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Geography and Tourism Relationship: A Study of Pokhara Valley**Khagendra Raj Poudel**

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Abstract

This study examines the geography–tourism nexus in Pokhara, Nepal, with the objective of understanding how physical landscapes, cultural heritage, and spatial interactions shape the city's development as a sustainable tourism destination. The research applies a qualitative, descriptive methodology, relying on secondary data from academic sources, government reports, and tourism statistics. Pokhara's geography including snow-capped mountains, lakes, caves, and hilltops forms the foundation for diverse tourist attractions and influences the spatial distribution of tourism infrastructure. Culturally, the city hosts a variety of Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries, and ethnic communities, enriching the visitor experience through religious, historical, and social engagement. Empirical data indicate that Pokhara receives over 460,000 international tourists annually, supports 75,000 direct tourism-related jobs, and generates over Rs 25 billion in revenue. The findings reveal a strong causal and mutual relationship between geography and tourism: natural and cultural landscapes drive tourism, while tourism development reshapes spatial patterns and economic activity. The study concludes that effective tourism planning in Pokhara must account for the delicate balance between geographic conservation and economic growth.

Keywords: Geography–tourism nexus, landscape, cultural heritage, tourism development, Pokhara.

1. Introduction

Geography and tourism are deeply interconnected disciplines, each influencing the other through spatial relationships and environmental interactions. Geography, as the study of both physical and human features of the Earth's surface, provides the essential framework within which tourism operates (Abellán & Martínez, 2021). It examines the patterns and processes of landforms, climate, vegetation, water systems, and human-made features such as settlements, transportation routes, and cultural landmarks. This spatial context is fundamental in determining where and how tourism develops (Hall & Page, 2014).

Tourism, in contrast, refers to the movement of people for leisure, culture, business, or exploration. However, it is not independent of geography; it occurs within specific geographical

contexts and actively shapes them. Tourism interacts with landscapes and cultural settings, often transforming them through infrastructure development, resource consumption, and socio-economic activities. It can have wide-ranging effects, both positive and negative, on local environments and societies, including environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and economic growth (Mason, 2003).

The spatial dimensions of geography offer a powerful lens for analyzing tourism. Geography helps us understand not only the location and distribution of tourist attractions but also the routes tourists take, the infrastructure they rely on, and the economic and cultural impacts of tourism on host communities. Likewise, tourism provides insight into the dynamic relationship between people and their environments, shedding light on how cultural landscapes are perceived, consumed, and reshaped.

This dynamic relationship is especially evident in Pokhara, a city located in central Nepal. The Pokhara Valley extends from 400 meters in the south (Bhimad) to around 1,300 meters in the north (Kharapani), sloping from northwest to southeast. The valley is drained by the Seti River and surrounded by snow-covered mountains and lush hills. Geologically, the region was formed through the collision of the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates, resulting in a tectonic depression filled by glacial and fluvial deposits during the Late Pleistocene period (Gurung, 1969; Paudel, 1988).

Pokhara's natural landscape includes a unique assemblage of features Annapurna and Machhapuchhre mountain ranges, lakes (Phewa, Begnas, Rupa), caves (Mahendra, Gupteshwor), Seti river gorge and terrace that landscape make it one of Nepal's most iconic tourism destinations (Udash, 2013). Simultaneously, the city offers rich cultural assets such as temples, monasteries, and ethnic diversity, reinforcing its attractiveness. This blend of natural and cultural geography positions Pokhara as a prime location for tourism-related research and planning.

This paper explores the geography–tourism nexus by analyzing how physical landscapes and cultural heritage have shaped emergence of Pokhara as a sustainable tourism destination.

