

Spiritual Branches of Buddhism: Humanistic Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh, India Pathways, Practices, and Tourist Engagement

Amrik Singh

Assistant Professor, SoTTHM
Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Ashish Nag

Professor, Department of tourism and travel Management,
Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Nihal Kapoor

Research Scholar, SoTTHM
Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the rise, contours, and tourist implications of Humanistic Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh, India. Rooted in modern reform movements originating in East Asia, Humanistic Buddhism emphasizes integrating Buddhist practice with everyday life, social engagement, and cultural modernity. Himachal Pradesh home to significant Tibetan exile settlements (notably Dharamshala/McLeod Ganj), indigenous Buddhist pilgrimage sites (Rewalsar, Lahaul-Spiti, Tabo), and a constellation of monasteries presents a compelling field to explore how Humanistic Buddhist values are interpreted, practiced, and commodified within local socio-political ecosystems and tourism economies. This paper assembles an interdisciplinary literature review (religious studies, anthropology, tourism studies), proposes a theoretical framework combining religious modernity, pilgrimage/tourism theory, and cultural commodification perspectives, and outlines a mixed-methods conceptual methodology for empirical investigation. Conceptual findings discuss pathways through which Humanistic Buddhist ideals diffuse in the region (monastic education, laity initiatives, NGO networks), practices shaping tourist experiences (retreats, meditation courses, community rituals), and tensions produced by commodification, governance, and geopolitics. Policy implications and recommendations focus on sustainable spiritual tourism practices, heritage protection, community benefit-sharing, and curriculum/monastery education reforms to balance religious integrity, livelihoods, and national concerns. The paper concludes by proposing an agenda for future empirical research and policy interventions to steward Himachal Pradesh's spiritual tourism responsibly.

Keywords: *Humanistic Buddhism, Tibetan diaspora, Dharamshala, spiritual tourism, pilgrimage, Himachal Pradesh, commodification, religious modernity, tourism policy*

Introduction

The Himachal Pradesh region, located in the Western Himalayas, is one of the most

diverse spiritual landscapes in the world. Its rough frontier, millennium-old tribal societies, colonial legacy cities, woodland monasteries, and Tibetan colourful well-known communities make it a distinctive ecosystem of Buddhism with Hinduism, native Himalayan traditions, missionary Christianity, Sikh heritage and contemporary worldwide spirituality. The contemporary scholarship usually refers to the state as the Land of the Bodhisattvas due to its long-standing connection with practices based on compassion, traditions of contemplation, and the residency of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in Dharamshala since 1960.

The formation of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the reformation of larger Tibetan Buddhist schools (Gelug, Kagyu, Sakya, Nyingma, Bon), and the migration of monastic universities out of Tibet to Himachal Pradesh have profoundly changed the socio-cultural, religious, economic, and identity landscapes of that region. Within the past 60 years, Buddhism has transformed the region as a survival system of knowledge centred on refugees to a system of global philosophy and humanism. Humanistic Buddhism is the most ethical, the most socially engaged and the most global movement in the varied interpretations and modern forms of Buddhism.

In the 20th century, it was reformist Buddhists like Taixu and reformist commentators such as Yin Shun and contemporary propagators like Master Hsing Yun and Cheng Yen who developed humanistic Buddhism (human-centred Buddhism). It redirects the Buddhist focus of the funeral and ritual concerned to the ethics of everyday life, to social involvement, and to practice with the laity. Humanistic Buddhism puts a focus on compassion exercised in social institutions (education, relief, healthcare), applying the Buddhist teachings in ordinary life instead of reducing them to monastic ritual only. Although the movement arose in East Asia, its values have spread and adapted throughout the world, including in the Himalayan regions of South Asia, where the Tibetan Buddhist institutions in exile, Indian Buddhist revival destinations, a growing global interest in mindfulness and spiritual tourism collide.

Himachal Pradesh (HP), India, provides a special laboratory to such dynamics. Without any proposed structural modifications to the state of Tibet itself, since 1959, the institutions of Tibetan exiles based in and around Dharamshala/ McLeod Ganj, combined with the long-term pilgrimage circuits among indigenous Buddhists (Rewalsar, Lahaul-Spiti), have transformed the region into a world spiritual/cultural hotspot. International visitors, students and pilgrims are found in monasteries, meditation centres and community initiatives, which create new kinds of religious practice, identity negotiation

and livelihood generation, which are all related to tourism. At the same time, the Indian national policy (such as recent attempts to standardise the monastic education in Himalayan monasteries) and regional governance influence the way the religious education, cultural heritage and development of tourism are carried out.

