



Issues, Challenges, and Opportunities in the Accommodation Sector to Promote Religious Tourism in Ramayana Circuit of Uttar Pradesh.

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The study observes the issues, challenges, and opportunities within the accommodation sector of the Ramayana Circuit of Uttar Pradesh, a popular religious tourism circuit in India. Challenges identified include a shortage of quality, affordable lodging, inadequate infrastructure, and poor accessibility, which limit the appeal of the circuit for diverse pilgrims. Environmental and cultural concerns also arise from unmanaged development near sacred sites, risking pollution, and cultural erosion.

To address these issues, the research paper suggests sustainable accommodations such as eco-friendly lodges, boutique hotels, and heritage properties, which would enhance cultural authenticity and meet environmental goals. Drawing on successful models from other pilgrimage circuits, the study emphasizes the need for public-private partnerships, regulatory reform, and smart hotel solutions to streamline services. By integrating local community involvement, sustainable practices, and digital innovations, the Ramayana Circuit could become a major destination for religious tourism, balancing spiritual preservation with modern amenities.

Keywords: Ramayana Circuit, Accommodation, Religious Tourism, Ambience, Hospitality

Introduction

Religious tourism is a fundamental part of the tourism industry in India, attracting millions of visitors every year. The Ramayana Circuit, which spans several states of India but primarily focuses on Uttar Pradesh, is the most important pilgrimage circuit in India. Pilgrims follow the journey of Lord Rama as delineated in the Ramayana, visiting significant sacred sites such as Ayodhya, Shringverpur, Prayagraj, and Chitrakoot in Uttar Pradesh. The Government of India aims to promote and develop this circuit to enhance visitors' spiritual and cultural experiences while supporting local economy and community development through initiatives like the Swadesh Darshan Scheme. However, for religious tourism to flourish in this region, the accommodation sector should achieve the demands of a continuously growing number of domestic and international pilgrims. Pilgrims require clean, affordable, as well as accessible fooding and lodging that respects the religious atmosphere and caters to an assorted audience ranging from budget travellers to high-end tourists. Unfortunately, the existing infrastructure in many locations along with the Ramayana Circuit faces so many challenges, like inadequate facilities, high-cost services, environmental issues, and regulatory hurdles. These issues are crucial to ensure the development of tourism for continued growth and sustainability in the region. This study will explore the issues and challenges in front of the accommodation sector within the Ramayana Circuit of Uttar Pradesh and identify opportunities for enhancement. By investigative research of case studies of other religious circuits and integrating insights from industry reports, the research paper will offer a roadmap for creating an accommodation ecosystem that will not only fulfill the needs of pilgrims but also contribute to the prevention and promotion of the cultural heritage located in the Ramayana Circuit of Uttar Pradesh.

Literature Review

India's tourism sector has long been supported by religious tourism as the foundation stone of its growth. According to the Ministry of Tourism studies, religious tourism contributes meaningfully to the country's economy, with millions of pilgrims visiting holy and sacred sites across multiple states. Destinations like Varanasi, Vrindavan, Mathura, and Haridwar attract worldwide attention due to their religious prosperity, and the government has released several schemes to promote religious tourism under the Swadesh Darshan and PRASAD schemes.

