

Religious Tourism: an Opportunity to Further Nepal-India Ties

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Introduction

Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi recently visited Lord Buddha's birthplace Lumbini in Nepal, on May 16, on the occasion of Buddha Purnima, at the invitation of Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba. PM Modi's fifth visit to Nepal since becoming the Prime Minister in 2014 and the first to Lumbini saw him use soft power diplomacy. The overtures will improve Indo-Nepal ties when the geopolitical dynamics are rapidly changing and further enhance the Indo-Nepal religious tourism circuit.

The two countries share special closeness and similarities in cultural tradition. Lord Buddha, born in Nepal, left his footprints worldwide, including in India. Sita, the daughter of Nepal, married Ram, the crown prince of Ayodhya in India. Sita has a special place in the heart of Hindus worldwide. The cultural and religious overlaps shape the relations between the two countries, with the religious facet being the predominant role. The religious connection has resulted in many Indian and Nepalese citizens visiting each other's countries for pilgrimage. Nepal sees the highest number of tourist visits from India.

Asia has seen significant growth in international tourist inflows over the years. Buddhism is among the potential avenues for attracting tourists from abroad, and pilgrimage is the second most popular reason for visiting Nepal. In the past few years, India and Nepal have worked closely on developing the transnational Buddhist and Ramayana tourist circuit. The COVID-19 pandemic struck a blow to tourism worldwide, bringing it to a standstill. With things easing to a certain extent, the two countries have made various moves to rejuvenate the religious tourist circuit in both countries. This report examines the religious circuits, steps taken to improve religious tourism, and the road ahead.

Buddhist Circuit

The Buddhist religious tourism circuit is significant since most Buddhists are concentrated in East and Southeast Asia. Buddha, in the Mahaparinirvana sutra, tells his followers that they

can attain merit and a noble rebirth by embarking on a pilgrimage covering the places where he was born, gained enlightenment, first taught, and attained Nirvana.

A tourist circuit typically has well-defined entry and exit points along with three major tourist destinations that are distinct and apart. The circuit can be confined into a state, region, or transnational. They usually have one dominant theme with other sub-themes.^[i]

The transnational Buddhist tourism circuit covers Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India and Nepal. It is intended to improve the footfall of tourists and includes Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir, Shravasti, Vaishali, Nalanda, Kaushambi, Sankisa, and Kapilavastu. Bodh Gaya and Sarnath lead the pack among them. These Buddhist sites in India receive 6% of nationwide foreign tourist arrivals.

The holy sites follow Buddha's life cycle. Lumbini (Nepal) is the most important one being Buddha's birthplace. Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath after enlightenment, Kushinagar was chosen for his final departure, Nalanda was an epicentre for learning and one of the world's first residential universities, and he spent several months meditating at Rajgir, Sravasti, where he taught many of his Suttas and Vaishali where he delivered his last sermon.

The connectivity is mainly via air, rail, and roads, although road remains the most popular mode of transportation for tourists on the Buddhist circuit. IRCTC operates Buddhist Circuit Train envisioned to cover the most venerable sites of Buddhism. The train enables all guests to pay respects at Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace, despite it being located across the India-Nepal border in addition to the Mayadevi temple. The train starts from New Delhi and covers Gaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, Varanasi, Sarnath, Lumbini, Kushinagar, Sravasti, and Agra in an 8-day journey allowing tourists to sightsee the holy sites. The Buddhist Train runs throughout the year, with trips scheduled from January-March and October-December in 2022.^[ii]

In October 2021, India inaugurated Kushinagar International Airport in Uttar Pradesh, which will help connect key Buddhist pilgrimage cities. The airport has its significance, given that Kushinagar is believed to be the final resting place of Buddha. It is also the centre of the transnational Buddhist circuit, including Lumbini, Sarnath, and Bodh Gaya, among other holy places.

On the Nepalese side, Nepal recently inaugurated the much-delayed Gautam Buddha International Airport in Bhairahawa. Nepal's second international airport in Bhairahawa is envisaged as the gateway to the pilgrimage site of the Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini. It is expected to increase the number of pilgrim arrivals to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Lumbini. The airport project conceived by South Asia Tourism Infrastructure Development to develop and improve tourism infrastructure was approved a decade ago by the board of the Asian Development Bank.