Buddhism, among the most resilient philosophical traditions in the world, has been interpreted differently in various regions of the world, socio-culturally, and has had a long and diverse doctrinal history, spanning over two millennia. Humanistic Buddhism, in its modern forms, a reformist, socially committed and ethically focused movement, has acquired remarkable visibility, especially in Asia, and in growing numbers in the global spiritual tourism pilgrimage. Based on the Buddhist renewal of modern thinkers like Taixu, Yin Shun and institutionalised by international institutions like FoGuang Shan, Humanistic Buddhism aims to reconcile classical Buddhism with local needs, especially by being compassionate, interdependent, educational and community-based and pragmatically spiritual (Zheng, 2017; Jones, 2019). Since spiritual tourism emerges as one of the most rapidly expanding sub-sectors of international tourism, Humanistic Buddhism suggests a philosophy and institutional structure that redefines Himalayan destinations as the places of self-transformation, ethical training, healing, and intercultural communication (Smith, 2021; Olsen and Timothy, 2020).

Himachal Pradesh, a state in the Himalayas region of India, where Buddhism originated, is at the pole position of spiritual tourism in the world. Himachal Pradesh has developed into a vibrant spiritual destination with a Tibetan Buddhist centre, around the world spiritual tourist destination of Dharamshala/McLeodGanj, along with Himalayan indigenous cultures and spiritual seekers around the globe. The 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community moved to exile in 1959, and turned it into a transnational Buddhist education hub, the place of human rights activism, a culture of meditation, mindfulness-based therapies, and spiritual education run by the community (Brekke, 2020). Himachal Pradesh has emerged as a laboratory of living Buddhist cultural brightness, diaspora sense, monastic education reformation, and humanistic principles to influence spiritual tourist destinations in the past 6 decades.

The embrace of spiritual tourism in the world, which is projected to receive over 300 million tourists every year (UNWTO, 2023), indicates a transition of tourism as a consumption-driven activity to experience-based, transformative and purpose-oriented travel. Tourists are likely to demand inner tranquillity, emotional and spiritual health,

environmental balance, and cultural engagements instead of material delights. Buddhist centres in Himachal Pradesh are a good example of how this transformation has taken place through the use of retreats, meditation classes, philosophical teachings, healing therapy like Tibetan medicine and participatory community programs. With its focus on ethical living, education, and serving society, humanistic Buddhism is perfectly consistent with these new motives, and, therefore, Himachal Pradesh can be a valuable source of empirical and theoretical research.

Although there has been a marked increase in the scholarship on tourism in Buddhist territories, little has been done in Humanistic Buddhism-based spiritual tourism in the Western Himalayas. The literature available has mostly concerned the Tibetan diaspora identity (McConnell, 2018), monastic administrations (Goldstein, 2019), pilgrimage aspects (Morinis, 2009), and cultural resiliency (Childs, 2021). But a significant gap in research exists on how Humanistic Buddhist philosophy as a modern, socially oriented, humanistic approach is shaping the trends of spiritual tourism, community welfare, institutional practices, sustainable tourism model and intercultural learning networks in Himachal Pradesh.

Furthermore, the Himachal spiritual tourism industry is at a crossroads at the moment. The number of tourists visiting the regions is increasing; Dharamshala alone receives 1.62 million tourists every year (DoT-HP, 2023). As tourists diversify and travel with the intention to experience more and less superficial tourism, Buddhist centres in Kangra, Dharamshala, Bir, Rewalsar, Tabo, and Keylong are becoming more involved in such global phenomena as mindfulness tourism, compassion education, secular Buddhism, digital learning, and humanitarian outreach. These changes are driven not only by the Tibetan monastic culture but also by service (*seva*), compassion (*karuṇā*), wisdom (*prajña*), and harmonious coexistence which are the values of Humanistic Buddhism.

The Himalayan ecological fragility adds another dimension to the significance of this research. Climate change, waste pollution, landscape degradation, and increasing commercialisation threaten the sustainability of spiritual sites. Humanistic Buddhism, with its foundational emphasis on ecological care, ethical livelihood, and mindful consumption, offers a philosophical lens for designing sustainable spiritual tourism strategies in Himachal Pradesh (Kaza, 2019). Understanding how spiritual institutions interpret and practice these principles can inform policy frameworks for regenerative tourism.