The Ramayana Circuit, a part of the Swadesh Darshan scheme, is intended to boost tourism by developing religious and cultural sites allied to the epic Ramayana. Previous studies (Streimikiene, Svagzdiene, Jasinskas, & Simanavicius, 2020) Have emphasized this circuit's cultural and spiritual reputation, pointing to the infrastructural deficits that hinder its growth well sustainable tourism development has to hold a high satisfaction degree of tourists' needs, assure significant experience for pilgrims, increase their consciousness under issues of sustainability, and spreading practices of sustainable tourism among visitors. These studies highlight the need for holistic development, with special reference to the accommodation sector and visitor amenities, to uplift the circuit's appeal. The role of the accommodation sector in tourism development cannot be ignored. The researchers including (Devkant & Barthwal, 2020) and (Lina, Nuno, & Viktorija, 2016) argue that the quality and availability of accommodation directly impact the value of the tourists and their experiences. In religious tourism, accommodation services need to cater to exceptional demands such as reverence for local customs, and traditions, provision of vegetarian meals, spaces for prayer, and the creation of a peaceful environment encouraging spiritual reflection with religious aesthetics. Accommodation service providers in religious circuits face specific challenges. As per the study of (Aulet & Duda, 2020) Reveal that a lack of accommodation options at popular pilgrimage sites is the cause behind overcrowding, excessive pricing, and corrosion of the experience of pilgrims. The absence of eco-friendly lodging facilities also creates environmental concerns in areas that already exist in vulnerable conditions due to congestion. (Sati, 2018). Sustainable tourism is a positive trend within the global tourism industry, and its position is especially pronounced in religious tourism destinations where the preservation of heritage in forms of nature and culture is paramount. The researchers like (Trono, 2021) and (Sati, 2018) Talk about sustainable tourism practices that abate the ecological footprint of tourism activities. In the context of the Ramayana Circuit, the accommodation sector must be developed holistically so that does not degrade this ancient site's natural or cultural landscape.

The government's attention on promoting eco-friendly hotels, motels, restaurants, dharmshalas, and homestays (Timothy & Olsen, 2006) Has started to evoke opportunities for sustainable tourism along the Ramayana Circuit. By incorporating sustainable infrastructural development and architectural designs as well as renewable energy sources, accommodation service providers can reduce their ecological impact while enhancing the visitor experience. This exclusive approach also aligns with the high demand for eco-conscious travel among domestic and international visitors.

YE R	AYODHYA		CHITRAKOOT	
	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic	Foreign
2021	15460182	883	2218572	67
2022	23909014	1465	3719223	98
2023	57570896	8468	10829438	131
Total	96940092	10816	16767233	296

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India

There are several religious tourism circuits in India and abroad that offer worthy instructions for the holistic development of the Ramayana Circuit, i.e. the *Chardham Yatra* in Uttarakhand has successfully upgraded its accommodation sector through public-private partnerships model (PPP), allowing for the development of a variety of lodging options, from budget-friendly Dharmshalas to luxury hotels and resorts. (Trono, 2021). Similarly, the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain is a leading example of a well-established religious circuit that has integrated modern tourism amenities as per (Chaudhari & Kabia, 2023) With the preservation and prevention of its spiritual ambiance and atmospheric construct.

These case studies emphasize the significance of balancing development with preserving natural, cultural, and religious authenticity. It has appealed for insightful policies and regulatory frameworks that ensure sustainable development while ensuring that the sanctity of religious sites is maintained.

Issues in the Accommodation Sector

The accommodation sector in the Ramayana Circuit of Uttar Pradesh has several serious issues that grave the growth of religious tourism. These issues are complicated, ranging from infrastructural gaps related to

affordability, policy, frameworks, and environmental sustainability challenges. Brief discussion on these issues is vigorous to improve the complete pilgrim experience and ensure the long-term success and growth of the Ramayana Circuit as a prominent religious tourism destination in India.

1. Infrastructural Gaps

One of the most stubborn issues in the accommodation sector of the Ramayana Circuit is the deficiency of infrastructural perfection. Many sites along the circuit, such as Ayodhya, Prayagraj, and Chitrakoot, attract large numbers of pilgrims during peak seasons like festivals, and special religious occasions of Hindus to practice their traditions and customs. Yet the availability of satisfactory food and lodging remains limited and inappropriate.

1.1 Quality of Existing Facilities

The tendency of accommodation options available in many areas is lagging far behind in comparison to international standards, specifically when compared to international religious tourism destinations. Budget accommodations often lack basic amenities such as hygiene and sanitation facilities, drinking water, and power backups, these all are essential for a comfortable experience of visitors. Additionally, the availability of standard or star-category hotels that provide luxury services to international tourists is limited, further restricting the growing potential and tourism development of the circuit. (Saha, 2022) have found that while religious destinations like Varanasi have developed a robust accommodation ecosystem over time, not as much of popular destinations in the Ramayana Circuit are still lagging far behind the standard accommodation ecosystem to achieve loyalty and satisfactory feedback from visitors.

