

Indigenous Traditions and Sustainable Futures in the Western Himalayas

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ABSTRACT

The Western Himalayas hold an abundance of resources that have helped sustain the lives and livelihood of the hill folk. The communities have co-existed not only with the human, but also with the non-human, forming a delicate balance, carried forward across generations through indigenous knowledge systems. The forests, lakes and rivers are not merely physical spaces but living entities embedded within systems of belief, ritual and customary law. The sacred traditions have historically shaped patterns of resource use, regulated the access to natural spaces and also encouraged forms of ecological stewardship that support both biodiversity and community well-being.

However, these traditional systems are being challenged by expanding tourism, commercialization of sacred and cultural events and changing media representations that often prioritize spectacle over cultural meaning. Such “developments” have contributed to environmental degradation, excessive pressure on local resources and gradual transformation of indigenous practices into market-oriented performances.

This study, based on fieldwork covering select regions of Himachal Pradesh intends to explore the role of customary institutions, community participation and indigenous knowledge systems, in sustaining both cultural heritage and fragile mountain ecosystems, while analysing the influence of media in shaping public perceptions of sacred spaces and their impact on tourism-driven development. By situating local experiences within broader discussions on cultural sustainability and conservation, the study argues that effective preservation requires approaches that recognize indigenous knowledge systems as central to environmental governance. The findings aim to contribute to policy discussions on sustainable tourism, cultural heritage management and community-led conservation in the Himalayan region while highlighting the continued relevance of sacred traditions in addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

Keywords: Folklore, Orality, Environment, Western Himalayas, *Nag Devta*

INTRODUCTION

The Western Himalayas constitute one of the most ecologically fragile mountain regions, where human communities have historically developed ways of negotiating the demanding and unpredictable environments. In Himachal Pradesh, forests, rivers, springs, pastures, mountains and valleys have provided not only the material basis of life but have simultaneously acquired social, cultural and sacred significance. Here, landscapes are embedded with oral traditions, customary practices, ritual systems and collective memory. The intimate relationship between landscape and the sacred is depicted in the land being called *Dev Bhoomi*, or the “Land of the Gods,”. Across the region divine presences reside, *devis* and *devtas* continue to occupy an important place in community life, not merely as objects of worship but as institutional authorities connected with territory, social organisation, customary practices and collective identity.

The Institution of Divinity or the *devi-devta* institution is particularly significant in understanding the relationship of the people to the landscape. Scholarship on Himalayan religion has demonstrated that local deities cannot be understood exclusively through the framework of temple worship or individual belief. William S. Sax’s work on Himalayan deity traditions, for instance, draws attention to the political and social authority exercised by local gods and their relationship with territorial communities. Ehud Halperin’s ethnographic study of the Kullu Valley examines the deity institution as a dynamic system in which religion, political organisation and social life intersect. Asaf Sharabi’s observations of the cult of Mahasu throws light on the ever-evolving nature of these cultures and how contemporary pressures are moulding ancient practices. Studies conceptualize the *devi-devta* institution through the notions of agency and sovereignty, demonstrating how divine authority is sustained through networks of human actors and community practices.

Within the institution which operates through a specialised body of ritual and administrative functionaries, the *gur* occupies a particularly important position as the medium through whom the deity is believed to communicate with the community. During ritual consultations, functioning as an important ritual intermediary, it is believed that the *gur* enters a state of possession or divine embodiment and the deity’s responses are conveyed through him. The *pujari* performs ritual and worship-related duties and the *kardar* assumes administrative and organisational responsibilities. Their roles and nomenclature vary across regions and individual deity institutions, but collectively these functionaries sustain the institutional presence and authority of the deity. The *devi-devta* system is therefore not a static religious structure but a living social institution reproduced through ritual performance, oral transmission and community participation.

