



Agra's Tourism Challenges: A Case Study Of Pathway To Resilience And Growth

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Abstract

Agra, India's Mughal capital, glows with its trinity of UNESCO gems, Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, and Agra Fort. The city of love, Agra, was founded by the Lodis. It was the only Mughal who turned Agra into a global heartthrob, ruling from its red-sandstone embrace for nearly a century. Yet, despite curling up to Delhi and Jaipur in the Golden triangle, Agra's star is dimming, and it's not just because tourists forgot their destination. It is because there is a lack of proper infrastructure here. This study, interlinking a decade of visitor data (2015-2024), reveals the Taj Mahal grabbing much attention, hidden jewels like Akbar's Tomb (2,23,428 visitors), Itimad-ud-Daulah (2,65,855), Mariam's Tomb (18,404), and Keetham Lake's wildlife barely get a bow. What is the reason behind it? the reason is a Lack of promotion and local mismanagement, which even grand schemes like Incredible India and Swachh Bharat couldn't fully polish here. Post-pandemic, India's tourism boom hasn't quite recaptured its pre-2019 glory (Taj Mahal's 8,15,680 foreign visitors vs. 7,06,187 in 2024). From promoting playing hide-and-seek with tourists' pouches to the Yamuna's less-than-inviting aroma, small barriers pile up. This paper investigates these characteristics, and why promote only the Taj when Mariam's Tomb is practically signaling for attention? and proposes a bit-by-bit fix: bundles of tickets, a snazzy app for Akbar's Tomb, eco-tours at Keetham Lake, and a metro line that doesn't stop at "coming soon."

Key Words- Agra Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Golden Triangle, under-visited Monuments, Visitor Trends

Introduction

Agra, home to one of the seven wonders of the modern world, the Taj Mahal, and the capital of the Mughals in the 16th and early 17th centuries Agra stands as a witness to the historical events of the bygone times. The magnificence of the fort, places, and mausoleums is an adequate indication of their prosperity. While its importance as the capital ended in 1634 CE when Shah Jahan shifted to Delhi, it continued to maintain its place on the international tourist map due to architecturally breathtaking monuments.

The history of Agra takes one back to the period of the Mahabharat, when the land was identified as Agravana, a part of Braj Bhoomi. During the early 16th century, Sikandar Lodhi made it his capital. Struggle for power continued, and Agra saw the rise of rulers like Babur, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. Their reigns brought forth remarkable developments in trade, commerce, and learning. The royal patrons gifted unparalleled monuments, gardens (Rambagh and Shahjahan Garden), and bazaars (Kinari Bazaar and Meena Bazaar), which to date continue to mesmerize visitors flocking here from far and wide. Eminent personalities like Haridas, Surdas, Bihari, Rakshan, Amir Khusro, Mirza Galib, and Nazeer Akbarabadi brought fame to this land. A place

of unbelievable craftsmanship, exotic cuisine, and contemporary Mughal Art, Agra is simply an exemplification of brilliance. Yet, despite Agra's star dimming, it's not just because tourists forgot their destination. What is the reason behind it? the reason is a Lack of promotion and local mismanagement, which even grand schemes like Incredible India and Swachh Bharat couldn't fully polish here.

This research paper aims to systematically analyze the primary hurdles facing Agra's tourism sector and propose actionable strategies for fostering resilience and sustainable growth.

The objectives of this research

- (1) to identify and evaluate the key challenges impacting Agra's tourism industry
- (2) to examine their effects on economic, environmental, and socio-cultural sustainability
- (3) to recommend practical solutions for policymakers, local communities, and tourism operators

This study also addresses the following research questions: What are the main barriers to sustainable tourism in Agra? How do these challenges affect foreign and local tourists and heritage sites? What strategies can ensure resilient and inclusive tourism growth in the city?

Purpose of the research

Agra, India's Mughal capital, shines with its trinity of UNESCO World Heritage gems: the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, and Agra Fort, making it the only city in India to boast three UNESCO World Heritage monuments. Yet, despite curling up to Delhi and Jaipur in the Golden triangle, Agra's star is dimming, and it's not just because tourists forgot their destination. This study carves a data-driven path through Agra's tourism industry, where Agra's monuments find attention, and why? According to visitor trends, the decline in tourism is drastic, despite it being almost 4 years since COVID-19 emerged. Despite Agra's white and red sandstone, its shine is fading. Tourism is not booming like pre-COVID-19, why? Also, we have to keep in mind that we not only have the Taj Mahal, we have other monuments, Keetham Lake, and Agra's local markets. Why, these markets out of reach of foreigners, and what types of problems are playing a major role in exploring sites?

