

The Cultural Impact of Sacred Sites in Shravasti District, Uttar Pradesh: A Comprehensive Exploration

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Abstract

Shravasti district (Uttar Pradesh), situated on the international border of India with Nepal, and is a region of profound religious and historical significance, particularly for Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. This study explores the cultural impact of sacred sites in Shravasti, known for its association with Mahatma Buddha's sermons and its prominence as a pilgrimage destination. The district's religious landmarks, including temples, stupas, and other sacred sites, have become central to local culture, influencing traditions, customs, and social practices. Through an examination of historical narratives, cultural rituals, and the role of these sites in shaping community identity, the research underscores the multifaceted role of sacred spaces as not only places of worship but also as symbols of cultural continuity and transformation. Moreover, Shravasti has emerged as a significant hub for religious tourism, attracting millions of visitors, especially from Buddhist-majority countries such as Sri Lanka, Japan, Tibet, China, Korea, and various ASEAN nations. This influx has facilitated cultural exchanges, enriching the local heritage while also highlighting the challenges and opportunities tied to preserving these sacred sites. Through field surveys, interviews, and archival research, this study assesses the contributions of these religious landmarks to cultural sustainability, heritage tourism, and interfaith dialogue. The findings emphasize the importance of maintaining these sites for fostering cultural resilience, promoting religious understanding, and ensuring the continuity of rich cultural legacy of Shravasti.

Keywords: *Cultural, Heritage, Tourism, Pilgrimage, Religious, Shravasti*

1. Introduction

Shravasti is a district of Uttar Pradesh state of India, situated on the bank of Rapti River and bordering Nepal. The headquarter of this district is Bhinga which is a part of Devipatan division. The area of this district is 1,640 square kilometers. This district has two assembly constituencies, Bhinga and Shravasti, one Nagar Panchayat, Ikouna and Nagar Palika, Bhinga. Shravasti has three tehsils, Bhinga, Ikouna and Jamunaha, 8 police stations, 5 blocks and 540 villages. Currently, Shravasti district has 5 development areas Ikouna, Hariharpurani, Gilaula, Jamunaha and Sirsia. This district is in the 'top' list, with 74.38 percent of the population considered multidimensional poor. It is followed by neighbouring Bahraich (71.88 percent) in second place and Balrampur (69.45 percent) in fourth place. According to the 2011 census data, the population of this district is more than 11

lakhs and the population density is 681 per square kilometer. The sex ratio here is 881. 46.74 percent of the population is literate. The literacy rate of men is 57.16% and that of women is 34.78% [1].

This district is also an important tourist destination for Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. It has Sitadwar and Vibhutinath temple associated with Ramayana and Mahabharata period, birthplace of Sambhavnath ji, the third Tirthankara of Jainism and Mahatma Buddha spent his 24 monsoon seasons here [2]. It is mainly the center of iconic places like Jetavana Monastery, Angulimal Stupa and Saheta-Maheta Sthan Religious tourism [3]. The festivals and rituals here further strengthen the local cultural practices. Major festivals like Buddha Purnima, Paryushan and Mahashivratri etc. [4] in Shravasti bring pilgrims and locals together, promoting a shared cultural experience. These festivals not only strengthen community bonds but are also a means of showing the cultural identity of the district to the outside world [5]. Moreover, the introduction of external cultural influences through tourism can disrupt the traditional social fabric of the district [6]. The younger generation exposed to the diverse lifestyles and consumerist values brought by tourists may feel disconnected from their cultural roots [7]. Balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the demands of tourism is also an important challenge for Shravasti.

This study addresses the areas of identification of major religious sites, cultural and religious impact, tourism and economic development, global significance and cultural diplomacy. The aim of this study is to explore the cultural significance of religious sites in Shravasti district, focusing on their historical, spiritual and socio-cultural impacts and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between religious tourism and cultural significance, which provides insights for sustainable development and heritage conservation.

2. Literature review

Aas, *et al.*, (2005), have emphasized the importance of stakeholder collaboration in the management of heritage sites, including the important contribution that religious tourism makes to cultural preservation when it is managed sustainably. Such criticism highlights that maintaining holistic heritage is a matter of maintaining a plan or framework that helps protect built forms as well as intangible components such as rituals or traditions, making the framework valuable for understanding the religious sites at Shravasti [8].

