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SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE TOURISM AND UNESCO RECOGNITION: A STUDY OF LEPAKSHI TEMPLE

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Abstract

Sustainable heritage tourism has emerged as a vital strategy for preserving cultural resources while simultaneously promoting regional economic development and destination competitiveness. The present study examines the heritage tourism potential of the Lepakshi Temple located in Sri Sathya Sai district of Andhra Pradesh, India, with special reference to UNESCO World Heritage recognition and sustainable tourism development. The study analyses the historical, architectural, cultural, religious and tourism significance of the temple and evaluates the role of heritage conservation in promoting sustainable destination management. Both primary and secondary data were utilized for the study. Primary data were collected from 500 respondents, including tourists, local residents, tourism stakeholders, guides, and local business operators through structured questionnaires and field observations. Secondary data were collected from the Ministry of Tourism reports, Andhra Pradesh Tourism publications, UNESCO documents, Archaeological Survey of India reports, books, journals, and research articles. Statistical tools such as Percentage Analysis, Weighted Mean Score Analysis, Chi-Square Test, Correlation Analysis, and Regression Analysis were applied for interpretation of data. The findings reveal that Lepakshi Temple possesses significant heritage tourism potential because of its Vijayanagara architectural excellence, mural paintings, monolithic Nandi sculpture, and religious importance. However, inadequate tourism infrastructure, limited conservation measures, insufficient awareness regarding UNESCO heritage significance, and lack of integrated heritage management strategies affect its sustainable tourism development. The study concludes that effective conservation policies, stakeholder participation, sustainable tourism planning, community involvement, and UNESCO-oriented heritage management are essential for transforming Lepakshi Temple into an internationally recognized sustainable heritage tourism destination.

Keywords: Sustainable Heritage Tourism, UNESCO Recognition, Lepakshi Temple, Heritage Conservation, Cultural Tourism, Vijayanagara Architecture, Andhra Pradesh Tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most significant economic sectors in the world, contributing substantially to employment generation, cultural exchange, regional development, and foreign exchange earnings. Among various forms of tourism, heritage tourism has gained remarkable importance because of the increasing interest among tourists in historical monuments, cultural landscapes, traditional lifestyles, and religious heritage. Heritage tourism not only preserves historical and cultural assets but also strengthens destination identity and promotes sustainable local development.

Sustainable heritage tourism refers to the responsible management of cultural and historical resources in a manner that preserves their authenticity and integrity while ensuring socio-economic benefits for local communities and future generations. UNESCO recognition plays a crucial role in global heritage preservation and tourism development. UNESCO World Heritage Sites often experience increased international visibility, higher tourist arrivals, improved conservation funding, and stronger destination branding.

India possesses a rich cultural heritage represented through temples, monuments, forts, archaeological remains, and sacred landscapes. South India, especially Andhra Pradesh, contains several heritage destinations associated with the Vijayanagara Empire. Among these, Lepakshi Temple is considered one of the finest examples of Vijayanagara architectural brilliance and religious heritage.

Lepakshi Temple, officially known as Veerabhadra Temple, is located in Lepakshi village of Sri Sathya Sai district (formerly Anantapur district), Andhra Pradesh. The temple was constructed during the 16th century under the patronage of Virupanna Nayaka and Veeranna during the reign of the Vijayanagara Empire. The temple is famous for its hanging pillar, intricate carvings, mural paintings, Nagalinga sculpture, monolithic Nandi statue, and exceptional architectural craftsmanship.

The increasing popularity of cultural and religious tourism has enhanced the significance of Lepakshi Temple as a heritage tourism destination. Despite its immense heritage value, the destination faces several challenges including inadequate infrastructure, limited interpretation facilities, insufficient conservation measures, environmental degradation, and inadequate international promotion. The temple has strong potential for UNESCO World Heritage recognition because of its artistic, architectural, cultural, and historical significance.

The present study attempts to analyze the sustainable heritage tourism potential of Lepakshi Temple and examine the role of UNESCO recognition in promoting heritage conservation and tourism development.

