

Recreating the Sacred Landscape

Environmental Studies Senior
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Tourism and pilgrimage in Himalayan sacred places under the conditions of modernity

Introduction

Increasing pilgrim and tourist traffic at sacred sites forces the examination of how and why pilgrims and tourists interact with ecosystems and local cultures at the sacred places they visit. Despite the destructive capabilities of tourism and pilgrimage, sacred places can increase the motivation of outsiders and locals to preserve ecosystems within sacred places. This project examines this issue relative to Himalayan sacred places. This project examines how colonial history has shaped both tourist and pilgrimage travel to the Himalayan region and how this molding has affected the modern impacts of both. Using these examples of the interactions between pilgrims, tourists, and local cultures and ecosystems at sacred sites, this project examines the extent to which 'sacredness' can drive ecological and cultural preservation in the modern world. It contends that the creation of Himalayan sacred spaces as outside of political and economic realms is problematic considering tourism's and pilgrimage's impacts on ecosystems and societies at these sites.



Himalayan Sacred Spaces: A History of Change

Political Sources of Change

Both Buddhist and Hindu sacred sites were created through the incorporation of the indigenous beliefs of Indian hill tribes and the Tibetan Bon tradition

Hindu sacred sites and pilgrimage was significantly altered by the creation of infrastructure implemented during British Colonial rule

After the Chinese invasion of Tibet, pilgrimage practices and other religious rituals were outlawed, sacred sites were closed and destroyed. When they opened again pilgrimage to sacred sites became a political act

Social Sources of Creation

Sacred sites are created in the pilgrims worldview in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions by pilgrimage guides which depict sacred sites as areas separate from political, economic, and social realities

Literature creating the Himalaya in the west depicts the Himalayan region as being outside of space and time and a storehouse of ancient knowledge. Orientalized idealism has painted western interaction with the Himalaya and forms the basis for western superiority and the creation of the serving and served dynamic of tourism.

Tourism Alters Sacred Space

Tourism places ethnic and religious identity on the marketplace. This can increase the involvement of certain populations in the tourism economy but makes tourists major agents of identity and sacred space creation in the Himalaya