The Buddhist circuit in Uttar Pradesh attracts international tourists from all across the world. Kaushambi, where Buddha stayed and preached during the sixth and ninth years of attaining enlightenment, received the highest number of tourists in the last five years. Sarnath is the second most visited place after Kaushambi. Tourist visits to Uttar Pradesh Buddhist Circuit in 2020-2021 have been severely impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Tourist visits to Uttar Pradesh Buddhist Circuit in the Years - 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021

S.NO.	TOURIST PLACE	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
1	SARNATH	1455271	1505787	1468751	461068	520225
2	KUSHINAGAR	937981	977693	1094657	323889	177002
3	KAPILVASTU (PIPRAHWA)	42374	43839	56413	17218	22924
4	SHRAVASTI	258012	1132109	1271749	16723	10982
5	KAUSHAMBI	2171654	2176288	21766759	517446	574452
6	SANSIKA	226178	227715	158347	30812	30910
	TOTAL	5091470	6063431	6228476	1367156	1336495

Source: [Year-wise Tourist Statistics](#), UP Tourism

Foreign tourists have preferred to visit Sarnath, where Buddha turned the Wheel of Law, whereas domestic tourists have preferred to visit Kaushambi. Sarnath has received the highest foreign tourist visits in the Uttar Pradesh Buddhist Circuit in the last five years. Shravasti received the second-highest number of tourists in the 2017-2019 period after Sarnath.

Table 2: Foreign tourists visit Uttar Pradesh Buddhist Circuit in the Years - 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021

S.NO.	TOURIST PLACE	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
1	SARNATH	430682	435752	336136	76308	325
2	KUSHINAGAR	76221	80147	89693	22465	0
3	KAPILVASTU (PIPRAHWA)	32064	32791	38075	4904	89
4	SHRAVASTI	137184	149304	155740	5485	0
5	KAUSHAMBI	15621	15659	15677	3785	0
6	SANSIKA	26901	27012	19814	4869	0
	TOTAL	718673	740665	655135	117816	414

Source: [Year-wise Tourist Statistics](#), UP Tourism

The inflow of foreign tourists to important tourist places in Uttar Pradesh was severely hit in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The foreign tourist visits increased yearly from the 2017-2019 period, with 2019 seeing a 25.5% increase in foreign tourists compared to the last year. The inflow, however, reduced staggeringly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with 2020 seeing an 81.22% decrease and 2021 seeing a 94.97% decrease in foreign tourists compared to the last year.

India banned international flights on March 23, 2020, with only limited international flights allowed to operate between India and select countries under bilateral air bubble agreements. Regular international flights resumed on March 27, 2022, after a COVID-19 pandemic-induced hiatus of two years. [iii]

Table 3: Foreign tourist visits to important tourist places of Uttar Pradesh in the years 2017 to 2021

Year	Foreigner	Change in Percentage in comparison to last year
2017	35,56,204	(+) 12.65 %
2018	37,80,752	(+) 6.31 %
2019	47,45,181	(+) 25.50 %
2020	8,90,932	(-) 81.22 %
2021	44,737	(-) 94.97%

Source: [Year-wise Tourist Statistics](#), UP Tourism

Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, is the most visited pilgrimage site in Nepal by foreign tourists excluding Indian tourists in Nepal. The incoming foreign visits, excluding Indian tourists, were battered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Nepal was open for tourist arrivals only for the first three months leading to a 73.7% reduction in tourist visits to Lumbini.

One million seven hundred seventy-nine thousand eighty-six persons visited Lumbini in 2019, with 78.76% Nepalese, 11.51% Indians, and 9.73% other countries. In 2020, 279,927 persons visited Lumbini, with 70.5% Nepalese, 13.3% Indians, and 16.2% from other countries. In 2021, 508,892 persons visited Lumbini, with 91.1% Nepalese, 8.6% Indians, and 0.23% from other countries.

Bhairahawa and Rupendehi account for most of the tourist arrivals by land entry points in the last three years. In 2019, the land entry point accounted for 161396 or 80% of arrivals out of 201307 in Nepal. In 2020, the land entry point accounted for 43272 or 92.2% of arrivals out of 46955 in Nepal.

