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Article

The Role of Cultural Festivals in Urban Tourism Development: Economic and Sustainability Evidence from Basant 2026 in Lahore

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Abstract: This study assesses the 2026 revival of Basant in Lahore as a cultural and event-tourism product, with particular attention to its economic contribution, cross-sectoral tourism linkages, destination-image effects, and sustainability risks. The research uses a structured secondary-data analysis of official statements, court-related disclosures, local administration figures, and published media reports, triangulated with established event-tourism and tourism-impact literature. Reported estimates indicate approximately Rs4–6 billion in city-wide business activity during the three-day festival, more than Rs2 billion in kite and string sales, substantial public-transport use, increased hospitality demand, and strong media and diplomatic visibility. At the same time, the event generated serious safety costs, including fatalities and injuries, and available economic estimates remain unaudited. The article therefore distinguishes gross turnover from net tourism benefit and proposes an evaluation framework combining visitor expenditure, hospitality indicators, public costs, safety outcomes, destination branding, and socio-cultural value. The scientific contribution lies in reframing Basant not merely as a cultural celebration but as an urban event-tourism asset whose long-term competitiveness depends on measurable economic value, safety governance, and sustainable destination management. Practical recommendations are offered for a "Safe Basant" tourism model based on controlled venues, integrated heritage experiences, audited impact measurement, and event-portfolio planning.

Keywords: event tourism; cultural tourism; festival economy; tourism multiplier; destination image; urban tourism; sustainability; Lahore; Basant; Pakistan

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1. Introduction

Cultural festivals increasingly function as tourism products, destination-branding instruments, and catalysts of urban economic activity. Event-tourism research emphasizes that planned events can attract visitors, stimulate expenditure, strengthen destination image, extend seasonality, and create social and cultural value Festivals are especially important because they combine intangible heritage, collective identity, entertainment, hospitality consumption, and place-based experience in a format that is difficult to reproduce outside the host destination [1]. Richards similarly notes that cultural tourism has expanded beyond visits to monuments and museums toward participatory, creative, and experience-based consumption.

Basant, the traditional spring kite festival associated with Lahore and Punjab, represents a particularly relevant case. Following a ban introduced after repeated deaths and injuries linked to dangerous kite strings, Lahore permitted a three-day revival on 6–

8 February 2026 under a regulated framework. The event immediately generated intense demand across kite production and retail, food services, transport, hospitality, aviation, and media activity. Published estimates placed total business activity at roughly Rs4–6 billion, while kite and string sales alone were reported above Rs2 billion. Yet the same event also produced fatalities, injuries, legal scrutiny, and public expenditure on regulation, transport, medical readiness, and safety enforcement.

This combination of high economic visibility and significant public risk makes Basant an important case for tourism economics. The central research problem is not simply whether Basant generated sales, but whether the festival can be transformed into a sustainable tourism product that creates net destination value. The article therefore asks three research questions: [2]. What economic and tourism-related effects were reported during Basant 2026? Through which tourism-linked sectors did the festival generate demand and destination visibility? What governance and measurement conditions are required for Basant to become a sustainable cultural-tourism asset?

The objective of the study is to evaluate Basant 2026 through an integrated event-tourism lens and to formulate practical recommendations for destination managers and public authorities. The study is relevant to tourism and hospitality research because it connects festival demand with accommodation, food service, transport, visitor mobility, destination branding, heritage interpretation, and sustainable event management.

1.1 Event tourism and destination development

Getz [3],conceptualizes event tourism as both a field of professional practice and a domain of academic research in which planned events are used strategically to attract tourists, shape destination image, and generate economic and social outcomes. Getz and Page [4],later showed that event tourism had developed into a mature research field encompassing event portfolios, destination branding, event experiences, sustainability, impacts, and policy. For urban destinations, recurring cultural events can become hallmark attractions that strengthen place identity and create competitive differentiation. Ritchie [5], argued that the impacts of hallmark events extend beyond direct economic effects to physical, socio-cultural, psychological, and political dimensions.

The Basant case fits this framework because the festival is strongly place-specific, historically associated with Lahore, visually distinctive, and capable of attracting media attention and visitors. Its tourism value is therefore not limited to ticket sales or kite purchases. It includes the broader capacity to position Lahore as a cultural destination and to create linked demand for accommodation, restaurants, transport, heritage attractions, crafts, and local experiences.