According to Cohen *et al.*, (1998), religious tourism promotes mutual understanding and broadens cultural exchange between the visitor and the host environment. Yet it also points to risks such as cultural co modification and loss of authenticity, which are relevant concerns in the case of Shravasti [9].

According to Dixit *et al.*, (2010), as a treatment of the cultural and religious themes of Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India, they are largely applied to Uttar Pradesh. Their research shows that religious tourism to these places of worship not only sustains cultural traditions but also revitalizes regional economies. This is directly linked to the objective of examining the religious establishments of Shravasti [10].

Dolezal *et al.*, (2015) examines the challenges mass tourism poses to cultural heritage in the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Bodh Gaya. Overall, the study highlights issues of overcrowding and commercialization of the sacred path, as well as provides direction for understanding the challenges of religious tourism in Shravasti. The results suggest that sustainable tourism strategies are necessary to combine conservation and development [11].

Sharpley *et al.*, (2005) examined religious tourism in the context of intercultural exchange with a case study of ashram tourism in India. Their study exemplifies how religious sites serve as vehicles for facilitating global connections of spirituality and that also promote India's cultural heritage to the outside world, a relevant finding for Shravasti role in global Buddhist and Jain circuits [12].

3. Methods

This study used mixed-method, adopting primary and secondary data collection methods to provide a holistic perspective to understand the cultural significance of religious places in Shravasti district. This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory study design with the aim of identifying and assessing the cultural, historical and socio-regional impacts of religious tourism in Shravasti. It relies on both qualitative and quantitative techniques [13, 14].

3.1 Primary Data Collection

The targeted respondents during primary data collection included tourists, pilgrims, local residents and stakeholders such as temple authorities and local businesses. Structured questionnaires using Likert scale were used during data collection to assess perceptions of cultural impacts, conservation efforts and tourism benefits. The sample size was determined to be at least 150 respondents, using purposive sampling to ensure representation across diverse groups.

3.2 Secondary Data Collection

Literature review, archaeological surveys on the cultural and religious history of Shravasti, historical texts and government reports, visitor data provided by the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, tourism revenue reports and other statistical records, tourism policies, UNESCO guidelines on heritage conservation etc. have been used[15].

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Survey data has been analyzed using statistical tools such as SPSS for descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression modeling [16].

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis has been carried out on interview transcripts, FGD notes and observational data to highlight key themes related to cultural preservation, community impacts and tourism dynamics. **Geospatial Analysis:** Using GIS tools to map religious sites and analyze their spatial distribution, accessibility and visitor flows [17, 18].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Impact of Religious Tourism on Values and Traditions

Religious tourism has brought positive changes in the values and traditions of the region. The data collected during the survey, as shown in Table 1, reflects the varying perceptions of its impact. The majority of respondents indicated that religious tourism has had a significant influence on local values and traditions. A smaller portion of respondents acknowledged a more moderate or minimal impact, while a few felt that there was no noticeable change. These findings demonstrate that religious tourism plays an essential role in shaping cultural practices and fostering the preservation of traditions within the community.

Table 1: Impact of Religious Tourism on Values and Traditions

(Source: Primary Survey)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
A little	42	28.0	28.0	28.0
None	13	8.7	8.7	36.7
Quite a lot	75	50.0	50.0	86.7
Very much	20	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

Quite a lot: Half of the respondents (50%) believe that religious tourism has brought significant positive changes in values and traditions. This suggests a strong acceptance of its cultural and social impact.

A little: About 28% of the respondents feel that religious tourism has had a moderately positive impact, indicating that some changes are evident but not very transformative.

Very much: A small group (13.3%) believes that religious tourism has brought substantial and transformative changes in values and traditions.

None: only 8.7% of the respondents reported any positive impact, indicating minimal resistance to the idea that religious tourism has affected local values and traditions.

Policy Focus: The high percentage of positive responses (especially the 50% who see significant changes) provides a basis for policymakers to further promote religious tourism as a means of cultural preservation and economic development.

Cultural programs: Authorities and stakeholders can develop programs to sustain and enhance these positive changes by integrating local traditions and values into tourism activities.

Awareness campaigns: For the minority (8.7%) who see no impact, campaigns emphasizing cultural richness and heritage preservation could help change perceptions.