Its significance extends beyond the strictly religious sphere. A deity’s territorial jurisdiction encompasses forests, water sources, pastures, agricultural land and mountains, creating

a relationship between sacred authority and the regulation of natural resources. Sacred prohibitions concerning the cutting of trees, access to forests, use of water bodies, grazing or entry into particular landscapes establish culturally meaningful limits upon resource extraction. The sacred, therefore, functions as a principle of restraint. As documentation of sacred groves in Himachal Pradesh suggests, deity institutions and their custodians have historically contributed to the protection of vegetation, water sources and local biodiversity through customary restrictions and sacred prohibitions (Himachal Pradesh State Biodiversity Board, n.d.; Thaplyal & Verma, 2015). Recent research similarly demonstrates that sacred groves such as Hurang Narayan Dev Van support biodiversity conservation through community-enforced beliefs, taboos and restrictions on resource use (Verma & Kumar, 2025).

Such practices represent an important dimension of indigenous environmental knowledge. This knowledge was not necessarily codified as an independent ecological science, rather, it was embedded within folklore- ritual obligations, customary law, oral narratives and everyday practices. Communities learned not only how resources could be used but also when, where and to what extent they could be accessed. Sacredness consequently transformed the environment from a collection of exploitable resources into a morally regulated landscape. The protection of fragile ecosystems was thus intertwined with cultural and cosmological understandings of human responsibility towards place.

However, these relationships are increasingly being transformed by tourism, infrastructure development, commercialisation of festivals and the expanding reach of digital media. Sacred landscapes are becoming tourist destinations, while rituals and festivals are increasingly circulated as visual and cultural spectacles. Greater visibility may generate appreciation, but it can also detach practices from the customary systems of knowledge and restraint within which they have historically operated. The increasing commodification of sacred spaces therefore raises questions about both cultural continuity and ecological sustainability.

Based on qualitative fieldwork and interviews with communities and custodians of the *devi-devta* tradition in selected regions of Himachal Pradesh, this paper examines the relationship between sacred institutions, indigenous environmental knowledge and changing patterns of tourism and cultural mediation. It argues that the ecological significance of the divine institution lies in its capacity to connect resource use with responsibility, access with restraint, and landscape with cultural obligation. At a time when Himalayan ecosystems and traditional cultural practices face increasing pressures, these indigenous knowledge systems warrant attention not as remnants of an obsolete past but as living frameworks that may offer valuable principles for sustainable and place-sensitive environmental stewardship.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, SACRED LANDSCAPES AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Traditional Knowledge Systems emerge from sustained interaction between communities and the environments in which they live. They are therefore fundamentally place-based: knowledge is accumulated through repeated observation of particular forests, mountains, rivers, springs, lakes, pastures, agricultural fields, animals, plants, and seasonal cycles. Such knowledge is not produced independently of lived experience but develops through generations of engagement with specific ecological conditions. Berkes, Colding, and Folke (2000) locate “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” within precisely such an integrated relationship between knowledge, practice, belief and environment. Drawing on earlier scholarship, they observe that “traditional knowledge is a knowledge–practice–belief complex” (p. 1252). They subsequently formulate this as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (p. 1252). This definition is significant for understanding Himalayan knowledge systems because it does not isolate ecological knowledge from the cultural and social structures through which it is produced, transmitted, and enacted.

Traditional knowledge, in this sense, is not simply information about the natural world. It encompasses ways of behaving towards that world. Knowledge of a water source, for instance, is inseparable from the customary rules governing its use, knowledge of a forest may be accompanied by restrictions on cutting particular species, knowledge of a pasture may be embedded in seasonal patterns of access and knowledge of a sacred landscape may be transmitted through stories concerning the deity or sacred presence associated with it. Berkes et al. (2000) note that traditional management systems include “multiple species management, resource rotation, succession management, landscape patchiness management” (p. 1251). Such practices demonstrate that ecological management can be embedded within everyday cultural institutions rather than operating as a separate, formally codified system of environmental governance.