1.2 Accessibility

Another infrastructural gap that significantly affects the accommodation sector is deprived accessibility or poor transportation connectivity. Many pilgrimage sites of the Ramayana Circuit are in remote areas, making them problematic to access, especially for elderly or physically disabled pilgrims. A lack of efficient public transportation, taxis in local areas, and limited access to airports and train stations intensify the problem, restraining the flow of tourists to these sites. Even when accommodations are available, poor connectivity decreases their utility as pilgrims struggle to reach them for their basic requirements.

2. Affordability

Religious tourism often attracts diverse travellers from rural to urban, including persons with limited financial means. Many pilgrims depend on budget hotels, such as inns, dharmshalas, Sarai, or low-cost guesthouses, to make their tours affordable. However, the accommodation sector of the Ramayana Circuit faces a challenge in balancing the affordability of budget accommodations to improve infrastructure and amenities for visitors.

2.1 Limited Options for Budget Travelers

While some pilgrimage destinations in the circuit provide low-cost lodging, there is a growing gap between supply and demand of hospitality services, especially on the occasion of topmost religious festivals like Ram Navami or Deepawali. When reasonable accommodation is unavailable, pilgrims are forced to pay overpriced rates for private hotels or, in extreme cases, skip their visits altogether. The lack of adequate budget accommodations also results in overcrowding at Dharamshala and guesthouses, leading to a decline in hospitality service quality.

2.2 High Costs of Mid-Range and Luxury Accommodation

The visitors who are looking for mid-range or luxury accommodations, the options are frequently inadequate and costly. The shortage of well-developed hospitality infrastructure in the circuit leads to higher prices, especially during peak seasons. This issue is heightened by inadequate competition in the market, as many areas have only a handful of private players in the accommodation sector. This dearth of choice not only limits the diversity of travellers but also discourages high-spending tourists from visiting the Ramayana Circuit.

3. Government Policies and Regulations

Government policies, plans, programs, and regulations play a vital role in determining the accommodation sector of any tourism destination. In the Ramayana Circuit, several challenges emerge from inadequate or poorly enforced policies that affect the development of accommodation infrastructure in this high-potential circuit.

3.1 Bureaucratic Red Tape and Licensing Issues

Setting up new accommodation facilities along the Ramayana Circuit often requires navigating a complex web of bureaucratic red tape. Tourism stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and private players looking to invest in the hotel and accommodation sector, frequently encounter delays in obtaining the necessary licenses, land-use permits, electricity-water connections, and environmental clearances. It slows down the speed of development in the circuit and restricts the growth of the accommodation sector. For example, a report by the Ministry of

Tourism (2020) pointed out that despite the government's Swadesh Darshan Scheme, red tape working style and bureaucratic inefficiencies have prevented many projects from execution.

4. Environmental and Cultural Concerns

Environmental and cultural issues are big concerns for the rapid development of accommodation infrastructure in religious sites often brings environmental and cultural challenges. In the Ramayana Circuit, the tension between preserving the sanctity of religious spaces and catering to growing numbers of tourists is particularly acute.

4.1 Environmental Degradation

Increased tourism, particularly in sensitive ecological zones such as Ayodhya, and Chitrakoot can lead to environmental degradation. Ailing planned accommodations contribute to waste generation, pollution, and water scarcity, which have negative effects in the long term on both the environment and the local community. A study (Bharti & Kumar, 2023) highlighted how religious sites that pull a huge number of pilgrims, and tourists such as the ghats of Ayodhya, have grieved from pollution due to unmanaged tourist inflows and inadequate waste management systems in nearby accommodation units.

