



LUMBINI: CONCERNS IN THE BIRTHPLACE OF BUDDHA: GS I



Nestled in the plains of Nepal, **Lumbini** holds profound significance as the birthplace of Lord Buddha. For over 500 million Buddhists worldwide, it is a symbol of peace, compassion, and renunciation. However, this sacred site has increasingly become a focal point of political maneuvering, geopolitical strategies, and commercial ventures. Once envisioned as a global pilgrimage center of harmony, Lumbini is now caught in a web of conflicting interests among various stakeholders. The stakes are high, and the concerns surrounding its future are mounting.

The Politics of Lumbini

A Stage for Geopolitical Rivalry

Lumbini's sacred aura is overshadowed by the political ambitions of powerful nations, especially China and India. Both countries view the site as a strategic gateway to soft power in the Buddhist world. China, a communist state with historical tensions regarding Buddhism, sees its growing presence in Lumbini as a counterweight to Tibetan resistance and a way to project itself as a protector of Buddhist heritage. This strategy has fueled controversies, such as the speculation over the attendance of the Chinese-backed Panchen Lama at a Buddhist roundtable in Lumbini, signaling deeper geopolitical motives.

India, on the other hand, has historically been slower to engage with Lumbini's development. However, in recent years, its initiatives, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's pledge to develop a Buddhist circuit connecting India and Nepal, indicate a renewed interest in reclaiming its Buddhist legacy. This competition between two regional giants further complicates the politics surrounding Lumbini.



Internal Political Manipulations

Nepal's political landscape has also played a critical role in shaping the future of Lumbini. Post-1991, the country has experienced significant political instability, with frequent shifts in government and priorities. Decision-making in Nepal is often influenced by personal ambitions rather than long-term vision, and this has affected the preservation and development of Lumbini.

The **Lumbini Development Authority (LDA)**, once a bipartisan institution, is now dominated by politicians from the ruling party. Controversial decisions, such as leasing sacred land to private enterprises, reflect the growing commercialization of the site. Political leaders have sought to control religious institutions for their benefit, as seen during Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal's tenure, when he attempted to replace Hindu and Buddhist priests with politically aligned appointees.

Global and Local Friction

The involvement of external players like China and South Korea has added layers of complexity. While South Korea's proposal for a World Peace City in Lumbini emphasized preservation and harmony, Nepal's preference for mega-projects funded by private business interests reveals a shift toward profit-driven policies. These dynamics highlight the tensions between global aspirations for Lumbini as a spiritual hub and local political agendas prioritizing economic gains.

Key Stakeholders in the Lumbini Saga

- 1. The Nepali Government and LDA:**
 - The central role in Lumbini's development lies with the Nepali government and the LDA. Once a respected body working under the principles of global collaboration, it is now heavily politicized. Decisions often cater to the ruling party's interests rather than the spiritual and cultural preservation of the site.
- 2. China:**
 - China has emerged as a significant stakeholder, using its Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation to propose large-scale development projects in Lumbini, bypassing the original master plan by Kenzo Tange.
 - The Chinese-backed Panchen Lama's potential involvement in Lumbini reflects deeper geopolitical strategies aimed at consolidating influence in the Buddhist community while countering Tibetan narratives.
- 3. India:**
 - India, despite its late entry, has committed to developing an Indian monastery and creating Buddhist circuits that connect shrines across both countries. It views Lumbini as a vital link to its Buddhist heritage and an opportunity to strengthen cultural ties with Nepal.



4. Local Religious Communities:

- Monks, priests, and the Buddhist faithful are among the most vocal critics of the political and commercial intrusion in Lumbini. Respected figures like Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche emphasize the need to preserve the site's sanctity for future generations.

5. Global Organizations:

- Entities like the United Nations and South Korea have shown interest in Lumbini's development. While their proposals have often focused on preservation, they face resistance from local authorities more inclined toward commercial investments.

