

Factors Affecting the Preservation and Management of Archaeological Heritage in Swat ValleyMr. Munib Hameed*¹, Mr. Hilal Ahmad Khan²**Original Article**

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Abstract

This research is about to explore the various challenges in preserving archaeological heritage in Swat Valley and is delimited to two sites including Jahan Abad Buddha and But Kara Stupa. The research addresses how various factors, including economic challenges, political uncertainty, environmental destruction, and people interactions, contribute to the ongoing decline of these valuable historical sites. Fieldwork was conducted using interviews with 25-30 respondents, including local stakeholders, experts, and tourism and heritage conservation professionals. Data from the focus group was also obtained from the community members and the data was thematically analysed with appropriate themes. The research identified critical gaps in current preservation efforts, particularly a lack of sustainable tourism practices and not enough financial support for maintaining these cultural landmarks. The findings also show that illegal activities, such as unofficial excavations, are rampant, undermining the preservation initiatives. The study suggests that promoting archaeological heritage preservation, as well as the need for strengthening government policies and implementation mechanisms to be strengthened.

Keywords: Tourism, Challenges, Issues, Preservation, Activities

Introduction

According to (Rahman, 2020) Swat Valley, known as the “Switzerland of the East,” is not only famous for its natural beauty but also famous for its rich archaeological and cultural heritage. (Ayushi, 2020) situated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan, Swat has been home of ancient civilizations, particularly the Gandhara civilization, which developed from the 6th century to the 11th century. The valley is the cradle of many Buddhist artefacts, including stupas, monasteries, and figures, many of which date back over two thousand years. These archaeological riches represent a notable chapter in both regional and global history, making Swat an important destination for cultural tourism. (Khan, 2016) As tourists from around the world come to explore these ancient sites, the valley has become a sign of the intersection between heritage preservation and tourism advertisement. Tourism, while providing crucial economic benefits

and growing global recognition of Swat Valley’s archaeological significance, poses challenges when it comes to the preservation of fragile sites. On one hand, tourism makes income that supports local people and finances conservation endeavours, such as the restoration of damaged antiquity and carrying of historical landmarks (Smith & Jones, 2019).

This influx of financial resources has led to expanded awareness about the need to safeguard these sites, as well as fostering local pride in the region’s cultural heritage (Ryan, 2018).

Additionally, cultural tourism serves as an educational tool, allowing visitors to be busy directly with the historical significance of Swat's monuments, which can increase global appreciation for its preservation. However, as the number of tourists to Swat Valley archaeological sites increases, so do the threats to their integrity. Without proper management, tourism can result in physical damage to ancient structures through activities such as trampling on fragile ruins, graffiti, and even the theft of artefacts (Khan, 2018). Furthermore, enhanced visitor traffic can make worse environmental pressures, including littering, pollution, and natural environment disruption around archaeological sites. Without appropriate infrastructure and administration, tourism can unintentionally sharpen the deterioration of these vital historical sites, undermining the very reason tourists are drawn to the area. This contradiction highlights the significance of sustainable tourism implementation that balances the need for economic development with the essential of preserving Swat Valley's unrepeatable archaeological heritage (Demas, 2013).

Problem Statement

This research purpose is to explore the influence of multiple factors on the preservation of Swat valley archaeological heritage and investigate strategies for sustainable tourism development. It has also presented serious challenges to the preservation of its archaeological heritage (Rahman, 2020). Unorganized tourism activities, such as overcrowding, littering, and vandalism, have led to the damage of numerous ancient sites, warning their long-term lives (Khan, 2018). also, despite the economic advantages of tourism, the economic gains are not forever equally divided among local communities, and not enough investment in infrastructure increases the problem, according to expert tourist guiders 80% of tourists select those areas and destinations where access easy and comfortable a well-developed infrastructure can also attract visitors. The lack of proper management strategies to handle increasing visitor numbers, alongside insufficient preservation policies, further threatens the region's archaeological heritage (Smith & Jones, 2019). Without a sustainable approach that balances tourism promotion with heritage conservation, Swat Valley's culture may be irreversibly damaged.

Research Questions

- How do sociocultural practices contribute to the degradation of archaeological sites in Swat Valley?
- How do economic challenges lead to the degradation of archaeological sites in Swat Valley?
- How do political challenges impact the preservation and management of the archaeological sites in Swat Valley?

Research Objectives

- To explore socio-cultural practices, contributing to the degradation of archaeological sites in Swat Valley
- To examine economic challenges that lead to the degradation of archaeological sites in the Swat Valley
- To explore political challenges, and their impacts on the preservation and management of archaeological sites in Swat Valley

Methodology and Procedure

This research accepts a qualitative approach to examine the influence of tourism on the preservation of Swat Valley archaeological sites. The nature of the research is exploratory, focusing on understanding the socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics impacting site preservation. The research is conducted in Swat Valley, Pakistan, targeting key sites such as the Buth Kara Stupa and the Jahan Abad Buddha.