4.2 Loss of Cultural Heritage

The cultural sites of pilgrimage sites can also be adversely affected by unconstrained commercialization. Construction of modern hotels and resorts without bearing in mind local architectural styles and cultural compassions can wear down the spiritual and cultural fabric of these sacred destinations. These issues are particularly relevant to the Ramayana Circuit, where the religious ambiance is central to the pilgrim experience. Tourists often seek an atmosphere that reflects the religious and cultural significance with suitable aesthetics of the places they are visiting, and the interference of commercialized or out-of-place accommodations can detract from this experience.

Challenges in the Accommodation Sector

The accommodation sector of the Ramayana Circuit has an appearance of several complicated challenges, some of which are exclusive to the nature of religious tourism, while others are tangled in the wide context of tourism growth. These challenges range from balancing religious and commercial interests to confirming sustainability and managing overcrowding during peak seasons. Consideration of these challenges is essential for developing a flourished religious tourism ecosystem while preserving the sanctity and heritage of the pilgrimage sites.

1. Balancing Religious and Commercial Interests

The development of the accommodation sectors in religious circuits like the Ramayana Circuit needs a balance between the area's religious significance and the commercial interests tied to tourism, with the focus on attracting more tourists and improving local economies, the commercial extension of hotels and resorts can sometimes surpass the religious and cultural significances of the pilgrimage sites.

1.1 Tension Between Development and Sanctity

Religious tourism is deeply rooted in its spirituality and tradition, the primary motivation of pilgrims to visit these sites is to connect with their faith and belief. The hasty commercial development of accommodations, especially luxury and star-category hotels, can break the religious atmosphere that is expected by visitors during the visit to sacred places like Ayodhya or Chitrakoot. For example, the construction of buildings and hotels near religious sites may not only disrupt the visual scenery but also detract from the spiritual experience by creating a more commercial, less contemplative environment.

1.2 Public Sentiment and Religious Sensitivities

Any large-scale construction or development in religious circuits must also consider the sentiments of the local people and the religious community. Often, the construction of commercial accommodations near sacred sites triggers disagreement from local religious leaders and devotees who are concerned about the sanctity and uniqueness of the area being compromised. Balancing these interests requires sensitive planning and collaboration between the government, religious institutions, and private developers to ensure that accommodations are built in harmony without harming the spiritual environment and ambiance.

2. Sustainability in Religious Tourism

Sustainability is a high concern in the tourism industry, and religious tourism is not an exception. The Ramayana Circuit, which includes both urban centers like Ayodhya and more ecologically sensitive areas like Chitrakoot, appearances challenges in ensuring that the development of accommodations does not lead to environmental degradation or unsustainable resource use for tourism industry.

2.1 Eco-Friendly Accommodations

One of the major issues or challenges in developing the accommodation units in the Ramayana Circuit is ensuring that new developments are eco-friendly. Several pilgrimage sites are located near rivers, forests, or other ecologically sensitive areas, and unconstrained construction can lead to deforestation, water pollution, and the depletion of local resources. For instance, Chitrakoot's delicate ecological balance has already been impacted by unplanned tourism development, leading to pollution of water bodies and excessive waste generation.

Eco-friendly accommodations that integrate sustainable architectural practices, like maximum utilization of renewable energy, rainwater harvesting, and waste recycling, are essential to mitigating the environmental impact of tourism. However, the development of such accommodations is expensive and requires more technical expertise, making it a challenge for many developers, particularly in the absence of large fundings from the government.

2.2 Waste Management and Resource Conservation

Waste management is another sustainability challenge in the accommodation sector. Pilgrims and visitors during the peak season or festivals often lead to heavy volumes of waste. Insufficient waste disposal systems can lead to dense pollution, especially in areas with limited municipal infrastructure. Hotels and guesthouses, if not managed properly, can contribute to the problem by generating large quantities of waste without proper mechanisms for recycling or disposal. Water scarcity is a critical issue, particularly in regions like Chitrakoot, where local water resources are already under pressure. Accommodation units that cater to large numbers of pilgrims must be designed to minimize water usage at minimal quantities, with measures of low-flow toilets, water recycling systems, and efficient laundry facilities.

