



Tourism Boom in Varanasi: Balancing Heritage Conservation and Urban Congestion

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Abstract

In the post COVID era, tourism in Varanasi has gained considerable momentum owing to the increased religious movements, the promotion of religious tourism by the state and huge infrastructural interventions to make Varanasi visible nationally and internationally. Varanasi, a major focus for pilgrimage of the Hindus, is one of the oldest continuously inhabited urban centres in the world, and is a key hub in India's growing tourist economy. The paper has explored the multifaceted relationship between tourism led urbanization and its impact on the conservation of heritage and the resultant urban congestion through both secondary and primary sources, which comprised government reports, policy documents, tourism statistics, academic literature and media analysis and discussions with the residents, shop keepers, boatmen, vendors, transport workers, pilgrims and other stakeholders. The results indicate growing concerns among the local community about the decreasing quality of life in the town, the increased cost of living, the lack of public areas and the loss of traditional neighbourhood systems. This is exacerbated by seasonal peaks and major religious events which add to mobility problems and lead to acute stress on transport and public infrastructure. Meanwhile, urban governance mechanisms are challenged to find a balance between the speed of modernization and preservation of the historic, cultural and spiritual heritage of Varanasi. The study proposes that integrated development strategies such as traffic control, environmental management, decentralization of tourists' flows and institutionalized community participation are suggested for the sustainable development of tourism. These are necessary to ensure sustainable growth in tourism and the protection of Varanasi's unique heritage..

Keywords -Tourism, Varanasi, Congestion, Sustainability, Heritage Led Development

Introduction

Kashi, also known as Varanasi or Banaras, is one of the oldest cities in the world with continuous human settlement and has a great historical, cultural and spiritual significance in India (Singh, 1997). The city is located along the banks of the holy river Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, India, and has been regarded as a major pilgrimage site for the Hindu faith, as well as the spiritual heart of the state. The name "Kashi" comes from the Sanskrit word "Kash" meaning "to shine" and signifies the city as being a "City of Light" related to spiritual enlightenment and liberation (moksha)(Sinha & Saraswati, 1978) . Dying in Kashi and funerals on the banks of the Ganga is believed to bring salvation from the cycle of birth and death in the eyes of Hinduism. This holy connection has made the city a religious hub for the followers of Hindu religion around the globe (Paul & Chowdhury, 2020).

Kashi has, historically, been a center of learning, philosophy, trade, music, art and religious scholarship for centuries (Yadav, n.d.). The city's religious and cultural significance is mentioned in ancient texts like the Rigveda, Skanda Purana and various Buddhist and Jain texts. Varanasi is also a sacred place to the Buddhists as the nearby place of Sarnath is where Gautama Buddha proclaimed his first sermon after his enlightenment (Tiwari, 2024). Likewise the Jain traditions also consider the area to be connected with the various Tirthankaras. Therefore the city is a unique amalgamation of the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (R. P. Singh, 2011b).

Varanasi is seeing a significant growth in tourism in recent years after the pandemic, owing to the efforts of the government in promoting spiritual tourism, as well as infrastructural development and transport linkages. The city has been transformed into a major tourist hub with projects like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, redevelopment of ghats, riverfront beautification, widening of roads, smart city project and extension of airport and railway facilities (Pati & Husain, 2023). Tourist inflows have further picked up due to greater media exposure, digital promotion and growth of domestic religious tourism. This, in addition, has made Varanasi a holy city as well as a vital place for economy and culture in the field of tourism in India.

Varanasi has contributed greatly to the economy of the local area through tourism. It has created job opportunities for the boatmen, shopkeepers, street vendors, guides, transport workers, hotel owners, artisans, and those working in the tourism and service industry (D. Das & Sharma, 2009). The tourism boom has also positively affected traditional Banarasi industries like silk weaving, handicrafts, music, and local cuisine. Thousands of local residents therefore have a new source of livelihood derived from tourism (P. Singh, 2008).