1.2 Economic impact, multipliers, and the problem of gross turnover

Economic-impact claims around festivals require careful interpretation. Dwyer, Forsyth, and Spurr caution that special-event assessments can overstate benefits when they treat gross spending as an addition to the economy without considering resource constraints, displacement, leakages, imports, and public costs. This distinction is central to Basant 2026. A reported Rs4–6 billion in business activity describes turnover generated or associated with the festival, but it does not automatically represent net economic welfare or net tourism income.

A tourism multiplier perspective is nevertheless useful for identifying the sectors through which visitor and resident expenditure circulates. Direct spending may occur in accommodation, restaurants, transport, retail, and event-related products. Indirect effects arise when these businesses purchase inputs, while induced effects may occur when employees and suppliers spend resulting income. Because the available Basant data are media-reported and not based on an official input-output or computable general equilibrium model, this article does not claim a quantified multiplier coefficient. Instead, it maps sectoral linkages and proposes a framework for future audited impact analysis.

1.3 Festivals, cultural value, and social impacts

Festivals can also create non-market value by strengthening social interaction, cultural identity, and community pride. Arcodia and Whitford [6] emphasize the relationship between festival participation and social capital, while Gursoy, Kim, and Uysal demonstrate that festival impacts include economic benefits, social incentives,

community cohesiveness, and social costs. These insights are particularly relevant to heritage festivals, where commercialization can generate tourism demand but may also create crowding, authenticity concerns, unequal benefit distribution, and safety pressures.

Basant therefore should be evaluated as both an economic and socio-cultural phenomenon. A tourism strategy that focuses only on turnover risks ignoring the heritage meaning of the festival and the external costs imposed on residents and public services.

1.4 Sustainability and event governance

Sustainable event evaluation requires simultaneous consideration of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental or public-cost dimensions. Andersson and Lundberg [7] demonstrate the value of triple-impact assessment and highlight the importance of opportunity cost and scope in event evaluation. More recent event-portfolio research also stresses that destinations should manage events strategically across the calendar rather than treat each event as an isolated attraction . For Lahore, this suggests that Basant could form part of a wider seasonal cultural portfolio linked to food, crafts, music, heritage walks, and other controlled urban experiences.

2. Materials and Methods

The study applies a qualitative-quantitative secondary-data case-study design. The unit of analysis is the three-day Basant festival held in Lahore on 6–8 February 2026. The analysis draws on four categories of evidence: public statements and figures attributed to the Punjab government and Lahore administration; court-related information reported from proceedings concerning safety and public costs; published economic and mobility estimates reported by Pakistani and regional media; and peer-reviewed literature on event tourism, cultural tourism, economic impact, destination image, and sustainability.

The analytical procedure consists of five stages. First, reported figures were extracted and classified by economic, mobility, safety, and tourism-related indicators. Second, figures were cross-checked across multiple published sources where possible. Third, sectoral transmission channels were identified across manufacturing and retail, food and catering, transport, hospitality, aviation, and destination promotion. Fourth, reported gross activity was separated conceptually from net tourism benefit by identifying public costs, displacement, safety losses, and data uncertainty. Fifth, findings were interpreted through established event-tourism and sustainable-impact literature.

The study intentionally avoids presenting press estimates as audited official statistics. Where sources conflict, a range is reported rather than a single definitive figure. The unusually high reported poultry-sales figure is treated as unverified because it exceeds some estimates of total event-related business activity. This transparency is important for research validity and represents a key methodological limitation of the current evidence base.

3. Result

3.1 The 2026 revival and regulatory context

Basant traditionally marks the arrival of spring in Punjab and historically formed part of Lahore's cultural identity and tourism appeal. Kite flying was banned in 2007 following deaths associated with metallic and chemically coated strings. The Punjab Regulation of Kite Flying Act 2025 enabled a tightly controlled Lahore-only revival in 2026 [8]. Reported rules included the use of cotton string only, restrictions on kite specifications, licensed sale points, and protective rods for motorcycles. The 2026 festival therefore functioned as a regulated pilot rather than a simple return to the pre-ban model.

