2016).

Inter-religious dialogue at and around the sites also merits attention. Although each site is associated primarily with one religious tradition, the actual pilgrim and visitor populations exhibit substantial religious diversity. Hindu visitors to Bodh Gaya, Muslim visitors to Borobudur, Christian visitors to Varanasi, and Buddhist visitors to the Shah Jalal Dargah were all observed during the fieldwork, and several interview participants commented on the meaning they derived from encountering practices outside their own tradition. The role of religious sites as spaces of interreligious encounter has been emphasised in the work of Eickelman and Anderson (2003), Sandal (2017), and others, and deserves dedicated investigation in the South and Southeast Asian context.

Concluding reflections on the implications of the findings extend to broader debates about cultural sustainability. The convergence of perspectives across the six sites suggests that religious tourism can be made sustainable when several conditions co-occur: a clear management framework that recognises both heritage values and devotional access; an inclusive process for community participation in decision-making; equitable distribution of economic benefits and burdens; investment in traditional crafts and intangible cultural heritage as well as monumental structures; and adaptive responses to changing demographic, environmental, and technological conditions. None of the study sites fully realises all these conditions, but each provides examples of partial success that, considered together, point toward a productive policy and research agenda. The next phase of work, building on the present comparative ethnography, could productively integrate longitudinal monitoring, quantitative impact assessment, and explicit attention to the digital mediation of pilgrimage practice.

The discussion of governance frameworks merits further elaboration. UNESCO World Heritage inscription, while widely viewed as a marker of global recognition, imposes specific obligations on state parties, including periodic reporting on the state of conservation, the development and implementation of management plans, and provisions for community participation. The comparative analysis revealed substantial variation in the way state parties operationalise these obligations. The Indonesian framework for Borobudur and Prambanan benefits from the engagement of multiple state actors, including the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Borobudur Conservation Authority, the local government of Magelang Regency, and a state-owned enterprise (PT Taman Wisata Candi) that manages tourist operations. Coordination among these actors has been mostly effective but has periodically produced friction, for example around the 2023 pricing decisions for upper-terrace access.

At Angkor Wat, the Apsara National Authority has progressively consolidated coordination across what was previously a fragmented institutional landscape, but tensions remain between national authority and provincial/local government, and between conservation priorities and tourism revenue objectives. The annual influx of international visitors generates significant foreign exchange earnings for Cambodia, and the political importance of maintaining visitor flows can constrain decisions that

would prioritise long-term conservation. At Varanasi, the Indian Archaeological Survey, the Uttar Pradesh state government, the Varanasi municipal authorities, and various religious trusts (including the principal temple trust) each maintain partial authority, with coordination achieved through informal channels at least as much as through formal mechanisms.

Implications for civil society organisations and academic institutions are several. First, the cross-site experience suggests that civil society engagement is most productive when grounded in long-standing local relationships, sustained over time, and informed by both technical heritage expertise and substantive cultural literacy. Second, academic institutions can contribute through capacity building (training of conservators, archaeologists, and heritage managers), through participatory research that builds shared analytical frameworks with local communities, and through the documentation of intangible cultural heritage that complements monumental conservation. Third, networks linking civil society and academic institutions across sites and across countries can multiply learning and reduce the costs of capacity building. The recent expansion of regional initiatives such as the ASEAN+3 Working Group on Sustainable Heritage Tourism and the SAARC Cultural Centre programmes provides infrastructure for such networking.

Further contextualisation against global comparative cases is illuminating. The European pilgrimage circuits, including the Camino de Santiago and Lourdes, have developed sophisticated frameworks for accommodating mass pilgrimage flows while maintaining contemplative atmospheres. The Mecca Hajj, by far the largest pilgrimage event globally with 2 to 3 million annual pilgrims, has produced extraordinary logistical and architectural innovations. The Hindu Kumbh Mela, including the 2025 Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj, presents another comparative reference for managing massive religious gatherings. Each of these comparative cases offers lessons that, when carefully translated, can inform the management of the South and Southeast Asian sites studied here. Cross-regional learning communities and structured exchange programmes among site managers could accelerate this knowledge transfer.

Local livelihoods and the cultural ecology of religious tourism merit emphasis in closing. The interview material consistently revealed that the everyday continuation of religious practice at each site depended upon a wider ecology of supporting livelihoods: priests and monastic communities, ritual artisans and craftsmen, hospitality workers and food vendors, scholars and interpreters, conservators and security personnel. The sustainability of pilgrimage as a living tradition depends as much on the sustainability of these supporting livelihoods as on the conservation of the monumental structures. Heritage management frameworks that focus exclusively on monumental conservation risk neglecting this living ecology, while frameworks that integrate intangible heritage and livelihood considerations offer greater promise of long-term sustainability.

The final reflections concern the relationship between academic research and the communities whose lives are studied. Ethnographic research at sacred sites is not a neutral act of observation; it intersects with the lives, livelihoods, and meanings of pilgrims, residents, and stakeholders in ways that demand sustained ethical attention. The principal authors and field team have sought throughout the project to maintain reciprocal relationships with research participants, to share findings in formats accessible to local audiences, and to support practical initiatives that complement the academic outputs. Continuing these reciprocal commitments beyond the completion of the present article is part of the broader ethical framing of the research and reflects the authors' commitment to research that contributes to the well-being of the communities engaged.

In conclusion, the comparative ethnographic evidence assembled in this study provides a foundation for thinking about religious tourism in South and Southeast Asia not as a uniform phenomenon to be managed by a single template, but as a family of distinctive practices each requiring

tailored response. The four overarching themes — sacred-profane negotiations, economic stakes and cultural erosion, community agency and resistance, and governance frameworks and outcomes — are present in all six study sites in ways that vary by religious tradition, institutional history, and contemporary political context. The continued vitality of religious tourism as a living tradition will depend on the collective capacity of governments, communities, civil society, and academic institutions to balance these tensions with thoughtfulness, equity, and respect for the deeply held meanings that bring pilgrims to these places.

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