

Historical Growth and Development of Tourist Centre in Agra District

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Abstract

Agra district occupies a distinguished position in the historical and cultural landscape of India. Located on the fertile plains along the banks of the Yamuna River, Agra has evolved over centuries from a modest settlement into one of the world's most renowned tourist centers. The historical growth and development of tourism in the Agra district are deeply rooted in its political importance, architectural brilliance, and cultural richness, especially during the medieval period. Agra possesses a rich historical legacy, clearly reflected in the numerous monuments located within and around the city. The earliest known reference to Agra dates back to the epic age, where the Mahabharata mentions it as Agravana. Earlier sources also refer to the region as Arya Griha, meaning the abode of the Aryans. The Greek geographer Ptolemy is considered the first to mention Agra by its modern name.

Keywords: *Tourism Carrying Capacity, Sustainable Tourism Management, Historical Growth, Development Centre.*

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Introduction: Agra district forms part of the twelve groves of the Brij Mandal. In ancient times, the area was known as Agarvan, believed to be a place where Lord Krishna played with his companions. Several traditions attempt to explain the origin of the city's name. One popular belief attributes the name to the brackish nature of the soil, while another associates it with salt pans, locally referred to in Hindi as *Agra*. The district derives its name from the historic town of Agra.

The district is mentioned extensively in ancient literature, where it occupied a nearly central position among the janapadas (early states) of Madhyadesh. Historically and culturally, the region was regarded as one of the most prominent areas of northern India. Agra remained an inhabited settlement long before the advent of Muslim rule.

During the Gupta period (approximately 455–467 A.D.), the present area of the Agra district formed part of the empire. In the early sixth century, after consolidating their control over the north-western frontiers and Punjab, the Huns under their chief Toramana advanced into Madhyadesh. Later, towards the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century, King Yashovarman of Kannauj rose to power and established dominance over much of northern India.

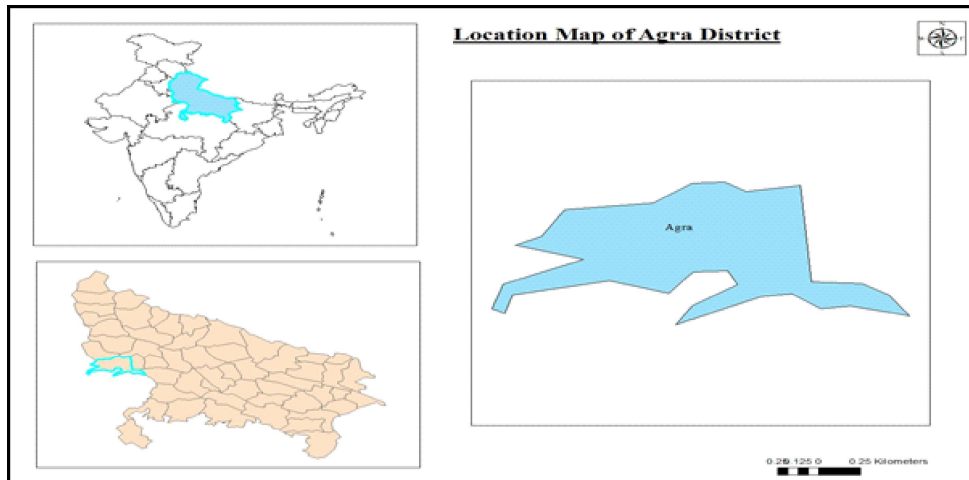
Throughout the ninth and a significant portion of the tenth centuries, the region likely remained under the control of the feudatories of the Gurjara-Pratiharas. In 1018 A.D., Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India with a vast cavalry force supported by foot soldiers recruited from various Central Asian territories. Subsequently, around 1196 A.D., Shihab-ud-din Muhammad Ghori and Qutb-ud-din Aibak conquered the region. It was during the reign of Alauddin Khilji (1296–1316) that the area firmly came under the authority of the Delhi Sultanate.

Although Agra's heritage is most prominently associated with the Mughal dynasty, many earlier rulers contributed to its historical development. Modern Agra was founded by Sikandar Lodi of the Lodi dynasty in the early sixteenth century. During his reign, he established his military headquarters at Agra, marking the beginning of the city's systematic growth and political significance.

Study Area: The district of Agra is situated in the extreme south-western part of the state of Uttar Pradesh, extending between 27°44'2" north latitude. The district is situated between 27°24'2" north latitude and 77°28'2" to 78°54'2" east longitude. It is bounded on the west by Bharatpur district of Rajasthan, while its southern boundary is shared partly with Bharatpur district and Morena district of Madhya Pradesh. To the east, the district is bordered by Mainpuri and Etawah districts, and to the north by Mathura and Etah districts.