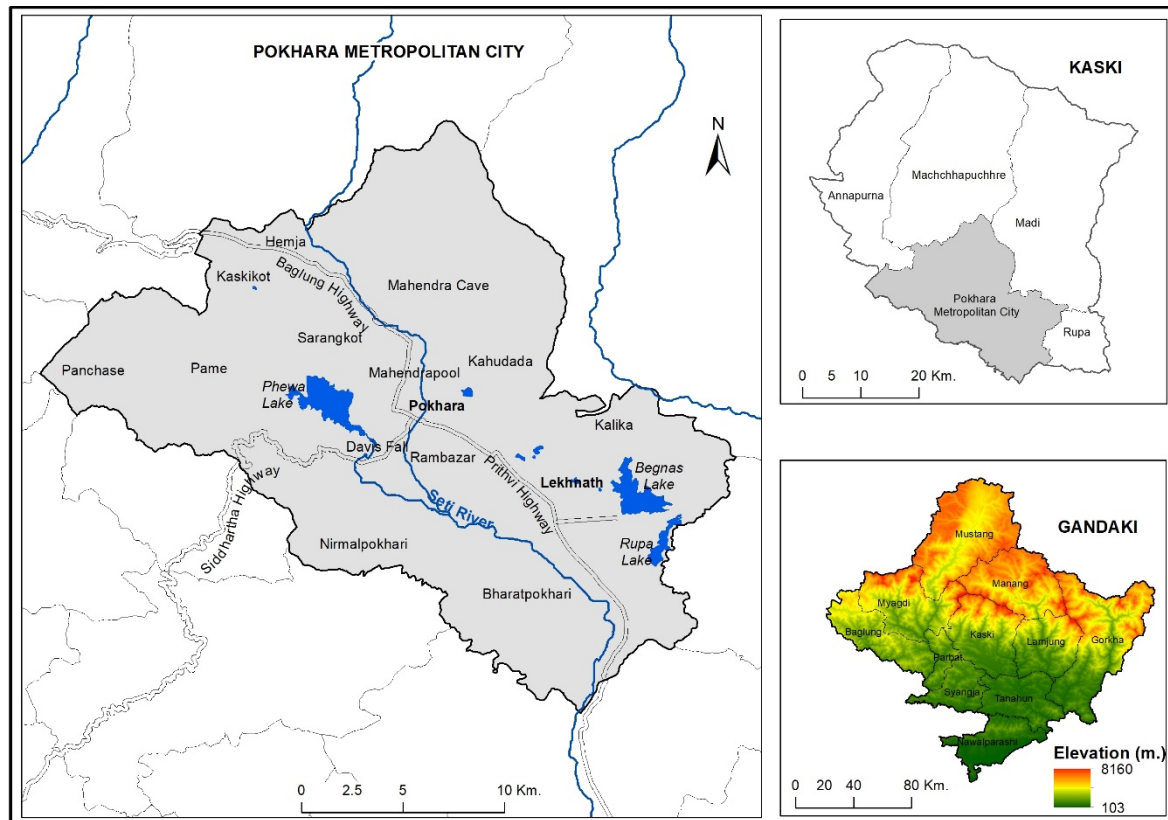
2. Study Area

Pokhara Valley, the focus of this study, is located in central Nepal within Gandaki Province and serves as the administrative center of Kaski District. Geographically, the valley lies between latitudes by 27° 50' to 28° 23' north latitudes and 83° 48' to 84° 13' east longitudes. The study area extends to Rupakot ridge in the east, Panchase and Lumle ridge to the west, Annapurna and Machhapuchhre range in the north and Barsami ridge in the south (Figure 1). This valley is directly under the shadow and in the south-facing lap of the majestic Mt. Annapurna Range. The valley is also dotted with scenic freshwater lakes such as Phewa, Begnas, and Rupa, which enhance the region's natural beauty and attract a wide range of domestic and international tourists. Major heritage sites such

as Bindyabasini Temple, Tal Barahi Temple, and the World Peace Pagoda underscore the valley's religious and historical importance.

Figure 1

Study Area Map



3. Methodology

This study is primarily data obtained through the review of secondary sources. Relevant information was collected from academic journals, scholarly books, and previous research studies focused on geography and tourism in Nepal. Government publications from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), as well as statistical data from the Nepal Tourism Board and Pokhara Tourism Office, were reviewed to understand tourism patterns and visitor trends. In addition, maps, photographs, and archival materials provided insight into the spatial distribution of natural and cultural heritage in Pokhara. Historical and geological references such as those by Gurung (1969) and Paudel (1988) offered important context regarding the formation and transformation landscape of Pokhara surrounding.