3. Managing Overcrowding during Festivals and High Seasons

Religious festivals and special events pull a sudden influx of pilgrims, the arrival of tourists far exceeding the usual capacity of accommodations in the region. This seasonal spike in tourism creates overcrowding, resource shortages, and safety challenges.

3.1 Insufficient Lodging Capacity

During festivals like Ram Navami, and Deepawali the number of visitors to Ayodhya can increase exponentially, overwhelming the available lodging options. Budget accommodations such as Dharamshala and Ashrams, frequently preferred by pilgrims, quickly reach capacity, leaving many visitors with no option but to sleep in temporary shelters or even on the streets. The lack of sufficient and scalable accommodation options during these peak periods is a significant challenge for tourism stakeholders and government officials.

3.2 Temporary and Mobile Accommodations

One potential solution to overcrowding during peak seasons is to substitute temporary or mobile accommodations, such as tent cities or modular housing units, which can be set up during major festivals and dismantled afterward. The Kumbh Mela, held in Prayagraj, is an example of how such accommodations can be successfully implemented to cater to millions of pilgrims and devotees. However, the logistics of setting up such substituted temporary accommodations are complex, requiring significant investment, coordination, and planning.

4. Preserving Religious Heritage Amid Development

Alongside the development of tourism and infrastructure, it is crucial to ensure the essence of the cultural and religious sanctity of the Ramayana Circuit. The primary expectations of pilgrims are modern conveniences with genuine aesthetics of spiritual connection, which can be lost if religious sites are overly commercialized or altered to accommodate large-scale tourism amenities.

4.1 Architectural Integrity

The construction of hotels and resorts should be completed in the context of the traditional architecture and cultural significance of religious destinations. Inappropriate or beyond-the-place architectural styles can reduce the authenticity of the pilgrimage experience, making the destination seem more like a generic tourist hub rather than a sacred holy site i.e. accommodation developments in Ayodhya that align with traditional temple architecture would be more effective to enhance the religious ambiance, while multi-story buildings may detract it.

4.2 Cultural Commodification

The possibilities of cultural commodification are enhanced when religious traditions and customs are packaged and commercialized in a way that diminishes their spiritual significance. It is a challenge for the accommodation sector to ensure and support the authentic religious experience for pilgrims and visitors,

without diminishing the cultural heritage to a mere attraction. This situation is difficult to maintain and balance, particularly when commercial interests dominate the tradition of Indian hospitality rituals.

Opportunities in the Accommodation Sector

Notwithstanding the numerous issues and challenges in the accommodation sector along the Ramayana Circuit, there are several opportunities for innovation and growth. Leveraging these opportunities can significantly improve the overall pilgrim experience. It has the potential to attract a more diverse range of visitors and ensure the sustainable development of the tourism industry. These opportunities enlist the development of eco-friendly accommodations, greater involvement of local communities, technological advancements, and public-private partnerships (PPP), all of which can contribute to the long-term success of the circuit including tourist's loyalty towards it.

1. Development of Eco-Friendly Boutique Accommodations

Because sustainability has become a worldwide priority for the tourism industry, there is a rising demand for eco-friendly and sustainable accommodation substitutes. The Ramayana Circuit, with its rich religious and natural heritage, offers a unique opportunity to develop eco-friendly boutique accommodations that align with the values of both environmental preservation and religious sanctity.

1.1 Eco-Friendly Lodging Options

Eco-friendly accommodations, such as green hotels, eco-lodges, and sustainable homestays, can cater to the environmental consciousness of pilgrims. These accommodations could incorporate renewable energy sources like solar power, sustainable materials for construction, and water-saving technologies such as rainwater harvesting.

By reducing the environmental footprint of tourism, eco-friendly accommodations can enhance the demand for the Ramayana Circuit for domestic and international visitors, especially those from countries where sustainability plays a pivotal role in the decision-making of tour plans.

Developers can also focus on establishing accommodations that harmonize with nature and natural landscapes, maintaining environmental integrity. Chitrakoot has a significant potential for eco-lodges that blend with the surrounding forested areas, allowing pilgrims to experience a peaceful, natural environment that complements their spiritual journey and delivers the aesthetics and sensuality of the exile route of Lord Rama.