2. Review of Literature

Timothy and Boyd (2003) emphasized that heritage tourism contributes significantly to destination development, cultural preservation, and regional economic growth. They observed that heritage tourism strengthens local identity and creates opportunities for sustainable tourism management.

Ashworth (2011) argued that heritage management must integrate conservation and tourism planning to ensure sustainable utilization of cultural resources. According to the author, tourism development without proper conservation policies may threaten the authenticity and integrity of heritage sites.

Nuryanti (1996) stated that heritage tourism generates employment opportunities, enhances community participation, and strengthens cultural identity. The study highlighted the importance of involving local communities in heritage conservation activities.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre reports revealed that World Heritage recognition improves international destination branding, increases tourist arrivals, and attracts global conservation support. UNESCO recognition also enhances heritage awareness among tourists and policymakers.

Garrod and Fyall (2000) emphasized that sustainable heritage tourism requires effective stakeholder coordination, visitor management systems, and environmental conservation strategies. The study highlighted the importance of balancing tourism growth with heritage preservation.

Studies conducted on Indian heritage destinations such as Hampi, Ajanta, Mahabalipuram, and Khajuraho identified infrastructure deficiencies, overcrowding, and conservation challenges as major barriers to sustainable heritage tourism development.

Several studies on Lepakshi Temple mainly focused on its architectural and religious significance. However, very limited research has examined sustainable tourism practices, UNESCO recognition potential, tourist perception, statistical evaluation of tourism facilities, and integrated heritage management strategies at Lepakshi Temple. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge this research gap.

3. Research Gap

Existing studies related to Lepakshi Temple primarily focus on its religious importance, historical background, and architectural features. However, the following research gaps were identified:

1. Limited studies on sustainable heritage tourism management.
2. Lack of empirical analysis regarding UNESCO recognition potential.
3. Insufficient research on tourist awareness and perception.
4. Absence of statistical evaluation of tourism infrastructure and visitor satisfaction.

5. Limited focus on community participation and sustainable conservation strategies.
6. Lack of integrated heritage tourism development models for Lepakshi Temple.

Hence, the present study attempts to provide a comprehensive analysis of sustainable heritage tourism and UNESCO recognition potential at Lepakshi Temple.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the heritage tourism potential of Lepakshi Temple.
2. To examine tourist awareness regarding UNESCO World Heritage recognition.
3. To evaluate tourist satisfaction towards tourism infrastructure and services.
4. To analyze the role of sustainable tourism practices in heritage conservation.
5. To identify challenges affecting sustainable heritage tourism development.
6. To suggest strategies for UNESCO-oriented heritage tourism management.

5. Hypotheses of the Study

H1: There is a significant relationship between educational qualification and UNESCO awareness.

H2: Tourism infrastructure significantly influences tourist satisfaction.

H3: Sustainable tourism practices positively affect heritage conservation.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Nature of the Study

The study is descriptive, analytical, and empirical in nature.

6.2 Study Area

The study area is Lepakshi Temple located in Lepakshi village of Andhra Pradesh, India. The temple is an important cultural and religious heritage destination associated with Vijayanagara architecture.

6.3 Sources of Data

Primary Data

Primary data were collected through:

- Structured questionnaires
- Tourist interviews
- Field observations
- Discussions with tourism stakeholders

Respondents included:

- Domestic tourists
- Local residents
- Tourism stakeholders

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from:

- Ministry of Tourism Annual Reports
- Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation reports
- UNESCO publications
- Archaeological Survey of India reports
- Journals, books, and research articles
- Tourism statistics and government publications

6.4 Sample Size

Table 1: Sample Size

Respondent Category	Sample Size
Tourists	300
Local Residents	150
Tourism Stakeholders	50
Total	500

6.5 Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling and purposive sampling methods were adopted for data collection.

6.6 Period of Study

The study was conducted during the period from January 2025 to April 2026.

6.7 Statistical Tools Used

The following statistical tools were used:

- Percentage Analysis
- Mean Score Analysis
- Weighted Average Method
- Chi-Square Test
- Correlation Analysis
- Regression Analysis

7. Historical and Architectural Significance of Lepakshi Temple

Lepakshi Temple represents one of the finest examples of Vijayanagara architecture in South India. The temple was built during the 16th century and is dedicated to Lord Veerabhadra, a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva.