The Western Himalayas provide a particularly important context for examining this relationship because ecological knowledge is frequently articulated through the institution of the *devi-devta*. Here, the *devis* and *devtas* are not understood simply as idols representing supernatural beings. They are experienced as sacred presences associated with the elements of the landscape, extending their significance beyond ritual worship. The deity functions as a cultural authority through which relationships between the community and its environment are regulated. The sacred landscape is consequently not merely a space in which religious activity occurs, it is a framework through which ecological behaviour is understood and disciplined.

This relationship is especially visible in traditions surrounding *Nag* deities. Across the Himalayan region, *Nag* deities are frequently associated with water, springs, lakes, streams. Within the communities encountered during fieldwork, these deities are understood not only in terms of ritual reverence but also as protectors of water resources. The association is significant because water in mountain environments is simultaneously an ecological necessity, a livelihood resource and a culturally charged element of the landscape. The protection of water therefore becomes both a practical and moral obligation. Polluting, damaging or disrespecting a water source can be understood not merely as an environmental offence but as a violation of the relationship established between the community and the deity.

The relationship between deity, landscape and ecological knowledge is particularly apparent in Sangla. Local traditions recorded during fieldwork hold that the sisters of *Baering Nag* manifest in the region in the form of waterfalls. The community's relationship with these waterfalls is consequently articulated through kinship: the waterfalls are understood as the *devta's* sisters rather than as anonymous physical features. When the *devta* is carried to these waterfalls, the journey is described as a visit to his sisters. Such a narrative transforms the physical landscape into a relational landscape. A waterfall is no longer simply a flow of water descending through the mountain, it becomes part of the social and sacred world of the community. The ecological feature acquires identity, memory, kinship and moral significance.

This form of traditional knowledge is important because it demonstrates how ecological relationships can be sustained without being expressed in the terminology of modern environmental science. The community does not necessarily need to describe a waterfall as a water resource in order to recognize its importance. Its protection may instead be articulated through a cultural vocabulary of kinship, sacredness, obligation and respect. The ecological and the sacred consequently become mutually reinforcing categories. The landscape is protected because it is meaningful, and it is meaningful partly because the community has learned to understand its ecological significance through inherited cultural narratives.

The tradition associated with *Devi Buddhi Nagin* and the Sereolsar Lake provides another striking example. In the local account recorded during fieldwork, this lake associated with her is kept remarkably clean through the presence of the *aabhi* bird. It is believed that when a leaf or other natural debris falls upon the surface of the lake, the bird swoops down, removes it and carries it away. The significance of the story lies less in establishing whether the narrative is empirically verifiable than in the ecological ethic encoded within it. The story teaches that the sacred water body must remain clean and that even apparently insignificant pollution is incompatible with its sacred status.

The narrative thus functions as an ecological lesson transmitted through oral tradition. The *aabhi* becomes a cultural figure of ecological responsibility where if even a bird is represented as responsible for maintaining the purity of the lake, human beings are implicitly expected to exercise an even greater degree of care. The story transforms cleanliness from a contemporary environmental recommendation into an inherited moral principle. The lake is not simply a body of water that humans happen to use, it is a sacred space whose integrity must be maintained.

Such examples demonstrate why sacred spaces should be understood as part of Traditional Knowledge Systems rather than treated exclusively within the domain of religion. Sacredness can establish boundaries around particular environments and can influence how, when and whether those environments may be used. A sacred spring may be approached according to particular rules, a lake may be protected from physical intrusion, a forest associated with a deity may be subject to restrictions on extraction and a mountain landscape may be treated as a domain of the deity rather than as unrestricted territory. These practices create culturally embedded forms of environmental regulation. Their effectiveness does not depend solely upon material calculation because the consequences of violating them are understood simultaneously in ecological, social, and moral terms.