The collected data are analyzed using a descriptive and interpretative approach. Content analysis was applied to literature and historical documents to trace the development of tourism in relation to Pokhara's geography. Spatial observation was used to assess the location and

distribution of natural attractions, cultural landmarks, and tourism infrastructure. Thematic interpretation helped identify key geographic features, such as mountains, lakes, and religious sites that contribute to the tourism appeal of Pokhara. Where applicable, visual materials like maps and figures were incorporated to support geographic analysis and contextualize the spatial interactions between physical landscapes and tourism activities. This approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of how geography shapes tourism development and how tourism, in turn, interacts with and transforms the landscape of Pokhara.

4. Results and Discussion

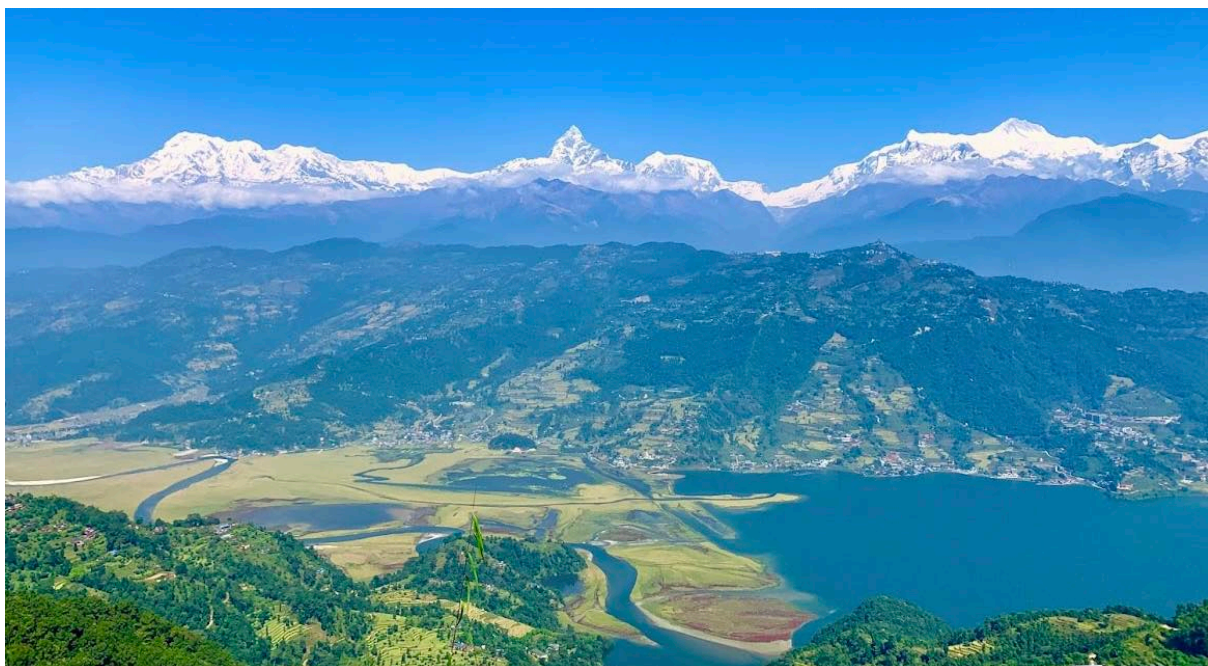
4.1 Geographical Landscapes of Pokhara

Pokhara's diverse and scenic landscapes are foundational to its tourism identity. The region is endowed with an exceptional range of natural attractions, lakes, caves, waterfalls, gorges, and hilltops that provide not only aesthetic pleasure but also support various recreational and cultural activities. These landscapes are spatially distributed throughout the valley and its periphery, offering a mix of tranquil and adventurous experiences.