This study, therefore, integrates **Buddhist studies, tourism research, environmental**

humanities, and cultural anthropology to develop a comprehensive examination of Humanistic Buddhism's growth, practice, and impact on spiritual tourism in Himachal Pradesh. It critically evaluates how Buddhist institutions operationalise humanistic values in teaching, tourism management, community outreach, secular education, and intercultural communication—while also analysing visitor motivations, socio-cultural exchanges, and local perceptions.

In doing so, the research contributes to multiple academic and applied domains:

1. Buddhist Studies

This paper has the potential to enrich the overall mapping of modern Buddhist reform movements across the world by methodically recording how Humanistic Buddhism is being read/rendered, passed on, and practised in the Himalayan setting of India. It strikes a step further by forgoing East Asian-centered arguments to preempt Himalayan adaptations through Tibetan exile institutions, Indian socio-cultural realities and transnational spiritual networks. The paper points to the localisation of the ethical participation, lay participation, social service, and education-oriented Buddhism in monasteries, meditation centres, and community-based initiatives in Himachal Pradesh. Through it, the comparative Buddhism studies will be enriched to show the way Humanistic Buddhism changes over geographies and still retains the same doctrines, providing new knowledge on the topics of Buddhist modernity, reform and lived religious practice.

2. Tourism Studies

This paper places Himachal Pradesh as a potential destination of spiritual tourism in the world by conceptualising Buddhist tourism as an experience-based, transformative travel as opposed to pilgrimage. It offers an empirical model on analysing the role of meditation retreats, monastic instruction, cultural immersion programs, and community-based spiritual events on visitor motivations, experiences, and wellbeing outcomes. Incorporating the ideas of the tourism theory and the religious studies, the study contributes to the knowledge on how spiritual meaning, authenticity, and experiential value are co-created by the institutions, local communities, and tourists. Therefore, the research paper develops the body of tourism academic literature with a sophisticated framework of studying Buddhist tourism as a kind of ethical, experiential, and reflective travel, but not necessarily as a leisure travel experience or as a heritage travel experience.

3. Diaspora Studies Cultural Anthropology.

The paper provides an important understanding of how Tibetan diaspora communities in Himachal Pradesh mediate upon identity, cultural continuity and global interaction in circumstances of exile and mobility. It looks at monasteries, cultural centres and tourism interfaces as important locations where religious practice, conservation of heritage and economic survival merge. Through studying the day-to-day life experiences that Tibetan communities face, as well as the interactions between the host societies of India and foreign visitors, the study identifies adaptive measures through which cultural traditions are maintained and at the same time as they adapt to global spiritual markets. The contribution adds value to the diaspora and anthropological literature by illustrating how religious institutions perform the cultural, economic, and transnational roles in a fast-globalising Himalayan world.

4. Sustainability and Policy Studies.

The study illustrates how social responsibility, compassion, moderation and interdependence (Foregrounding the Humanistic Buddhist principles) can be applied to inform sustainable tourism policy in ecologically delicate mountain regions. It understands tourism as development, not as an economic activity but only as a moral and ecological practice within the context of local lifeworlds. The study provides policy-relevant information on livelihood creation, heritage protection, and environmental management in Himachal Pradesh. It hypothesizes that incorporating humanistic principles in tourism planning by emphasizing community involvement, mechanisms of commodification, and culturally sensitive governance can help to make tourism in the Himalayas and other sensitive landscapes more resilient, inclusive and ethically based forms of development.

5. Intercultural Studies Peace Studies.

The paper has indicated the importance of Buddhist monasteries and meditation centres in Himachal Pradesh as useful places of intercultural dialogue and peace education and formation of global citizens. These institutions involve various international audiences and promote cross-cultural understanding through teachings about non-violence, compassion, mindfulness, and ethical responsibility. The study exemplifies how spiritual tourism helps in informal diplomacy through establishing long-term interaction between tourists of various cultural, national, and religious backgrounds. The research works on peacebuilding and intercultural learning by locating Buddhist centres as soft-power agents in peacebuilding and contributing to the peace and conflict studies by focusing on the opportunities of spiritual institutions to cultivate empathy, dialogue, and shared

human values in the polarised world. The research is part of emerging Himalayan spiritual landscape concept in the Indian vision of the 21st century of spiritual economy, Buddhist diplomacy and preservation of Himalayan cultural heritage due to its strategic value in regional diplomacy, soft power and cultural diplomacy. The paper has the following question: How is Humanistic Buddhism understood and applied in Himachal Pradesh? How are these interpretations delivered to the local communities and visitors? What are the effects and interactions of these practices and tourist engagement in diverse ways, such as pilgrimage to experiential spiritual tourism? So what policy solutions could be most conducive to sustainable and community-based spiritual tourism and to religious integrity?