The relationship between tourism growth, heritage conservation and urban congestion in the post-COVID Varanasi is discussed in the background of the present study. This study aims to examine the process of the tourist urbanisation and the consequences of it on the spatial, social and cultural changes of the city. It also seeks to analyze how the rapid development of the tourism sector affects the preservation of heritage, transport systems, environmental sustainability and local economies, as well as addressing governance issues regarding the management of larger numbers of tourists in a culturally sensitive, historically rich city context.

Literature Review

Heritage cities and tourism has become an area of great research interest in both urban studies and tourism geography, and heritage management and sustainable development. Some literature suggests that tourism is an economic process but also an urban process that reconfigures the urban landscape, the management of the city and how the urban citizens relate to each other on a daily basis. Gotham (2005) and Judd and Fainstein (1999) develop the argument that tourism-induced urbanization is a process of the transformation of the physical infrastructure, public space and local economies of cities to meet the needs of tourists. In heritage cities, the change is often associated with the commercialisation of heritage that in turn has led to the re-packaging and re-conceptualisation of the historical landscapes and symbolic identities for consumption within the tourism economy (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Fainstein & Judd, 1999). In India the redevelopment of cities has been studied in the context of tourism at Jaipur, Agra, Kochi and Udaipur where it has been found that the process of redevelopment is often aesthetic modernization, the branding of heritage and infrastructural development, and at the same time, it puts pressure on the local community, traditional neighbourhoods and ecological systems (Bedi et al., 2018). With the revival of domestic tourism and the mobility of pilgrims being a significant aspect in the revival of cities in India after the COVID-19 pandemic, the relevance of these discussions has increased significantly in the post-COVID era. The Ministry of Tourism (2022) also emphasizes that the religious tourism product has proven to be more successful in the recovery process following Covid-19, with investments in religious tourism infrastructure, strengthening of spiritual circuits and transport infrastructure, that has helped to attract visitors to these destinations. One of the most salient examples of this change is Varanasi. Recent study has showed that the works such as Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, developments of riverside areas and the increased transport network have altered the urban morphology and symbolism of the city, transforming it into a "sacred city," a "world touristic site" and a "visible political-cultural city" simultaneously (Pandey et al., 2020). One of the most salient examples of this change is Varanasi. Recent scholarship has pointed to how the projects

