



Religious Tourism Development In Ayodhya Municipal Corporation: A Socio- Economic Perspective

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Abstract

Ayodhya, a city of profound religious and cultural significance, has emerged as a prominent destination for religious tourism in India. Known as the birthplace of Lord Rama and home to the recently inaugurated Ram Janmabhoomi Temple, Ayodhya has witnessed a rapid transformation driven by spiritual, historical, and cultural narratives. This study explores the development of religious tourism in Ayodhya from a socio-economic perspective, highlighting its impact on local communities, infrastructure, employment generation, and economic diversification. The research examines how religious tourism contributes to income opportunities, revitalizes traditional livelihoods such as handicrafts and hospitality, and fosters cultural preservation. Simultaneously, it addresses the challenges posed by rapid urbanization, environmental pressures, and socio-cultural shifts. By analysing the interplay between religious heritage and socio-economic development, the study underscores the need for sustainable tourism planning that balances economic growth with cultural integrity and community welfare. The findings aim to inform policy frameworks and development strategies to ensure inclusive and long-term benefits from Ayodhya's growing religious tourism sector.

KEY WORDS: Religious Tourism, Socio-economic perspective, Cultural integrity, Historical Background and Ayodhya Municipal Corporation.

1. Introduction

The Socio- economical characteristics of Ayodhya city encompass a blend of economic, social and cultural elements that give the region its unique identity. Geography significantly influences the growth of religious tourism, involving both natural and human-made factors such as landforms, water systems, climate, soil types, vegetation, human resources, economic activities, and cultural aspects. The tourism industry is closely tied to the natural environment, as it relies on geographical space for development. Tourism involves people traveling to various destinations, and tourist sites that are easily accessible and well-connected tend to attract more visitors. Typically, such destinations are found in areas with flat terrain, efficient transportation networks, and modern infrastructure. However, some tourist spots are located in less accessible areas like mountains or regions with harsh climates and poor transport, which tend to appeal more to younger travellers. When it comes to religious tourism, most destinations are found in geographically favourable locations. Therefore, understanding the geographical distribution of tourist sites is crucial for studying the tourism sector. Analysing a region's geographical features also helps determine the most suitable type of tourism

that can thrive there. In this chapter, the researcher examines the geographical elements that contribute to the rapid growth of religious tourism in the Ayodhya region.

2. Administrative Structure of Ayodhya Municipal Corporation and City-Region

Ayodhya is geographically situated in the North Gangetic Plain and politically lies in the south-central part of Uttar Pradesh. Formerly known as Faizabad district, the region spans between 26°27' to 26°52' North latitude and 81°44' to 82°30' East longitude. It is bordered by Gonda and Basti districts to the north, Amethi and Sultanpur to the south, while Ambedkar Nagar and Barabanki lie to the east and west, respectively.

The district covers a total area of 2,505 square kilometers and comprises five tehsils: Rudauli, Milkipur, Sohawal, Faizabad, and Bikapur. Additionally, there are 1,272 villages spread across 11 community development (CD) blocks, which include Amaniganj, Bikapur, Harringtonganj, Masodha, Mawai, Milkipur, Pura Bazar, Rudauli, Sohawal, and Tarun. The Ayodhya Municipal Corporation is administratively divided into 60 wards, and more broadly into two main areas: Ayodhya Cantonment and Ayodhya Dham. For better governance, the municipal area is further segmented into five zones, with Zones 4 and 5 hosting the majority of tourist attractions. These include popular sites such as river ghats, temples, and kunds (sacred ponds). The municipal corporation spans from 26°45'0" N to 26°49'0" N latitude and from 82°63'0" E to 82°13'30" E longitude. Among all, Zone 5 receives the highest number of tourists, particularly in wards 2, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 18, 24, 31, 43, 48, and 49 — all of which fall within the core area of Ayodhya city.