The total geographical area of the district is 4,805 square kilometres. The maximum length of the district is about 125 kilometres from north-west to south-

east and 120 kilometres from north-east to south-west, with an average width of nearly 120 kilometres from north to south.



Objectives of the study

- To study the cultural heritage tourism is a rapidly growing market.
- To identify the various tourist spots in the Agra District.
- To delineate the tourism efficiency regions and tourist potential centers.
- To identify areas of improvement needed for tourism.

Methodology

To achieve the desired result the study depended on tested methods of surveys and interviews of the various constituents of the tourism industry, including the tourists. Surveys have been conducted with purposefully designed questionnaires, and interview methods. Proper analysis of the government policies and the data on tourist arrivals and receipts in Agra will also help in deriving conclusions in the research. Information was gathered from the state tourism department and the data available on the internet.

Summary and Conclusion

The district is mentioned extensively in ancient literature, where it occupied a nearly central position among the janapadas (early states) of Madhyadesh. Historically and culturally, the region was regarded as one of the most prominent areas of northern India. Agra remained an inhabited settlement long before the advent of Muslim rule.

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The city of Agra gained prominence in 1505. During this period, a fort was constructed, and Agra was later established as the capital of the kingdom in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, stayed in Agra for some time and introduced the concept of square, Persian-style gardens.

Emperor Akbar further enhanced the city's importance by building the Agra Fort and establishing Fatehpur Sikri near Agra. Fatehpur Sikri served as his capital for approximately fifteen years, after which it was mysteriously abandoned. Jahangir continued to beautify Agra by constructing palaces and gardens, despite spending much of his time in Kashmir, to which he was deeply attached.

Agra reached the height of its glory during the reign of Shah Jahan. His rule marked the zenith of Mughal architecture, exemplified by the construction of the Taj Mahal in memory of his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. Known as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Taj Mahal stands as a magnificent symbol of architectural splendor and the opulence of the Mughal Empire.

Agra's significance as a political center declined when Shah Jahan transferred the capital to Delhi in 1634. In his later years, he ruled from the newly established city of Shahjahanabad. In 1658, Shah Jahan was dethroned by his son Aurangzeb, who imprisoned him in the Agra Fort. Aurangzeb later shifted the capital back to Agra, where it remained until his death.

Following Aurangzeb's demise, the Mughal Empire gradually weakened, leading to the emergence of several regional kingdoms. After the Mughals, the Marathas and Jats ruled the region, introducing changes to the administrative structure originally

developed by Akbar. Eventually, the British took control of the city. The Marathas were defeated by the British in 1803, and Agra was designated as a revenue division in 1834.

During British rule, the district's boundaries and internal administrative arrangements underwent several modifications in 1874, 1878, and 1879. British rule ended in 1947 with India's independence. Later, in 1989, the new district of Firozabad was carved out of the Agra district.

Agra district has long occupied a prominent position on the tourism map of India due to its exceptional historical, cultural, and architectural heritage. The presence of world-famous monuments such as the **Taj Mahal**, **Agra Fort**, and **Fatehpur Sikri** has made Agra one of the most visited tourist destinations in the country. Over time, tourism in Agra has witnessed several phases of growth, decline, and revival, shaped by historical developments, infrastructure expansion, and global events.

Growth of Tourism in Agra District

Years	Number of Tourists Visits	Years	Number of Tourists Visiting
1951	16,826	1993	14,84,731
1955	33,269	1994	15,32,184
1960	1,23,095	1995	16,12,321
1965	1,47,900	1996	16,92,114
1970	2,80,281	1997	17,54,321
1975	4,65,265	1998	18,12,652
1980	8,00,150	1999	19,18,765
1983	8,84,731	2000	20,32,173
1984	8,52,530	2001	21,24,665
1985	8,37,000	2002	22,11,234
1986	10,00,000	2003	22,24,876
1987	11,63,744	2004	23,10,123
1988	12,23,635	2005	23,45,345
1989	12,98,761	2006	24,56,465
1990	13,41,732	2007	30,12,465
1991	13,95,431	2008	31,45,456
1992	14,43,541	2009	32,56,876
2001	32,58,987	2012	39,88,456
2004	33,34,567	2013	40,01,453
2005	34,10,345	2014	40,45,654
2006	34,67,567	2015	51,34,567
2007	35,23,876	2016	62,42,180
2008	36,67,543	2017	64,61,917
2009	37,34,564	2018	65,59,769
2010	38,42,765	2019	47,04,564
2011	39,45,876	2020	13,91,422

Source: *Statistical Magazine of Agra District 2025*.

The table clearly reflects the long-term growth and transformation of tourism in Agra District, highlighting how the district evolved from a modest tourist destination in the early post-independence period to one of India's most visited international tourist centres.