This is where Berkes et al.'s understanding of traditional ecological knowledge as adaptive management becomes particularly relevant. They identify traditional systems in which local ecological knowledge is used to respond to environmental feedback and they note that such systems resemble adaptive management through their emphasis on learning and their recognition of "uncertainty and unpredictability intrinsic to all ecosystems" (Berkes et al., 2000, p. 1252). The importance of this observation for Himalayan communities lies in the fact that mountain ecosystems are inherently dynamic and vulnerable to environmental fluctuations. Seasonal changes, variations in precipitation, water availability, landslides, changes in vegetation and pressures upon agricultural and pastoral resources require continuous adjustment. Traditional knowledge develops precisely through such long-term engagement with ecological variability.

The sacred, therefore, should not be understood as opposed to the ecological. In many traditional Himalayan contexts, the sacred provides one of the cultural mechanisms through which ecological relationships are maintained. Sacred narratives encode behavioural expectations, while rituals reproduce relationships between communities and places and oral traditions preserve ecological memory. The *gur*, *mali*, *kardar*, priests, elders and other custodians transmit knowledge through participation and performance. What is preserved through these traditions is not only a belief in a deity but also a way of inhabiting a landscape.

This perspective also makes it possible to understand why certain places acquire sacred status. Sacredness may operate as a form of cultural restriction that places particular landscapes beyond unrestricted exploitation. Once a forest, spring, lake or mountain is understood as belonging to or inhabited by a sacred presence, its use becomes subject to culturally defined limits. Such limits can function as what may be termed cultural conservation, environmental protection is embedded within belief, customary authority, oral tradition, and ritual practice rather than separated into an externally imposed conservation regime.

The fieldwork suggests that such systems should neither be idealised nor dismissed. Traditional communities have always altered their environments, and not every traditional practice can be assumed to be ecologically sustainable. The significance of Traditional Knowledge Systems lies instead in the adaptive principles that they contain: locally accumulated observation, limits on extraction, seasonal regulation, respect for particular ecological sites, collective responsibility and responsiveness to environmental change. The lesson of these systems is therefore not that the past offers a perfect model for contemporary conservation, but that ecological sustainability can emerge from cultural institutions that connect human behaviour with the continuity of the resource base.

This becomes increasingly significant in the contemporary Western Himalayas, where tourism, infrastructure development, commercialisation, construction and increasing pressure on water and land are transforming relationships with sacred landscapes. When a sacred waterfall becomes a tourist attraction, a sacred lake becomes a destination for uncontrolled visitation, or a landscape previously regulated by customary authority becomes available for commercial use, the transformation is not merely economic. It can also weaken the cultural institutions through which ecological limits were historically communicated. The erosion of sacred restrictions can consequently produce an ecological as well as a cultural loss.

The rediscovery of Traditional Knowledge Systems is therefore not an exercise in nostalgia. It involves recognising that ecological knowledge can exist within stories, rituals, kinship relations, customary restrictions, sacred geographies and oral traditions. The stories of *Baering Nag* and his sisters, the association of *Nag* deities with water sources, and the folklore of Buddhi Nagin demonstrate how ecological relationships can be encoded within sacred narratives. Such narratives make the environment intelligible through culturally meaningful relationships and, in doing so, can encourage forms of restraint that contemporary environmental discourse often seeks to establish through legislation, scientific management or regulation.

Traditional Knowledge Systems thus offer an important conceptual bridge between cultural preservation and ecological sustainability. In the Western Himalayas, the

protection of sacred spaces cannot be separated from the preservation of the knowledge systems that give those spaces meaning. To protect the sacred landscape is, in many cases, also to protect the oral traditions, customary institutions, ecological memories and ethical relationships through which communities have historically understood their environments. The challenge posed by contemporary development is consequently not simply how to conserve particular forests, lakes, waterfalls, or springs, but how to sustain the cultural systems that have historically taught communities why these places matter.

TOURISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SACRED LANDSCAPES

Tourism has created new economic possibilities in Himachal Pradesh, but its expansion has also altered relationships between communities and their environments. The Himachal Pradesh Tourism Policy 2019 recognizes both the economic importance of tourism and the need to conserve the state's natural and cultural heritage. The policy emphasizes sustainable tourism, protection of tangible and intangible heritage, and benefits for local communities (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2019).

