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Buddhism, tourism, and development in the trans-Himalayan Buddhist region: three decades after Ancient Futures (Norberg-Hodge, 1991)

Jungho Suh

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Buddhism, tourism, and development in the trans-Himalayan Buddhist region: three decades after *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991)

Jungho Suh

Department of Geography, Environment and Population,
School of Social Sciences,
The University of Adelaide,
Adelaide, SA, 5005, Australia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9580-6327
Email: jungho.suh@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract: Ladakh (India) and Bhutan opened their gates to foreign tourists in 1974. The book *Ancient Futures*, published in 1991 in English, depicted that the traditional Buddhist economy was being phased out while the regional economy became heavily dependent on tourism. This study critically discusses whether Buddhism, tourism, and economic development are compatible with one another in the contemporary trans-Himalayan Buddhist region, from a tourist researcher perspective. This study finds that rural villagers in both Ladakh and Bhutan do not directly reap their well-deserved benefits from tourism although they are the primary provider of rural and cultural tourism. The traditional trans-Himalayan way of life should globally be considered a plausible pathway to sustainable futures. In this context, the study suggests that community-based cultural ecotourism schemes be established in such a way to promote small-scale and place-based economic development.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhism; Ladakh; Bhutan; Buddhist economy; ecotourism; community-based cultural tourism.

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Biographical notes: Jungho Suh has a strong research interest in pathways to a green economy. His recent research focus is on documenting real-world examples of sharing, circular, and localised economies. He obtained a Permaculture Design Certificate at the Food Forest in South Australia in 2012. Out of his research interest in permaculture and ecovillage movements, he has examined grassroots social initiatives to mitigate global warming, reduce climate change vulnerability, and enhance social sustainability. He has visited various ecovillages around the world, including Auroville in Tamil Nadu, India.

1 Introduction

Since Ladakh was reopened to outsiders in 1974, it has become one of the most popular adventure and culture tourism destinations in India. Helena Norberg-Hodge visited Ladakh in 1975 for the first time and founded the Ladakh Project in 1978 to tailor ecological and resilient development in Ladakh. To carry out the missions of the Ladakh Project, she also facilitated the establishment of several other local non-governmental organisations in Ladakh inclusive of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG). The LEDeG has researched into, and promoted, the adoption of a wide range of energy-saving technologies such as solar water heating systems. The Ladakh Project was expansively reorganised into the International Society for Ecology and Culture in 1991 and then renamed Local Futures in 2014 to tackle diverse local sustainability problems around the world.

Norberg-Hodge (1991) narrated the plight of change in Ladakhi culture and livelihoods since 1975 and called for the conservation of Ladakhi culture and values with a brief reference to Bhutan. Ironically, her book *Ancient Futures* published in 1991 in English has motivated a massive inflow of tourists who would otherwise be indifferent to travelling to the high-altitude wilderness region. The author of this paper was one of the many tourists to Ladakh and Bhutan in 2019, who were inspired by the book *Ancient Futures* (Norberg-Hodge, 1991).

This paper investigates whether Buddhism, tourism, and development are compatible with one another in the trans-Himalayan Buddhist region. The paper aims to identify any missing element of what successful ecotourism should look like, from the tourism policy perspective. The paper first briefly depicts tourism's impacts on Ladakh and Bhutan and then disentangles the local perceptions of the possible synergy between Buddhism, tourism, and economic development. The paper next discusses community-based cultural ecotourism schemes as a pathway to regional economic development.

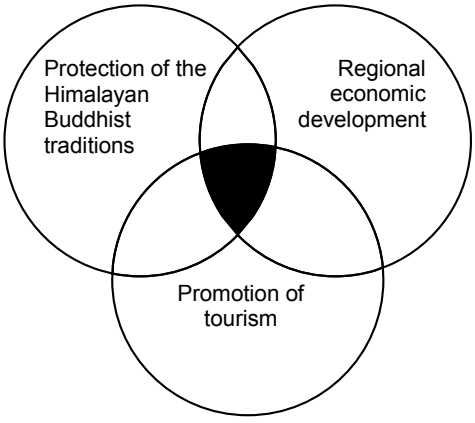
2 Research framework

In line with the main themes of Norberg-Hodge (1991), this paper looks into the nexus between Buddhism, tourism, and development as illustrated in Figure 1. The intersection (dark fragment) shown in the Venn diagram signifies that the three spheres intersect and can be integrated into a common goal. First, the Himalayan landscapes and Buddhist traditions are protected as an exotic attraction to inbound tourists. Second, tourists themselves are responsible for the considerate and respectful use of natural and cultural resources. Third, tourism is promoted in such a way to improve the social cohesion and economic wellbeing of the host communities. This paper discusses whether these three goals can practically combine to constitute the concept of ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable tourism.