Research Methodology

To achieve the desired result, we conducted semi-structured interviews with interested parties, including local tour guides, hoteliers, shop owners, and tourism officials, to capture their perspectives on tourism-related issues. The data was taken from 2015 to 2024, around a decade. This data was taken from the Agra Tourism and ASI office, and also field visits to prominent sites, such as the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar Tomb, Marium Tomb, Rambagh, Mehtab Bagh, Itmad-ud-Daula, Keetham Lake, and nearby markets. we had the opportunity to observe real-world situations, think about overcrowding or lack of amenities, and write detailed notes on the tourism ecosystem. In this research, we have taken qualitative and quantitative data.

Findings

Visitor Trends (2015-2024)

	TAJ MAHAL		AGRA FORT		FATEHPUR SIKRI		TOMB OF AKBAR		ITMA-ud-DAULA		MEHTAB BAGH		MARIAM TOMB		RAMBAGH	
	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN	INDIAN	FOREIGN
2015	5842287	671256	2000484	343776	615502	199279	471009	29662	141511	68405	181651	24924	59668	286	74558	177
2016	5547949	694231	1838440	377499	505195	146340	392458	28427	127903	75652	175007	29345	30733	191	57441	161
2017	5618738	861539	1978079	526930	498581	180336	379590	26801	128886	76000	169261	49686	28780	225	51084	1907
2018	5675989	883770	2028509	526886	506900	164835	365519	26623	166782	100910	232496	83966	34543	200	89432	423
2019	4845084	815680	1778220	499721	494314	180156	254295	21552	140880	93324	201163	86659	24657	210	88265	408
2020	1184317	207105	431118	124680	95926	28948	75762	6486	39325	26690	59362	21298	6313	51	23707	179
2021	2962324	19441	837392	8023	141537	941	161821	531	77027	853	81272	865	15916	32	25364	37
2022	5591045	156656	1575384	89831	317688	28388	338302	6396	164965	28016	121393	14145	22220	769	58283	471
2023	5249407	430116	1049898	138827	253040	60938	168924	10387	150253	51875	86610	13718	8841	53	53760	3049
2024	6391822	706187	1415931	218471	274748	97277	197766	25662	178336	87519	131917	26691	18185	219	45566	522

Figure 1: Visitor Trends (2015-2024)

(Data: ASI, 2024; UP Tourism, 2024)

The data collected is of the entire decade, and it can be seen from it that tourist arrivals are the highest at the Taj Mahal and lowest at other monuments of the city.

It can also be seen in the above data that Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri do not seem to be reaching their pre-COVID condition, but other monuments seem to be almost reaching their previous condition.

Triangle of three UNESCO sites

The Mughals, besides being great rulers, were also great builders, and they preserved their architectural wonders in Agra and its environs. Their architectural genius can also be seen in the forts, places, and aesthetically laid out gardens, each one a silent witness to a grand style of the golden era. The symbol of love, the Taj Mahal, built in white marble, is a masterpiece of Mughal architecture at its best. Today, Taj Mahal is not only a world heritage site, but it is the most visited monument among the 7 wonders, along with it Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri are also included in the world heritage sites. It is very rare to see such places that have three or more UNESCO sites.

Taj Mahal- The Taj Mahal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, built on the banks of the river Yamuna, is an amazing Taj, a great architect's masterpiece, and has maintained its shine even after more than 350 years. From America's presidents to G20 leaders, everyone is eager to see it and why not, when people enter through its main gate (Dwaraza-e-rauza), a huge building wrapped in marble is seen in front of it, with fountains in the middle and seeing the greenery of beautiful trees around it, the mind blossoms and only one word comes out of people's mouths - "Wah Taj". Attracting 7–8 million visitors annually, the Taj Mahal remains a global icon of romance and architectural brilliance.

Comparing the Taj Mahal with the seven wonders

Taj mahal	Great Wall of China	Colosseum	Chichen Itza	Christ the Redeemer	Machu Picchu	Petra
Annual visitors approx.	Annual visitors approx.	Annual visitors approx.	Annual visitors approx.	Annual visitors approx.	Annual visitors approx.	Annual visitors approx.
7-8 million	10 million	7 million	2.5 million	2 million	1.5 million	1 million

Fatehpur Sikri- The first planned capital built by the Mughals, Fatehpur Sikri, was the capital of the entire Mughal India from 1571 to 1585, but due to water problems there, Akbar had to leave the city. Fatehpur Sikri used to be a grand city built on the Vindhya Mountain range. Even today, looking at the architecture of the fort, it seems that everything was built in a very planned manner. The Buland Darwaza, built in Indian and Persian style in Fatehpur Sikri, which was built by Akbar to commemorate the victory of Gujarat, is the tallest gate of India. Any edifice here, Panchmahal, Jodha Mahal, and Salim-Chisti's Dargah, speaks of the elegance of Mughal architecture.