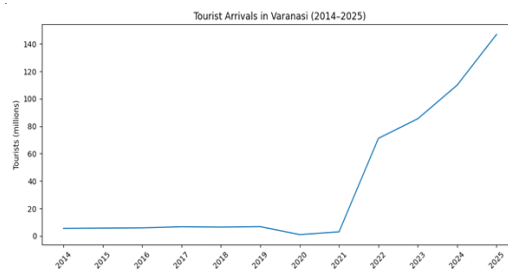
like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, redevelopment of riverside areas and the expanded transport network have changed the city's urban morphology and symbolism, making it a sacred city, a global tourist hotspot and a political-cultural visible place, at once (Jha et al., 2025). But there is also a literature that highlights the conflicts of development models that focus on tourism. UNESCO's (2011) Historic Urban Landscape framework places a strong focus on the need to go beyond monuments to consider the lived cultural practice, neighbourhood life and community memory. However, researchers contend that the quick, redevelopment in historic cities can favour the monumental visibility over lived heritage, causing commercialization, displacement and loss of socio-cultural authenticity (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). As depicted by Chakrabarty (2018), heritage-led redevelopment often results in the conversion of everyday urban spaces into cultural areas for markets, deepening socio-spatial inequalities in South Asian cities (Chakrabarti, 2023). Such issues can be found in the Varanasi case as well, where the traditional sacred routes have been altered by the development of corridors, informal settlements have been displaced, and historically layered neighbourhoods have been turned into spaces of controlled tourism (Soccali, 2021). In addition to the heritage issue, urban congestion and infrastructural stress are also major issues in the tourism scholarship. The study of pilgrimage cities like Mecca, Jerusalem, and Kathmandu reveals that short-term peaks of this tourism contribute to the strain of mobility systems, public services and environmental sustainability (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Problem of overcrowding, traffic congestion, garbage, and disturbance of daily urban life are also reported during peak pilgrimage periods in the study on Haridwar, Tirupati, and Puri, India (S. Das & Islam, 2017). The population density, the narrow lanes and the poor mobility in Varanasi makes it especially vulnerable to such pressures. Singh and Rana (2022) claim that the growing mobility of tourists has led to congestion in the old city, which has impacted the ability to access the city, the movement of people and the lives of the residents (R. Singh & Rana, 2022). Environmental academics also point to the fact that tourism development increases the pollution, generates too much waste and puts pressure on river systems and heritage landscapes (Gössling, 2002). The issues of the riverfront of the Ganga, the pressure of sewage, air pollution and saturation of capacity have increasingly come into focus in recent urban discussions in Varanasi. The process has also been boosted by the state's promotion of religious mobility and infrastructure for pilgrimage, in the wake of the COVID tourism recovery. According to UNWTO (2022), domestic and faith tourism have bounced back quicker than international leisure tourism since the pandemic especially in culturally significant destinations. In India, this recovery has been tied to wider political and cultural discourses where religious heritage is seen as the driver of economic development, national identity, and urban modernization (R. P. Singh, 2011). The government statistics from Uttar Pradesh Tourism (2023) show that the number of tourists has grown significantly after 2021, which reflects the unprecedented growth of tourists visiting Varanasi as a result of infrastructural redevelopment, media visibility and reopening of pilgrimage circulation. However, despite considerable research about urbanization and tourism, heritage governance and congestion in pilgrimage cities, there is limited integrated research that looks at the interaction of these processes at both macro-level (policy) and micro-level (lived experiences) in the context of post-COVID Varanasi. Studies on heritage redevelopment are typically limited to one or two aspects of the subject, and comparatively little research has been conducted on the issues of overcrowding, commercialisation, mobility stress and shifting cultures for local residents in their daily lives.

Research Methodology

The study is conducted in a qualitative and exploratory nature to explore the nature of the complex relationship between growth of tourism and protection of heritage along with urban congestion in post-COVID Varanasi. In a historically layered and culturally rich city, such as the one under study, a qualitative approach is more suited to understanding lived experiences, perceptions and everyday realities relating to the process of tourism-led urbanization. The study seeks to record the new socio-spatial changes in an open-ended manner, as well as the conflicts arising between infrastructural modernisation, the conservation of heritage and the quality of the cities. Secondary data and primary data are used to make sure that the research is analytically deep and triangulated. The secondary data was collected through government reports, tourism reports, policy document, academic papers, census data, smart city reports, and recent media reports on tourism development, tourism mobility and heritage governances in Varanasi. These sources provided policy and infrastructure perspectives at the macro level as well as trends in post-

pandemic tourism. The primary data was collected from semi structured interviews, informal conversations and field observations in the key places of the city of Varanasi which are associated with tourism in the city such as Dasashwamedh Ghat, Assi Ghat, Vishwanath gali, Godowlia, Chowk, Lanka and the Kashi Vishwanath corridor. The participants comprised local residents, boatmen, street vendors, shopkeepers, transport workers, as well as pilgrims, tourists and small business owners and stakeholders whose livelihood and daily existence is affected by the expansion of tourism. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select respondents who have direct involvement in tourism related activities or live in the areas of high concentration of heritage sites. The interviews were held largely in Hindi and Bhojpuri, and centered on aspects of overcrowding, mobility issues, and commercialization of sacred spaces, livelihood changes, environmental pressures, and visions of urban transformation. In addition, traffic conditions, pedestrian movement, crowding, spatial reconfiguration and use of public space and areas were documented through field observations. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, which included coding, categorizing, and interpreting common themes within the data around the themes of tourism-led urbanization, pressures on heritage, governance issues, and sustainability issues. The primary narratives were integrated with documentary and policy analysis that allowed a thorough analysis of the socio-cultural and urban transformation of Varanasi due to the growth of tourism in the post-COVID era.