The paper provides conceptual answers to these conceptual questions by synthesising literature on Buddhist studies, tourism and pilgrimage studies, anthropology of diaspora, and policy studies; through a multi-level theoretical frame, a conceptual methodology based on a mixed-methodology; and conceptual findings, analysis, and policy implications. It is meant to give scholars, policymakers, and practitioners a logically consistent roadmap in terms of empirical research and effective interventions.

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into five thematic groups: (1) Humanistic Buddhism and Buddhist modernism; (2) Tibetan Buddhism and exile communities in India (with special reference to Dharamshala/McLeod Ganj); (3) Buddhist pilgrimage, spiritual tourism and involvement of tourists; (4) commodification and heritage in religious tourism and (5) governance, education and current policy changes to Himalayan monastic institutions.

1. Buddhism, Modernism and Humanistic Buddhism. Humanistic Buddhism has often been described as belonging to a larger Buddhist modernist reaction to the problems of modernity, by focusing more on ethical practice, social work, and lay practice. Ossified ritual focus was criticised by foundational reformers (Taixu; Yin Shun) who encouraged socially engaged practice; later sources (Hsing Yun, Fo Guang Shan; engaged Buddhism by Thich Nhat Hanh) extended forms to education, charity and cultural work. Current scholarship is institutionalised, transnationalized, and modified to suit different situations (Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and communities in the diaspora). The practical focuses of Humanistic Buddhism, education, welfare and cultural propagation, are aligned with tourist-centred activities like retreats, cultural programs and activities that face the general population, like dharma talks.

Key words and perspectives:

1. The initial reform proposals by Taixu, in the early 20th century, focused on Buddhism in human life and the integration of Buddhism in the social and national life. Wikipedia
2. The society-oriented critique of deification and the demand for a socially oriented doctrine by Yin Shun reflected on the development of post-war China and Taiwan. Wikipedia
3. The modern-day studies of Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan demonstrate institutional modernising pressures, especially education, media, and cultural outreach, to be applicable in the way the Buddhist institutions address the public and tourists. MDPI+1

2. Tibetan Buddhism in Exile and Himachal Pradesh

After the Tibetan exodus of 1959, Dharamshala became the de facto political and cultural capital in exile, and the residence of the Dalai Lama attracted international attention. The literature studies diasporic identity, urban change (McLeod Ganj as a Little Lhasa), and socio-economic changes into a negotiation of exile, preservation of heritage and commercial pressures by Tibetans. Research is also recorded on monastic adaptation of curricula and the contribution made by monastic institutions to education, transmission of cultures and tourism.

Representative findings:

1. Dharamshala /McLeod Ganj is a transnational node which connects the flow of Tibetan exile politics, religion and world tourism; this has altered local economics and social space. digitalcollections.sit.edu+1
2. Relative analyses indicate urban precarity within the Tibetan communities and emphasise resilience measures such as cultural entrepreneurship, hostels, teaching centres, and tourism-related services.

3. Buddhist Pilgrimage, Spiritual Tourism and Tourist Engagement.

The study of religious and spiritual tourism has placed an ever-growing focus on the search for authentic experience, wellbeing, and spiritual metamorphosis among the tourists. Buddhist locations can be visited by various categories of visitors: pilgrims, spiritual seekers, leisure travellers and researchers. Research findings indicate that spiritual tourism is usually a combination of religious education (retreats, teachings), ritual observation (pujas, prayers), and commoditised cultural experiences (souvenir markets, guided tours to monasteries). Available empirical evidence indicates that spiritual tourism may have quantifiable impacts on the psychological welfare of tourists and may potentially lead to cross-cultural empathy, although it may also have de-

escalating effects when improperly handled. The recent studies point to motivations (learning, spirituality, pilgrimage), and experiential results (wellbeing, changes in identity).

Notable contributions:

1. The article by Zhang et al. (2023) on spiritual values and the psychological well-being of the tourists reveals that religious experiences at sites can lead to significant well-being effects.