Agra Fort- The building nearest the Taj Mahal is made of red sandstone, which is known as Agra Fort. It was constructed by Akbar between 1565 and 1573. Later, many buildings were constructed in it by Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The Diwan-e-aam(Hall of public audience), Diwan-e-khas(Hall of private audience), Nagina Mosque(Mosque of gems), Musamman Burj (Octagonal tower), and Sheesh Mahal, built in the Agra Fort, describe the richness of the Mughal architecture. Also, a Full view of the Taj Mahal can be seen from the top of the fort.

Barriers to Tourism in Agra

Traffic and transportation chaos

After talking to the officials of Agra's tourism department, I found that the biggest problem in Agra's tourism is the local administration, in which traffic plays an important role. Due to this, outside tourists are unable to see other monuments due to a lack of traffic, and otherwise, they will not be able to reach the local market. If we talk about reality, then there is no harm in saying that only one road has been developed here, which connects Rail Marg (Agra Cantt) and Air Marg (Kheria Airport) to the Taj Mahal, which is known as Mall Road. Here, a dedicated corridor should be prepared for all the monuments, like Agra Fort, Sikandra, Mehtab Bagh, Fatehpur Sikri, Itmad-ud-Daula, Rambag, Mariam Tomb, which would help in visiting all the monuments. So that tourists can easily reach, and there should be provision of high-quality cafes, bakeries, and restaurants on all road sides.

Misguided by guides

After talking to local guides, I found that some of the guides misguide the tourists a lot, due to which those people come to Agra during the day, but they do not prefer to stay overnight there on the advice of the guides. They only have lunch. Very few of them have dinner and return to Delhi in the evening or leave for Jaipur. Those people do not stay here overnight. The hotel owners of Delhi have a big hand in this; this thing cannot be denied.

No nightlife safety concerns for tourists

The reason for most tourists not staying in Agra at night is also due to security reasons at night. There is no nightlife outside the 5-star hotels. There is no proper policing here, and misbehavior by locals with foreigners and people from other states. Similarly, there have been many incidents in the past due to which they have been deprived of enjoying the local market, culture, and nightlife here.

Lack of awareness about lesser-known monuments

Many tourists visiting Agra focus only on the Taj Mahal and ignore other important historical sites and monuments in the city. In recent years, it has grown even more, as can be seen in Picture 1. It is worth mentioning that this shortage is due to many reasons, including a lack of publicity, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of accessibility. Consequently, many less famous monuments like Cheenee-ka-Rauza, Mariam Tomb, Mehtaab Bagh, Rambag, and the Roman Catholic graveyard remain relatively unknown to tourists.

Environmental pollution and deterioration

The pollution in the areas around the Taj Mahal includes both air and water. Air pollution is mostly seen in winters, after which it seems as if the Taj Mahal will disappear somewhere (Agra's Air Quality Deteriorates, Taj Mahal Hidden in Haze-The Indian Express). Along with this, water pollution is also seen quite a lot. We all know that the Taj Mahal is built on the banks of the Yamuna River. And to keep the foundation of Taj Mahal strong, it needs water but due to insufficient water in Yamuna River, the foundation is getting damaged and along with this Yamuna has become so polluted that if one stands above the Taj Mahal and looks at Yamuna then looking at its foul smell and visible garbage, it seems as if it is a drain. This is not only harming tourism, but the white marble of the Taj Mahal is also being severely damaged due to the presence of microplastics and algae growth.

No proper Infrastructure

Well, in a city like Agra, because of having one of the seven wonders Taj Mahal, and three UNESCO sites, every facility should be on a higher level. Still, the infrastructure here is of very poor quality, and the quality of the roads is very poor, due to which traffic gets affected. There is also a great shortage of clean water suitable for drinking, cold R.O. water, everywhere. It is written that it is water, but if it is seen in its true sense, then it is not clean water, which can make a common man sick by drinking it. Often, it has also been seen that taxi or auto rickshaw drivers demand a very high amount of money from the tourists, and out of compulsion, the tourists have to pay that money. Due to this, the tourists feel cheated. These are little things to say, but because of all these things, the image of the city gets damaged a lot.

Solutions to Increase Tourism in Agra

Improve Infrastructure

1. Making a separate corridor for Monuments

The estimated population of Agra city is 1.5 million based on the 2011 census. It has a high population density, meaning that many people live within a relatively small area. The population density of the Agra district is around 1,084 inhabitants per square kilometer. As can be seen in Figure 1, tourists are mostly limited to the Taj Mahal, so there is a need for a separate corridor for all the other monuments. This will not only increase tourism but also provide relief from the traffic congestion in Agra, as the number of tourists visiting here every year is approximately 10.4 million. A dedicated corridor for tourist movement could alleviate congestion, enhance visitor experience, and potentially reduce pollution around the Taj Mahal. Also, it will not only provide easy access to all the monuments, but it will also encourage tourists to make a multiday visit.