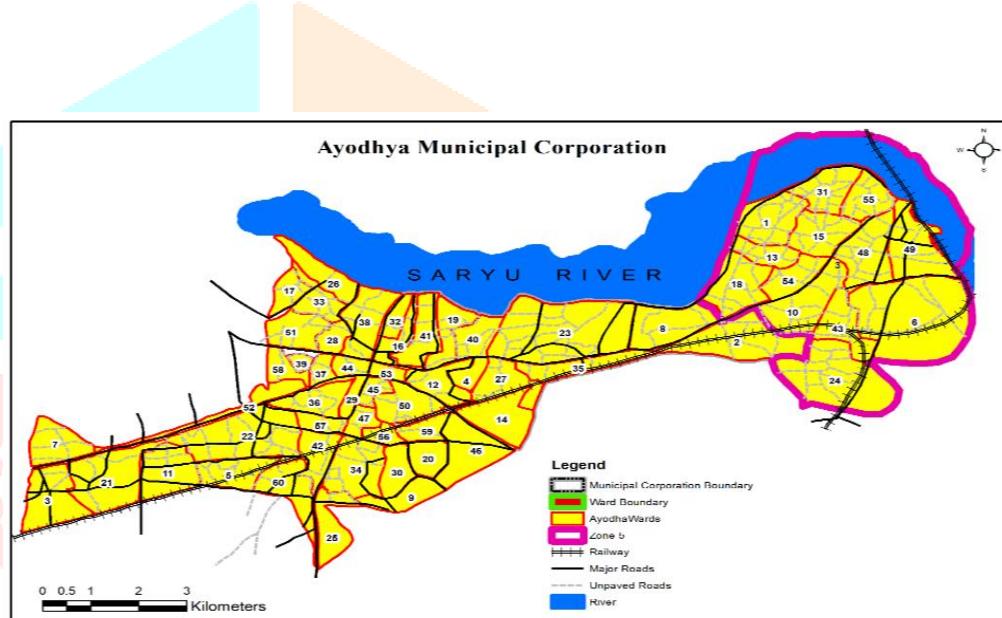


Fig 1 Source: Researcher w.r.t Ayodhya Municipal Corporation,

3. Historical Background of Ayodhya:

Ayodhya, an ancient Indian city, holds sacred significance for Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, and is recognized as one of India's seven holy cities. Traditionally believed to be founded by Manu and ruled by the legendary Ikshvaku dynasty, it was known by different names in various religious texts—most notably as Saketa in Buddhist and Jain scriptures.

Historically, Ayodhya evolved as a major urban and religious center by the 5th–6th century BCE. It was an important stop on ancient trade and pilgrimage routes, frequently visited by figures like Gautam Buddha and Mahavira. Over time, it came under several dynasties—Mauryas, Shungas, Devas, Kushans, Guptas, and later the Maukhari and Gurjara-Pratiharas.

Under the Guptas, especially Skandagupta, Ayodhya regained prominence and was associated more closely with its legendary identity. It remained significant even during periods of invasion and decline, continuing as a religious hub. The Gahadavala dynasty further elevated Ayodhya's Vaishnavite identity by building Vishnu temples, and by the 13th–18th centuries, it had become a prominent pilgrimage site.

During Mughal rule, the Babri Mosque was constructed, but the city retained its religious relevance. Under British colonial rule, communal tensions rose, particularly over the Babri site. These escalated post-independence, culminating in the 1992 demolition and subsequent legal disputes.

In 2019, the Supreme Court of India ruled in favor of constructing a Ram temple at the disputed site, while allotting separate land for a mosque. The Ram Janmabhoomi Temple was formally inaugurated on January 22, 2024, marking a historic milestone in the city's religious and cultural legacy.

4. Socio Cultural Background of Ayodhya

Ayodhya is one of India's seven sacred cities and is revered as the birthplace of Lord Rama, attracting millions of pilgrims annually. Beyond its spiritual significance, the city offers a rich cultural experience through its festivals, heritage areas, crafts, and cuisine.

4.1 Heritage Zones in Ayodhya

Ayodhya's cultural heritage is divided into tangible elements (like monuments and landscapes) and intangible ones (such as traditions and rituals). These are preserved in designated heritage zones, reflecting both ancient and active religious practices.