Table 4: Foreign tourist visits to Lumbini, Nepal (excluding Indian tourists)

Year	Number of Visits	Change in Percentage in comparison to last year
2018	169180	-
2019	173083	2.3
2020	45469	-73.7
2021	1197	-97.4

Source: [Nepal Tourism Statistics 2021](#), Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation

East and South East Asian countries account for many international arrivals to the Buddhist Circuit. The same is reflected in the country-wise visit statistics to Lumbini (excluding Indian citizens) for 2020. Sri Lanka (47507), Myanmar (30791), Thailand (28364), China (21269), Vietnam (8345), South Korea (6145), Germany (3306), Taiwan (2623), Japan (2056), and the USA (2047) were the top 10 countries in terms of country-wise tourist visit (excluding Indian citizens) to Lumbini in 2019.

Ramayana Circuit

Recently, the transnational Buddhist circuit has dominated the discourse around Indo-Nepal religious tourism, with both countries looking to rejuvenate tourism in the post-COVID-19 world. The bilateral Joint Working Group for cooperation in the tourism sector had earlier agreed to promote the development of the Ramayana circuit and Buddhist circuit in the two countries. [iv]

During PM Modi's visit to Janakpur in 2018, the two Prime Ministers launched India-Nepal Ramayana Circuit to connect spiritual places in Nepal linked to Ramayana to the places in the rest of India where Lord Rama and Mother Janaki had set their feet. They had also flagged off the inaugural bus service between Janakpur and Ayodhya. The bus service will allow devotees to experience the pleasure of affordable and attractive pilgrimage and help develop Nepal's tourism by coming in large numbers. Thousands of devotees from India visit Janakpur in Nepal on the occasion of Vivah Panchami. Devotees keep coming to perform Parikrama throughout the year. [v]

On the Indian side, fifteen destinations have been identified for development under the Ramayana circuit, including Rameshwaram, Hampi, Bhadrachalam, Nagpur, Nashik, Jagdalpur, Buxar, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Chitrakoot, Mahendragiri, Ayodhya, Nandigram, and Shringverpur. [vi]

On the Nepalese side, Janakpur is an integral part of the Ramayana circuit, and the Ayodhya-Janakpur bus service made it a part of the Ramayana circuit. In 2018, the two countries agreed to organize yearly fairs in Ayodhya and Janakpur to promote religious ties between the two cities.

PM Modi in 2018 announced assistance of Rs 100 crores for developing Janakpur and nearby areas in cooperation with the Nepal Government. The two countries, in collaboration, would identify projects along with the provincial government. [vii]

Although the primary focus till now has been on connecting Ayodhya and Janakpur, the Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu is a significant centre of faith for Hindus, among other important places. The Pashupati area in Nepal receives the second highest foreign tourists (excluding Indian tourists) after Lumbini. Pashupati was visited by 163311, 171937, 25400, and 3190 foreign tourists (excluding Indian tourists) in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 respectively. The incoming foreign tourists, excluding Indian tourists, grew year-on-year between 2015-2019 but were affected severely by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 5: Foreign tourist visits to Pashupatinath, Nepal (excluding Indian tourists)

Year	Number of Visits	Change in Percentage in comparison to last year
2018	163311	-
2019	171937	5.3
2020	25400	-85.2
2021	3190	-87.4

Source: [Nepal Tourism Statistics 2021](#), Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation

The Pashupatinath Mahadev temple in Varanasi also attracts scores of tourists and pilgrims after the development of the Kashi Vishwanath temple. The temple has also emerged as a symbol of India-Nepal unity. [^{viii}]

Last month, IRCTC started running the Bharat Gaurav Tourist Train connecting India and Nepal for the Ramayana circuit covering prominent places associated with the life of Lord Rama. [^{ix}] The 18-day train journey covering an 8,000 km long circuit kick-starts from Delhi and covers Ayodhya, Janakpur (Nepal), Sitamarhi, Varanasi, Nashik, and Rameshwaram before returning to the capital. The theme-based Tourist circuit train takes the tourists to Ram Janmbhoomi temple in Ayodhya, Hanuman temple and Bharat Mandir at Nandigram, and Ram-Janaki temple in Janakpur, among other essential holy sites. [^x]

Last year, it ran the Shri Ramayana Yatra Tour package under the 'Dekho Apna Desh' Deluxe Air-Conditioned Tourist train with 16 nights/17 days tour package to help devotees explore various prominent sacred places associated with the life of Lord Rama.