2. Literature on the Indian situation references the lack of promotion of Buddhist destinations with rich heritage resources (Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, and Himalayan monasteries), indicating that integrative approaches to tourism are necessary.

4. Commodification, Heritage and Local Economies.

Complex literature on the commodification of religion and culture in tourism has been written on: how religious routines can be staged, the heritagization of a narrative commodified, and how local craft can be re-focused towards market rationality. Researchers focus on imbalances of power: who is economically advantaged, who sets the narrative of the frame, and how authenticity discourses influence tourism experiences. The Himalayan situations are similar to this: monastic economies and local artisans heavily depend on tourism, which benefits their livelihood and creates cultural conflicts.

5. Key observations:

1. Tourism has the potential to revive old crafts, generate jobs and also offer addiction and erosion of ritual sanctity by offering performative acts. tourismhimachal.co.in

2. The bargaining power of local stakeholders (monasteries, local governments, entrepreneurs) defines the distribution of benefits. IJARIE

6. Himalayan Monasteries, Governance, Education and Policy.

The recent policy action highlights the political relevance of monastic education and custodianship of culture. In 2025, India claimed a standardised curriculum in Himalayan monasteries to incorporate modern subjects into the Buddhist doctrine across several states, including Himachal Pradesh, a move that can be viewed as both educational modernisation and national integration in a tense border situation. According to scholars, there were policy conflicts: the need to reconcile monastic independence and national education norms, and geopolitical insecurities. This governance turn influences the way Humanistic Buddhist practices might be institutionalised and how educational programs

associated with tourism might increase. Reuters

Scholars highlight:

1. Reforms in the curriculum can also increase the employability of monastic students and also confront the traditional models of pedagogy. Reuters

2. The policy interventions should be conscious of religious autonomy and community voice to prevent alienation. Bhumi, The Planning Research Journal.

1. Humanistic Buddhism: Academic literature on Humanistic Buddhism dates its emergence to the activities of Chinese Buddhist modernisers (Taixu, 20th c.) and subsequent organisations such as FoGuang Shan (Hsing Yun) that propagated socially engaged Buddhism (Shahar 2008; Liu 2011). Major topics: (a) re-exploring monastic practice in the direction of social welfare and education; (b) re-exploring the role of the laity in monastic practice and lay community projects; (c) re-exploring the application of doctrine to secular life (mindfulness, social action). Theoretical literature looks at the ways Humanistic Buddhism is negotiating modernity (Liu 2012), and the dynamics of its development in the diasporic settings.

2. Buddhism in Himalaya/Himachal: Research on Tibetan Buddhism in India has focused on the effects of exile, institutional change in the monasteries and the preservation of the culture (Shakya 1999; Samuel 1993). Himalayan monastery histories and ritual economies are discussed by Rizvi (1996) and Samuel (2012) in their works. More recent academics are interested in Dharamshala as a transnational Tibetan hub (McKean 2009; Thapa 2018).

1. Spiritual tourism and pilgrimage: The literature of spiritual tourism has made a differentiation between pilgrimage, a retreat and commodified spiritual experiences (Rinschede 1992; Collins-Kreiner 2010). The studies signify conflict between authenticity, commodification, and community good (Picard 2015; Timothy and Olsen 2006). The research on pilgrimage economies, commodification of ritual, and the transformation of culture is on the rise in the context of the Himalayas (Sinha 2017; Mishra 2019).
2. Theories of religion-tourism interaction: Several theories apply to it: commodification/authenticity discourses (Cohen 1988), supply/demand models of spiritual tourism (Rinschede 1992), and the approach to the contact zone - spaces of encounter between religious traditions and the tourists (Eade&Sallnow 1991). The present paper combines these frameworks and the value orientation of Humanistic Buddhism (compassion, social engagement) to investigate the

possibility of using spiritual tourism as a means of promoting the well-being of the monastic community and community resilience.