The survey findings indicate that religious tourism has had a significant positive impact on the values and traditions of the region. Half of the respondents believe the changes have been considerable, demonstrating the powerful role of religious tourism in shaping local culture. A smaller group perceives moderate changes, while a few feel the impact has been transformative. Only a small percentage reported minimal or no effect, indicating limited resistance to the idea of religious tourism fostering cultural change. These results emphasize the crucial role of religious tourism in cultural preservation and societal development. Policymakers should capitalize on this positive sentiment by promoting religious tourism as a tool for both cultural sustainability and economic growth. Developing cultural programs that integrate local traditions can further enhance these changes. Additionally, awareness campaigns aimed at those perceiving minimal impact can bridge gaps and deepen appreciation for the region's cultural heritage. Overall, religious tourism is vital in preserving and promoting the cultural identity of Shravasti district, but continuous efforts are necessary to maximize its benefits.

4.2 Role of Tourism in Promoting Cultural Exchange

The survey data presented in Fig. 1 reveals varying perceptions of the role of religious tourism in promoting cultural exchange. A significant portion of respondents believes that religious tourism has facilitated substantial cultural interactions, underscoring its positive impact on cultural exchange. A slightly smaller group acknowledges a moderate contribution, indicating that tourism fosters cultural exchange, though to a lesser degree. A smaller subset recognizes a profound and transformative effect, emphasizing the deep cultural connections established through religious tourism. Only a small group sees minimal impact, indicating little opposition to the idea that tourism encourages cultural exchange. To build on this positive perception, stakeholders can organize cultural festivals, exhibitions, and interactive programs to further enhance cultural interactions. Additionally, strengthening infrastructure like museums and cultural centers, and encouraging active community involvement, will deepen cultural integration and preserve traditions.

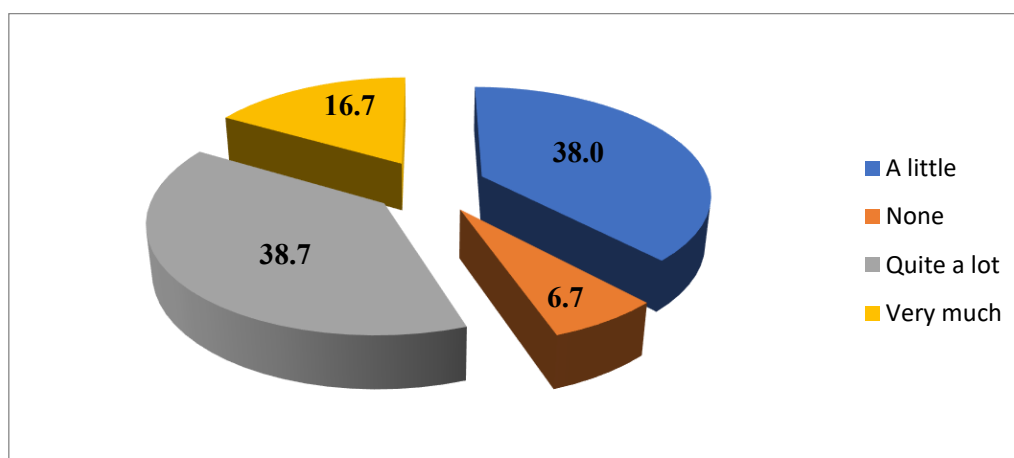


Fig. 1: Role of Tourism in Promoting Cultural Exchange

(Source: Primary Survey)

The detailed analysis based on the given data is as follows:

Quite a lot: The largest segment (38.7%) believes that religious tourism has promoted cultural exchange to a great extent, highlighting its role in promoting interaction between different cultures.

A little: Almost an equal percentage (38.0%) believes that tourism has contributed to cultural exchange, but to a lesser extent, which suggests a moderate impact on cultural interaction.

Very much: A smaller portion (16.7%) acknowledges a substantial and profound impact, emphasizing meaningful and transformative cultural exchange.

None: only 6.7% of respondents see any impact, indicating minimal opposition to the idea that religious tourism promotes cultural exchange.

Promotional programs: Stakeholders can build on this positive perception by organizing cultural festivals, exhibitions, and interactive programs to enhance cultural exchange.

Infrastructure development: Strengthening infrastructure, such as museums, cultural centers and multilingual information systems, can make exchanges more impactful.

Community involvement: Encouraging local communities to actively participate in tourism-related activities can deepen cultural integration and maintain interest in preserving traditions.