4.2 River Side Heritage Zones

Located along the Saryu River, this zone features historic ghats and temples, many dating from the 18th to 20th centuries. Important sites include Svargadvara Ghat, believed to be the cremation site of Lord Rama, and various kunds like Brihaspati and Sita Kunda. Notable temples such as Nageshwar Nath and Kanchan Bhavan are also situated here.

4.3 Ramkot Heritage Zone

This zone houses key religious landmarks including the Ram Janmabhoomi temple (birthplace of Lord Rama), Hanuman Garhi, and Kanak Bhawan. It also includes kunds, shrines, and temples dating back to the Gupta period, reflecting the deep roots of Vaishnavism in the region.

4.4 Gulab Bari–Bahu Begum Maqbara Heritage Zone:

This area showcases the Nawabi architectural legacy with monuments like Gulab Bari, Bahu Begum's tomb, and the Fort of Nawab Shuja-Ud-Daula. Gulab Bari, surrounded by rose gardens, is particularly notable for its historical and architectural importance.

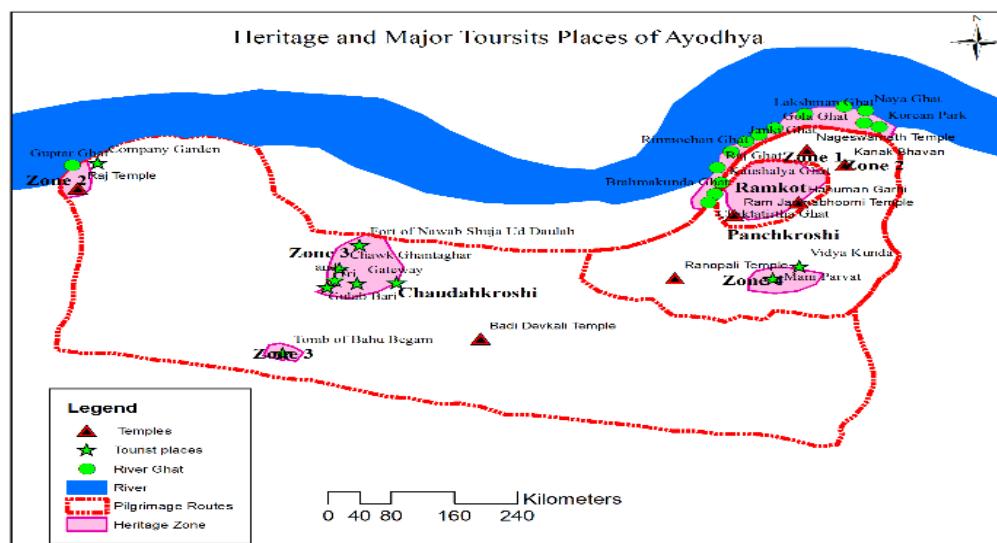


Fig 2 Source Researcher w.r.t Ayodhya Mission plan 2031, Generated Arc GIS 10.8

The Mani Parvat Zone includes over twenty culturally significant sites linked not only to Hinduism, but also to Islam and Buddhism. Historically recognized as one of the oldest Buddhist locations, the area is now primarily known for the Ram-Sita Temple. Currently, it is maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. One of the most celebrated festivals here is Shravan Jhula. A key attraction in this zone is Vidya Kund, located about 200 meters east of Mani Parvat and roughly 1.75 km southwest of Sita Kund. On the southern side of Vidya Kund stands a temple dedicated to Vidya Devi (Goddess Saraswati, the deity of knowledge). It is believed that Lord Rama received instruction in the fourteen fundamental sciences from Sage Vashishtha at Vidyapitha, situated on the western side of the kund. Other notable sites in this zone include the grave of Hazrat Shesho (a Muslim religious site), Sita Kund, Ganesh Kund, Ranopali Temple, and Khajuri Kund.