One of the most iconic views is offered by Mount Machhapuchhre (Fish-Tail) and the Annapurna range, located to the north of Pokhara. The snow-covered peaks provide a dramatic backdrop to the city, especially enchanting during sunrise and sunset. Viewpoints throughout the city, such as Sarangkot and Kahun Danda, provide excellent platforms for mountain viewing, photography, and spiritual reflection.

Figure 2

Iconic Views of Phewa Lake, Sarangkot, Mount Machhapuchhre and Annapurna Range



Among the most visited sites are the region's lakes. Phewa Lake, located on the southern flank of the valley near Lakeside and Baidam, is central to Pokhara's identity. It supports a

wide range of activities such as boating, kayaking, shopping, and sightseeing, and offers striking reflections of Mount Machhapuchhre on clear days. Begnas Lake and Rupa Lake, situated east of the city, are more serene and are popular for birdwatching, swimming, horse riding, and fishing. These lakes contribute not only to the ecological diversity of the valley but also to its recreational economy.

Another striking geographic feature is the Seti River Gorge, which slices through the city from north to south. Just 1 km from the downtown bazaar, the gorge offers a dramatic natural attraction, where the white Seti River flows through narrow, deep rock formations. The gorge is also home to the city's first cement-concrete bridge, built in 2014 B.S., which adds infrastructural significance to the site.

Pokhara's subterranean landscapes also draw significant tourist interest. The Mahendra Cave, located about 6 km north of the city in Batulechaur, is a popular site for exploratory tourism, known for its limestone formations and dark passages. Nearby, the Bat's Cave provides a more intense, adventurous experience due to its narrow exits and large bat colonies. Both caves reflect the region's geological complexity and appeal to adventure seekers. Similarly, Bhim Dhunga, located near the Prithvi Narayan Campus in the north of the city, features enormous granite boulders and twisted rock formations, adding geotourism value to Pokhara's offerings.

Water-based attractions are also prominent. Patale Chhango (Devi's Fall) is a powerful waterfall located about 2 km from Lake Side, where water from Phewa Lake rushes underground through a tunnel. The falls are a favorite for sightseeing, photography, and short romantic visits due to their force and setting.

In terms of elevated vantage points, Pokhara offers multiple scenic hilltops. Sarangkot, on the northwestern rim of the valley, provides panoramic views of the entire city, surrounding lakes, and the Annapurna range. It is a prime spot for sunrise watching and paragliding. Similarly, Foksing Hill (south of the airport), Kaski Kot, and Pangdurekot Hill-Top offer historical and natural significance. These sites provide peaceful surroundings, hiking opportunities, and insights into the region's historical connection with the Kaski Kingdom. From Kahun Hill, one can view the ridges of Machhapuchhre and nearby hill chains, making it a rewarding stop for nature lovers.

The physical landscape of Pokhara is not only naturally diverse but also deeply integrated with tourism. Each site whether mountain, lake, cave, waterfall, or hilltop contributes uniquely to the city's aesthetic, cultural, and recreational value. The variety of experiences, from soft leisure to adrenaline-filled adventure, is grounded in the region's distinctive geographical features, affirming the central role of landscape in shaping Pokhara's tourism appeal.

4.2 Cultural Heritage of Pokhara

Pokhara is not only known for its scenic landscapes but also for its rich and diverse cultural heritage, deeply embedded in its religious shrines, monuments, and multi-ethnic communities. The city serves as a confluence of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, which is reflected in the wide range of religious sites spread across the valley. These shrines, temples, monasteries, mosques, and churches attract pilgrims, spiritual seekers, and culturally curious tourists alike, making cultural heritage a significant dimension of Pokhara's tourism identity.

