

Dissonance in heritage: the case of Lumbini, Nepal

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Heritage can bring a number of benefits to different stakeholders, ranging from individual spiritual values to economic prosperity to the nation through tourism. However, if there are differences in interests and expectations among stakeholders, that may create conflict in heritage and consequently poses a threat to its preservation and management. The purpose of this paper is to discuss heritage issues and conflicts with a case study of Lumbini, the birth place of Lord Buddha. Lumbini has recently been a national icon for tourism promotion and has been able to attract about 40,000 pilgrims and tourists (not including Indians and Nepalis) every year, mostly from Asian countries. From both heritage and tourism point of views, Lumbini is different from many heritage sites. Lumbini is surrounded by non-Buddhist population, which is a major impediment for preservation and management of the heritage. This situation complicates “community involvement,” one of the principles of sustainable development. As a result government and international agencies have been trying to manage the site without much local involvement.

The paper uses heritage dissonance theory to discuss the issues and conflicts of heritage preservation and management of Lumbini. The paper draws upon the author’s five visits to Lumbini since 1983, including semi-structured interviews with the people associated with various organizations responsible for managing Lumbini including the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT), Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Nepal Tourism Board, and Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP), local villagers, local businesses, tourist guides, and tourists. This paper has also used archive documents and unpublished tourism data collected by the LDT.

This paper argues that if the people living around religious heritage sites do not have the same faith, the site is controlled by the government and international agencies. Within the two dominant religions around the site, Hindus feel somewhat connected with the site and are more interested in preserving the heritage, whereas most of the Muslims are indifferent. Both groups see the heritage as an economic resource than spiritual value.

National and international agencies have conflicting goals. Nepal, until recently a Hindu Kingdom, used Lumbini as a political icon to gain international support. After the inclusion of Lumbini in the World Heritage Site list, UNESCO is pointing fingers to the master plan which has a greater influence of Japanese Buddhist Society. The government of

Nepal, on the other hand, is desperate for financial assistance to implement the master plan to develop the area.

Despite the importance of spiritual and academic interest of Lumbini and its great potential for attracting international visitors, the area has not been able to draw tourists. Although the number of tourists and pilgrims has a growing trend, the government and locals have been unable to get enough economic benefits. The diversification of tourism products by the TRPAP without much in-sight of tourism may not be appropriate; rather, it is recommended to increase the length of stay of tourists through the development and promotion of other Buddhist sites around the area including Kapilvastu and Devdaha.