5. Ayodhya and the UNESCO World Heritage Criteria

In 1997, a Korean delegation visited Ayodhya to explore historical ties between Queen Huh-Hwang-ok of Korea's Kaya dynasty and the Indian city. Based on ancient Korean texts, they identified "Ayuta"—believed to be Ayodhya—as the origin of the queen, who is said to have married into a royal family there. This connection led to the establishment of a cultural relationship, officially recognizing Ayodhya as the sister city of Kimhae (Korea). The idea to propose Ayodhya for UNESCO World Heritage status was raised but not pursued due to lack of planning and submission, and current urban development plans have largely overlooked UNESCO guidelines.

However, following the inauguration of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple on January 22, 2024, Ayodhya has gained national focus for heritage and tourism development. The city is now being positioned as a global religious tourism hub. Officials claim that Ayodhya fulfills 8 out of 10 UNESCO criteria for inscription on the World Heritage list. These include:

Masterpiece of Human Creativity

Ayodhya showcases exceptional architecture, such as Kanak Bhavan, Hanuman Garhi, and Valmiki Ramayana Bhavan—believed to be unique in India.

Acculturation of Human Values

The city reflects multi-religious harmony through its numerous Hindu temples, Muslim shrines, Jain temples, and Sikh sites, displaying a rich cultural mosaic.

Living Cultural Traditions

Ayodhya has been a center of intangible heritage since 600 BCE, preserving traditions like Ramkatha, Ramleela, Ramanami chanting, and festive celebrations like Diwali and Ram Navami.

Fusion of Architecture and Landscape

The city's iconic riverfront along the Saryu River features a combination of temples, ghats, and scenic landscapes, highlighting the integration of nature and sacred architecture.

5.1 Traditional Habitats and Cultural Interactions

Ayodhya exemplifies religious harmony through sacred sites visited by both Hindus and Muslims. Notable examples include the tombs of Hazrat Shish and Nughazi Mazar, which are revered for their spiritual and healing significance. These sites, mentioned in historical records, attract pilgrims globally and reflect a long-standing tradition of shared rituals and peaceful coexistence.

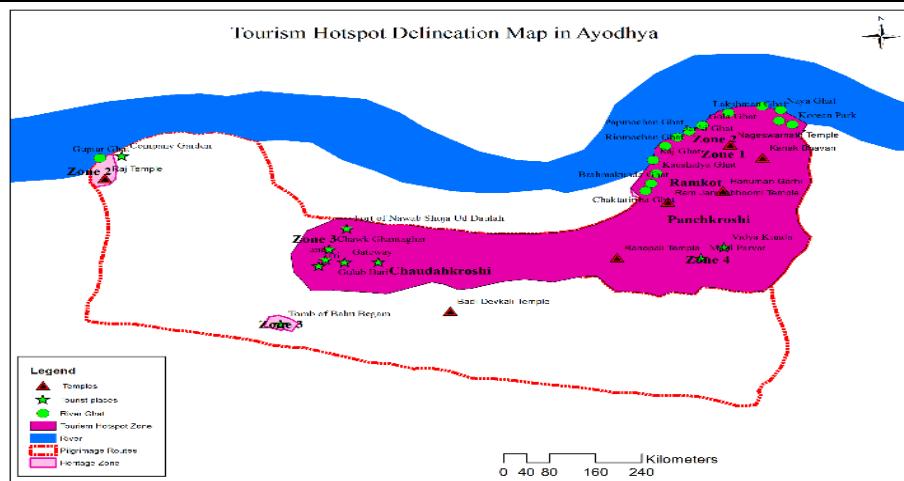


Fig3 Source Researcher w.r.t Ayodhya Mission plan 2031, Generated Arc GIS 10.8

5.6 Continuity of Living Traditions

Ayodhya preserves age-old rituals and customs through daily temple activities, festivals like Diwali and Ram Navami, and events such as Ramcharitmanas recitations and Ramlila performances. The blending of Hindu and Sufi practices, where both communities visit shared shrines, highlights the city's deep spiritual continuity and vibrant cultural life.

5.7 Aesthetic and Natural Beauty

The natural beauty of Ayodhya enhances its spiritual atmosphere. The Saryu River, especially at sunrise and sunset, offers breathtaking views. Ghats like Ram Ki Paudi are central to spiritual experiences, while seasonal festivals such as Diwali transform the city into a glowing spectacle. Nature and devotion blend seamlessly to create an environment of peace and reverence.