This paper is based on the tourism experience of the author in Ladakh and Bhutan in 2019 as a tourist researcher. The author of this paper participated in adventure and culture tourism to the Himalayan Buddhist region with the intention of seeing if there is any discrepancy between what was described in Norberg-Hodge (1991) and what I myself would be observing. Apart from Norberg-Hodge (1991), the author reviewed the literature on sustainable tourism in the context of Ladakh or Bhutan. With the concept of sustainable tourism in mind, the author undertook semi-structured interviews with local

informants including a Ladakhi researcher working in a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), an NGO activist in Bhutan, and a farmer in Bhutan to triangulate observations and literature review findings.

Figure 1 Conceptual co-existence and integration of Buddhism, tourism, and development



3 Buddhism and tourism

Ladakh can be characterised as religiously influenced by the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism (Dhondup, 1977; Rizvi, 1996; Namgyal, 2018; Lundup, 2020; Williams-Oerberg, 2021). Travellers in Ladakh often come across cloth prayer flags. Tibetan Buddhism symbols, mantras, and short forms of a sutra are printed on every single prayer flag. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that the symbols (e.g., *rlung-rta*), mantras, and words of Buddha's teachings are conveyed by the wind horse (*rlung-rta*) and bless every being the wind touches. 'Buddha' refers to the enlightened who are liberated from 'suffering' (*duhkka*) and attain 'peace of mind' (*nirvana*). Buddhism preaches that human suffering originates from the misperception that one's self exists.

Although the 'emptiness' (*sunyata*) of the 'self' is one of the central concepts in Buddhism, it is hardly straightforward to those who are familiar with dichotomous thinking. Norberg-Hodge (1991) admitted that she had difficulty in understanding the concept of 'emptiness' until her Ladakhi tour guide, who she considered Ladakh's most respected Buddhist philosopher, explained it by taking a tree as an example. A tree cannot exist alone without other elements in the universe such as rainfall, wind, and soil. More importantly, the identity of the tree keeps changing in a web of interrelationships, and thus the tree never remains the same. The tour guide wrapped up his analogical comparison: 'This is what we mean when we say that things are "empty", that they have no independent existence…Everything is subject to the law of dependent origination' (Norberg-Hodge, 1991, pp. 73–74).

Like a tree, the trans-Himalayan Buddhist region has continued to evolve. Particularly in recent decades, the number of tourist arrivals in Ladakh has exponentially risen from 6000 in 1990 to 327,000 in 2018. The tourist arrivals in 2018 comprised about 277,000 domestic and about 50,000 international travellers (Pelliciardi, 2021). The soaring number of domestic travellers to Ladakh was largely attributed to the huge success of *3*

Idiots, a Bollywood movie released in 2009, a part of which was shot in Ladakh (Lundup, 2020). Like Ladakh, Bhutan was opened to international tourists in 1974 (Suntikul and Dorji, 2016). The total number of international tourist arrivals in Bhutan reached about 274,000 in 2018 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2020). According to media reports, the number of visitors in both Ladakh and Bhutan rapidly dropped in 2020 due to COVID-19, which has heavily affected local employment in the trans-Himalayan regional tourism sector.

Most tourist hot spots (e.g., Nubra Valley, Pangong Tso, Tso Moriri) in Ladakh are located in Leh District. Leh District used to be a self-sufficient agricultural and pastoral society. The district has rapidly been urbanised along with a sharp and steady increase in the number of tourists. Leh Town is a focal point for most tourists who intend to travel to other parts of Leh District. The total local population of Leh Town increased to 45,000 in 2018 from about 29,000 in 2001 (Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, 2020). About a half of the labour force in Leh Town is employed in the tourism sector (an anonymous Ladakhi researcher, personal communication, 2019). In addition to the permanent residents of Leh Town, the annual influx of more than 300,000 tourists has rendered Leh Town short of appropriate urban infrastructure including water supply, electricity, and sewage system (Dame et al., 2019).