The difficulty lies in translating these principles into practice. A landscape can be formally identified as culturally significant while simultaneously being exposed to tourism practices that undermine its ecological and sacred character.

Yula Kanda

Yula Kanda, located in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, offers a significant case for examining the relationship between Traditional Knowledge Systems, sacred landscapes and contemporary religious and tourism practices. Situated at approximately 3,900 metres above sea level, Yula Kanda has increasingly been popularised as the location of one of the highest Krishna temples. However, this contemporary representation does not fully capture the older local sacred geography of the site. According to oral traditions documented during fieldwork, the lake is associated with a *Nag Devi* who is believed to reside within it. The sacredness of Yula Kanda therefore extends beyond the temple and is embedded in the natural landscape itself.

This distinction between religion and the sacred is central to understanding the changes taking place at the site. Traditional Knowledge Systems are often place-specific, sustained through oral traditions, customary practices and relationships between communities and particular ecological features. At Yula Kanda, the lake is not simply a water body surrounding a temple it constitutes part of the sacred presence of the landscape. Such a relationship differs from a standardised religious practice that can be reproduced across locations. The sacred here is inseparable from place.

Historically, Yula Kanda remained a secluded and relatively offbeat pilgrimage site. Its remoteness naturally limited human movement and helped maintain a restrained relationship between pilgrims and the landscape. The recent influx of trekkers, however, has produced significant socio-ecological changes. During fieldwork, long lines of visitors were observed around the site, accompanied by increasing concerns regarding plastic pollution, soil erosion and water contamination. In a fragile high-altitude ecosystem, these pressures cannot be dismissed as merely aesthetic problems. Increased footfall, waste generation and disturbance of the surrounding terrain place additional stress upon an environment with limited capacity for rapid ecological recovery.

A recent *bhajan* programme at the site further illustrates the transformation. Conducted in temperatures of approximately -6°C and involving microphones, loudspeakers and temporary arrangements, the event is significant not merely as an instance of religious devotion but as an example of mainstream religious practice being layered upon an older sacred ecology. The concept of a palimpsest is useful here, the newer religious layer does not necessarily erase the older tradition but partially covers and transforms it. The increasingly visible Krishna-centred religious identity of Yula Kanda exists alongside the local belief in the *Nag Devi* associated with the lake.

The distinction matters because organised religious practice and indigenous sacred practice may embody different relationships with landscape. A *bhajan* can be conducted at numerous locations, whereas the sacred presence of the *Nag Devi* is fundamentally tied to this particular lake. The former may require sound systems, temporary structures and larger congregations whereas the latter is rooted in the recognition of the landscape itself as sacred and therefore subject to restraint. The ecological implications of these different modes of religious engagement consequently become important.

Yula Kanda demonstrates how the transformation of a sacred landscape can occur through both tourism and religious standardisation. The site remains sacred, but the ways in which that sacredness is represented and experienced are changing. What is at stake is therefore not simply the preservation of a temple or ritual. It is the survival of a place-based knowledge system in which water, deity, folklore, landscape and ecological responsibility are interconnected. Protecting Yula Kanda consequently requires recognising the lake not merely as a destination for pilgrimage and tourism but as a living sacred ecology whose preservation is inseparable from the preservation of the traditional knowledge through which its significance has been transmitted.

***Raulane* and Sangla Holi**

Sangla Holi and *Raulane* are both festive celebration in District Kinnaur and have gained immense popularity in contemporaneity. The festivities illustrate how increasing tourism can transform the relationship between a community and its sacred celebrations. During

one of the interviews conducted for this study, local participants expressed a striking concern, they have increasingly been pushed to the periphery of their own celebration while tourists occupy the centre. Visitors arrive to participate in Holi, often interpreting the festival through a mainstream understanding of colour, entertainment and public celebration. In the process, ritual practices embedded within local histories and relationships with the *devta* risk being reinterpreted as tourist spectacle.