5.8 Unique Traditional Performances

Ayodhya is known for its rich performing arts, especially the Ramlila, which vividly dramatizes the Ramayana. Devotional music, Bhajans, Kirtans, and Katha Vachan (scriptural storytelling) are integral to temple life. These performances foster community spirit and keep cultural traditions alive across generations.

6. Ayodhya: Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to the traditions, practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and individuals pass down through generations. Unlike tangible heritage, which includes monuments and artifacts, intangible heritage is living culture—constantly evolving while maintaining deep-rooted significance. It includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge related to nature and the universe. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as elements that provide a sense of identity and continuity to communities. Examples include India's *Ramlila* performances, Japan's tea ceremony, flamenco dance in Spain, and yoga as a spiritual and physical practice. This heritage plays a vital role in fostering cultural diversity and human creativity, ensuring the preservation of traditions that shape collective memory and social cohesion.

UNESCO classifies Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) into five broad categories, recognizing the diverse ways in which cultural traditions are expressed and transmitted across generations: oral traditions and expressions,

performing art, social practices, ritual and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, traditional craftsmanship.

A.Oral traditions in Ayodhya

Ayodhya has a rich tradition of oral storytelling, deeply rooted in its religious and cultural heritage. One of the most significant forms is the recitation of the Ramayana and *Ramcharitmanas*, where priests, scholars, and storytellers narrate the epic of Lord Rama in temples and public spaces. The tradition of Katha Vachan, where saints and spiritual speakers interpret sacred texts and scriptures, remains an essential part of religious gatherings. Another notable oral tradition is Bhajan and Kirtan singing, where devotional songs dedicated to Lord Rama are sung in groups, often accompanied by traditional instruments. Folk singers also preserve Ayodhya's oral history through ballads and local legends, passing down stories about the city's sacred sites and saints. During festivals like Ram Navami and Diwali, oral performances, including Ramlila dialogues, bring ancient stories to life, ensuring that Ayodhya's spiritual and cultural heritage continues to thrive across generations.

A. B.Performing Arts in Ayodhya

Ayodhya has a vibrant tradition of performing arts that reflect its deep cultural and spiritual heritage. One of the most iconic performances is Ramlila, a dramatic reenactment of the *Ramayana*, performed with elaborate costumes, expressive dialogues, and devotional music. This theatrical tradition, especially grand during Dussehra, attracts audiences from across India and is recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Other important arts are Bhajan, Ramajanma Badhai, Birha Dance, Ramnami Chanting, Bharat Milap, Nautanki etc.

B. C.Pilgrimage Routes in Ayodhya

Ayodhya, a sacred city for Hindus, has several Parikrama (circumambulatory pilgrimage) routes, each holding deep religious and spiritual significance. Devotees undertake these sacred journeys around the city and its holy sites, seeking blessings and purification. There are mainly 4 Parikrama routes namely Ramkot Parikrama, Chaurasikroshi Parikrama, Chaudahkoshi Parikrama and Panchkroshi Parikrama. Ramkot is also known as fort of Lord Rama, is the most significant and ancient religious site in Ayodhya. This area is home to several prominent temples and numerous shrines. Among these most popular is Ram Janmabhoomi temple. Apart these others temples are Kanak Bhavan, Hanuman Garhi. Pilgrims perform Parikrama around this sacred site on Ekadashi Tithi, the 11th day of the waxing and wanning phases of the moon's cycle.

Chaurasikroshi Parikrama is one of the oldest extensive pilgrimages circuits. It stretches over 252 Kilometres and connected 108 sacred sites. Among these, presently 100 sites are open for pilgrims. The journey is spread over twenty- one days and believed to symbolize the soul's passage through 8.4 million life forms, as per Hindu belief in transmigration. The Parikrama route extends across five districts- Faizabad, Gonda, Basti, Akbarpur and Barabanki. It starts from Makhauda, situated on the banks of the Manorama River and is performed annually on the Chaturdashi Tithi of Chaitra (March – April) according to the Hindu Calander.