The Himalayan Buddhist communities have commodified their Buddhist heritage such as monasteries, called *gompas*, in Ladakh and Bhutan, religious rituals, and folk festivals (Williams-Oerberg, 2021).[1] In the 1990s, many studies (e.g., Stettner, 1993; Johnston and Edwards, 1994; Acott et al., 1998) echoed Norberg-Hodge's (1991) concern that the commodification of a place like Ladakh would result in eroding the self-identify of a traditional community. An anonymous Ladakhi researcher (personal communication, 2019) was aware of this kind of critique and contended that

> "The Ladakhi villagers are proud of their traditional way of life. There has been enormous change in their economic livelihoods and perceptions since 1974, but there still exist the traditions that the locals do not want to lose. Rural Ladakhi families inherit their knowledge from mothers to daughters, from fathers to sons. The local villagers know each other very well and look after one another."

Before 1974, inbound tourism to Bhutan was strictly restricted in order to protect local culture and to prevent the environmental pollution that can be caused by tourism (Priesner, 2004). Based on a survey, Suntifkul and Dorji (2016) found that a majority of the Bhutanese monks and laypersons perceived that tourism had not negatively affected their social culture and identity. In a similar context, an anonymous Bhutanese NGO activist (personal communication, 2019) stressed that the touristification of tangible Buddhist cultural icons, such as monasteries and temples, helped to spread a deep understanding of Buddhist teachings among visitors. While seeing tourists as the source of non-agricultural income, the locals liked to proudly share Buddhist teachings with them. However, it was apparent that the younger generation had been highly influenced by tourism and globalisation. Many of them I came across in Thimphu were wearing jeans and were passionate about contemporary Western-style pop music and dancing.

4 Buddhism and development

Norberg-Hodge (1991) was sceptical of the virtue of growth-oriented capitalism and neoliberalism-driven globalisation. She postulated that indigenous knowledge accumulated for thousands of years in Ladakh could be erased in the face of globalisation, and that greedy and egotistic competition would crowd out the social ethos of cooperation. Norberg-Hodge (1991) despaired when witnessing the traditional Buddhist economy, which Schumacher (1973) portrayed as production from local resources for local needs, had been phased out, and the regional economy had become heavily dependent on tourism.

Should not the trans-Himalayan Buddhist region grow its economy? With all due respect for differing views, surely the decision should rest with the locals in the end. Norberg-Hodge (2019) explained that she did not mean to say that Ladakh should remain unchanged or have to return to the past. At the *2019 Happiness of Economics Conference* held at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies in Ladakh, she emphasised that Ladakh needs to have more contact with the outside world and adopt low-impact and energy-saving technologies.

In fact, the influence of Tibetan Buddhist traditions in Ladakh and Bhutan was a by-product of centuries-long trans-Himalayan interactions. Owing to being geographically positioned along the trans-Himalayan trade routes connecting West and East, the region has enriched their traditional culture and endured harsh terrain and challenging climatic conditions for millennia. After reopening up the region to foreign tourists, the area has become vulnerable to fluctuations in tourism demand. Nevertheless, an anonymous farmer in Bhutan (personal communication, 2019) expressed their optimistic vision that the succession of cultural traditions and the growth of the regional economy can go hand in hand.

> "Two-thirds of our population is under 35 of their age. We young generations are learning from our nature, spiritual traditions, and social integrity. I am sure we can grow our economy and generate more job opportunities in the tourism sector while we implement the Gross National Happiness philosophy and achieve its goals."

The Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy has been a well-known intellectual export of Bhutan. The concept of GNH was introduced by the late King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, in 1971 when he made a speech on the occasion of Bhutan's admission to the United Nations (Priesner, 2004). Based on Buddha's teachings, a 'Middle Path' in the context of Bhutan's national development has been implemented in such a way to integrate economic, social, cultural, and environmental values and performance. The merit of the GNH index is that it places emphasis on non-economic goals as well as economic growth and therefore regards economic prosperity as a means for achieving happiness rather than as an end.[2]

Under the banner of the GNH philosophy, tourism is considered a high-value and low-impact industry and has strategically been promoted for national development in Bhutan (Brooks, 2013; Schroeder, 2015): Tourism is seen as a fuel for economic growth and a reason for the protection of traditional culture and environmental assets. In 2019, every international tourist to Bhutan from countries other than India was charged a daily tourism fee of US$200–250 per day. Owing to this policy, tourism has been one of the largest export industries in Bhutan while overtourism has been controlled.

Norberg-Hodge (2019) warned that those who visited Ladakh in the late 2010s for the first time would not see much of place-based culture because of marginalised or displaced self-reliant local economies and eroded rural subsistence. Compared to other parts of the world, however, rural Ladakh was found to be still relatively pristine in 2019 in terms of living up to a localised economy. This is one of the unique characteristics which most tourists to Ladakh are attracted to. Thus, the uptake of their traditional Buddhist economy can catalyse regional economic growth without having to be industrialised.