Table 1. Reported economic and mobility indicators

Indicator	Reported figure	Interpretation / source status
Total business activity in Lahore	Rs4–6 billion	Media/analyst estimate; not independently audited
Government-linked estimate	Rs3–4 billion	Reported government-linked estimate

Indicator	Reported figure	Interpretation / source status
Kite and string sales	Above Rs2 billion; some reports Rs2–2.5 billion	Direct festival-product demand
Pre-festival kite trade	Above Rs1.5 billion by day 5; more than 1 million kites reportedly sold on day 4	Trade association figure reported by media
Free public transport	2.068 million passenger journeys in one government figure; about 1.4 million in another report	Shows very high urban mobility demand
Vehicles entering Lahore	Approximately 900,000	Secondary estimate; requires official verification
Licensed kite sale points	1,413	Administration figure reported in the press
Motorcycles fitted with safety rods	700,000+	Public safety intervention reported by government/media
Poultry sales	Rs10.75 billion reported by one secondary outlet	Unverified and inconsistent with total estimates; excluded from core economic estimate

The available evidence indicates that Basant produced a short but intense concentration of spending. Reported city-wide activity of Rs4–6 billion is economically meaningful at the urban-event level, although modest relative to the national economy. More important for tourism analysis is the breadth of sectors affected and the visibility of the event in the destination economy.

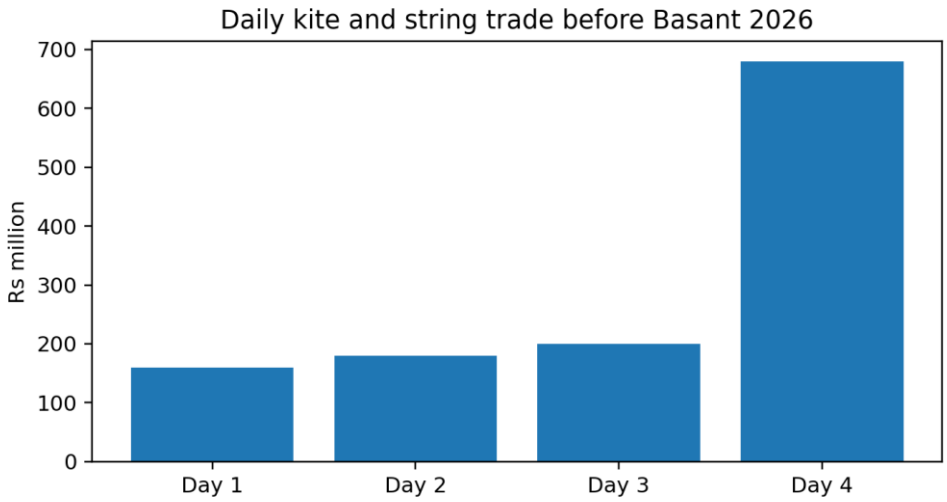


Figure 1. Daily kite and string trade reported before Basant 2026 (Rs million). Source: Kite Flying Association figures reported by Profit, 6 February 2026; not independently audited.

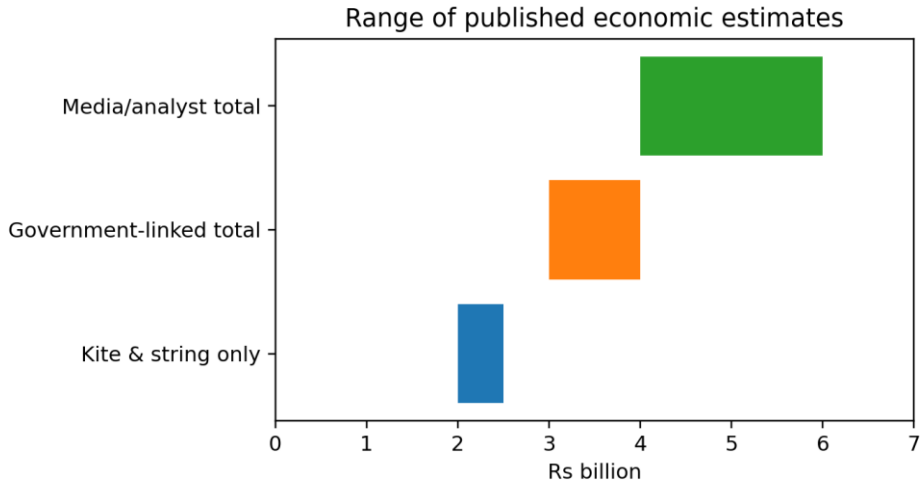


Figure 2. Range of published economic estimates for Basant 2026. Sources: Aaj News, Daily Pakistan, ProPakistani and related reports; estimates are not audited.