Panchkoshi

and

Chaudahkroshi

Parikramas

Panchkoshi Parikrama is one of Ayodhya-Faizabad's oldest sacred pilgrimages, covering a 15 km circuit that connects 36 holy sites and sacred water bodies. It takes place annually on Ekadashi of the Kartik month (October–November).

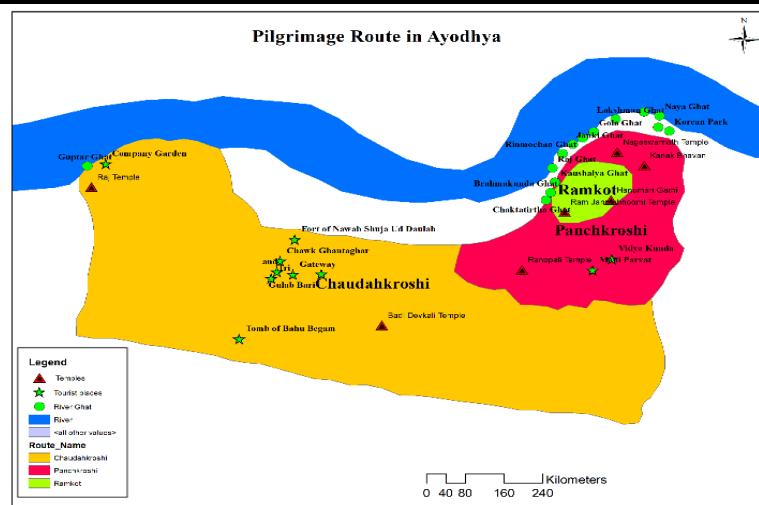


Fig 4 Source Researcher w.r.t Ayodhya Mission plan 2031, Generated Arc GIS

The Chaudahkroshi Parikrama, a longer 45 km route, also links 36 sacred locations and begins with a ritual vow (*sankalpa*). Held on Kartik Navami, this pilgrimage draws over 500,000 devotees each year, who begin their journey with a ceremonial dip in the Sarayu River.

7. Infrastructure in Ayodhya

One of the critical pillars of tourism development is the availability and accessibility of infrastructure at the destination. It is the government's responsibility to provide and maintain high-quality infrastructure that supports tourist needs. Basic infrastructure such as safe drinking water, efficient transport and communication systems, budget and mid-range accommodations, food services, primary healthcare, banking facilities, electricity, sewage and waste disposal systems, security services, emergency response, and recreational amenities all play a vital role in attracting visitors to any region. Therefore, analyzing the current infrastructure, along with the issues and challenges it faces, is crucial for understanding Ayodhya's potential as a major tourism hub.

7.1. Ayodhya Development Authority (ADA)

The Ayodhya Development Authority (ADA) serves as the key governing body responsible for infrastructure planning and development in Ayodhya. Initially established on November 2, 1985, under the Uttar Pradesh City Planning and Development Act, 1973, it was first known as the Ayodhya-Faizabad Development Authority. In February 1988, it was renamed the Ayodhya Special Area Development Authority, and later, on February 26, reconstituted again as Ayodhya-Faizabad Development Authority. Eventually, on December 10, 2018, it was renamed the Ayodhya Development Authority, signaling the government's commitment to developing Ayodhya as a religious and global tourism hub. The ADA focuses on providing essential urban infrastructure, promoting smart city planning, and preserving the city's cultural and spiritual heritage.

7.2. Infrastructure Development in Ayodhya Since 2019

Following the Supreme Court's verdict in November 2019, which granted Hindus the right to build a Ram Temple on the disputed site, and allocated 2 hectares of land to the Sunni Waqf Board for a mosque, significant infrastructure development began in Ayodhya. On February 5, 2020, the Government of India formed the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra (SRJTK) trust to oversee the temple's construction. The foundation ceremony (Bhoomi Pujan) was conducted on August 5, 2020.