The construction of the grand Ram temple in Ayodhya, expected to be completed next year, will boost the Ramayana circuit. The upcoming Ayodhya International Airport is supposed to become functional by the time the construction of the Ram temple is over will increase the air connectivity in the circuit. [^{xi}]

Promoting Trans-National Buddhist and Ramayana Circuit

Prime Minister Modi's visit to the Mayadevi temple on May 16 underscores the importance of religious connections in India-Nepal bilateral ties. The birthplace of Lord Buddha lies within the Mayadevi temple. Nepal and India share the civilizational and profound cultural heritage of the people of both countries. The civilizational contact of over two millennia and cultural overlaps between India and Nepal results in the countries sharing complementarities, including religion and culture, among other things. India's soft power has great resonance with Nepal. Over the centuries, the vast tradition of civilization, culture, and knowledge has gained momentum through the pilgrimages from India and Nepal.

PM Modi's visit to Nepal saw the 'shilanyas' ceremony for constructing the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage at a plot in Lumbini owned by the

New Delhi-based International Buddhist Confederation (IBC). [xii] The envisaged Buddhist centre is proposed to house prayer halls, a meditation centre, an exhibition hall, a library, and other amenities. The Buddhist centre will be open to Buddhist pilgrims and centres worldwide. The centre in the Lumbini monastic zone will deepen the cultural and people-to-people linkages between India and Nepal. The centre will help promote the Buddhist philosophy and the teachings of Gautam Buddha.

Tourism is an integral part of Nepal's economy. Religious tourism is one of the most significant contributors to the Nepalese tourism industry. It has helped generate revenue, and jobs, apart from promoting the Nepalese way of life, culture, and traditions, among other things. Every year, lakhs of devotees from all over the world visit the religious shrines in India and Nepal.

Last year, the new Kushinagar International Airport received a proposal from Nepal-based Buddha Airlines to connect Kushinagar with Kathmandu via Lucknow. The airline also has plans to operate flights between Kushinagar and Bhairahawa in Lumbini. [xiii]

The airport has boosted airline connectivity within the Buddhist circuit and pushed the holy places in Uttar Pradesh on the global map. The airport received the first batch of international Buddhist travellers a few months ago. A high-level Buddhist delegation from Thailand and Vietnam arrived via a chartered flight.

Earlier, tourists and pilgrims from Buddhist nations would touch at Kathmandu airport and then travel to Kushinagar by road. Alternatively, international charter flights would land at Bodh Gaya and return via Varanasi. Now, pilgrimage tourists from Vietnam, China, Sri Lanka, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore can comfortably fly directly by air to Kushinagar. They will also have a direct flight from Bhairahawa and Kathmandu to Kushinagar as and when operational.

A decade ago, Buddha Airlines had experimented with operating flights from Kathmandu, Lucknow, and Varanasi, but the same fell flat due to less footfall. Uttar Pradesh now has three international airports: Kushinagar, Lucknow, and Varanasi. The airport is part of India's Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS), wherein underserved airports connect with key airports through flights.

PM Modi, during his recent visit to Nepal, had first flown to Kushinagar Airport and from there left for Nepal in a chopper in a symbolic move. The airport will likely start international flights soon in the next few months, with airport authorities working on fulfilling the technical requirements. The airport will allow international tourists to visit pilgrimage sites in Kushinagar and Lumbini easily.

Pilgrims prefer travelling through India to Lumbini rather than flying to Kathmandu and then making their way to Lumbini. Most international tourists come from India as part of the Buddhist circuit, including the holy places in Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, among others.

The Buddhist circuit already has four international airports and two domestic airports. Another two domestic airports are in the pipeline, apart from plans to develop helicopter services and improve international connectivity. [^{xiv}]

Bharat Gaurav train is tipped to be the first tourist train from India to cross the international border into Nepal. The previous Ramayana circuit tours covered by tourist trains from India covered Janakpur through Sitamarhi station. Indian Railways, with support from Nepal Railways, has now extended the track from Jainagar station in India to Janakpur in Nepal.