Table 2. Tourism-linked sectoral effects

Sector	Tourism/economic transmission channel
Manufacturing and retail	Kites, cotton string, paper, dyes, packaging and licensed retail outlets experienced direct demand.
Food and catering	Rooftop gatherings and social celebrations stimulated poultry, bakery, sweets, fast-food and catering sales.
Transport	Visitors and residents generated high mobility demand; the government provided free public transport during the event.
Hospitality	Hotels and restaurants reportedly experienced higher occupancy or customer volumes, although systematic hotel data have not yet been published.
Aviation	Media reports indicated higher fares on routes to Lahore in the run-up to the festival, suggesting a temporary demand spike.
Destination promotion	Foreign visitors, diplomatic participation and international media exposure increased Lahore's destination visibility and soft-power profile.

These linkages illustrate why festival expenditure should be analysed through a tourism system rather than as a single retail market. The festival stimulates demand in multiple visitor-economy sectors at the same time [9]. This interdependence is the basis of the multiplier concept, although a precise multiplier cannot be derived from the current evidence without primary visitor-expenditure data and an appropriate regional economic model.

3.2 A reasoned cross-check of the reported scale

One published analysis used Basant-related activity from 2004 as an anchor and adjusted it for inflation, Lahore's population growth, and changes in purchasing power, producing a modelled value near the upper end of the Rs4–6 billion range. A separate simple plausibility check can be constructed from the 1,413 licensed kite-sale points: if each outlet generated approximately Rs1 million per day over three days, gross turnover would be about Rs4.24 billion. These calculations do not prove the final economic impact, but they show that the reported order of magnitude is internally plausible under strong turnover assumptions. They should therefore be treated as triangulation tools rather than audited estimates [10].

3.3 Safety costs and sustainability risk

The economic case for Basant cannot be separated from its safety record. The Punjab Home Department reportedly informed the Lahore High Court that at least 17 people died during the three festival days, including deaths associated with falls from rooftops; reports also identified electrocution and other incidents. Early control-room figures cited by TechJuice recorded 118 Basant-related accidents in the first 48 hours, including numerous string-related injuries. These figures create a direct sustainability problem: an event cannot be considered successful tourism development if its economic benefits are achieved alongside unacceptable human and public-health costs [11].

A rigorous net-impact assessment must therefore subtract or otherwise account for public spending on policing, traffic management, free transport, emergency services, medical treatment, compensation, safety equipment, and enforcement. It should also consider displaced spending, productivity losses, crowding, and the opportunity cost of public resources. This is consistent with the economic-impact literature, which warns against equating sales turnover with net welfare gain.

4. Discussion

4.1 Basant as a cultural and event-tourism asset

The findings support the interpretation of Basant as a potentially powerful event-tourism asset. Its advantages include strong cultural distinctiveness, immediate market recognition, visual appeal, cross-sector spending, seasonality value, and international media visibility. These characteristics are consistent with hallmark-event theory: over time, the identity of an event and a destination can become mutually reinforcing. Lahore's association with Basant can therefore create a competitive tourism narrative that other cities cannot easily replicate [12].

At the same time, long-term tourism value depends on transforming spontaneous festival demand into a managed visitor experience. Without structured tourism products, a large share of expenditure may remain concentrated in local retail and private gatherings. By integrating heritage walks, gastronomy, crafts, supervised rooftop experiences, cultural performances, and hotel packages, destination managers could increase the share of festival-related spending captured by the tourism and hospitality economy [13].

4.2 Destination image and soft power

Events can influence destination image by generating symbolic associations and media narratives. In the 2026 Basant case, images of Lahore's rooftops, traditional dress, music, food, and kite-filled skies created a highly recognizable visual identity. Diplomatic and international media participation further amplified this effect. Destination-image value is difficult to monetize immediately, but it may affect future visitation, online search interest, word-of-mouth, and the broader perception of Lahore as a living cultural city rather than only a heritage-sightseeing destination [14].

4.3 The sustainability threshold

The principal constraint is safety. A festival with repeated fatalities risks reputational damage, legal restrictions, insurance problems, public opposition, and eventual cancellation. Therefore, safety should not be treated as an external administrative issue; it is part of tourism-product quality. For Basant to become a durable tourism product, the destination must reduce accident probability to a socially acceptable level and demonstrate this improvement through transparent indicators. Sustainability here is therefore simultaneously economic, social, institutional, and reputational [15].