3. This conceptual inquiry is inspired by three key gaps:
 1. Relational Dynamics Between Humanistic Buddhism Practice and Tourist Experience in Himachal: Although the literature on Buddhist modernism and the Tibetan communities where they are in exile have been studied on an individual basis, the interplay between Humanistic Buddhism values and the tourism experience in HP has been understudied. What effects does Humanistic influence have on the programmes provided to tourists (retreat design, lay education), and what does the expectation of tourists have on practice?
 2. Policy-Practice Nexus: The new national policies regarding monastic education have not been discussed in detail concerning tourism economies and heritage administration in HP. Its impact on the content of the curriculum, community livelihoods and the tourist programming has not been well researched.
 3. Theory of Conceptual Integration: Himalayan Buddhists do not have a comprehensive framework of religious modernity, pilgrimage/tourism experience, commodification, and political governance. The present paper tries to develop such an integrative frame and provide empirical strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The paper will combine three theoretical perspectives into one unified model of Humanistic Buddhism and tourist interaction in Himachal Pradesh:

1. Religious Modernity / Reform Theory: This theory is based on the studies into Buddhist modernism (Taixu, Yin Shun, Hsing Yun), as well as on the so-called engaged Buddhism, and it emphasises changes in doctrines and institutions in favour of social action, education, and lay involvement. It assists in examining the operationalisation of the values of Humanistic Buddhism through the institutions (monasteries, NGOs, retreat centres).

Wikipedia+1

Pilgrimage and Tourist Experience Theory: Building on classic pilgrimage theory (e.g., Turner & Turner) and contemporary spiritual tourism scholarship (motivation–experience–outcome models), this lens emphasises visitor motivations (devotional, experiential, educational), experience staging, and wellbeing outcomes. It is used to examine how Humanistic Buddhist activities cater to diverse visitor types and shape

experience trajectories.

Commodification and Cultural Political Economy: This lens draws from critical tourism and cultural commodification literature to analyse how religious practices and heritage are packaged for markets, how economic benefits are distributed, and how authenticity narratives are constructed. It foregrounds power relations among monasteries, residents, tourism entrepreneurs, and state actors. Integrating these lenses produces an analytical matrix: **Pathways (institutional and social), Practices (ritual, pedagogic, service delivery), Experiences (tourist motivations and outcomes), and Governance (policy, heritage management, economic distribution)**. This matrix structures the conceptual findings and the recommendations below.

Methodology (Conceptual Design)

This paper is conceptual and prescriptive, proposing a mixed-method empirical program to investigate Humanistic Buddhism and tourist engagement in HP.

Research Questions (RQ)

RQ1. What institutional pathways (monastic networks, NGOs, educational programs) foreground Humanistic Buddhist values in Himachal Pradesh?

RQ2. How are Humanistic Buddhist practices translated into tourist-facing products (retreats, meditation classes, cultural events)?

RQ3. What are the tourist motivations, experiences, and well-being outcomes associated with Humanistic-Buddhist engagement?

RQ4. How do commodification processes and governance arrangements shape local benefits, authenticity narratives, and heritage protection?

RQ5. What policy measures can enhance community benefits while protecting religious integrity?

Conceptual Methods

1. Document & Policy Analysis.

Gather government papers (Himachal tourism plans, 2025 monastery curriculum policy), NGO documents, websites of the monasteries, and program brochures to map institutional pointing and policy environment.

2. Qualitative Fieldwork.

Interview with stakeholders (semi-structured interviews): monastery leaders (abbots, education heads), lay teachers, organisers of retreats (e.g., Tushita), tourism

entrepreneurs, local craftspeople and government tourism representatives.

Retreats, puja, meditation classes, and tours of the monasteries that face tourists in order to observe practices and how they are performed. tushita.info+1

3. Visitor Surveys and Psychometric Measures.

Prepare design visitor questionnaires to obtain demographics, motivations (devotional, learning, leisure, wellbeing), satisfaction and wellbeing outcomes (validated scales e.g. Ryff Psychological Wellbeing Scale adaptations). Provide pre-post measures to participants of the retreat to evaluate changes. Apply the quota sampling based on the type of visitors (pilgrim seeker and leisure tourist). PubMed Central

4. Economic & Network Analysis.

Carry out household/enterprise surveys of the local service providers (guesthouses, shops, guides) and determine the estimated economic linkages and distribute benefits.

Apply social network analysis to reveal institutional relationships between monasteries, NGOs, schools, and tourism operators.

5. Visual & Discourse Analysis.

Compare marketing materials and websites as well as social media of monasteries and retreat centres, to analyse the discourse of authenticity, modernity, and spiritual value.

Ethical Considerations

Get informed consent; be observant of religious procedures; work with local communities and monastic leaders; make sure reports are given back to communities in available formats.