In 1951, Agra recorded only 16,826 tourist visits, indicating a very limited tourism base. During the early decades (1951–1965), the growth was slow but steady, with tourist numbers increasing to 1,47,900 by 1965. This gradual rise can be attributed to improved transportation facilities, growing awareness of historical monuments like the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, and Fatehpur Sikri, and the early development of domestic tourism in India.

Between 1970 and 1980, the district experienced a significant acceleration in tourist arrivals. Tourist visits increased from 2,80,281 in 1970 to 8,00,150 by 1980. This phase marks an important period when tourism infrastructure such as hotels, roads, and basic amenities improved considerably. Government initiatives and the inclusion of Agra in national and international travel circuits also played a crucial role.

During the 1980s, tourism growth remained positive, though with minor fluctuations. Tourist numbers increased from 8,84,731 in 1983 to nearly 13 lakhs by 1989. The declaration of the Taj Mahal as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983 significantly enhanced Agra's global visibility, leading to increased foreign tourist inflow.

The 1990s represent a period of consistent and stable growth. Tourist visits rose steadily from 13,41,732 in 1990 to 19,18,765 by 1999. Economic liberalization, better international connectivity, and the expansion of travel agencies contributed to this sustained increase. By the year 2000, tourist visits crossed 20 lakhs, marking a major milestone in Agra's tourism development.

From 2001 to 2009, the data shows a sharp rise in tourist arrivals, with figures increasing from around 21–22 lakh in the early 2000s to more than 32 lakhs by 2009. This phase reflects the impact of improved urban infrastructure, increased promotional activities, and the popularity of the Golden Triangle (Delhi–Agra–Jaipur) tourist circuit.

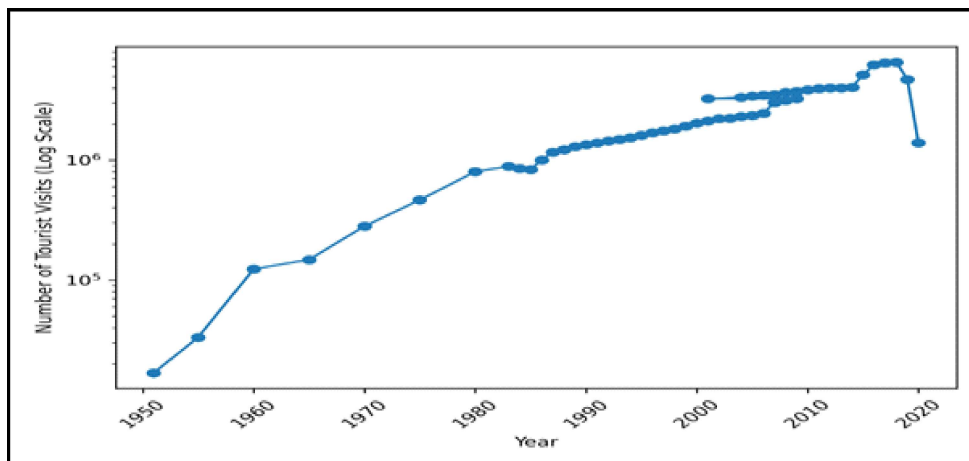
The period 2010 to 2018 can be considered the peak growth phase of tourism in the Agra District. Tourist visits rose from 38,42,765 in 2010 to 65,59,769 in 2018. Major contributing factors during this period include better expressway connectivity (Yamuna Expressway), expansion of hotel capacity, increased domestic tourism, and rising international interest in heritage tourism.

However, a decline is clearly visible after 2019. Tourist visits fell from 47,04,564 in 2019 to 13,91,422 in 2020. This sharp decline is primarily due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, which severely affected global and domestic travel, leading to unprecedented losses in the tourism sector.

The table demonstrates that tourism in Agra District has shown a long-term upward trend, despite short-term fluctuations caused by economic, political, and health-related factors. The historical monuments, especially the Taj Mahal, remain the core drivers of tourist growth. The data highlights the importance of sustained infrastructure development, heritage conservation, and tourism planning for maintaining Agra's position as a premier tourist destination.

Growth of Tourism in Agra District (1950 – 2020)



(b) Development of Tourist Centre in Agra District: Development of Tourist Centre in Agra District refers to the planned and continuous process of enhancing Agra's tourism potential through the conservation of heritage resources, improvement of infrastructure, diversification of attractions, and provision of visitor services to support sustainable economic and socio-cultural growth.

Agra district, internationally renowned for the Taj Mahal and other Mughal monuments such as Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri, has evolved as a major tourist centre through coordinated efforts by the government and allied agencies. This development includes preservation and restoration of historical monuments; creation and upgradation of transport networks (road, rail, and air connectivity); establishment of accommodation facilities ranging from budget hotels to luxury resorts; and improvement of civic amenities like water supply, sanitation, landscaping, signage, and security.