5 Tourism and economic development

Norberg-Hodge (1991) pointed out that tourism and development brought psychological changes to the Himalayan Buddhist region. The term 'psychological change' can be interpreted to mean the sense of 'relative deprivation' (Sen, 1999), in which the locals felt that the international tourists they received were rich enough to travel to Bhutan whereas they could not afford to travel overseas. Indeed, local people in Ladakh and Bhutan are eager to travel elsewhere out of curiosity. They have been exposed not only to the increasing number of tourists, but also to the digital revolution. They can be connected to an ocean of information through the internet with just a few clicks. They wish to see how other people live in other places and want to learn about themselves reflected in a mirror by travelling.

To make such a dream come true, the locals need to make much higher individual incomes from growing their regional economy. It was striking to learn that the locals visiting Buddhist monasteries were praying for worldly fortune and prosperity. On one hand, it is self-contradictory when they are praying for luck if 'one's self' is empty; On the other hand, it makes sense as they have no choice but to pray for the best luck if everything is connected to everything else that keeps changing, and there are too many unknown variables out of their control that may change the course of human life. One way or the other, the locals obviously have the desire for materialistic prosperity to the level to which they become capable of travelling to wherever they want to.

Direct participation and adequate empowerment of local rural communities in tourism businesses in Ladakh and Bhutan would increase the disposable income of the inhabitants, and enable them to travel to the so-called developed countries. Paradoxically, increased income from tourism may lead to lifting the socio-economic status of the communities, which may in turn further push them to move into towns. Had they travelled to the other sides of the post-pandemic world, however, it would have dawned on them that the world has started recognising how important it is to maintain and implement the Buddhist economy.

In sum, tourism can offer a means to enhance economic wellbeing whilst the locals must conserve their natural and cultural assets to keep attracting international tourists. Arguably, tourists would not be so strongly interested in travelling to the Himalayan Buddhist region if local socio-cultural traditions were no longer visible (Sood, 2000; Schroeder, 2015). In parallel, residents are well aware that the extinction or erosion of their tangible or intangible tourism assets would undermine the sustainability of their tourism industry and regional economy. It can be said that tourist and host perceptions are converging towards the concept of ecotourism, whereby the protection of destination

amenities and the promotion of tourism can be achieved together with the improvement of local livelihoods.

Although there is no universal definition of ecotourism, three elements are commonly taken into consideration: The conservation of natural assets, the tourist appreciation and enjoyment of the natural amenities, and the improvement of local livelihoods (Rinzin et al., 2007; Karst, 2017). These elements of ecotourism should not be treated as if they are separate independent policy domains. They are interrelated to the point where failure in one element is likely to lead to failure in the other elements of ecotourism.

New access roads to tourist hot spots in Leh District have been constructed to meet tourism demand and brought about increased movement and mobility in the region. However, access roads in the region are still limited and the limited accessibility mitigates the occurrence of overtourism to some extent. In Leh District, there is no institutional setting to restrict the tourist numbers other than insufficient access roads. On the other hand, the flow of tourists has offered income-generating opportunities to some village households with extra space for homestay, for example, because small clusters of residential blocks in the vicinity of the little arable land that exists in the arid deep valleys have become popular stopovers for mountain trekkers. However, running a homestay in conjunction with tourism operators or collecting camping fees in Ladakh can generate meagre cash income for the households involved, but does not benefit the whole community (Anand et al., 2012; Vannelli et al., 2019).

By contrast, Bhutan has established a policy mix to implement the principles of ecotourism (Nyaupane and Timothy, 2010). The number of annual visitors is capped via the availability of inbound flight seats and the certification of qualified tourism agents. International tourists can apply for a tourist visa through accredited tourism agents only. Every group of tourists must be accompanied by a trained and registered tour guide. A high rate of daily tourism fee is charged for every inbound tourist in Bhutan. These policy instruments combine to regulate overtourism. The local villages visited by tourists are involved in homestay accommodation services, and can make non-agricultural incomes (Tenzin et al., 2019). The three-dimensional principles of ecotourism seem to have been incorporated into the national tourism policy in Bhutan. Indeed, the concept of ecotourism has been cherished particularly in Bhutan because it aligns with Bhutan's Gross National Happiness strategy of balancing the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental values (Schroeder, 2015).