Tourism Growth and Urban Transformation in Post-COVID Varanasi:



Author Analysis

Post-COVID era has been a pivotal time for the city of Varanasi, where significant changes have occurred in the spatial structure, economic systems and socio-cultural fabric of the city. The growth of tourism, both in number and volume, since 2021 signals a qualitatively different urban change in Varanasi, which has historically been one of the most important pilgrimage centres in India and one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world (Sharda, 2026). The post-pandemic resurgence of tourism is not a mere increase in tourism numbers, but a result of a myriad of factors related to the restructuring of cities in the name of tourism, the agenda of the state, the policies of heritage cities, and the nature of contemporary political economy of religious tourism. However, with the opening of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in tandem with better connectivity and promotion of tourism, the influx of visitors picked up and the city came into the national and international limelight as a spiritual hub (Mehrotra, 2025). The number of tourists rose sharply from around 3 million in 2021 to more than 71 million in 2022, showing a development pattern where religious heritage becomes more and more a strategic input in the economic growth, urban branding and cultural visibility.

The development of Varanasi is not only economic; it can also be studied sociologically as a process of 'remodelling' the urban space and social life. The city, which was previously a messy mix of varied landscapes, is now largely reshaped by large-scale projects, such as corridor development, riverfront beautification, redevelopment of ghats, expansion of roads and infrastructural projects under the Smart City Mission, Namami Gange programme, etc., into a much more controlled tourist environment (Dutta & Banerjee, 2026). The interventions focus on accessibility, mobility and visitor experience – reflecting a tourism focus to planning. Such efforts have led to better sanitation infrastructure, walking habits, nighttime lighting, and urban image, but have also created new patterns of socio-spatial inequality and exacerbated the pressures on the historically dense urban settings. For understanding these changes, Henri Lefebvre's notion of production of space is relevant, as he describes urban space as a social construction – a product of relations of power and institutional practice. Sacred landscapes, temple precincts and community spaces are being restructured in Varanasi in response to the demands of the tourism circulation and consumption

(K. A. Shinde & Olsen, 2026). Social spaces and spaces for community activities that were once vibrant with intimacy have slowly been replaced by controlled and visually planned spaces that are meant to enable circulation and to improve the tourist experience.

Particularly, there have been major reconfigurations in public spaces. Historically, ghats were multifunctional spaces for ritual practices, livelihood, recreation and community interaction, but are now increasingly used as spaces of organized tourism via boat trips, cultural activities and tourist-guided tours (Jamal, 2026). This is a symptom of the phenomenon of cultural commodification, in which sacred and historical landscapes become capitalist assets, re-packaged for the consumption of the tourist. Likewise, traditional *galis* or old-city lanes are undergoing changes because of the transformation of the surrounding functions from residential to commercial, with tourism-oriented establishments gradually taking over local services and neighbourhood-based functions. Increasing rents and shifting consumer habits lead to the erosion of neighbourhood identity and exacerbate concerns about the sense of displacement from familiar places.

These processes can be seen more clearly in the context of neoliberal urbanization as reflected in the work of David Harvey who shows how the city is increasingly being seen as a place where cultural resources and urban infrastructure are becoming economic assets. In Varanasi, redevelopment processes, which are stimulated by the pilgrimage and tourism, show this change by organizing sacred places and landscapes strategically for investment and economic profit. But the gains of these changes are not distributed evenly. The increase in visitors is very beneficial to certain industries, such as the hospitality sector, as well as transport and tourism services; and all the other industries have uncertain and precarious situations (Suman et al., n.d.). Traditional groups are not only more likely to be a part of the tourism economy, but they are also more likely to face a number of competitive pressures, regulatory constraints, and displacement pressures. The increased number of visitors has caused unprecedented stress on roads, transport systems and public facilities especially during religious festivals and on holidays when large numbers of pilgrims visit. The post-COVID tourism in Varanasi, in this context, should be seen not just as an economic process but as a multidimensional process that takes into account a reorganisation of urban space, transformation of livelihoods and cultural meanings. Despite its increase in visibility and economic opportunities, tourism has put more stress on the environment, social inequalities, and infrastructure in Varanasi. One of the major governance questions is then how to design a development framework that can help deliver a balance between economic growth and cultural conservation, social inclusion and the needs of local communities.