Conceptual Findings (Synthesis)

Based on theory and conceptual and methodological lenses, the synthesised (conceptual) findings of pathways, practices, and tourist involvement with Humanistic Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh are as follows.

1. Pathways: Institutional Diffusion and Local Adaptation.

Humanistic Buddhist concepts do not come in through a single channel: Tibetan exile schools (Monasteries of Dharamshala and the general teachings of the Dalai Lama), transnational Buddhist institutions (retreat centres, East Asian visiting teachers), and Indian state/NGO teaching institutions. These channels come together in HP: exile institutions also offer doctrinal richness and symbolic capital; transnational NGOs and Buddhist organisations also introduce programmatic forms (retreat syllabi, structured meditation courses); government and local NGOs also create infrastructure (tourism

marketing, festival support). New directions in the curriculum, which can be part of Humanistic emphases (social skills, modern subjects), are also introduced by recent policy initiatives to make monastery schooling standardised (digitalcollections.sit.edu+2tushita.info+2).

2. Practices: Publicising Humanistic Values in the Program.

Although not explicitly formulated into specific programs, Humanistic Buddhist values are implemented in monasteries and retreat centres by addressing local communities and visitors alike: lay education courses, community service initiatives (food relief, health camps), and retreat packages that put a strong premium on meditation-as-life-skill. Structured study and retreat centres such as Tushita provide instruction to international practitioners, and follow Humanistic principles of helping practice be applied in everyday life. Some ritual activities are also modified to allow participation by the general population (open pujas, instructional sessions), which makes the rituals easier to access by tourists, but also casts doubt on ritual purity. tushita.info+1

3. Engagement and Motivations of the tourists.

Tourists coming to the Buddhist sites in HP have diverse interests: devotion/pilgrimage (local Indian and Himalayan pilgrims), spiritual-seeking (international students of meditation), cultural curiosity (heritage tourists) and wellbeing-oriented tourists. Humanistic Buddhist services - including practice of foreground, ethics, and social action - appeal to the applied mindfulness setting and community learning, and wellbeing seekers. Other contexts indicate that empirical studies can be used to promote psychological well-being in the realms of such spiritual programs; the same results would be probable in HP when such programs are properly structured and culturally sensitive. PubMed Central+1

4. Commodification & Tension Points.

Due to the scale of spiritual programs as a type of tourism, the pressure of commodification appears: commercialisation of retreats, performances of ritual by tourists, and markets of souvenirs around monasteries. Tourism has created livelihoods (guesthouses, handicrafts), but it contributes to dependency and the need to host events to attract tourists. The authenticity issue comes up; some practitioners and religious leaders object to commodification because of the threat to the integrity of religion; others are pragmatic and seek funds and recognition as a result. tourismhimachal.co.in+1.

5. Governance Policy Implications.

The institutionalisation of Humanistic values depends on policy measures (e.g.,

standardisation of the monastery curriculum). When introduced effectively, these reforms have the potential to improve the outcomes of education among monastic young people and raise the possibility of capacity building on behalf of the locals to help them handle tourists in responsible ways. Nonetheless, top-down reforms threaten to put off the traditional stakeholders unless they are formulated collaboratively. The tourism policy should provide a balance between promotion and preservation, the sharing of benefits with the local communities and capacity building for the community stakeholders.

Reuters+1

Analysis & Discussion

Translational Dynamics: Between Doctrine and Tourism Product.

The ethical and lay focuses of humanistic Buddhism easily convert into products that attract tourists: weekend retreats in the middle of the forest, staying with the monks, community service tours, and culture education tours. These products suit the modern tourist's need to have meaningful, transformative experiences. The translation, in turn, can be characterised as the work of institutional entrepreneurs (teachers, NGOs, monastery administrators) who integrate the authenticity of the doctrine with the design of the pedagogy and the promotion of tourism. The quality of the tourist experience, however, is conditional on adherence to teachings, instructor competence and cultural sensitivity. Over-simplified and exoticised practice programs run the risk of disappointing seekers and bleeding credibility.

Socio-Economic Trade-offs

The revenues generated by tourism are used to maintain monasteries and local communities; however, they lead to distributional injustices when the gains are concentrated by a few entrepreneurs or external tour operators. Local crafts and service providers can get short-term benefits, but with the tourism seasons and geopolitical occurrences (e.g. pandemic, border tensions). Equity can be reduced through policy and community-level interventions, including cooperative enterprise forms, heritage taxes redirected to community development, and local entrepreneur training.

