

Integrating Heritage Tourism and Rural Tourism to Understand the Tourism Potential in Sarnath Circle

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Abstract- Rural tourism being promoted at the global level by the UN Tourism indicates its importance as a powerful tool for sustainable development. It helps rural livelihoods, preserve heritage and encourage responsible travel by introducing tourist to the local way of life. While rural tourism emphasizes authentic experiences, natural settings and agriculture, heritage tourism concentrates on the preservation and interpretation of historical landmarks, customs and cultural landscapes. Integrating these two types of tourism has a great deal of promise to improve visitors experience and promote rural communities- socially and economically. By promoting intangible cultural heritage, it strengthens the cultural identity while enhancing tourism attractiveness. This study suggests that balanced regional development, cultural resources protection, and the creation of immersive experiences can be easily achieved with the integration of heritage and rural tourism. Sarnath circle holds a significant place in Buddhism and the people of this religion. Therefore, to create sustainable tourism models that promote both rural development and cultural conservation, cooperative planning between local communities and tourism stakeholders is crucial.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Intangible cultural heritage

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the industries with the fastest growth and most vitality in the global economy is tourism. Developing countries, including India, increasingly recognize tourism as a strategic tool for economic diversification and regional development.

Within the tourism industry, rural tourism has become increasingly significant. The term "rural tourism" describes travel experiences that occur outside of cities and are distinguished by the natural surroundings, customs, cultural heritage, and local encounters.

Authenticity is one of the characteristics that distinguish rural tourism. The desire to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city and experience tranquillity, simplicity and cultural diversity frequently drive tourists.

As defined by UN Tourism- "Rural tourism has a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change because of its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP and job creation, and its capacity to promote the dispersal of demand in time (fight seasonality) and along a wider territory."

However, rural tourism development requires careful planning. Uncontrolled development may result in cultural commercialization, environmental deterioration and unfair benefit distribution. As a result, data driven forecasting and planning become crucial instruments for stakeholders in the tourism industry and policymakers.

Rural Tourism at the Global Stage

The global rural tourism market was value at USD 122.3 Billion in 2026 and reaching USD 244 Billion by 2035 with a projected CAGR of 8% from 2026 to 2035. Millennials and Gen Z travellers in particular are seeking meaningful travel experiences that align with their values. Rural tourism promotes low-impact travel by using small businesses and local sources.

The United Nations, which estimates that 83% of the world's population lives in poverty, supports UN Tourism's initiatives in rural tourism. By creating economic opportunities and promoting cultural and ecological treasures, rural tourism can especially help

historically underprivileged populations including women, young people, and indigenous people.

North America is the most important area in the global rural tourism market, with a market share of 38.3% in 2025. The U.S. has a strong rural tourism industry because it has a lot of national parks, nature reserves, and beautiful places that draw tourists from all over the world.

Europe's rural tourism sees market growth through sustainability and innovation. The different rural landscapes, like France's lavender fields, Italy's vineyards, and Norway's fjords, draw a lot of people to rural tourism.

Global travellers are drawn to Southeast Asia for its picturesque rice fields, diverse hill tribes, and authentic cultural homestays. Asia's varied population, reasonable prices and changing rural tourism landscapes make it an attractive destination.

National Strategy and Roadmap for Development of Rural Tourism

In 2025, 63.13% of India's 1.463 billion people live in rural areas, while 36.87% live in urban areas. India's villages are where you may experience "real India" these villages also serve as archives for the nation's customs, heritage, crafts, and agricultural methods.

In order to prioritize the growth of rural tourism, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) published a Draft National Strategy and Roadmap for Sustainable Tourism in June 2021 with the vision of *"To leverage India's rural heritage in creating a vibrant and responsible tourism segment by creating engaging rural experiences thereby promoting indigenous jobs, and preserving local culture and heritage"*. An initiative towards the Atmanirbhar Bharat- which is a call to become vocal for local products, thus developing a rural economy and creating job opportunities is essential.

National strategy and roadmap for the development of rural tourism aim at prioritization of rural tourism at the national level. It seeks to unify different initiatives to address challenges including poverty, the empowerment of women, and the enhancement of the economic conditions of rural populations.