Heritage Conservation Challenges in the Context of Tourism-Led Urban Transformation in Varanasi

The rise of tourists after the pandemic period in Varanasi has brought with it worries of probable harm to its heritage and concerns of the sustainability of urban development. Varanasi is not a site preserved as a monument or an archaeological site but is a living site, everyday life, religious life, occupational forms and interaction of one another closely linked (K. Shinde & Singh, 2023). The concept of 'heritage' in this context is not only one of tangible items, but of an active and dynamic social fabric, local knowledge systems and cultural practices which continue to maintain the heritage. Conservation should thus not be limited to beautification and architectural conservation but should recognize that heritage is a dynamic process that is socially embedded. The redevelopment projects by the state, the Smart City Mission, infrastructure projects, and the growing number of tourists since 2021 have added more pressure to this complex urban ecosystem (Bhatt & Roychoudhury, 2023). The Smart City programme has contributed to transforming the urban environment of Varanasi by a number of measures, such as the revitalisation of heritage, mobility, smart surveillance, river developments and public infrastructure enhancements (D. Das et al., 2024). While these schemes aim to increase the ease with which the city can be accessed, to improve the city's facilities and to improve the experience the visitor has on site, they also have a broad range of implications for the spatial and cultural character of the city.

Projects like Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, Smart City redevelopment, beautification of riverfront and the expansion of roads have brought in a transformation in the symbolic and material aspects of Varanasi. Such programmes have served to increase the city's profile as a global spiritual hub and to improve its

infrastructure provision and yet have also impacted on historically developed spatial configurations and led to issues of cultural continuity. One such example of these tensions is Kashi Vishwanath Corridor (R. P. Singh & Rana, 2023). The project enhanced circulation and access to the temple precinct, but also included the demolition of historic houses, temples and the physical removal of the numerous lane networks that had formed a part of the old city landscape. In many of these the cultural significance was significant and substantial, but lacked formal recognition as a heritage of any kind. These developments demonstrate a selective conservation perspective that prioritises the monumental visibility over the vernacular architecture and everyday cultural spaces.

Increasing tourism has also stimulated commercialisation of heritage areas. Businesses to serve tourists, souvenir shops and businesses along the road are being located in and around Vishwanath Gali, Godowlia, and the river front areas (Bagchi, 2026). This transformation has helped to increase the value of these properties, the transformation of land use and the increased strain on traditional markets and artisanal spaces. Thus, heritage landscapes are threatened to lose their status of lived place and become places of consumption based on social relations and local identity. The trend towards market-oriented development could also lead to the displacement of communities and to the transformation of neighbourhood character.

The issues of intangible cultural heritage conservation are also noteworthy. Varanasi is not only a city of temples and architecture, it is also a city of ritual knowledge, weaving practices, artisanal skills, music cultures and occupations related to river livelihoods. But redevelopment often focuses on the obvious and economically marketable elements of the heritage, at the expense of social conditions required for maintaining heritage traditions (Dhal & Singh, n.d.). As more people and entities become involved in commercialization, and economic structures shift, networks of cultural knowledge may be weakened. These issues are compounded by environmental pressures. The development of the ghats and the riverfront of the Ganga has caused pollution, overcrowding and waste disposal problem to ecological system and to the heritage site due of the increasing density of the visitors. These developments, along with weak governance, infrastructural restructuring under the auspices of a 'Smart City' and insufficient community involvement, reflect the multi-faceted nature of the preservation and protection of the city's heritage in Varanasi, pointing to the need for multi-pronged strategies that can reconcile the demands of tourism with cultural continuity and social sustainability (Praharaj, 2022).