Among the most iconic Hindu religious sites is the Tal Barahi Temple, located on a small island in Phewa Lake. Accessible by boat, the temple offers a serene blend of spirituality and nature. Likewise, the Bindyabasini Temple, situated at Moharia Tol in the older part of town (Var Patan), is a frequently visited Hindu site known for its historic and religious importance. Other prominent Hindu shrines include the Gupteswar Mahadev Cave Temple, located in Chhorepatan, near the famous Devi's Fall, and Bhairav Temple, situated at the center of the old bazaar. Additional Hindu sites such as Bhadra-Kali Temple in Kundahar–Matepani and Bhimad temple are often included in religious tour circuits due to their accessibility and spiritual ambiance.

In terms of Buddhist heritage, Pokhara presents a meaningful landscape of monasteries and stupas. The World Peace Stupa, perched atop Anadu Hill about 10 km from the town center, is one of the most visually and symbolically significant landmarks. It overlooks Phewa Lake and is accessible by road or boat. The stupa attracts not only Buddhist pilgrims but also general visitors for its panoramic views and tranquil surroundings.

Figure 3.

Cultural Heritage: Shanti Stupa (Photo by Ashesh Shakya)



Other key Buddhist institutions include Dharmasheela Buddha Vihar at Nadipur, Ward No. 3, the Karmadubgya Chokhorling Monastery in Matepani, and the Jangchub Choeling Monastery located in the Hyanja Tibetan Refugee Camp, 12 km away. These monasteries are centers of worship, meditation, and cultural preservation, particularly for the Lama and Tibetan Buddhist communities.

Islamic and Christian heritages are also represented in Pokhara's cultural mosaic. The Jame Mosque A (Masjid) ya Aksa, located in Miya-Patan, Kundahar, serves the Muslim community and is situated about 2.5 km from Mahendra Pool. For Christian visitors and

residents, the Nepal Christian Church at Ramghat–Ranipauwa offers a place of worship and religious gathering. These institutions not only serve spiritual purposes but also showcase the city's religious inclusivity and cultural tolerance.

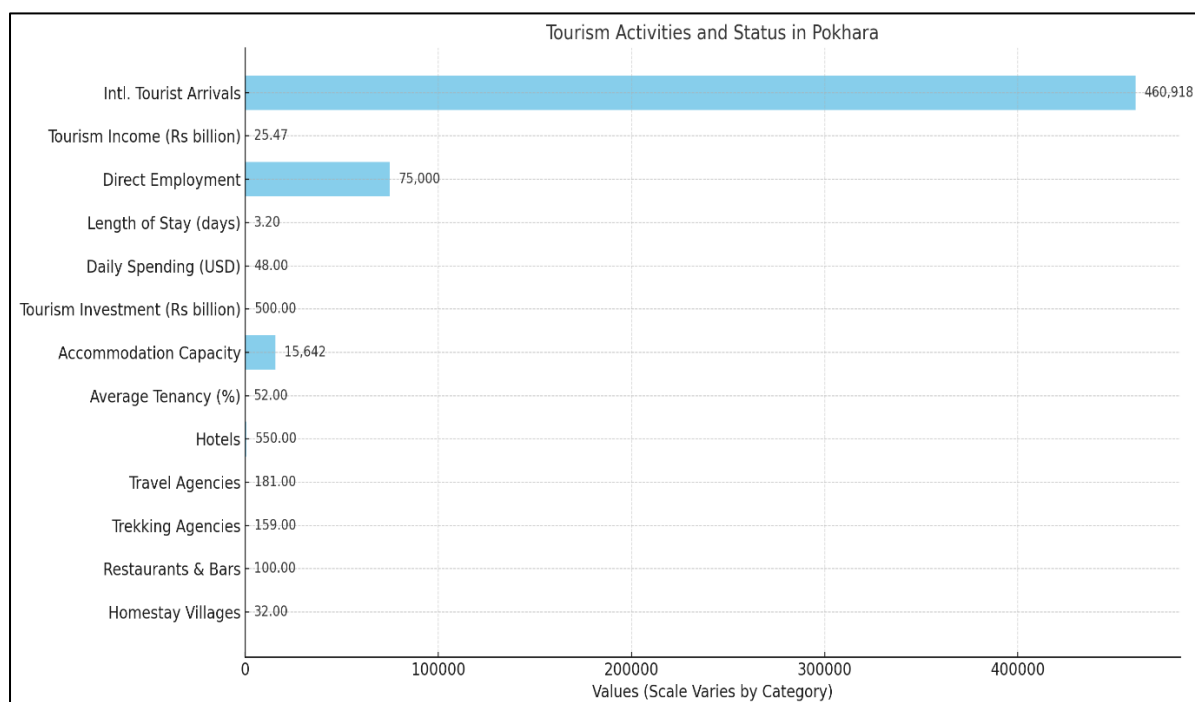
Each of these religious and cultural landmarks contributes unique tourism profile of Pokhara. For domestic tourists, they serve as sites of pilgrimage and festival celebration. For international visitors, they offer insight into Nepal's religious diversity, traditional architecture, and daily life. Their spatial distribution across different localities also influences tourist movement patterns, creating thematic circuits that link natural and cultural attractions. Consequently, the presence of such heritage sites enhances the experiential depth of Pokhara as a tourism destination adding cultural value to its natural charm.