Uttar Pradesh: The Hub for India's Rural Tourism

To encourage rural tourism, several states have launched flagship schemes to promote rural tourism. Recently, Uttar Pradesh hosted the "Rural Tourism Conclave 2025" in Lucknow to promote itself as a leading destination for rural tourism. The state unveiled a bold action strategy there. The Uttar Pradesh government has designated 234 villages as the tourist destination and pledged to support over 750 farm stays and homestays in these regions. The conclave featured new initiatives like combining agritourism with silk-farming clusters and involving locals in tourism through community mobilization programs, subsidies and training programs.

While metropolitan cities attract a large number of domestic and international tourists, many historically significant sites are located in rural or semi-rural areas. These locations offer unique opportunities to integrate heritage tourism with rural economic development. This not only strengthens community identity but also promotes sustainable cultural heritage management.

One such prominent destination in Uttar Pradesh state is Sarnath Circle- which is one of the most significant, revered, well-known religious and pilgrimage sites in the Buddhist world. There is total 136 monuments/sites under the control of this circle which are fall in 21 districts of the Eastern Uttar Pradesh. For a destination like Sarnath, which has attracted foreign tourist arrivals presented an opportunity for rural tourism destinations development in surrounding villages.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the tourism potential in the villages situated near the historical monuments in Sarnath circle.
2. To identify the cultural experiences and traditions that tourist can experience in Sarnath circle.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the United Nations, which estimates that 83% of the world's population lives in poverty, supports UN Tourism's initiatives in rural tourism. By creating economic opportunities and promoting cultural and ecological treasures, rural tourism can especially help historically underprivileged populations including women, young people, and indigenous people.

Rural tourism can significantly contribute in many aspects: (Bajrami D. D. & Desimir Knezevic, 2024)

economic growth- through increased income opportunities, job creation

social cohesion, a sense of pride and community identity while promoting cultural exchange and preserving local traditions

and lastly, *environmental conservation* with responsible tourism practices have shown to enhance the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity.

The connection between cultural heritage and rural tourism has been explored through diverse perspectives. The heritage has a crucial role in determining the competitiveness and sustainability of rural tourism.

The analysis on Šibenik-Knin County (Croatia), a Mediterranean region characterized by abundant tangible & intangible traditions and argues that the region's greatest competitive edge is its cultural heritage – both tangible and intangible. Authenticity is emphasized by stakeholders as the primary difference for rural tourism, despite ongoing issues including dispersed governance and inadequate finance. In order to turn heritage into sustainable rural tourism source their study emphasizes the necessity of governance and investment (Cerjak et al., 2026). The role of intangible cultural heritage (local customs, music, dance and gastronomy) demonstrates that these traditions enrich tourism offerings while directly improving financial outcomes. These ICH traditions into tourism products enhances visitor experiences, strengthen local identity and increases the profits (Starčević et al., 2022). The ICH can generate value for rural communities through innovation and sustainable tourism, it creates economic, cultural, environmental positioning it as a strategic resource for rural development. (Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024)

Rural architectural heritage can be sustainably managed through tourism; these structures stand out as significant local components in rural tourism activities. Restoring these abandoned structures and integrating them into tourism activities revitalizes rural economies. (Soykök Ede et al., 2025)

Heritage-based tourism can enhance rural attractiveness, generate economic opportunity- job opportunity & income sources, strengthen cultural identity. However, the challenges it faces can be infrastructure, marketing and governance coordination (Ancuța & Jucu, 2023). With the help of spatial coupling between rural human-habitat heritage and key tourism villages situated in China the author (Shen et al., 2025) revealed that how villages distribution and viability are impacted by heritage landscapes. The finding indicates that the areas with rich cultural and ecological heritage attracts more tourist.

However, the challenges remain in terms of infrastructure, marketing and governance coordination. The successful capitalization requires integrated strategies combining heritage conservation, tourism promotion and community involvement. The spatial analysis can uncover mechanisms of heritage-tourism interaction, offering insights for rural revitalization strategies. (Shen et al., 2025)

The heritage is not only a cultural resource but also a driver of socio-economic resilience when embedded in coherent development frameworks.(Ancuța & Jucu, 2023)

IV. AREA OF STUDY

Sarnath Circle, the 27th Circle of Archaeological Survey of India was established on 2 September 2013 by joining together some parts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh of Patna Circle and some of Lucknow Circle. It is one of the most important, sacred and famous religious as well as pilgrimage place for the Buddhist world and it is directly associated with the Lord Buddha's life and teaching. From this place Lord Buddha has started the journey of Dhamma.

Sarnath is also where Ashoka, a 3rd-century-BCE Mauryan emperor, erected a memorial pillar topped with a capital consisting of four lions. This capital, known as the Lion Capital of Ashoka, is the basis for the state emblem of India.