The temple architecture showcases intricate sculptures and carvings inspired by Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, constructed in the traditional Nagara style. The development of the temple has driven vast improvements in the city's roads, bridges, and public facilities to accommodate the increasing influx of pilgrims and tourists.

The temple's construction is being executed in multiple phases—beginning with the main shrine and followed by auxiliary structures and amenities. The grand inauguration of the temple took place on January 22, 2024, by

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, attended by over 4 lakh people from across the world, including dignitaries, scholars, entrepreneurs, and celebrities.

7.3. Transportation System in Ayodhya

Transportation is the lifeline of tourism and economic activity. A well-connected and affordable transport system boosts tourism by increasing accessibility. Ayodhya's transportation infrastructure has expanded significantly to support rising tourist traffic. Most religious and cultural landmarks are accessible via public buses, autos, e-rickshaws, and ride-sharing services like Ola and Uber. AC buses are also available for inter-city travel. To manage the growing traffic, civic volunteers have been deployed at key junctions.

7.4 Development of Ayodhya Airport

To enhance regional and international connectivity, the Government of Uttar Pradesh initiated the construction of Maharshi Valmiki International Airport, Ayodhya Dham, located about 12 km from Ram Mandir. Inaugurated on December 30, the airport was 50% complete at the time, with ongoing work on the runway, taxiway, apron, isolation bay, and RESA (Runway End Safety Area). Once completed, this project is expected to significantly improve air connectivity and stimulate tourism and economic development in the region.

The Government of India launched the Ayodhya Railway Station redevelopment project with an estimated budget of ₹443 crore. Designed with a majestic aesthetic, the station incorporates domes, tall pillars, and prominent shikharas, reflecting traditional Indian temple architecture. The project is being executed in two phases:

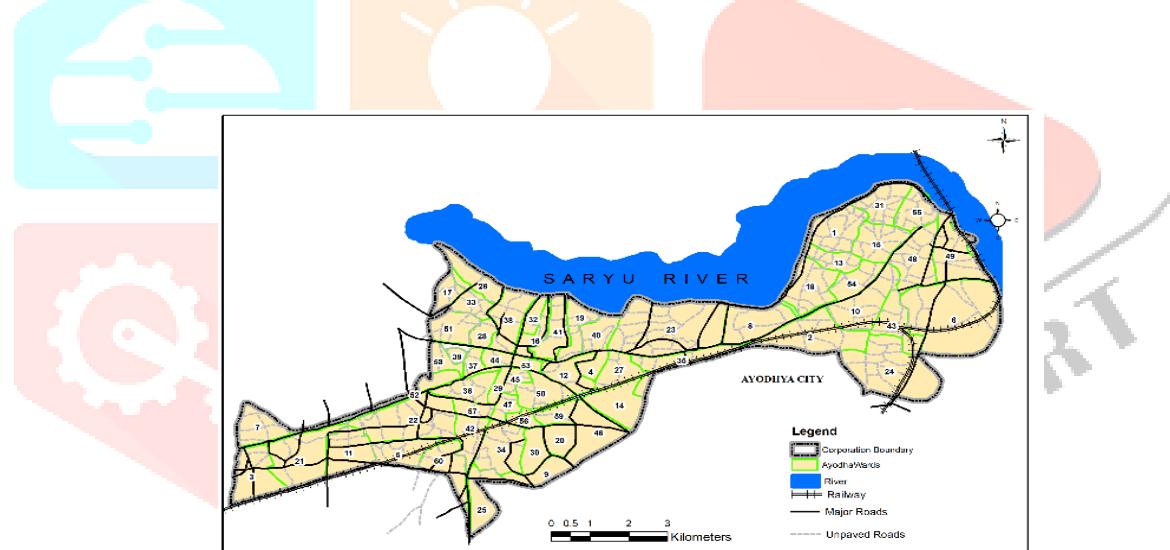


Fig 5 Source Researcher w.r.t Ayodhya Mission plan 2031, Generated Arc GIS 10.8

- **Phase 1** includes the construction of a double-storied terminal building, a metal shed, dormitory accommodations, a food court, and other essential passenger amenities.
- Phase 2 will focus on the expansion of waiting lounges and parking areas to better manage peak-time congestion.