2. Sustainable development

Agra, which was once the capital of the entire Mughal India, is facing a lot of problems today. A few years ago, Agra was included in the list of the top 10 polluted cities. To get rid of this, its eco-friendly design is necessary. We should also bring a separate green transport act (2021) for Agra, like America, under which the use of solar-powered light and recycled things should be promoted, and for visiting the monuments, the use of electric buses and cars should be promoted. Another positive solution in this could be that, just like a bicycle track has been built at the eastern gate of the Taj Mahal, similarly, a bicycle track should be constructed to reach all the monuments. All these steps will not only provide relief to the people here from pollution, but they will also save the Taj Mahal marble from damage; therefore, immediate funding should be provided by the governments for this.

3. Modernize tourist facilities

For the convenience of tourists, clean washrooms, pure water, and basic amenities should be fully provided and accessible pathways should be created for the differently abled. Public-private partnerships should be promoted in this area so that the satisfaction level of tourists increases.

4. Smart initiatives

For Agra, which has a unique identity in the whole world, an app should be made in the name of "Agra Visit" which should have the facility of real-time crowd management and digital tickets. This will make it easy for the tourists to explore everything.

Promote nearby attractions

Keetham Lake- Sur Sarovar, also known as Keetham Lake, is a human-made reservoir created to supply water to the city of Agra in summer. The wetland soon became an important and rich ecosystem. The Site's patchwork of different habitat types provides refuge to resident and migratory birds, and more than 60 species of fish. due to very little information about this to tourists coming to Agra, the number of tourists coming here in 2024 was approximately 75900, out of which 75000 were Indians and 900 foreigners. This situation is worrying.

Radhasoami Temple - Radhasoami Temple is a mausoleum located in Dayal Bagh, which is also known as Soami Bagh Temple. Temple should be promoted as a tourist destination, especially in the spiritual tourism sector. This temple is known for its sophisticated white stone structure, a blend of architectural styles from Hindu, Muslim, Jain, and Christian traditions. It is a significant religious place and an architectural gem, which is still under construction and attracts tourists with its unique spirituality and peaceful environment.

Awareness among the local people

To promote tourism in Agra, it is necessary to tell the local people about the benefits of tourism so that they do not misbehave with any tourist and follow "Athiti Devo Bhava." For this, community education campaigns and School Programs: Introduce tourism awareness in school curricula to educate youth about Agra's heritage and economic potential. It will strengthen local identity and encourage residents to act as cultural ambassadors.

Improve human resources

Often it is seen that there are a lot of untrained staff, and because of are untrained guides, they are poor storytellers, and when visitors cross-verify the points themselves, they also share their experience with other people. This creates a negative image of the tourism site in the minds of others. There is also a lack of knowledge of foreign languages, which creates a barrier in communication with visitors. For improvement in all these, trained staff or multilingual support is required.

Future Opportunities to increase tourism

1. **Rubber dam behind Taj-** Building a rubber dam behind the Taj Mahal will not only help in strengthening its foundation, but also allow mini yachts can be operated by cleaning the water ahead of the dam. This will enable tourists to see the Taj from all sides.
2. **Expansion of tourism at night-** For nightlife, every monument should have a night light and sound show to boost stay overnight
3. **Royal horse-drawn carriage-** The Royal horse-drawn carriage will not only be eco-friendly but will also enhance the tourist experience.
4. **Keetham Lake boating-**Keetham Lake should also be developed like the upper lake (Bhojtal) of Bhopal. Both are Ramsar sites and human-made, but in Bhopal, one can see mini yachts and a lot of boating in the upper lake; such things are not seen in Keetham lake; therefore, it should also be developed like Bhojtal lake so that tourism gets attracted.
5. **Light and sound show-** Like Agra Fort, all monuments should have light and sound shows.
6. **Promote markets-** Many markets in Agra have been situated since ancient times, like Kinari Bazaar, Sadar Bazaar, Subhash Bazaar, Shahganj Bazaar, and Raja Ki Mandi; all these can be developed for tourists.
7. **International airport development-** A separate international airport is very important for Agra, so that tourists can reach Agra via direct flights

Conclusion- If we first understand the problem then there are many problems and then there is a solution to it and in the end some suggestions were given so that instead of focusing on the entire Taj Mahal we can go to other sites, if we take the solution seriously then tourism in Agra can increase a lot which will help in the growth of Agra.

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