The survey data clearly highlights the significant role of religious tourism in promoting cultural exchange, with the majority of respondents recognizing its positive impact. While many believe that religious tourism has greatly facilitated cultural interaction, others acknowledge its moderate contribution, and a smaller group identifies its transformative effect in fostering deep cultural connections. Only a small fraction perceives minimal impact, which suggests broad acceptance of religious tourism's ability to encourage cultural exchange. In Shravasti district, religious tourism is widely seen as a key driver of cultural exchange, with most respondents agreeing on its beneficial influence. To further enhance this impact, it is crucial for stakeholders to focus on organizing cultural festivals, exhibitions, and interactive programs, as well as strengthening infrastructure such as museums, cultural centers, and multilingual information systems. Additionally, promoting active community involvement will deepen cultural integration and help preserve local traditions. Policy support and inclusive programs aimed at maximizing cultural interaction should be prioritized to ensure the continued growth and positive influence of religious tourism in the region [19, 20].

4.3. Role of Tourism in Preserving the Cultural Identity of the Local Community

The survey data, presented in Fig. 2, explores the role of tourism in preserving the cultural identity of the local community in Shravasti district, particularly in the context of religious tourism. A significant portion of respondents believes that tourism has made a notable contribution to cultural preservation, with many recognizing its positive impact. The data shows that tourism has played an important role in incorporating local traditions, rituals, and festivals, strengthening the community's cultural identity. While a smaller group acknowledges a moderate impact, there is consensus on the overall positive perception of tourism in cultural preservation. Only a few respondents expressed the view that tourism has not contributed to preserving cultural identity, indicating negligible opposition.

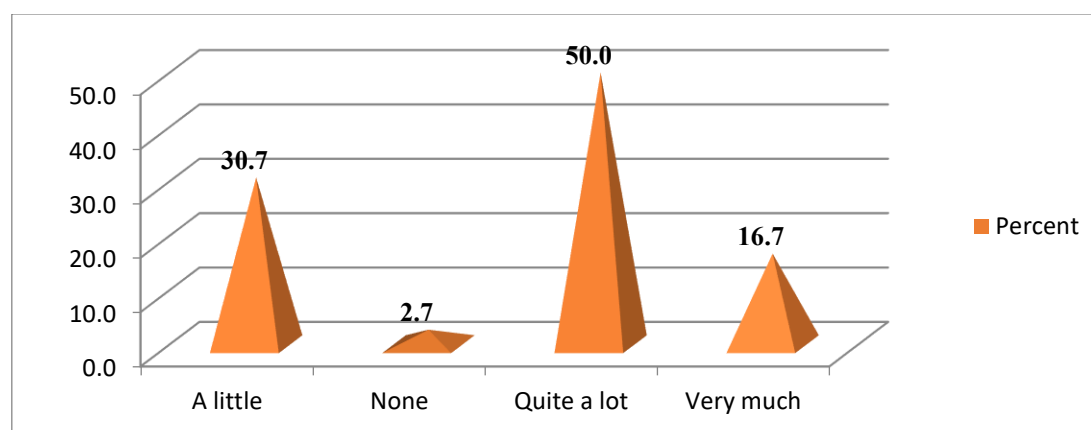


Fig. 2: Role of Tourism in Preserving the Cultural Identity of the Local Community

(Source: Primary Survey)

The detailed analysis based on the given data is mentioned as follows.

Quite a lot: Half of the respondents (50%) believe that tourism has contributed significantly in preserving the cultural identity of the local community. This highlights the positive role of tourism in cultural preservation.

A little: About 30.7% of the respondents believe that tourism has made a minor impact in preserving cultural identity, which indicates a moderate impact but shows scope for improvement.

Very much: A small group (16.7%) accepts substantial preservation, which indicates that cultural identity has been effectively maintained and celebrated through tourism.

None: Only 2.7% of the respondents believe that tourism has not preserved cultural identity at all, which suggests minimal opposition to the role of tourism in cultural sustainability.

Overall positive perception: 97.3% of respondents acknowledged cultural preservation at least at some level, tourism are widely seen as beneficial for maintaining cultural identity.

Cultural integration: High percentages for “quite a lot” (50%) and “very much” (16.7%) indicate that tourism activities often incorporate local traditions, rituals, festivals and art forms, which strengthen cultural identity.