Urban Congestion and Livability

Varanasi has a large tourism base which shows a sharp rise in tourist numbers after COVID and has made the issue of urban congestion and urban livability even more pressing. The city has always seen a spike in visitors over a certain period of time during pilgrimages and religious festivals, but the surge in tourism after 2021 has put new strain on urban mobility, public services and daily life (Jha et al., 2025). The reorientation of the sacred city of Varanasi into a mass tourism destination has created a unique urban situation that is marked by crowding, lack of mobility, infrastructural strain and growing conflicts between the developmental nature of tourism and the routine life of locals (Pragya & Thakur, n.d.). In the current debates of urban sociology, livability goes beyond the economic growth and its physical foundations, to accessibility, environmental conditions, social interaction, public comfort and the capacity of citizens to effectively access and occupy urban space. However, in Varanasi, the growth of tourism has greatly changed these aspects and created new issues of managing an old city with a high number of tourists.

The growing numbers of tourists have changed the movement of people around the main religious and the heritage zones like Godowlia, Kashi Vishwanath temple precinct, Dashashwamedh Ghat, Assi Ghat, etc. and around the neighbourhoods. The increased numbers have put enormous strain on the transport network and have created congestion on major city transport routes (Modak & Sanyal, 2024). The built morphology of Varanasi, with narrow streets, small neighbourhoods and organic development of settlement structure, constrains the ability to accommodate large scale vehicular activities. The city developed with much narrower streets and little provision for transport systems, as opposed to the well-designed planned urban centers with wider streets and segregated transport systems. This has led to structural mismatches of built-up structures with current transport needs due to the increase of tourist mobility (K. Srivastava & Kumar, 2023). Mobility and circulation management, encroachments and traffic congestion are increasing problems for administrative authorities, which results in more strict enforcement of mobility and traffic

regulations to improve circulation and diminish congestion.

The impact of these pressures is especially felt during major religious festivals and pilgrimage occasions like Dev Deepawali, Mahashivratri and Kartik Purnima at which the number of visitors changes drastically. Seasonal highs create unforgettable needs of transportation systems, causing long extended travel delays and issues in daily transportation (R. P. Singh, 2011b). Large concentrations of visitors often impact residents, too, as they struggle to access places of employment, educational institutions, health care and routine services. There are emerging frustrations in the local context about the mobility restrictions and crowd control technologies that change the usual ways of moving around and access of neighbourhoods. Whereas public spaces used to be local social realms, they now work to temporary regimes of regulation, mostly oriented towards the management of visitors.

For reasons beyond transportation, concerns for livability go beyond environmental and social issues. More vehicles on the roads lead to poorer air quality and noise pollution, especially in urban environments with high population density and insufficient infrastructure. At the same time, the congestion in public spaces puts extra strain on sanitation networks, waste management infrastructure and people's access to the city. (A. K. Singh, 2022) The high number of visitors increases the competition for scarce urban resources and puts strain on essential services. Space and mobility are thus increasingly subject to negotiation in urban areas between its inhabitants, its pilgrims, its tourists, its vendors, its transport workers and the administrative institutions with different agendas that claim space and mobility.

The progress of these events clearly indicate that urban congestion in Varanasi is not just about transportation, it is about governance and sustainable urban development. Current answers tend to the short-term, including traffic management, road widening and crowd management which does little to tackle the structural issues linked with tourist "growth clusters". Decentralization of tourist flows, better public transport, pedestrian policies planning and better coordination between tourism policies and urban infrastructure development are needed for sustainable approaches (Shyju & Kushwaha, n.d.). As equally important, it is the participation of local communities in planning processes.

Towards Sustainable Tourism in Varanasi

The exceptional growth of the tourism industry in Varanasi has posed an opportunity as well as challenges, thus the concept of tourism sustainability has been a major issue in discussion regarding urban planning, urban heritage management and long term development of the city. The expansion of tourism has led to a variety of problems regarding congestion, environmental stress, pressures on heritage landscapes and the quality of urban life, as well as economic revitalisation, infrastructural development and national and international visibility (P. Srivastava & Sinha, 2025). This is because when growth is uncontrolled there is some mixed and counterintuitive effects like it happened to be the case in Varanasi and it is now a very important religious and tourism centre. So, the overall policy-making framework needs to move beyond growth-based policies to one which is broad enough to encompass environmental protection, cultural continuity and social equity, as well as economic development. Therefore, sustainable tourism in Varanasi has to be understood beyond its environmental aspects, as it is a multi-faceted process involving changes in governance, mobility planning, participation and development strategies with a cultural approach (Chatterjee, 2022).