The two countries recently launched a cross-border railway line linking Jainagar in Bihar to Kurtha in Nepal. It is the first broad-gauge passenger rail link between the two countries which will be extended up to Bardibas in Nepal. India is supporting the project with Rs 548 crore grant. [^{xv}]

Last year, the Ministry of Tourism under the Government of India organized Buddhist Circuit Train FAM Tour and Conference to promote the potential of Buddhist tourism. The conference discussed vital issues around developing and promoting tourism in the circuit. Under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, Tourism Ministry (India) sanctioned five projects worth Rs 325.53 crore to develop a Buddhist circuit in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh. [^{xvi}]

The Ministry focuses on connectivity, infrastructure and logistics, cultural research, heritage, education, public awareness, communication and outreach as the significant verticals of development under the Buddhist circuit. The four-fold development strategy focus on improving rail, air, and road connectivity, enhancing tourism infrastructure and dependent services, streamlining branding and promotion, and showcasing the heritage and culture. [xvii]

On the Nepalese side, the country is developing infrastructure on its side of the Ramayana circuit. The Janakpur Cultural and Tourism Infrastructure Development Project has an estimated cost of NRs 2000 million. As part of it, the cultural heritage sites of Janakpur will be conserved and beautified, and the construction of information boards, signage, and parks have been planned. It is working to link local and national infrastructure with the Buddha circuit and Ramayana circuit. It is preparing master plans for implementation for the Buddha and Ramayana circuits, among other religious circuits. [xviii]

In 2018, Nepal proposed developing a monorail network connecting Buddha's birthplace Lumbini, Tilaurakot, and Ramgram with the Gautam Buddha International Airport. The government had planned a feasibility study, after which the works would start if it got a favourable report from the study. The Lumbini Declaration 2018 established Lumbini as the gateway to the larger tourist circuit of Asian Buddhist pilgrimage sites. The plan envisaged connecting Lumbini with Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar of India and other Buddhist heritage sites in other countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and other countries. [xix]

The new Gautam Buddha International Airport's financial and technical viability might not be possible if India does not allow aircraft to enter Nepal from proposed cross-border routes in Nepalgunj, Mahendranagar, or Bhairahawa. International flights headed to the new airport will have to fly an extra 300 km in the aerial distance if not allowed to use the proposed cross-border airspaces.

The grant of additional routes from Janakpur, Nepalgunj, and Mahendranagar to Nepal will be essential to facilitate connectivity and travel between the two countries. Nepal has requested India for more cross-border entry and exit points for a decade. India and Nepal, in a joint communique in 2014, had agreed to resolve the issue of the direct cross-border route to facilitate flights between regional airports in Pokhara and Bhairahawa. In 2016, Kathmandu-

Mahendranagar-Delhi (L626) route bi-directional or two-way was agreed upon, but the same remains unimplemented. [xx]

The India-Nepal Bilateral Motor Vehicle Agreement for passenger traffic envisaged regular bus services between the two countries per agreed routes, trips, and timetables to promote tourism. The bus services initially covered Kathmandu, Bhairahawa, and Varanasi, among other places. [xxi]

The two countries had earlier signed MoU on twinning arrangements between Lumbini-Bodh Gaya, Ayodhya-Janakpur, and Kathmandu-Varanasi as sister cities in light of their historical and deep cultural linkages. The sister-city relations would help promote cultural exchange and develop stronger people-to-people ties. Recently, the two countries have agreed to establish sister city relations between Lumbini-Kushinagar to enhance ties between the two countries. [xxii]

Road Ahead

Culture helps bring people closer. Religious tourism between India and Nepal has already added value to public life and society. The holy places in India and Nepal symbolize both countries' shared heritage and values. The shared heritage has existed since ancient times, from Lumbini in Nepal to Kushinagar, Bodh Gaya, and Sarnath in India. The two countries need to develop this heritage together and enrich it further.