6 Towards community-based cultural ecotourism in Ladakh and Bhutan

The widely cited definitions of ecotourism do not place clear emphasis on the cultural element. For example, TIES (2015) defined ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education'. In this definition, ecotourism is seen as a form of nature tourism. Moreover, the local understanding of ecotourism becomes ambiguous or unclear when it comes to power dynamics across the tourism stakeholders in Bhutan (Gurung and Scholz, 2008; Montes and Kafley, 2019; Karst and Nepal, 2021).

As in Ladakh, it was found that rural villagers in Bhutan do not directly reap their well-deserved benefits from tourism although they are the main actor of cultural tourism. This observation coincides with the relevant literature (Rinzin et al., 2007; Suntikul and Dorji, 2016; Montes and Kafley, 2018; Tenzin et al., 2019). It is tourism operators,

hospitality businesses, and the government who benefit the most from burgeoning tourism. The establishment of the Tourism Council of Bhutan, which replaced the Department of Bhutan in 2008, was aimed to enhance the power and participation of local communities in the tourism industry (Schroeder, 2015). Nevertheless, it still lacks the empowerment of the local communities and the social inclusion and economic wellbeing of local rural communities. An anonymous NGO activist (personal communication, 2019) in Bhutan asserted that

> "We export hydropower-generated electricity to India. However, the export of electricity has decreased because of climate change and consequently less volume of water in rivers in summer. Therefore, tourism has become a more important export industry for Bhutan. In addition to climate change, tourism boom has triggered rural-to-urban migration. To stop this trend, place-based and community-based tourism should be promoted. Currently, only a few travel agents are undertaking truly community-based ecotourism."

The rights-based approach would be ideal and legitimate for amending the current situation and promoting community-oriented tourism. In other words, the collective ownership of cultural assets is to be recognised (Gurung and Seeland, 2008; Anand et al., 2012; Schroeder, 2015). Communal culture tourism schemes are suitable for promoting small-scale and place-based economic development. Ostrom (1990) asserted that traditional communal property management schemes across the globe were effective in protecting natural resources such as watersheds and customary fisheries. The same idea is applicable to the collective management of cultural assets.

Cultural traditions can be crafted into, and managed according to, ecotourism principles. Most community-based ecotourism studies of Ladakh or Bhutan (e.g., Gurung and Seeland, 2008, 2011; Karst, 2017; Vannelli et al., 2019; Karst and Nepal, 2021) focused on the balance between nature conservation and livelihood improvement. Little attention has been put on community-based ecotourism particularly in the context of cultural tourism although local cultural assets are an overriding tourist attraction.

In a communal culture tourism management scheme, local villages can become the centre of the decision-making and tourism operation process, rather than being subject to city-based tourism operators. For instance, a rural landscape of Buddhist temples coupled with terraced rice paddies and draft animals can be regarded as communal property, and the local villagers are to be entitled to maintain and commodify the communal property. The Tibetan Buddhist culture and the intact pastoral scenery that accompanies the Himalayan terrestrial landscape have been a tourism resource that significantly contributes to sustainable local economic development. Thus, the local resources of cultural tourism need to be protected for further economic development (Gurung and Scholz, 2008; Schroeder, 2015).

7 Concluding comments

This study has investigated whether the current links between Buddhism, tourism, and development in Ladakh or Bhutan are sustainable, and envisaged the future direction of the links. This paper reiterates the point made by Norberg-Hodge (2019) that the traditional trans-Himalayan way of life is no longer just an object of touristification, but rather a plausible pathway to sustainable global futures. The study concludes that the protection of Buddhist culture, the promotion of tourism, and the development of the

regional economy are achievable simultaneously under the slogan of ecotourism. The study finds that the local rural villages in the Himalayan Buddhist region are not adequately empowered in the tourism sector even though they are the primary provider of rural and cultural tourism. Thus, a geographically confined local community needs to be granted a set of clearly defined and lucrative communal incentives for them to collectively maintain their inherited lifestyle.

The principal element of successful ecotourism is not just the protection of natural areas by local communities. More importantly, there should be tangible benefits for their participation in protecting their religious and cultural traditions as well as natural areas. No ecotourism policies would be complete and effective if they are not congruous with the needs of the local communities. Without congruence between tourism policies and local needs, a strong and sustainable cycle of Buddhism-tourism-development cannot be established. Rather, a destructive cycle of industrialisation-marginalisation-erosion would continue to take place.

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Notes

[1]The fact that Kargil District in Ladakh is dominated by the Muslim population and culture should not be overlooked although this research focuses on the Buddhist traditions of Leh District.

[2]Myrdal (1973) commented that constructing an objective index of GNH could not be possible, given a lack of reliable quantification of social and environmental values and the imperfect knowledge of interrelations between the values.