For the local community, Sangla Holi is not simply an occasion for recreational colour-play. Its significance is rooted in inherited ritual practices, collective memory and the presence of the *devta*. The outsider may encounter movement, costume, colour, music and ritual action as components of a cultural performance, but the community experiences them as practices carrying meanings that cannot be separated from their sacred context. The distinction between participating in a sacred tradition and consuming it as an experience consequently becomes increasingly important. Tourists participate in colour-play and other visible aspects of the festival, but such participation does not necessarily imply access to its deeper ritual meanings. This distinction can be understood through MacCannell's (1973) concept of staged authenticity, in which tourists seek experiences perceived as authentic, "touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences" (p. 597). The paradox is that the tourist search for authenticity can itself transform the cultural practice being encountered. In Sangla, what the tourist sees as a cultural performance remains, for the community, a tradition embedded in memory, belief and relationships with the *devta*.

The displacement described during the interview also represents a shift in cultural authority. When tourists equipped with cameras and recording devices occupy the centre of the celebration, local participants can become spectators to a ritual that their community has historically maintained. Cultural visibility therefore produces an unexpected paradox—the festival becomes more widely recognised while those who sustain its meanings may exercise less control over how it is experienced and represented.

A similar tension can be observed, in passing, in the *Raulane* festival, where growing media and tourist attention has brought concerns regarding the intrusion of outsiders into ritual spaces and the recording of ritual figures whose identities have traditionally been protected. In both cases, increased visibility risks privileging the spectator's interpretation over the community's understanding of the sacred. The central issue is not tourism alone, but the displacement of local ritual authority. The preservation of such festivals requires more than documenting or promoting them; it requires ensuring that the communities who have historically carried their knowledge remain participants, custodians and interpreters of their own sacred traditions.

TOURISM, PERFORMANCE AND THE NEED FOR RESPONSIBLE ENGAGEMENT

The rise of digital media has intensified the visibility of Himalayan festivals and sacred practices. Dean MacCannell's (1973) concept of staged authenticity is useful in understanding this process. Tourists often seek experiences they perceive as culturally authentic, yet their presence can alter the very practices through which authenticity is sought.

Victor Turner's (1969) concepts of liminality and *communitas* further clarify this distinction. Ritual temporarily creates relationships and experiences that cannot be understood through ordinary social structures. Its meaning therefore lies not merely in what is visually available but in the collective experience of those who share its cultural framework. Cameras and digital circulation can capture the visible body of a ritual while leaving its cultural knowledge inaccessible. Ritual creates forms of collective experience that cannot be reduced to what an external observer can see. In this sense, the tourist may encounter the surface of the ritual without entering its cultural structure. Participation at the level of colour, costume, movement or photography does not necessarily constitute participation in the knowledge system itself.

Yet tourism should not be understood solely as a destructive force. Fieldwork indicates that local communities are aware of the economic possibilities created by tourism and have, in many cases, strategically accommodated visitors and benefited from the opportunities generated by increased visibility. The problem arises when economic participation becomes unchecked environmental consumption. The distinction is particularly evident in the Parvati Valley, where large-scale music and rave events have increasingly placed pressure on forested landscapes. In June 2026, a five-day event near Kasol reportedly attracted thousands of people to a forested area. The Himachal Pradesh High Court noted that sound permission had been granted despite a prior police warning concerning possible narcotics use and other unlawful activities (Himachal Pradesh High Court, 2026; Parashar, 2026).

The issue, therefore, is not tourism itself but its scale, regulation and ecological consequences. Himalayan destinations cannot indefinitely absorb increasing footfall, waste, construction, noise and commercial events without consequences. Responsible tourism must consequently incorporate carrying capacity, waste management, regulation of events, protection of forests and water sources, and meaningful community authority.