The temple complex is renowned for:

- Hanging pillar architecture
- Intricate stone carvings
- Fresco mural paintings
- Monolithic Nandi sculpture
- Nagalinga sculpture
- Mandapas with ornate pillars
- Sculptural depictions of Hindu mythology

The temple murals are considered among the largest and best-preserved fresco paintings in India. The artistic excellence and craftsmanship of the temple reflect the cultural richness of the Vijayanagara Empire.

Religiously, the temple is associated with the Ramayana legend where Jatayu, the divine bird, is believed to have fallen after fighting Ravana. The term “Lepakshi” is believed to originate from the Telugu phrase “Le Pakshi,” meaning “Rise Bird.”

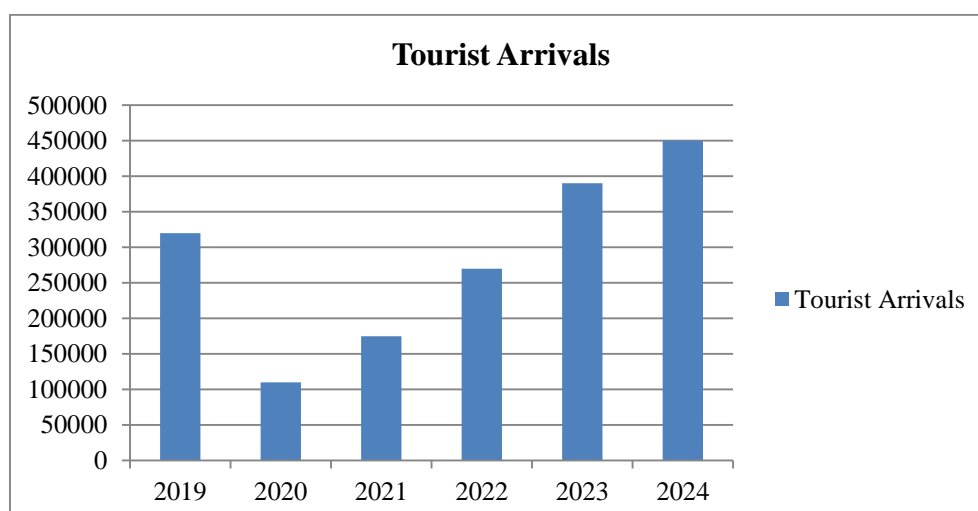
8. Tourist Footfall Analysis

Tourism statistics indicate a gradual increase in tourist arrivals at Lepakshi Temple after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2: Tourist Arrivals at Lepakshi Temple

Year	Tourist Arrivals
2019	3,20,000
2020	1,10,000
2021	1,75,000
2022	2,70,000
2023	3,90,000
2024	4,50,000

Source: The data gathered from Andhra Pradesh Tourism Reports, Ministry of Tourism Statistics, and regional tourism estimates.



Interpretation

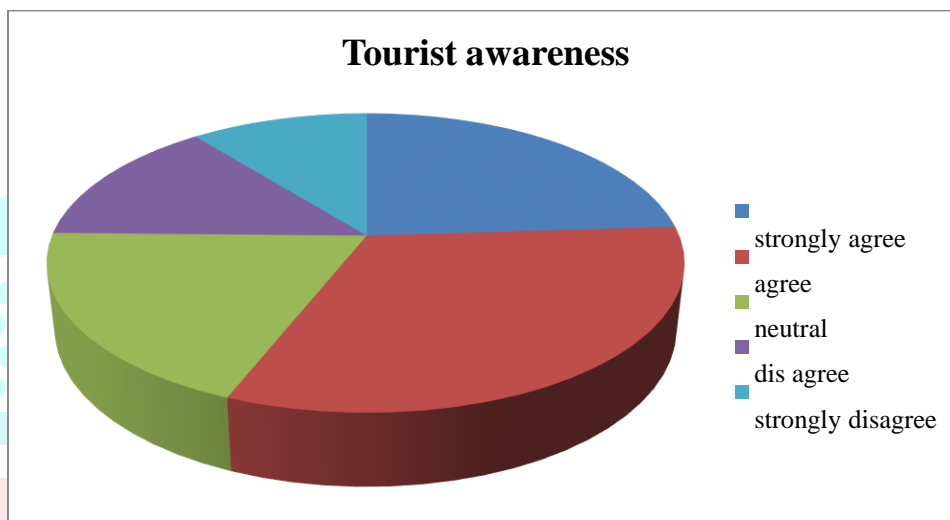
The table indicates a sharp decline in tourist arrivals during 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, tourist footfall increased significantly from 2021 onwards due to recovery in domestic tourism, improved road connectivity, and growing interest in heritage tourism. The steady increase in tourist arrivals demonstrates the growing tourism potential of Lepakshi Temple.