Even though Nepal can offer a lot to prospective tourists, including the Himalayas, among other tourist places, it has not been able to capitalize on the potential of tourism ultimately. The contribution of tourism to Nepal's GDP is not as significant as it can be. However, it has made a considerable impact on the economy of Nepal by driving the socio-economic development of the country. Nepal can make it big in tourism but will have to change its approach in order to fulfil the potential of tourism it has.

The tourism sector was one of the worst-affected sectors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nepal's revenue from tourism decreased by 70% in 2020 compared to the last year due to the pandemic-induced disruption. In 2021, the income from tourism decreased by 48.2% in comparison to the previous year.

After improving the COVID-19 situation and achieving vaccination targets in India, the Tourism Ministry has started aggressively promoting tourism. The tourism sector has started showing signs of returning to the pre-pandemic normal. The New Year of 2022 saw the tourism sector rejuvenating. Lumbini is reported to have received more Indian tourists after PM Modi's visit in May. [xxiii] The Governments need to be prudent in formulating policies and take into confidence the stakeholders to ensure that the tourism sector remains resilient while facing new challenges in the future.

The transnational nature of the Buddhist circuit necessitates greater coordination between India and Nepal. [xxiv] The two countries need to continue making significant investments in infrastructure to implement the Buddhist religious circuit. The investment must improve connectivity, build more hotels to address paucity, maintain the cleanliness of tourist spots, enhance security, and create amenities along the transnational circuit.

The connectivity between the tourist destinations in the transnational circuit is essential. While various measures have been taken to improve the same, it is pertinent to enhance the connectivity between Lumbini and other destinations in the transnational circuit. Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace, is an indispensable part of the transnational Buddhist circuit. The proposed Lumbini-Kushinagar rail link will help improve the connectivity between the two countries. [xxv]

Creating more integrated check posts (ICPs) like the upcoming Bhairahawa and Sonauli will help facilitate the movement of people across the border. As and when the under-construction ICPs are completed, this will increase the movement of people across the India-Nepal border. The increase in ICPs will allow international tourists coming to India to come to Nepal more easily.

The road travellers on the East-West corridor cutting through Kushinagar and the Buddhist circuit routes in Bihar often lacked decent eateries and even toilets. India and Nepal should work on improving amenities on both sides of the borders by opening cafes/food courts with hygienic washrooms. Such moves will also lead to the generation of jobs for the locals residing in and around the Buddhist circuit. Local entrepreneurs must be encouraged to cash

in by catering to the pilgrimage tourists whose footfalls are bound to soar. Taxi services and car rentals can also be another avenue for employment generation and help tourists. [xxvi] 10

The two countries also need greater cooperation to focus on the joint marketing and promotion of the religious circuits. The two countries can develop, share and set common tourism standards, undertake capacity building in the tourism industry, and formulate joint marketing and branding strategies to create a brand around the transitional religious circuit. A dedicated standard website for promoting the international religious circuit can help increase the impressions around the same.

India already showcases the Buddhist sites on its Incredible India website and also developed a dedicated website, 'indiathelandofbuddha,' to promote and showcase the rich Buddhist heritage in India.

The two countries need to give more momentum to their future efforts to take religious tourism to the next level. Religious tourism between India and Nepal will lead to interdependence through the religious circuits, driving economic growth and bilateral ties. It will also help strengthen the spirit of friendship between the two countries.

Conclusion

India and Nepal have been working closely and supporting each other's efforts to develop the transnational Buddhist circuit and Lumbini. The two countries strongly realize all the possibilities of development. The two countries' common heritage, culture, and love are significant assets. The stronger the asset becomes, the stronger both countries can leverage the potential and take the message of Lord Buddha across the world. It will also further the ever-strengthening friendship of India and Nepal and the closeness between the two countries.

The two countries need to strengthen their cooperation and leverage the close links to benefit from the tourism sector. COVID-19 sent the tourism industry across the world into a deep slumber, but with things getting back on track, things are looking bright again. There is a need to aggressively market tourism to get it back on track. Hurdles will be there throughout in the form of bureaucratic red tape and political issues. The will of both the counterparts and

how they handle the obstacles as they come in the way will dictate the state of religious tourism between the duo. Only time will tell whether India and Nepal can fulfil the potential religious tourism.

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