4.3 Tourism Activities and Status in Pokhara Valley

Pokhara has emerged as one of Nepal's foremost tourism hubs, with a dynamic mix of natural, cultural, and adventure-based attractions. The city plays a vital role in the national tourism economy, as reflected by key indicators. According to data from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA, 2020), the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB, 2020), and the Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment (MoITFE, 2021), Pokhara welcomed 460,918 international tourists, generating an impressive Rs 25.47 billion in tourism-related revenue annually. These figures underscore Pokhara's importance as a destination of international repute.

Figure 4

Tourism Activities and Status in Pokhara Valley



Source: Source: MoCTCA, 2020; NTB, 2021; MoITFE, 2019.

The tourism sector in Pokhara provides direct employment to approximately 75,000 individuals, indicating the industry's strong role in local livelihoods and urban economic stability. On average, tourists stay 3.2 days, with a daily expenditure of USD 48, showing moderate per capita spending levels. The city's accommodation capacity stands at 15,642 beds, with an average tenancy rate of 52%, reflecting seasonal fluctuations and room for growth in visitor retention and hospitality utilization.

Investment in the tourism sector has reached approximately Rs 500 billion, reflecting public and private sector confidence in Pokhara's long-term tourism potential. The city supports a wide range of tourism-related enterprises. There are 550 tourist hotels, including luxury resorts, boutique lodges, and economy accommodations concentrated in areas like Lakeside and Baidam. In terms of tourism services, 181 travel agencies and 159 trekking agencies operate in the city, facilitating domestic and international travel, especially to destinations in the Annapurna Conservation Area. The hospitality sector is further supported by 100 restaurants and bars, offering culinary diversity, and 32 registered homestay villages, which provide authentic rural and cultural experiences for visitors seeking immersion in local life.

Recreational and adventure activities such as paragliding, ziplining, ultralight flights, mountain biking, and boating have become defining features of Pokhara's tourism identity. These are deeply tied to the city's geography and natural topography, which offer ideal conditions for such experiences. The opening of Pokhara International Airport is expected to further enhance international connectivity, reduce travel time, and elevate the city's global tourism profile.

However, despite these positive trends, Pokhara's tourism landscape faces challenges. The average length of stay (3.2 days) and per capita spending (USD 48) remain modest compared to other international destinations. The city also grapples with issues such as unplanned urbanization, waste management near tourist hotspots, and environmental degradation around lake areas. Managing tourist flow while maintaining environmental and cultural integrity remains a priority for future planning.

As tourism sector, Pokhara is economically significant and structurally well-developed. The presence of a robust hospitality network, diverse service providers, and strong investment support has positioned the city as a major node in Nepal's tourism economy. With strategic planning, Pokhara can move toward a model of sustainable and inclusive tourism that balances growth with conservation.

4.4 Geography and Tourism Nexus

The nexus between geography and tourism in Pokhara is best understood by examining the interplay between its natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and tourism development dynamics. Each of these elements, analyzed in the previous sections, contributes to shaping Pokhara's identity as a tourism destination, and together, they reveal the spatial and functional connections that underpin tourism geography in the region.