This is especially important in the context of Varanasi as a living heritage city with sacred spaces, ritual practices, neighbourhood structures and occupational communities interwoven in a significant way, where the need for sustainable approaches is particularly salient. The city's character is reinforced by the connections between communities and culturally formed environments that have been created over time; in contrast, only recreationally developed places are mostly used for recreation. Policies designed for the visitor will put at risk the social foundations that support this cultural ecosystem. Planning for the future should thus take a cultural landscape approach, which sees Varanasi as an integrated socio-spatial system and environment instead of a series of disjointed monuments and attractions. This would help the protection of both material and immaterial heritage and allow development to be sensitive to the local histories and social contexts (Rana & Singh, 2000).

One of the essential conditions of long term sustainability is the distribution of tourist flows throughout the city. Tourist visit is concentrated around some major sites like Kashi Vishwanath temple precinct,

Dashashwamedh Ghat, Assi Ghat, Godowlia etc. which results in over stress on the infrastructure and public spaces. By encouraging the promotion of less-visited heritage sites, neighbourhood temples, craft clusters, cultural districts and surrounding rural landscapes, the diversified tourism circuits can help spread visitors and benefit beyond the centre of the town. Urgent attention is also needed to environmental sustainability. Earlier it was observed that as the number of tourists grows, a significant amount of waste is created, sanitation resources under strain and the ecological stress of the riverbank environment. Waste management, reducing the use of plastic products, environmentally responsible practices of tourism and river conservation are some of the key points to keep in mind for sustainable strategies (V. K. Singh, n.d.). Community involvement is also vital, as local communities are still the guardians of cultural life and of the practice of heritage. Creating institutional structures that can integrate local voices into policy-making can help to enhance the responsiveness of policies and increase equity. In conclusion, sustainable tourism in Varanasi should focus on cultural resilience and the well-being of the city, rather than on the short-term growth of tourism. Sustainable development should reinforce the social and historical identity of the city, not erode it (R. P. Singh & Rana, 2017).

Conclusion-

The findings of this study clearly highlight how the post-COVID tourism boom has created a critical juncture to understand the interconnections between tourism-driven urbanization, everyday urban experiences in India, and the governance of heritage in the city. In the last three decades, the city's spatial organization, cultural landscapes, economic structures and social relations have significantly been altered due to the accelerated mobility of tourists, backed by state-led infrastructural development and faith-based tourism promotion. The results suggest that the steps taken at a large-scale level, such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, redevelopment of the river front and transport connectivity, have improved the accessibility of the city, increased its international profile and created economic opportunities, but have done so in an unequal manner and come with significant social, environmental and cultural tradeoffs. A critical analysis reveals that the growth of tourism in Varanasi is increasingly taking place in a development mode of visibility, mobility and spectacle, with a focus on infrastructural modernization and tourist management rather than on the maintenance of a historically rooted social environment. As a result, sacred landscapes and heritage spaces are increasingly reworked based on the rules of circulation and consumption, and the processes of commercialization are becoming more extreme, with new meanings being given to neighbourhoods, public spaces and cultural practices. The study also shows how tourism-driven re-development has created new socio-spatial inequalities, with particular impacts on those local populations relying on traditional livelihoods or occupations. At the same time, rising mobility of tourists has exacerbated urban congestion and wider issues of carrying capacity, access to urban areas, and the decreasing urban livability. Traditional solutions such as traffic management and the development of infrastructure often address immediate pressures rather than underlying structural issues related to intense tourism growth. Thus, the future of Varanasi cannot be judged based on the number of visitors and/or development indicators alone, but should be based on sustainability of its cultural landscapes and living conditions of the people.

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