Four Sub-Circles namely Sarnath, Prayagraj, Jaunpur and Kushinagar are under the jurisdiction of Sarnath Circle. There are total 136 monuments/sites under the control of this circle which are fall in 21 districts of the Eastern Uttar Pradesh. These districts are Prayagraj, Amethi, Ambedkar Nagar, Azamgarh, Ballia, Basti,

Chandauli, Deoria, Ghazipur, Gorakhpur, Jaunpur, Kaushambi, Kushinagar, Mau, Mirzapur, Pratapgarh, Sant Ravidas Nagar, Sonbhadra, Sant Kabir Nagar, Sultanpur and Varanasi.

The important monuments of Sarnath Circle are: Buddhist monuments of Sarnath and Kushinagar, excavated remains of ancient Kashi and Kausambi, architectural remains of Sharki Dynasty of Jaunpur especially Atala and other mosques, Khusrubagh and Ashokan pillar of Allahabad etc.

Monuments in focus:

1. Lord Cornwallis Tomb
2. Old Fort (Shahi Fort) Jaunpur
3. Excavated Remains at Sarnath
4. Ancient Buddhist Site known as Chaukhandi stupa

V. METHODOLOGY

The source of this study is based on the data published by Ministry of Tourism and other information available through internet. On the other hand, the secondary data was collected from various Books, Journals, Internet, Newspapers, Reports of Ministry of Tourism and Archaeology Survey of India.

Population: The number of foreign tourists is considered in this study as the traditions and culture of the village would be a new experience for them in comparison to the domestic tourists.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Post-pandemic the monuments of Sarnath has observed a rise in the numbers of foreign visitors at the centrally protected ticketed ASI monuments. The villages associated with these monuments are:

Lord Cornwallis Tomb- Ghazipur

- *Local culture-* Known for its world-famous rose essence (attar), holy sites, and links to freedom fighters and philosophers, Ghazipur offers travelers an experience that blends nature, spirituality, and a blend of ancient history and rich culture heritage. It has connections to the Vedic era and the Ramayana.

- *Music & Dance-* The Birha, a Chaiti, Sohar is very famous. Ghazipur gives many Singers of International repute in Birha. The Dhubia and Poorbi Nautanki of this area is very famous folk Dances of this district. when accompanied by enchanting music generated by Harmonium, Tabla, Dhol, Majeera, Nagara, Jhanjh and Kartal. Dhubia dance is common among the Washerman community and this district produces some dancer of national repute.
- *Economy-* Ghazipur's diverse economy have a significant contribution from its opium factory established by the British East India, this factory also plays a crucial role in the global pharmaceutical industry.
- *Ghazipur Literature Festival 2025-* reflected the city's literary and cultural fervour, with scholars, writers, artists, and young talents from India and abroad attending the festival preserving history, bridging local and national discourse, and honoring Bhojpuri's global footprint.

Old Fort (Shahi Fort) – Jaunpur

- *Culture-* Jaunpur's rich cultural and architectural heritage offers a unique opportunity to explore a lesser-known but historically significant city. The district's history can be traced back to ancient times, with references to it found in texts and inscriptions from the Mauryan and Gupta periods.
- *Fairs & Festivals-* Jaunpur hosts various festivals that reflect its rich cultural legacy. Visitors can explore the vibrant markets and try local delicacies such as kebabs and biryanis. Festivals like Diwali, Holi, and Eid are celebrated with great enthusiasm, uniting people from different backgrounds.
- *Traditonal crafts-* The district's traditional crafts, such as pottery, weaving, and embroidery, continue to flourish, showcasing the artistic skills passed down through generations. Nai Sarak also known as "Street of Barbars" is a bustling market famous for its traditional embroidery and fabrics.
- *Famous places-* Atala Mosque, Chandra Prabha Wildlife Sanctuary, Sheetla Chaukiya Dham, Kalinjar Fort, Ranipur Sanctuary.