Moderate to some impact: 30.7% who see only slight impact highlight the need for enhanced strategies to deepen cultural integration and awareness through tourism.

Negligible opposition: With only 2.7% stating no preservation, the findings reflect strong community support for cultural sustainability through tourism.

The survey data indicates that religious tourism has a predominantly positive impact on preserving the cultural identity of the local community in Shravasti district. A majority of respondents recognize the significant role tourism plays in integrating local traditions, rituals, and festivals into the cultural landscape. While some respondents view the impact as moderate, the overall perception is overwhelmingly positive, with minimal opposition to tourism's role in cultural sustainability. These findings underscore the importance of tourism in strengthening and maintaining the cultural identity of the region [21, 22, and 23].

4.4 Impact of Religious Tourism Language and Cultural Transformations

The survey data, shown in Fig. 3, highlights the impact of religious tourism on language and cultural changes in Shravasti district. Most respondents reported only minor changes, suggesting that while tourism has influenced local culture, it has not disrupted it significantly. A smaller group noted moderate changes, indicating some blending of traditions, while a few felt that religious tourism had little to no impact. These results imply that religious tourism has fostered cultural resilience and balanced socio-cultural development in the region. The detailed analysis of the survey data is given as follows;

A little: Most (56%) of the respondents believe that religious tourism has brought only minor changes in language and culture. This shows that tourism has affected cultural elements, but not to a disruptive extent.

None: a small portion (11.3%) sees any change, indicating that some communities have maintained their cultural and linguistic identity despite tourism activities.

Quite a lot: About 26% of the respondents acknowledged a moderate level of cultural and linguistic changes, highlighting visible but manageable changes influenced by tourism.

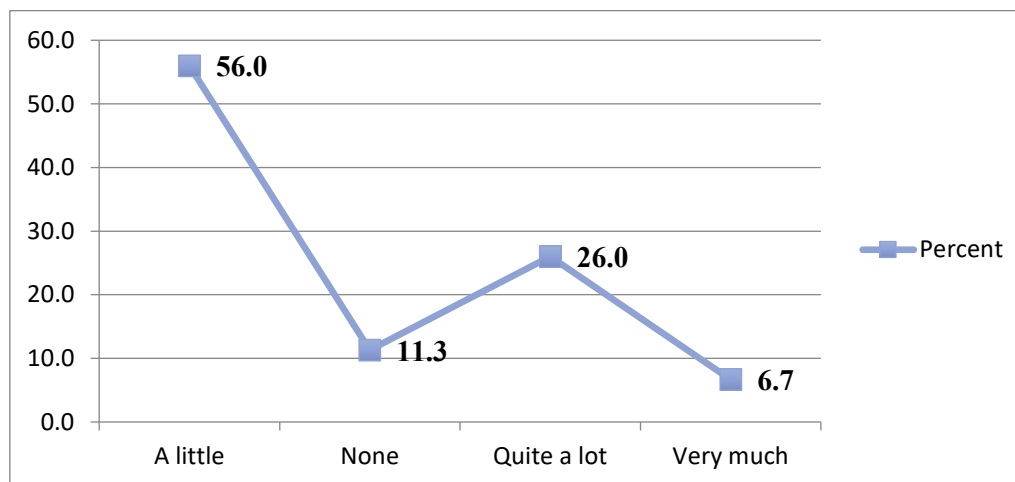


Fig. 3: Impact of Religious Tourism Language and Cultural Transformations

(Source: Primary Survey)

Very much: Only 6.7% of people feel that religious tourism has brought significant linguistic and cultural changes, indicating relatively less concern about cultural erosion.

Minimal impact on cultural integrity: The majority (56%) reporting only minor changes suggests that religious tourism in Shravasti has largely preserved cultural integrity, enabling limited adaptation to external influences.

Moderate adaptation: The 26% who reported notable changes point to emerging trends in cultural blending, such as the adoption of new languages or customs to serve tourists.

Cultural resilience: A low percentage (11.3%) reported no impact and 6.7% reported high changes, meaning that most residents feel cultural resilience despite tourism growth.

Balanced development: The results suggest that religious tourism supports cultural development without affecting traditional practices, indicating balanced socio-cultural development.