9. Data Analysis and Interpretation

9.1 Tourist Awareness Regarding UNESCO Recognition

Table 3: Frequency Distribution: Awareness about UNESCO Recognition

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	72	24.0	24.0	24.0
Agree	96	32.0	32.0	56.0
Neutral	58	19.3	19.3	75.3
Disagree	42	14.0	14.0	89.3
Strongly Disagree	32	10.7	10.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	



Interpretation

The majority of respondents (56%) agree that Lepakshi Temple has strong potential for UNESCO recognition. The analysis reveals moderate awareness among tourists regarding UNESCO recognition and heritage significance. Although more than half of the respondents were aware of UNESCO heritage importance, a considerable percentage lacked knowledge regarding the international heritage value of Lepakshi Temple.

9.2 Tourist Satisfaction Analysis

Table 4: Tourist Satisfaction Analysis

Tourism Component	Mean Score
Temple Architecture	4.8
Heritage Experience	4.7
Cultural Value	4.6
Cleanliness	3.9
Transportation	3.7
Accommodation	3.4
Tourist Information	3.2

Interpretation

Tourists expressed high satisfaction regarding the architectural beauty, cultural value, and heritage experience of Lepakshi Temple. However, relatively lower scores were observed for accommodation facilities, transportation, and tourist information services.

9.3 Weighted Average Analysis of Tourism Components

Table 5: Weighted Average Analysis of Tourism Components

Tourism Component	Weighted Mean	Rank
Temple Architecture	4.82	I
Heritage Experience	4.67	II
Cultural Significance	4.54	III
Cleanliness	3.91	IV
Transportation	3.66	V
Accommodation	3.34	VI

Interpretation

Temple architecture and heritage experience are the major strengths of Lepakshi Temple as a heritage tourism destination. However, transportation and accommodation facilities require significant improvement for sustainable tourism development.

10. Chi-Square Analysis

Relationship between Educational Qualification and UNESCO Awareness

Hypotheses

H0: There is no significant relationship between educational qualification and UNESCO awareness.

H1: There is a significant relationship between educational qualification and UNESCO awareness.

Table 6: Chi-Square Analysis

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.842a	4	.012
Likelihood Ratio	13.517	4	.009
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.964	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	300		

The significance value (.012) is less than 0.05; there is a statistically significant relationship between educational qualification and UNESCO awareness.

Table 6.1

Calculated Value	Table Value	Result
12.84	9.49	Significant

Interpretation

Since the calculated Chi-Square value is greater than the table value at the 5% significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between educational qualification and awareness regarding UNESCO recognition.

11. Correlation Analysis

Relationship between Tourism Infrastructure and Tourist Satisfaction

Table 7: Correlation Analysis between Tourism Infrastructure and Tourist Satisfaction

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Tourism Infrastructure & Tourist Satisfaction	0.82

Interpretation

The correlation coefficient indicates a strong positive relationship between tourism infrastructure and tourist satisfaction. Improvement in infrastructure facilities can significantly enhance visitor experience and destination competitiveness.