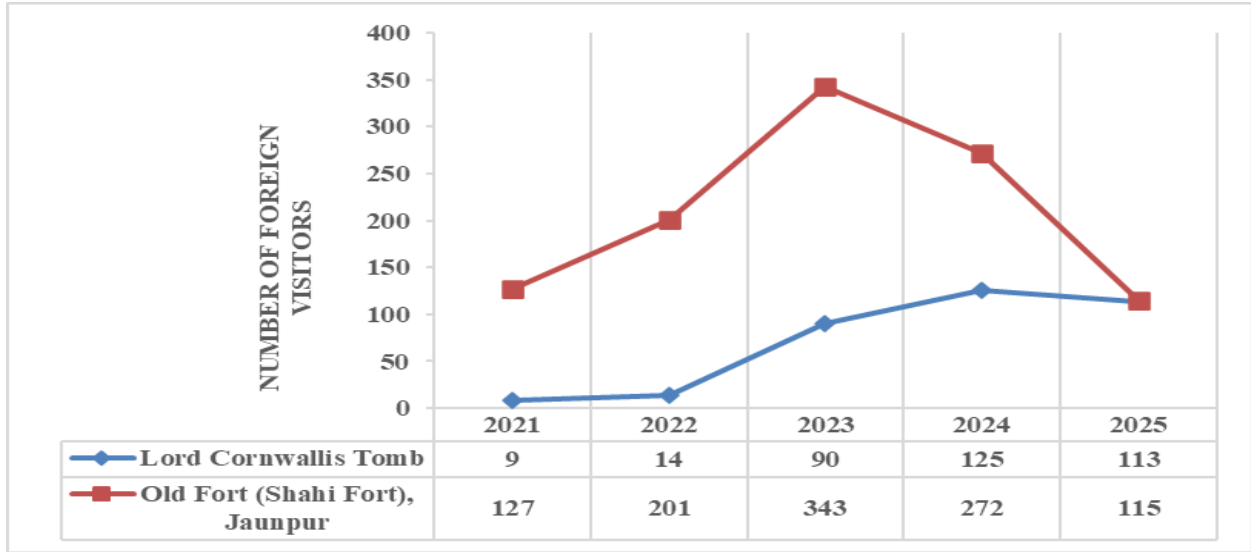


Figure 1 Foreign Tourist Arrival at Lord Cornwallis Tomb and Old Fort from 2021-2025

The Lord Cornwallis Tomb and Old fort situated in Ghazipur and Jaunpur respectively attracts the huge number of the foreign tourists every year. They hold a significant cultural experiences and places to visit during the tours.

Both the places having a significant rural household. Ghazipur District is home to approximately 546664 households, with a large proportion located in rural areas. The district has an average household size of 6.62 people. Whereas, Jaunpur District is home to approximately 663513 households, with a large proportion located in rural areas. The district has an average household size of 6.77 people.

Excavated Remains at Sarnath & Ancient Buddhist Site (Chaukhandi Stupa) - Sarnath

- *Historical & Pilgrimage importance-* It is one of the most important and revered sites in Buddhism. This is where the Buddha delivered his first sermon after attaining enlightenment. Sarnath has developed into a spiritual center that attracts pilgrims and scholars from all over the world. Its historical, cultural, and religious significance continues to inspire people and serves as a living symbol of Buddhist teachings.
- *Community & Local people-* Sarnath is considered the birthplace of the Buddhist Sangha, the monastic community founded by the Buddha. The Sangha became an essential pillar of Buddhism, preserving the teachings and

embodying the practice of renunciation, meditation, and ethical conduct.

- *Monasteries-* The monasteries offer meditation halls, temples, and guest accommodations, contributing to Sarnath’s role as a vibrant religious center. It also represents diverse Buddhist traditions, including Thai, Burmese, Tibetan, Japanese, and Sri Lankan communities.
- *Art, Sculpture, and Iconography-* Sarnath is celebrated for its rich artistic heritage. During the Gupta period, the site became a center for the creation of some of the finest examples of Buddhist sculpture. The “Sarnath Buddha” statue emphasized softness, spiritual calm, and idealized beauty, influencing Buddhist art throughout Asia. Also, carvings of Jataka tales, which narrate the Buddha’s previous lives and teach moral lessons. These works of art served both devotional and educational purposes, helping pilgrims and practitioners internalize Buddhist teachings through visual storytelling.
- *Cultural Performances and Festivals-* Several Buddhist festivals are celebrated at the Japanese Temple with great devotion and grandeur. These festivals attract both locals and international visitors who wish to partake in spiritual and cultural ceremonies like Ullambana (Obon Festival), Hanamatsuri (Flower Festival), Kathina Ceremony