The survey data indicates that religious tourism in Shravasti district has led to primarily minor or moderate linguistic and cultural changes, with most respondents reporting no significant disruption to traditional practices. While some cultural blending is observed, the impact remains manageable, allowing for cultural resilience and balanced development. These findings highlight the district's ability to preserve its cultural heritage while adapting to tourism demands. Moving forward, strategies focused on cultural preservation and education can help maintain this balance between economic development and cultural sustainability [24].

4.5 The Impact of Religious Tourism on the Lifestyle of Local Communities

The data from the survey, shown in Table 2, reveals that religious tourism has had a noticeable impact on the lifestyle of local communities in Shravasti district. A significant portion of respondents reported moderate lifestyle changes, indicating that tourism has influenced local economic, social, and cultural structures. While a smaller group acknowledged more substantial changes, a few respondents observed minimal or no impact, suggesting that the effects vary across different regions.

Table 2: The Impact of Religious Tourism on the Lifestyle of Local Communities

(Source: Primary Survey)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
A little	59	39.3	39.3	39.3
None	10	6.7	6.7	46.0
Quite a lot	66	44.0	44.0	90.0
Very much	15	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	150	100.0	100.0	

The data available during the survey evaluates how religious tourism has impacted the lifestyle of local people in Shravasti district. A detailed analysis based on the data has been explained as follows:

Quite a lot: A significant portion of the respondents (44%) reported a significant change in their lifestyle due to the increase in religious tourism. This indicates a substantial impact on the local economy, social structures and cultural practices.

A little: A large group (39.3%) acknowledged minor lifestyle changes, indicating that tourism has had an impact but has not changed their lifestyle much.

Very much: A small proportion (10%) felt that religious tourism has brought about a lot of lifestyle changes, highlighting the local areas undergoing rapid change.

None: Only 6.7% of the respondents did not notice any change, indicating that tourism has impacted almost all aspects of the local community.

Pervasive impact: The combined 83.3% (44% + 39.3%) who report moderate or noticeable changes highlight the pervasive impact of religious tourism on local lifestyles, primarily through increased economic opportunities and cultural adaptation.

Balanced growth: 10% report significant changes and 6.7% report no impact, suggesting a mix of developments – some regions and groups have adapted rapidly, while others have maintained traditional lifestyles.

Economic growth: Changes likely reflect job opportunities, infrastructure development, and improved income levels from tourism-related activities such as hospitality, retail, and transportation.

Cultural changes: Lifestyle changes may also include changes in language, clothing, and food habits influenced by interactions with tourists.

The religious tourism in Shravasti district has significantly influenced the local lifestyle, fostering economic growth and cultural adaptation [25]. The survey highlights that most respondents observed moderate to significant changes, with some areas experiencing rapid transformation while others retained traditional ways of life. These diverse effects emphasize the importance of balancing development with cultural preservation. Moving forward, sustainable practices are essential to ensure that economic benefits from tourism are aligned with the preservation of local heritage.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the cultural significance of religious sites in Shravasti district, emphasizing their historical, spiritual, and socio-cultural impact, along with the relationship between religious tourism and cultural preservation. The findings reveal that religious tourism plays a crucial role in shaping local values and traditions,

promoting cultural exchange, and supporting the preservation of cultural identity. The positive perceptions of respondents regarding cultural preservation highlight its significance in safeguarding the region's heritage and driving socio-economic development. Furthermore, religious tourism has aided in preserving local traditions, rituals, and festivals, fostering a connection between visitors and the community. While tourism has contributed economically, it is essential to balance this with the protection of cultural integrity. Despite some moderate cultural and linguistic changes, the core cultural values of Shravasti remain intact. In conclusion, religious tourism in Shravasti has proven to be a vital catalyst for cultural sustainability, economic growth, and global cultural exchange. Future efforts should focus on maximizing the benefits of tourism while ensuring the alignment of activities with sustainable development and heritage conservation principles.

6. Recommendations

This study on the cultural significance of religious sites in Shravasti district offers several recommendations for sustainable development and enhancing religious tourism like prioritizing the restoration of key religious sites in Shravasti, involving local communities in tourism development, and implementing sustainable tourism policies to mitigate environmental and cultural impacts. Enhancing visitor facilities and promoting the region globally through international networks will further enrich the tourism experience. Strengthening policies to maintain cultural authenticity and supporting interdisciplinary research will ensure the sustainable growth of religious tourism while preserving the region's heritage.

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