12. Regression Analysis

Impact of Tourism Infrastructure on Tourist Satisfaction

Regression Model

$$Y = a + bX$$

Where:

- Y = Tourist Satisfaction
- X = Tourism Infrastructure

Table 8: Regression Analysis

Variables	Beta Coefficient	t - value	Significance	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Tourism Infrastructure	0.76	8.42	0.000	0.67	0.65

Interpretation

The regression analysis indicates that tourism infrastructure significantly influences tourist satisfaction. The R-square value of 0.67 indicates that approximately 67% variation in tourist satisfaction is explained by tourism infrastructure facilities.

13. Discussion

The findings reveal that Lepakshi Temple possesses strong potential for sustainable heritage tourism development because of its architectural excellence, historical significance, religious importance, and cultural identity. The increasing tourist footfall indicates growing interest in heritage and cultural tourism in Andhra Pradesh.

The study confirms the observations of Timothy and Boyd (2003) that heritage tourism contributes significantly to destination development and cultural preservation. Similarly, the findings support Ashworth's argument regarding the need for integrated heritage management and sustainable tourism planning.

The statistical analysis indicates that tourists are highly satisfied with the cultural and architectural dimensions of the temple. However, deficiencies in accommodation, transportation, interpretation facilities, and destination management negatively affect overall tourist experience.

The findings also reveal moderate awareness regarding UNESCO heritage significance. This suggests the need for stronger heritage education, digital promotion, and interpretation programs. UNESCO recognition could enhance global visibility, attract international tourists, and strengthen conservation efforts.

14. Major Findings of the Study

1. Lepakshi Temple possesses strong heritage tourism potential.
2. Tourist arrivals have increased steadily after the pandemic period.
3. Tourists highly appreciate the architectural and cultural heritage of the temple.
4. Infrastructure facilities remain inadequate.
5. UNESCO awareness among tourists is moderate.
6. There is a significant relationship between education and UNESCO awareness.
7. Tourism infrastructure strongly influences tourist satisfaction.
8. Sustainable tourism practices and conservation measures are insufficient.
9. Community participation in tourism management remains limited.
10. Lepakshi Temple possesses strong potential for UNESCO World Heritage recognition.

15. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Improve road connectivity and public transportation facilities.
2. Develop quality accommodation and tourism amenities near the temple.
3. Establish heritage interpretation centres and digital information systems.
4. Strengthen conservation and restoration measures through scientific methods.
5. Promote community-based heritage tourism initiatives.
6. Increase awareness regarding UNESCO heritage significance.
7. Implement sustainable visitor management systems.
8. Develop eco-friendly tourism infrastructure.
9. Encourage public-private partnerships in tourism development.
10. Prepare a comprehensive UNESCO nomination dossier.

11. Introduce multilingual signage and interpretation services.
12. Enhance digital marketing and global tourism promotion.

16. Conclusion

The study concludes that Lepakshi Temple represents an important cultural heritage destination with immense potential for sustainable heritage tourism development and UNESCO World Heritage recognition. The temple's exceptional architectural excellence, mural paintings, monolithic sculptures, and religious significance make it one of the finest examples of Vijayanagara heritage in India.

The findings reveal positive tourist perception regarding the heritage value of the temple, while also highlighting infrastructure deficiencies, conservation challenges, and limited awareness regarding UNESCO recognition. Sustainable tourism planning, heritage conservation, stakeholder coordination, and community participation are essential for preserving the monument and enhancing visitor experience.

UNESCO recognition would significantly improve international visibility, strengthen conservation initiatives, attract cultural tourists, and contribute to regional economic development. Therefore, integrated heritage management strategies and sustainable tourism policies are necessary to transform Lepakshi Temple into a globally recognized heritage tourism destination.

17. Limitations of the Study

1. The study was limited to Lepakshi Temple and surrounding areas.
2. Convenience sampling may limit generalization of findings.
3. Time and financial constraints affected broader field investigations.
4. Limited availability of long-term tourism statistics posed challenges for trend analysis.

18. Scope for Future Research

1. Comparative studies between Lepakshi and other UNESCO heritage sites.
2. Studies on digital heritage tourism and smart tourism technologies.
3. Research on economic impact assessment of heritage tourism.
4. Studies focusing on community-based tourism models.
5. Research on climate change and heritage conservation.

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