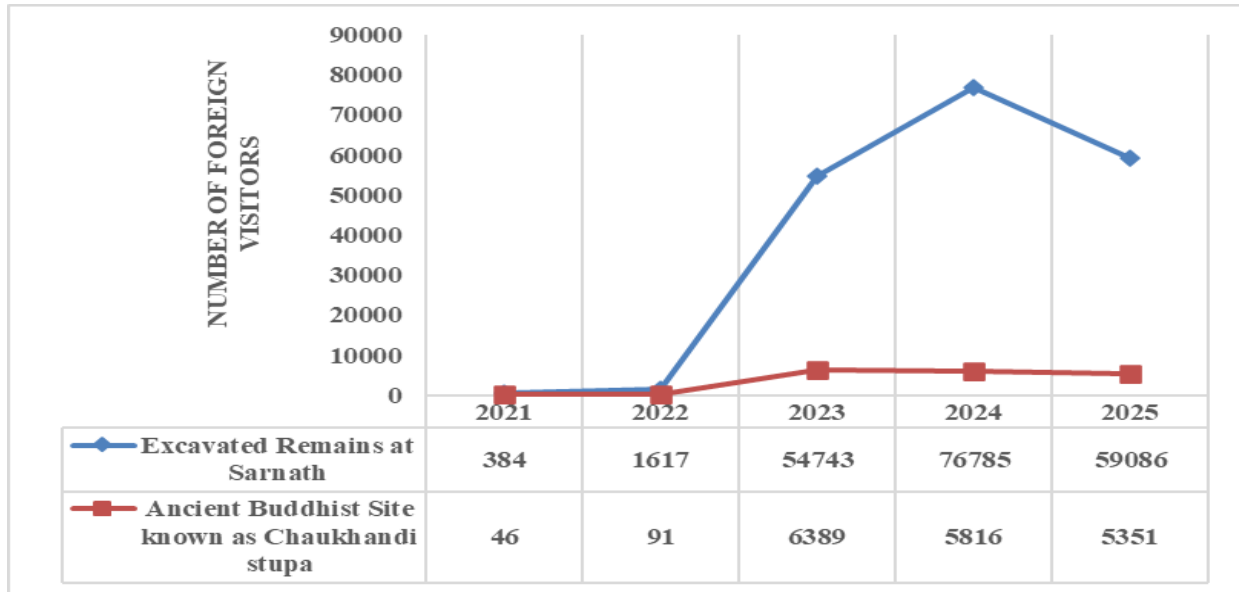


Figure 2 Foreign Tourist Arrival at Excavated Remains and Chaukhandi Stupa from 2021-2025

The Excavated Remains and Ancient Buddhist sites in Sarnath provide a great learning experience to its visitors. Being the most accessible among the important Ancient Buddhist sites, it equally fascinates the religious visitors and the history seekers.

The vicinity of Sarnath is characterized by a mixed of semi-urban and rural areas, including places like Paharia, Lamhi and Bada Lalpur. The area is densely populated with 56.6% living in rural areas.

These historical monuments across the Sarnath is surrounded by the number of villages with their culture, true & authentic experiences. The tourists visiting these heritages not only enjoys the archaeological aspects of the place but also the intangible cultural heritage. Every village have their own customs, culture and identity which will promote the villages across the globe and will help the community economically and socially. Sarnath is the place which attracts the tourists for its wellness and spiritually intentions coinciding it with the rural tourism it will help the visitors to experience the authenticity and a sense of peaceful mind. Post-pandemic the tourists are travelling around the world for spiritual and mindful purpose.

Promoting the heritage tourism in rural areas will help in integrating the heritage preservation along with the boost in rural tourism and serving the local communities with the employment and income encouraging the showcase of their skills and handcrafts. This will eventually lead to the

regenerative practices where the tourist visiting these rural areas gets to enjoy the scenic views and practicing the agri-tourism in the farms.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Sarnath circle has seen a significant increases in tourist arrivals with the foreign tourist flocking to the sites of Buddha's first sermon. To conclude the researcher can say that promoting the rural tourism in the villages which have some Archaeological Survey of India recognised heritage monuments present and having the foreign visitors can help the surrounding rural areas to grow in terms of economically-employment generation, infrastructural development, income source and socially getting the recognition for its cultural values and beliefs. Integrating the heritage tourism and rural tourism leads to the regenerative practices in the villages. Sarnath holds an important place in the Buddhism pilgrimage still it's not widely known across the globe. The government should emphasis on the infrastructure building around the areas of the Sarnath circle and encourage the local people to welcome the tourists in their house or homestays and let them know about their traditions and lifestyle, this will not only help the local community to grow but the development of the villages and the interest of tourists will also increase more.

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