From the analysis of Pokhara's landscapes, it is evident that physical geography forms the visual and functional core of tourism activities. The snow-clad mountains, scenic lakes, deep river gorges, and hilltop viewpoints serve as both tourist attractions and structural determinants of tourism infrastructure and movement. The placement of hotels, view towers, trekking routes, and adventure zones is closely aligned with these natural features. The mountains attract trekkers and mountaineers, while the lakes and surrounding hills support leisure tourism, paragliding, and sightseeing demonstrating how natural geography not only attracts tourism but also organizes it spatially.

Similarly, the cultural heritage of Pokhara contributes a human and historical dimension to its tourism geography. Temples like Bindyabasini and Tal Barahi, and stupas like the World Peace Pagoda, are often located on hilltops, lakeshores, or within historic settlements integrating sacred geography with the physical terrain. The spatial distribution of religious and ethnic communities contributes to cultural circuits that complement natural sightseeing routes. For example, a single tourist journey may include a boat ride to Tal Barahi Temple, a hike to the Peace Stupa, and a visit to a Tibetan monastery all linked through both geographic proximity and cultural coherence. This reinforces how cultural geography builds upon and enriches physical geography in forming a complete tourism experience.

Tourism activities and status further highlights how geographic features shape tourism economy of Pokhara. The concentration of tourism infrastructure as hotels, agencies, transportation hubs, and recreational services is most prominent near geographic landmarks such as Phewa Lake, Sarangkot, and Mahendra Cave. The length of stay, investment volume, and employment distribution are all indirectly influenced by how accessible and attractive these geographic sites are. For instance, paragliding is viable because of elevation gradients and wind currents along Sarangkot, while lakeside accommodations benefit from scenic reflections of Machhapuchhre and proximity to water activities.

Thus, the geography-tourism nexus in Pokhara is a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. Geography provides the foundational attractions and defines the spatial logic of tourism, while tourism reinterprets, reuses, and sometimes transforms the geographic environment. The economic infrastructure is built on physical terrain, cultural values are anchored to places, and tourist behavior is shaped by spatial access and environmental appeal. This convergence of natural, cultural, and economic-geographic factors makes Pokhara not only a successful destination but also a model for understanding how geography and tourism operate as an integrated system.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the complex relationship between geography and tourism in Pokhara by analyzing its landscapes, cultural heritage, and tourism status. The findings clearly demonstrate that Pokhara's emergence as a prominent tourist destination is fundamentally rooted in its geographical setting. The physical landscape featuring iconic mountain ranges, serene lakes, gorges, waterfalls, and elevated viewpoints constitutes the visual and functional

core of Pokhara's tourism appeal. These natural features not only attract tourists but also determine the spatial orientation of tourism infrastructure and activities.

The study further revealed that Pokhara's cultural heritage enhances the city's tourism value by offering religious diversity, ethnic richness, and historical depth. Temples, stupas, monasteries, and local traditions are spatially intertwined with the physical terrain, creating layered experiences for visitors. Tourism services hotels, travel and trekking agencies, restaurants, and homestays are strategically located near natural and cultural landmarks, reflecting the deep influence of geography on tourism development. Statistical data supported this pattern, highlighting the scale of tourist arrivals, employment generation, and investment in tourism infrastructure.

The concept of the geography–tourism nexus becomes particularly evident when considering how physical and cultural geography jointly shape tourism demand, infrastructure distribution, and visitor experience. Pokhara exemplifies how natural and human landscapes can work in synergy to promote sustainable tourism. However, challenges such as seasonal pressure, environmental stress, and uneven urban growth also underline the need for integrated spatial planning.

At the end, Pokhara presents a strong case for understanding the geography–tourism nexus in action. The findings underscore the importance of conserving natural landscapes and cultural heritage while promoting tourism development that is spatially balanced, economically inclusive, and environmentally responsible.

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