4.4 Scientific novelty of the study

The scientific novelty of this study lies in integrating four analytical dimensions that are often discussed separately in public commentary on Basant: event-tourism demand, sectoral tourism-economic linkages, destination image and heritage value, and safety-related external costs. Rather than interpreting reported turnover as sufficient evidence of

tourism success, the study proposes a net-value perspective in which economic benefits must be evaluated together with public costs and social risk. The article also adapts event-portfolio thinking to the Lahore context by positioning Basant as a potential anchor within a broader seasonal cultural-tourism calendar.Introduce an annual audited Basant impact study covering visitor numbers, visitor origin, average expenditure, hotel occupancy, restaurant sales, transport use, tax receipts, employment, public expenditure, injuries, and compensation costs.

a. Distinguish residents from non-resident visitors in data collection so that genuinely incremental tourism expenditure can be separated from local spending that would have occurred elsewhere in Lahore.
b. Create licensed and supervised visitor zones, including selected rooftops, parks, viewing terraces, and heritage venues with occupancy limits, guardrails, emergency access, and trained safety personnel.
c. Develop integrated tourism packages combining Basant participation with Walled City heritage walks, museums, food experiences, craft markets, music programmes, guided cultural interpretation, and hotel accommodation.
d. Use advance digital registration and ticketing for controlled venues to generate reliable visitor statistics and improve crowd management.
e. Maintain strict enforcement of cotton-only string rules and impose traceability requirements on manufacturers and licensed sellers.
f. Publish a transparent post-event safety dashboard showing accidents, causes, enforcement actions, response times, and year-on-year improvement targets.
g. Coordinate airlines, hotels, restaurants, transport providers, tour operators, cultural institutions, and city authorities through a destination-level Basant tourism task force.
h. Build Basant into a wider Lahore event portfolio rather than treating it as an isolated three-day event; related food, craft, music, heritage, and creative-industry activities can extend visitor stay and distribute benefits over a longer period.
i. Commission future economic analysis using visitor surveys and, where feasible, input-output or computable general equilibrium methods so that gross turnover is not confused with net economic contribution.

Table 3. Proposed Impact-Measurement Framework for Future Research

Dimension	Suggested indicators	Purpose
Economic	Visitor expenditure; hotel occupancy/ADR; restaurant sales; retail sales; tax receipts; temporary employment; supplier purchases	Quantify direct and indirect economic contribution
Tourism demand	Non-resident visitor count; origin markets; length of stay; package sales; repeat-intention	Separate tourism demand from resident participation
Destination image	Media reach; social-media sentiment; international coverage; destination awareness before/after event	Measure branding and soft-power effects
Socio-cultural	Resident attitudes; perceived cultural pride;	Assess social licence and heritage value

Dimension	Suggested indicators	Purpose
	authenticity; community participation	
Safety and public cost	Fatalities; injuries; emergency responses; enforcement costs; transport subsidy; compensation	Calculate external costs and sustainability threshold
Environmental/urban management	Waste; congestion; noise; electricity disruption; public-space pressure	Assess urban carrying capacity and environmental burden

The study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary data and media-reported figures because a complete audited government impact report was not available in the reviewed material. Second, different sources report different values for transport use and economic activity. Third, no representative visitor survey was available to distinguish tourists from Lahore residents or to calculate average tourism expenditure and length of stay. Fourth, the analysis cannot estimate a formal tourism multiplier or net welfare effect. Fifth, some safety and public-cost questions remained subject to legal and administrative review at the time of reporting. These limitations do not invalidate the observed scale of activity, but they require caution when interpreting precise monetary figures.

5. Conclusion

The 2026 revival of Basant demonstrates that a culturally distinctive festival can rapidly activate multiple components of an urban tourism economy. Reported business activity in the range of several billion rupees, more than Rs2 billion in kite and string sales, extensive mobility, hospitality demand, and international media attention indicate strong market potential. From a tourism perspective, Basant is valuable not only because visitors and residents spend money, but because the festival can reinforce Lahore's identity as a living cultural destination and stimulate linked demand across hospitality, food, transport, heritage, crafts, and entertainment. However, gross turnover is not equivalent to net tourism benefit. The fatalities, injuries, enforcement needs, and public costs associated with the 2026 event show that safety is the decisive condition for long-term viability. The future of Basant as a tourism product therefore depends on a shift from spontaneous mass celebration toward controlled, measurable, and professionally managed event tourism. If Lahore combines rigorous safety governance with audited impact measurement, visitor-oriented product design, and a broader cultural-event portfolio, Basant could evolve from a high-risk traditional festival into a sustainable seasonal pillar of the city's tourism economy.

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