1.2 Boutique Hotels and Heritage Accommodations

Moreover, to eco-friendly lodgings, there is also a growing market for boutique hotels and heritage accommodations that offer a more intimate and culturally immersive experience. Boutique hotels, categorized by unique designs and personalized services, can deliver pilgrims with an enhanced spiritual and cultural experience.

These accommodations can draw inspiration from the ironic religious history of the Ramayana. Heritage accommodations refer to havelis, palaces, and other historical buildings or monuments transformed into accommodation units offering another unique opportunity. These properties can be refurbished into comfortable lodging facilities that deliver a blend of luxury and cultural authenticity. By protecting the historical and architectural significance of the region, such accommodations contribute to cultural preservation while catering to more affluent tourists in the circuit.

1.3 Homestays and Local Guesthouses

One of the most promising opportunities is the development of homestays and local guesthouses. These accommodations offer pilgrims the chance to stay in local homes, experience authentic regional cuisine, and hospitality, and learn about the area's culture, customs, and traditions. Homestays can deliver a more personal and immersive experience compared to large hotels, which is often what religious tourists seek. It generates the opportunities for local community to benefit from the tourism industry, creating economic opportunities for those who may be sidelined from the formal tourism sector.

Governments and other stakeholders can provide training and support to local communities in managing guesthouses, including hospitality management, hygiene standards, services, and online booking systems. Chitrakoot and Ayodhya, where local culture is deeply intertwined with religious practices, this type of accommodation can offer pilgrims a closer connection to the religious atmosphere they want to experience.

2. Digitalization and Smart Solutions

Digitalization boons a significant opportunity to revolutionize the accommodation sector and expand the pilgrim experience. Technology can enhance everything from the reservation, registration, check-in, check-

out, and feedback process of a standard guest cycle to on-site services, making pilgrimages more accessible, efficient, and comfortable solutions for visitors.

2.1 Online Booking Platforms

The development of a global distribution system for a centralized online booking platform of accommodations units along the Ramayana Circuit could greatly simplify the planning and decision-making process for pilgrims. Such a platform could offer comprehensive information about available lodging options, including budget, mid-range, homestays, and star-category luxury accommodations, as well as feedback, reviews, and ratings from other customers or visitors. Amalgamation with travel services like train, bus, or flight and religious event calendars would make it easier for pilgrims to plan their trips, ensuring that they can find accommodations that suit their needs and budget. Furthermore, digital booking platforms will provide real-time availability updates and allow them for the seamless reservation of accommodations, especially during peak season and festival times.

2.2 Smart Hotel Solutions

Fully automatic or semi-automatic hotel units that include smart technology can also improve the experience within accommodations themselves. Smart hotel solutions, such as mobile check-in and check-out, keyless entry, and digital concierge services, can update the guest experience, particularly for younger or tech-savvy pilgrims. Hotels can also launch their mobile apps that provide detailed data to pilgrims with information about local religious sites, prayer timings, and festive or religious events, enhancing the spiritual aspect of the pilgrimage.

Conclusion

Accommodation is a basic component of the tourism sector and plays a pivotal role in the success of the tourism industry. While the sector appearances several challenges, including infrastructural gaps, sustainability concerns, and the need to balance commercial and religious comforts, there are also significant opportunities for growth and innovation. By developing eco-friendly and culturally immersive accommodations, fetching local communities, and implementing digital solutions, the Ramayana Circuit can evolve into a leading destination for religious pilgrims and visitors.

The amalgamation of sustainability, community involvement, and technological innovation will be essential to ensuring that the accommodation sector supports both the cultural and environmental preservation of the Ramayana Circuit of Uttar Pradesh. Utilizing interest in religious tourism continues to grow, particularly among domestic and international visitors, the Ramayana Circuit has the potential to become a global beacon of spiritual and religious tourism, contributing a unique blend of history, culture, tradition, and religious significance.

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