Although the project was initially expected to be completed by 2024, various delays have pushed back its completion. Once operational, the upgraded station is projected to handle around 25,000 passengers daily, significantly enhancing the city's capacity to accommodate religious tourists—particularly during major festivals such as Dussehra, Ram Navami, and Diwali.

The Government of Uttar Pradesh has undertaken the development of the Maharshi Valmiki International Airport Ayodhya Dham, located approximately 12 kilometers from the Ram Mandir. The airport was inaugurated on December 30, with around 50% of the runway construction completed at the time. The project includes the extension of the runway, construction of taxiways, aprons, an isolation bay, and a Runway End Safety Area (RESA). Once completed, this airport is expected to significantly improve connectivity to Ayodhya.

and contribute to the economic and regional development of the area by supporting increased tourist and pilgrim inflow.

7.5 Water Supply in Ayodhya

Water has been a fundamental element of human civilization since ancient times, and its adequate availability is often seen as a key indicator of a region's economic development. It also plays a crucial role in the growth of the tourism industry. Ayodhya, situated on the left bank of the Saryu River—a tributary of the Ganga—benefits from a naturally abundant water supply throughout the district. The responsibility for providing safe and clean water to residents lies with the Ayodhya Municipal Corporation. Multiple sources are used for water distribution, including tap water, wells, tubewells, and hand pumps. According to available data (see table), the Bikapur CD block has the highest number of water sources, followed by Milkipur, Amaniganj, Maya Bazar, and Rudauli.

According to the Ayodhya Master Plan 2031, the planning, design, implementation, and monitoring of various water supply schemes in the region are being systematically undertaken. The execution and management of these projects include the establishment of new water sources, expansion of water works, setting up of water distribution stations, and enhancement of the capacity of existing water treatment plants. Additional efforts involve the construction of intake wells, underground storage tanks, overhead tanks, and the design and installation of transmission and distribution pipelines, along with the installation of valves and related infrastructure. These projects are implemented through public tenders, with qualified contractors being appointed upon approval by the competent authority of the Ayodhya Municipal Corporation. Several initiatives have already been launched to ensure the adequate and reliable supply of water to all city residents.

8. Economy of Ayodhya

Ayodhya, located in Uttar Pradesh, has long been a major religious and cultural center, especially due to its association with Lord Ram. Its economy is primarily driven by religious tourism, along with agriculture, trade, and growing commercial development. The presence of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple attracts millions of pilgrims annually, whose spending on lodging, food, transport, and shopping significantly supports local businesses, particularly in the hospitality and retail sectors.

Agriculture also plays a vital role in Ayodhya's economy. The fertile land along the Saryu River is well-suited for crops like wheat, rice, sugarcane, and pulses. Many residents also engage in livestock and dairy farming, especially in the rural areas surrounding the city.

In addition to tourism and agriculture, Ayodhya supports small-scale trade and service industries. Local markets offer a variety of goods such as religious items, handicrafts, and farm products. Small industries producing souvenirs and handmade crafts cater to visiting pilgrims. With ongoing infrastructure development and the completed Ram Mandir, Ayodhya's contribution to Uttar Pradesh's economy is steadily growing. While not yet a major industrial hub, its economic significance is expected to rise as tourism and urban growth expand its influence across the region.

9. Conclusion

Ayodhya stands out as a uniquely diverse region, both within Uttar Pradesh and across India, due to its rich physical, socio-cultural, and historical characteristics. Its favourable geographical features—such as fertile alluvial plains, riverbanks, a tropical to subtropical climate, and the presence of rivers and tributaries—create a strong foundation for tourism development. Alongside its natural advantages, Ayodhya's deep historical roots and vibrant cultural heritage enhance its appeal. The city's temples, ghats, kundas, and mosques each reflect unique cultural narratives that attract visitors from around the world. Currently, Ayodhya is experiencing a phase of growing infrastructural development. Ongoing and upcoming projects offer significant potential for sustained regional progress. These elements together serve as valuable resources for research focused on advancing tourism development in Ayodhya.

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