International models demonstrate that tourism can be regulated without eliminating its economic benefits. Bhutan's tourism policy, for instance, has explicitly adopted a "High Value, Low Volume" approach, seeking to regulate tourism according to the absorptive capacity of its natural environment, sociocultural values and infrastructure (Department of Tourism, Bhutan, n.d.). Costa Rica provides another model through its Certification

for Sustainable Tourism (CST), which evaluates tourism enterprises according to environmental, social, economic and cultural criteria and encourages local-community participation in tourism development (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo, n.d.). The Galápagos Islands demonstrate a more restrictive model in which tourism operates within a protected-area framework. Visitors are required to use authorised operators and guides, remain on designated trails and comply with regulations designed to minimise ecological disturbance, demonstrating how visitor access can be reconciled with the conservation of ecologically vulnerable landscapes (Galápagos National Park Directorate, n.d.). The lesson for Himachal Pradesh is not to reproduce these models mechanically, but to recognise that tourism policy must place ecological limits alongside economic objectives.

The challenge is therefore not to prevent people from encountering Himalayan culture, but to ensure that cultural visibility does not become ecological excess. Tourism can support local economies, it must not consume the landscapes and traditions upon which those economies depend.

These cases also demonstrate that tourism should not be represented through a simple binary of community versus outsider. Local communities have recognised the economic opportunities generated by tourism and have actively negotiated its expansion. Increased visibility can provide livelihoods and economic development. The more urgent concern is therefore the ecological scale of tourism and the absence of adequate limits. The 2026 Kasol case illustrates the danger particularly starkly. This demonstrates that tourism becomes environmentally destructive when commercial activity exceeds the ecological and administrative capacity of a landscape.

The cases collectively suggest that sustainable tourism must therefore move from destination-centred promotion towards community and ecosystem-centred governance. Sacred spaces should not automatically become tourism commodities. Communities should retain authority over participation, recording and access to ritual spaces, while tourism planning should incorporate both ecological and cultural carrying capacity. Waste, noise, alcohol consumption, commercial filming, temporary infrastructure and visitor numbers must be considered together rather than separately.

Traditional Knowledge Systems offer principles that remain relevant to this challenge restraint, reciprocity, collective responsibility, respect for place, seasonal regulation and recognition of ecological limits. The objective is not to romanticise the past or exclude outsiders, but to ensure that tourism does not consume the cultural and ecological foundations that make these landscapes meaningful in the first place. In the Western Himalayas, sustainable tourism must therefore recognise that a sacred lake is more than a destination, a ritual is more than a performance, and cultural visibility does not automatically constitute cultural access.

CONCLUSION

The sacred landscapes of Himachal Pradesh demonstrate that sustainable futures cannot be imagined through environmental management alone. Traditional Knowledge Systems reveal how ecological responsibility can be embedded within cultural memory, customary restrictions, sacred beliefs and community authority. Forests, lakes, springs, mountains and pastures were sustained not simply as resources but as living landscapes with which communities maintained reciprocal relationships.

Contemporary tourism presents both opportunity and risk. Increased visibility can strengthen local economies and create new livelihoods, yet unchecked visitation, commercialisation, and the transformation of sacred practices into spectacles can undermine the ecological and cultural systems that sustain these landscapes. The experiences of Yula Kanda, Sangla Holi, and *Raulane* demonstrate that conservation must therefore address both environmental pressure and the erosion of local control.

A sustainable future for the Himalayas requires moving beyond the assumption that every sacred landscape must become accessible, consumable and promotable. Tourism must operate within ecological limits and respect community-defined boundaries of participation, access, and representation. Local knowledge holders must be recognised as active custodians and decision-makers rather than merely subjects of cultural display.

The future, therefore, lies neither in rejecting tourism nor in romanticising the past, but in learning from the principles of restraint, reciprocity, collective responsibility and respect for place embedded within Traditional Knowledge Systems. Sustainable Himalayan futures will depend upon ensuring that economic development does not come at the cost of the ecological and cultural foundations upon which these communities have long depended.

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