Political and Geopolitical Aspects.

The political symbolism of Dharamshala (the government in exile of Tibet, the seat of the Dalai Lama) makes the spiritual tourism politically sensitive. Such efforts on a national level to incorporate monastic education are linked to concerns regarding border security and influence, and policies can potentially redefine the role of monks in the life of the

population, including what they teach about themselves to foreign visitors. Researchers should be cognizant of political sensibility in developing studies and suggest that tourism programming be less instrumentalization of religious stories to geopolitical purposes.

Wikipedia+1

Cultural Integrity/ Market Logic.

Reflexive institutional governance is needed to combine religious integrity and market logic. The codes of conduct may include visitor participation (dress code, photography, staged or authentic ritual) set by the monastic councils and local governments, and stipulated ways of consulting with the community before initiating the tourism ventures. These measures preserve religious activities at the same time, supporting livelihoods.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

Drawing from the conceptual analysis, the following policy recommendations are proposed for state authorities, monastic institutions, tourism departments, and civil society actors in Himachal Pradesh.

1. Collaborative Curriculum & Capacity Building

Implement the monastery curriculum reforms (as per 2025 initiatives) through participatory design, involving monastic elders, teachers, local education experts, and tourism stakeholders to ensure cultural continuity and practical skills (English, hospitality, digital skills). This will equip monastic students for engagement with visitors and broader livelihoods while protecting doctrinal cores. Reuters

2. Sustainable Spiritual Tourism Framework

Develop a state-level “Spiritual Tourism Code” for Himachal Pradesh: standards for program quality (teacher qualifications, program duration), visitor codes (behaviour, photography), pricing transparency, and revenue-sharing models. Include accreditation for retreat centres that meet pedagogical and ethical standards.

3. Community Benefit-Sharing Mechanisms

Facilitate local cooperative models for handicraft production, home-stays, and guide services; provide micro-credit and business training to ensure tourism benefits remain local. Explore a modest tourist eco-levy directed to monastery conservation and community projects.

4. Heritage Protection & Zoning

Identify sensitive sacred sites and apply protective zoning to regulate commercial development within proximity. Provide capacity and funding for the conservation of monastery architecture and ritual artefacts.

5. Research & Monitoring Infrastructure

Establish a regional research hub (e.g., in Dharamshala) to monitor spiritual tourism impacts (social, economic, environmental) and to accredit research collaborations that ensure ethical standards and community consent. Use longitudinal visitor wellbeing surveys to monitor outcomes of retreat programs.

6. International Partnerships & Exchange

Encourage partnerships with reputable international Buddhist centres to co-develop teacher-exchange programs, ethical tourism curricula, and cross-cultural training for guides and retreat staff, ensuring quality and preventing exploitative short-term “voluntourism” models.

7. Crisis-Resilient Livelihoods

Develop off-season livelihood supports (value addition for agricultural produce, handicraft market linkages, digital platforms) to reduce economic dependency on tourism seasonality.

Conclusion

Himachal Pradesh’s unique confluence of Tibetan exile institutions, indigenous Buddhist pilgrimage circuits, and a growing global appetite for spiritual, experiential tourism positions it at the crossroads of religious modernity and tourism development. Humanistic Buddhism, with its emphasis on practice in daily life, social engagement, and education, offers conceptual resources to shape spiritually-oriented tourist programs that are meaningful, ethical, and beneficial for local communities. Yet the transition from doctrine to tourism product entails significant trade-offs: commodification pressures, distributional inequities, and political sensitivities.

This paper proposed an integrative theoretical framework and a mixed-methods conceptual methodology for empirical study. It synthesised conceptual findings regarding institutional pathways, practice translations, tourist motivations, commodification tensions, and governance imperatives, and advanced concrete policy recommendations: participatory curriculum reform, sustainable tourism codes, community benefit mechanisms, heritage zoning, research hubs, international partnerships, and crisis-resilient livelihoods.

Future empirical research should operationalise the methodological program outlined here, collect longitudinal data on tourist wellbeing and local economic impacts, and co-produce policy interventions with monastic and community stakeholders. Doing so will help ensure that Himachal Pradesh’s spiritual landscapes remain sites of authentic practice, shared prosperity, and intercultural learning, an embodiment of Humanistic Buddhism’s promise:

bringing the dharma into the life of the world.

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