6. Private Investors:

- The increasing role of private enterprises in Lumbini's development has sparked protests from local communities and religious leaders who view such initiatives as profit-driven and contrary to the spirit of the site.

Concerns Over Lumbini's Future

Spiritual and Cultural Erosion

Lumbini's transformation into a "commercial and communist zone," as feared by many within the Buddhist community, poses a grave threat to its identity. Sacred spaces are being encroached upon for profit-making ventures, diminishing the spiritual experience for pilgrims. The lease of holy land near Buddha's relics to private parties exemplifies the dangers of prioritizing economic interests over cultural preservation.

Geopolitical Manipulation

China's growing presence in Lumbini, including the influx of Chinese tourists, politicians, and government officials, raises concerns about its intentions. The potential use of Lumbini as a platform to promote its version of Buddhism, aligned with communist ideals, is a contentious issue for traditional Buddhist communities.

Commercialization vs. Preservation

The shift toward large-scale development projects, often bypassing established preservation plans like Kenzo Tange's master plan, risks irreversibly altering the character of Lumbini. While economic development is essential, it must not come at the cost of the site's spiritual and cultural integrity.

Political Interference

The politicization of the LDA and other decision-making bodies has undermined their ability to function effectively. Controversial decisions, such as the appointment of politically



affiliated leaders and the sidelining of bipartisan collaboration, reflect a lack of commitment to Lumbini's long-term vision.

Conclusion: A Call for Collective Responsibility

Lumbini's current predicament reflects a broader struggle between preservation and progress, spirituality and politics, and cultural heritage and commercial interests. The birthplace of Buddha, revered as a symbol of peace and compassion, must not be reduced to a battleground for political and economic gains.

The primary responsibility to protect Lumbini's sanctity lies with Nepal, particularly its government and citizens. However, global stakeholders, including India, China, and international organizations, also bear a shared duty to ensure that their actions align with the spirit of the site. Development must be balanced with preservation, and economic ambitions must not overshadow cultural and spiritual values.

Respected figures like Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche remind us that Lumbini's essence lies in its message of peace and renunciation. To honor this legacy, all stakeholders must prioritize collaboration, transparency, and a commitment to preserving the site's sanctity for future generations. Only through such collective efforts can Lumbini continue to inspire as a beacon of harmony and enlightenment in an increasingly divided world.

Main Practice questions

Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, has become a focal point for geopolitical rivalry, political interference, and commercial interests. Critically analyze the challenges facing Lumbini's development, focusing on the role of various stakeholders and their implications for its sanctity. Suggest measures to balance development with the preservation of its spiritual and cultural heritage. (250 words)

Answer Guidelines

1. Introduction (30–50 words):

- Begin with Lumbini's global significance as the birthplace of Lord Buddha and a symbol of peace and compassion.
- Highlight the challenges it faces today, including geopolitical, political, and commercial influences.

2. Main Body (150–170 words):

a) Challenges Facing Lumbini:



- **Geopolitical Rivalry:**
 - China's strategic interest in Lumbini to counter Tibetan narratives and influence the global Buddhist community.
 - India's efforts to establish Buddhist circuits for cultural and religious ties.
- **Political Interference:**
 - The politicization of the Lumbini Development Authority (LDA), with decisions catering to ruling party interests rather than preservation goals.
 - Lack of bipartisan collaboration and misuse of sacred spaces for commercial leases.
- **Commercialization:**
 - Profit-driven projects that encroach upon sacred lands and undermine the spiritual atmosphere.

b) Measures for Preservation and Development:

- Ensure that all development aligns with Kenzo Tange's original master plan emphasizing preservation.
- Form an independent international body for oversight, including UNESCO and religious communities.
- Promote sustainable tourism that respects the sanctity of Lumbini while fostering local economic benefits.

3. Conclusion (30–50 words):

- Reiterate the need for collective responsibility among global and local stakeholders to maintain Lumbini's sanctity.
- Emphasize balancing development with preserving its spiritual essence as a global symbol of peace.