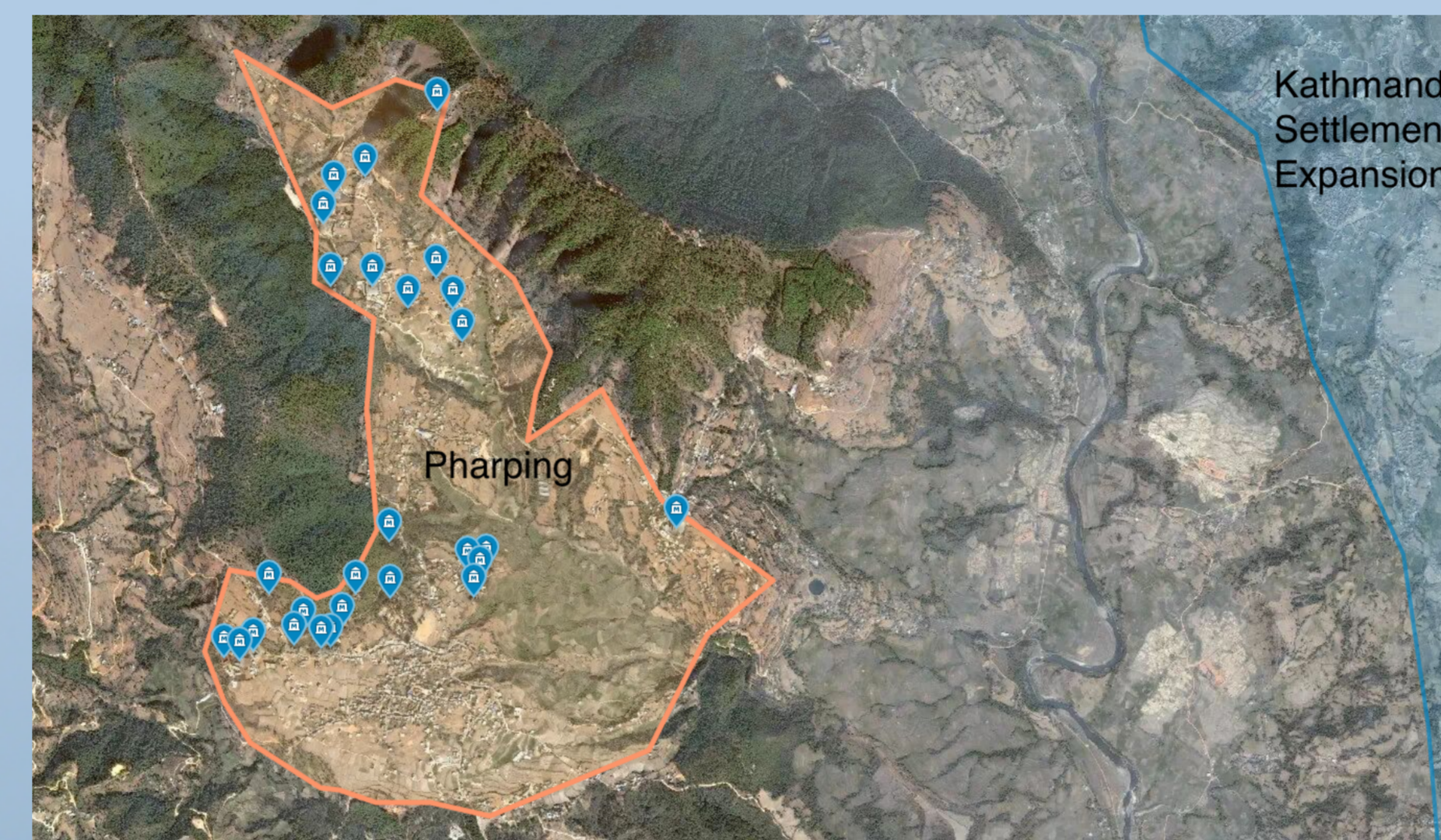
Tourism revenue is stratified based on a group's ability to conform with tourist's idealized vision of sacred space. Those unable to conform to this image are left out of the tourism economy and sometimes can be pushed out of sacred spaces.

Discussion

The ideologies of pilgrims and tourists which place sacred places outside of space and time masks the effects these travellers have on these places. On the contrary, Sacred sites are contact zones of cultural interaction and collision which shape and are shaped by social, political, and economic realities.

While 'Sacredness' certainly has the potential to drive cultural and ecological conservation, in a Himalayan context it is not enough. In order to protect aspects of sacredness and allow local people to be agents of creation and change, complex and integrated policy must be implemented which reflects the interrelated scales and actors within this issue

Pharping



Thus map shows the settlement of Pharping relative to that of Kathmandu. The dots indicate the presence of a monastery

Pharping is a settlement outside of Kathmandu which contains ancient Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu sacred sites. While Tibetans have conducted pilgrimage to these sites for hundreds of years, they have only become permanent residents recently due to economic and political factors. The successful incorporation of Tibetan Buddhism into the tourism market and its connection to other sources of income have allowed Buddhist to construct numerous monasteries in the valley. This integration with the global marketplace has turned Pharping into a 'Buddhist' place. This transformation of place has altered the social, political, and economic character of the Pharping Valley.

How Buddhicization Affects Place



Ecological

- The expansion of Pharping mirrors that of Kathmandu, one of the most polluted and poorly regulated cities in the world. The combination of unregulated expansion, which is encouraged and driven by increasing tourism traffic. If expansion continues, ecological consequences could be severe.
- Monastery expansion extends settlement into the forest surrounding Pharping, upon which many of Pharping's residents depend for subsistence.

Social Impacts

- The stratified benefits of tourism favor Tibetans over Nepalese ethnic groups. This increases the social disconnection between Tibetans and Nepalese that exists as a result of the monastic lifestyle, lingual differences, and the Tibetan view the Hindus are dirty because they eat meat and conduct animal sacrifice
- Land sales can disenfranchise low-caste members of Pharping because of the high-caste monopoly of political power. Monastery construction and the tourism it encourages also raises land prices, which can also displace poorer residents.

Foundational Resources

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