Data collection is carried out through semi-structured interviews with 15 to 20 participants, including members of the local people, archaeologists, and tourists. Such as, focus group discussions are held on both sites with 5 to 10 individuals from the local population to further investigate community perceptions of cultural practices, tourism, and their effects on historical sites. These methods give us a rich, in-depth understanding of how various stakeholders view the intersection of tourism and archaeological preservation.

The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis face-to-face Interviews and focus group responses are transcribed and coded to identify key themes, such as cultural practices leading to site damage, economic challenges, and the role of political instability in conservation efforts. This thematic approach helps uncover patterns that inform recommendations for balancing tourism development with the protection of Swat Valley's invaluable archaeological heritage.

Data Analysis

Major Themes

Cultural Practices and Physical Deterioration in the Archaeological Sites

The destruction of archaeological heritage is a serious issue, particularly at sites like the Jahan Abad Buddha and Buth Kara Stupa in Swat Valley. Damage to these sites can come in many forms, including physical deterioration, theft, and illegal trade (Brodie, 2024). The research highlights how these problems are often increased by the socio-cultural practices of the local people living near these sites. numerous locals frequently use these archaeological sites for various cultural and social activities, such as family outings, picnics, religious rituals, and informal gatherings. While these practices are part of their heritage, they unintentionally contribute to the physical destruction of the sites. For example, daily relationships to the Archaeological sites, such as walking on fragile ruins, lighting candles during religious rituals, and organizing cultural events, often result in wear and tear on the ancient sites (Byrne, 2017). Unorganized tourism and lack of awareness regarding the preservation of these archaeological sites further increase the issue. Field observations and interviews with the local community indicate that these cultural practices have resulted in physical damage. Most respondents expressed concern that picnics, gatherings, and unregulated use of the site have led to its gradual deterioration. One respondent specifically noted,

“Over the last five years, I've witnessed constant physical damage to the site, primarily due to locals using it for picnics and celebrations with no regard for its preservation” R-5

The picture shows the status of But kara site



One significant problem is that religious and cultural activities can unexpectedly cause damage. For example, at religiously important sites like But Kara Stupa, local people often engage in traditional rituals such as flaming incense, and give invitations for preaching (Nash, 2019). While these types of practices are crucial for the spiritual lives of the regional communities, they may enhance the physical destruction of the ancient' sites. The collection of soot from burning candles, for example, may affect the stone top and inscriptions on the Stupa, while physical handling of the site during rituals may cause surface wear over time. Based on field observations and interviews, most respondents expressed the view that cultural and religious rituals may inadvertently harm the site. As one respondent noted,

"While these practices are deeply rooted in tradition, they often lead to unintentional damage to the monument." R-3

Informal gatherings and tourism importantly contribute to destroy the site. local people near the Stupa often engage in cultural or religious-related activities, participating in large crowds. This increasing foot traffic and physical interaction with the site can result in erosion of the monument's surface and site damage. While tourism can give financial benefits, it represents challenges when not properly organized. Tourists frequently touch or climb on various parts of the structure, leading to physical damage to the site, a trend observed in similar ancient sites globally (Mackay & Douglas, 2018). Field observations and interviews show that informal gatherings and tourism call large numbers of people, which can disturb the site. Many respondents were concerned about this, with one saying,

"Noting the potential for damage if these activities are not carefully monitored. Overall, a balanced approach to managing tourism and community events is essential to preserve the site's integrity for future generations" R-3

Unregulated tourism can cause significant physical damage to archaeological sites, jeopardizing their preservation.



Another challenge is the lack of proper facilities for the protection of the site during traditional events. Most of historical structures, particularly in rural areas like Swat Valley, are not equipped with the necessary protective infrastructure to protect them from local use (Byrne, 2017). Without barriers, signage, or educational events, tourists and regions alike may be busy with the archaeological site in ways that inadvertently damage it. Cultural practices, combined with a lack of protection awareness, often lead to cumulative damage, slowly degrading the site's condition. Interviews conducted in the field and destruction demonstrate how pressing damage can result from improper preservation facilities. Most respondents emphasized the absence of necessary safety precautions at archaeological sites in mountainous areas. One respondent expressed the concern through comments.

“Without proper infrastructure to guide and protect the site, both locals and tourists may unintentionally contribute to its degradation”. R-4

Theme- two:

Economic Challenges and Degradation of the Jahan Abad Buddha

The destruction of the Jahan Abad Buddha is firmly attached to economic challenges that create it hard to protect the archaeological site. One of the main issues is that there are not sufficient funds available for preservation. provincial governments often focus on more urgent financial needs, so they do not give sufficient money to Archaeological heritage sites like the Buddha. Without sufficient investment, there are not enough skilled laborers or proper maintenance, which increased up the site's decline (Smith & Jones, 2021). The insufficient of money makes it difficult to preserve the archaeological site in the long run. Field observations and interviews reveal that most respondents are concerned about insufficient funding for conservation. As one respondent stated.

“Without adequate financial support, we can't protect our heritage effectively.” R-2

The statue of the Jahan Abad Buddha was destroyed by militants in 2007 during a wave of extremism in the Swat Valley.