In addition, the development of tourist centres in Agra involves promoting cultural tourism (festivals, crafts, cuisine), religious tourism (temples, mosques,

churches, and gurudwaras), and eco-tourism along the Yamuna riverfront. Institutional initiatives such as the Taj Trapezium Zone (TTZ), heritage walks, sound-and-light shows, and smart tourism services have further strengthened Agra's position as a global tourist destination.

Early Development of Tourism

Tourism in Agra began to take a structured form during the **British colonial period**, when the Taj Mahal gained international recognition as a masterpiece of Mughal architecture. Improved rail connectivity and documentation by British historians and travelers helped introduce Agra to foreign visitors. However, tourism during this period remained limited and elite in nature.

Post-Independence Growth (1950s–1980s)

After India's independence, tourism in Agra expanded steadily. The Government of India and the Archaeological Survey of India undertook conservation efforts at major monuments, while improved road and rail networks enhanced accessibility. During this period, Agra emerged as a key stop on the Golden Triangle tourist circuit (Delhi–Agra–Jaipur). Tourist inflow, especially domestic tourism, increased gradually as educational tours, pilgrimages, and heritage visits became more common.

Rapid Expansion Phase (1990s–2019)

The real acceleration in tourist growth occurred after the economic liberalization of the 1990s. Increased international travel, promotion of India as a global tourism destination, and improved hospitality infrastructure led to a sharp rise in visitors. Hotels, travel agencies, guides, and ancillary services expanded rapidly in Agra.

By the late 2010s, Agra was receiving over one crore tourists annually, with a significant share of foreign visitors. The Taj Mahal consistently ranked as the most visited monument in India. Government initiatives such as heritage walks, tourism festivals, better urban facilities, and digital ticketing further strengthened tourism growth during this phase.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2021)

The steady growth of tourism in Agra was severely disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nationwide lockdowns, international travel restrictions, and prolonged closure of monuments led to a drastic decline in tourist arrivals. Visitor numbers dropped sharply, affecting hotels, guides, artisans, transport services, and the local economy. This period marked the most significant setback in the history of tourism growth in the Agra district.

Post-Pandemic Recovery and Recent Trends (2022 onwards)

With the gradual lifting of restrictions, tourism in Agra began to recover from 2022 onwards. Domestic tourism played a crucial role in the revival, supported by pent-up travel demand and government promotional campaigns. Monument footfall increased steadily, and the Taj Mahal once again attracted millions of visitors annually. Though foreign tourist numbers took longer to recover fully, recent trends indicate a return towards pre-pandemic levels.

Overall Growth Pattern

Historically, tourism growth in the Agra district can be described as progressive and resilient. Despite temporary declines due to global crises, the district's strong heritage base ensures sustained tourist interest. Continuous conservation of monuments, infrastructure development, and diversification of tourism activities such as cultural tourism, religious tourism, and eco-tourism have further strengthened Agra's position as a major tourist center.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical evolution and tourism development of the Agra district clearly demonstrate its enduring significance as one of the most prominent cultural and heritage centres of India. From ancient times, the region held an important position in the political and cultural landscape of northern India, passing through the rule of several dynasties such as the Guptas, Gurjara-Pratiharas, Delhi Sultanate, Mughals, Marathas, and the British. Each of these periods contributed in different ways to the historical character and administrative development of the district.

Agra achieved its greatest prominence during the Mughal period, particularly under emperors such as **Akbar**, **Jahangir**, and **Shah Jahan**, who transformed the city into a major political, cultural, and architectural centre. The construction of magnificent monuments such as the **Taj Mahal**, **Agra Fort**, and **Fatehpur Sikri** not only symbolized the architectural brilliance of the Mughal era but also laid the foundation for Agra's global reputation as a heritage city.

Over time, these monuments became the principal attractions driving tourism growth in the district. The statistical data on tourist arrivals clearly reveal a long-term upward trend in tourism development from the early post-independence period to the late 2010s. From a modest number of visitors in the 1950s, Agra gradually evolved into one of the most visited tourist destinations in India, supported by improved transport connectivity, expansion of hospitality infrastructure, and the promotion of heritage tourism through national and international tourism circuits such as the Golden Triangle.

Despite occasional fluctuations caused by economic, political, or global crises, tourism in Agra has demonstrated remarkable resilience. The sharp decline in tourist arrivals during the COVID-19 pandemic represents a temporary disruption rather than a permanent setback. With the gradual recovery of travel activities and renewed government initiatives, tourism in Agra is once again moving toward growth and revitalization.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the sustained preservation of heritage monuments, continuous infrastructure development, effective tourism management, and diversification of tourism activities are essential for maintaining Agra's position as a leading international tourist centre. Given its unparalleled historical legacy and cultural richness, the Agra district will continue to play a vital role in India's tourism landscape in the future.

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