The regional community's economic struggles also play a role in the Buddha's degradation. Since many people in the area have limited earnings, they may be busy in activities like tourism or small construction projects that harm the site. These actions are not done on purpose to destroy the Buddha but are often necessary for people to earn a living (Miller, 2020). The economic pressure on the community means that protecting the Buddha is not always a top priority compared to making ends meet. As extracted from field observations and interviews, limited income in the local community often leads to physical destruction of the site. Most respondents expressed concern that economic challenges contribute to the site's degradation. One respondent shared,

"The financial hardships force locals to focus on immediate economic gains, often at the cost of preserving the heritage site" (R-4).

Theme-three:

Political Challenges in the Preservation of Archaeological Sites in Swat Valley

Political uncertainty has important impacts on the preservation of archaeological heritage in Swat Valley. Frequent changes in government and shifts in political priorities can lead to inconsistent support for archaeological heritage preservation efforts. As said by Ali and Khan (2020), "political turmoil often leads to a lack of focus on cultural heritage, which results in neglect and disturb the sites." This instability hinders the establishment of effective policies and funding mechanisms necessary for the preserving and maintenance of archaeological sites. During periods of political uncertainty local governments may prioritize immediate economic and security concerns over cultural heritage (Rahman, S. (2021)). This often results in the diversion of resources away from conservation initiatives. The focus on urgent needs can create a neglectful environment for sites that require ongoing attention and care. The lack of a stable political framework makes it challenging to implement long-term protection strategies, leading to increased destruction of valuable heritage sites. Field observations give us that during political instability, funds for archaeological projects often go to more urgent security needs. Many respondents said that political instability has caused important sites to be neglected. One archaeologist stated,

“Without stable government, we can’t rely on consistent funding or support for our heritage.” R-3

Despite the existence of policies intended to safeguard archaeological sites, their implementation is frequently undermined by governmental inefficiencies and a lack of political commitment. Khan and Ullah (2020) highlight that “the laws meant to protect our heritage are often weakened by poor enforcement and corruption in different parts of the government.” This disconnection between policy and practice poses significant challenges to the preservation of cultural heritage in regions like the Swat Valley. One of the main issues affecting policy enforcement is the lack of resources allocated to heritage management. Many local governments prioritize other pressing needs, resulting in insufficient funding and personnel dedicated to overseeing archaeological sites highlighted by Shah and Iqbal (2019). This lack of investment leads to inadequate monitoring of sites, making them vulnerable to neglect and damage. Furthermore, the absence of trained professionals in heritage conservation exacerbates these challenges, as there are not enough qualified individuals to ensure that existing laws are applied effectively. Field interviews with local stakeholders revealed that illegal excavations are common, undermining efforts to preserve archaeological sites. Most respondents indicated frustration with the lack of enforcement of existing laws. One respondent remarked,

“We have laws meant to protect our sites, but they are rarely enforced, allowing for ongoing destruction.” R-5.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research mainly focuses on the intricate relationship between tourism and the preservation of Swat Valley's archaeological heritage sites. While tourism serves as an important economic driver, making money and raising awareness about the region's rich cultural history, it also presented important challenges that threaten the integrity of its archaeological heritage. The findings show that socio-cultural practices, economic hardships, and political uncertainty collectively contribute to the destruction of significant archaeological sites like the Butkara Stupa and the Jahan Abad Buddha. Regional communities busy in different cultural activities that, although rooted in tradition, often lead to unintentional damage to these important sites. Also, economic constraints limit the ability of local governments and communities to invest in necessary conservation efforts, further jeopardizing the preservation of these historical treasures. Political uncertainty increased these issues, with inadequate enforcement of preservation policies leading to neglect and illegal activities that undermine heritage conservation. To ensure the long-term protection of Swat Valley's archaeological heritage, it is essential to adopt sustainable tourism practices that balance economic advantages with the preservation of cultural assets. This includes improving infrastructure, implementing effective management strategies, and fostering community engagement and awareness about the importance of preserving these sites. By addressing the interconnected challenges identified in this research, stakeholders can work towards safeguarding Swat Valley's invaluable heritage for future generations while also promoting its cultural significance on a global scale.

Suggestions

- Strengthening government commitment to enforce preservation laws is essential. Revising policies and improving enforcement mechanisms, along with regular monitoring, can better protect sites. Special task forces should be created to safeguard vulnerable areas like Jahan Abad Buddha and Butkara Stupa.

- Community involvement is key to protecting heritage sites. Educating locals on the importance of these sites can encourage them to take responsibility for their preservation. Collaboration between local authorities, NGOs, and educational institutions should promote awareness of the cultural and economic value of conserving archaeological heritage.
- Sustainable tourism should be promoted to support both the preservation of archaeological sites and local economic growth. Measures like visitor limits, entry fees for site upkeep, and proper tourist facilities can help protect these heritage sites. Training for tour guides and businesses in the tourism sector is essential to ensure their activities do not harm the sites.
- Securing sufficient funding is vital for the preservation of archaeological sites. Local governments, alongside international organizations, should allocate resources for restoration, maintenance, and skilled labor. Additionally, innovative funding methods like grants or crowdfunding should be explored to support ongoing conservation efforts.

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