

Holy triangle can power UP's trillion-dollar dream

Tourist Arrivals In Varanasi, Prayagraj And Ayodhya Have Increased Manifold In The Past Few Years, With A Strong Multiplier Effect On The Economy

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North India's golden triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur now has a holy rival in the east. While Prayagraj and Varanasi were already drawing crores of pilgrims every year, newly spruced-up Ayodhya has joined their league. Last year, the three UP cities together had close to 15 crore visitors – almost half of the state's 32-crore tourist traffic.

If the opening of Kashi-Vishwanath Corridor made Varanasi a magnet, Ram Mandir is expected to do the same for Ayodhya. The town's tourist footfall has already shot up from nearly 3.5 lakh in 2019 to over 2 crore in both 2022 and 2023.

"Interest in Ayodhya has gone up exponentially," said Abbas Mahdi, regional head of a B2B travel portal. "All properties and allied services like taxis are sold out from January 15 to 25. The demand is high after the (temple consecration) event as well. And over 80% of tourists are pilgrims."

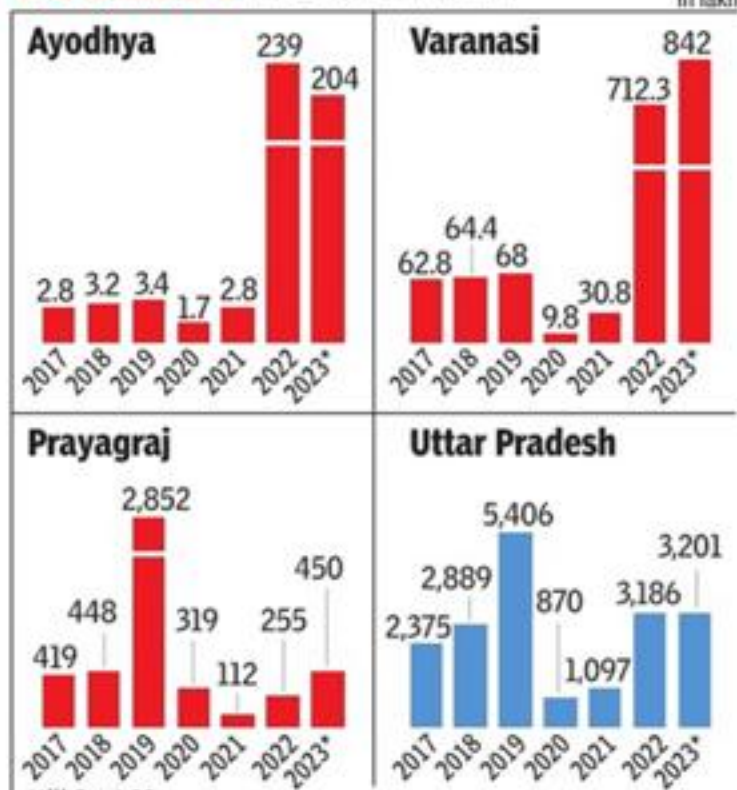
While Prayagraj is a steady draw, averaging around 4 crore arrivals in most years, Varanasi has jumped to the top with 8.4 crore visitors last year, as against over 60 lakh in 2017.

Temple visits boost businesses involved in transportation, food and lodging, sacred offerings, sightseeing, entertainment and shopping. "The economic potential of each of these activities gives good return on investment," said Manoj Dixit, vice-chancellor, Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner, who is a tourism policy advisor to several state governments. He said job creation from tourism in the holy triangle will slow down migration to Delhi-NCR and Mumbai.

The increasing popularity of these temple towns could also boost tourism in nearby places. For instance, Chhapaiya, barely 60km from Ayodhya, is the birthplace of Akshardham sect founder Swaminarayan. Similarly, Gorakhpur, Sravasti and Kushinagar are all about 2.5 hours from Ayodhya.



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Note: 2022 Ayodhya figures reflect post-pandemic surge to see under-construction Ram temple. Kashi Vishwanath corridor inaugurated in Dec 2021. Prayagraj hosted Kumbh mela in 2019.



All three centres now have air connectivity, and Lucknow isn't far away, so the entire central-east UP region has become accessible to high-spending tourists, which has got the hotel industry interested. Dixit said tourism to the Ayodhya-Varanasi-Prayagraj triangle could drive UP's trillion-dollar-economy dream.

"It is for this that tourism and culture have been placed in the list of top 10 focus sectors," said Alok Kumar, UP's

principal secretary, planning. "The goal is to increase tourist inflow in UP by about 1.4 times in the next five years, and the per-tourist spend by about three times."

Strictly speaking, "tourist" is a visitor who spends at least one night at a destination, and to spur the tourism economy the state government wants more than day visitors. But to get more tourists you need "engaging options like a museum, or a boat ride, or sound-and-light show", said Prateek Hira, chair of industry body Ficci's tourism committee. But the sudden popularity

of these places has created a demand-supply mismatch, pricing out many potential tourists. For example, some hotels in Varanasi charge Rs 1 lakh or more for a night on special occasions like Dev Deepavali. This is "stealing the simplicity for which Varanasi was known," said Rana PB Singh, former faculty at Banaras Hindu University.

Mukesh Meshram, principal secretary, UP Tourism, said 50 starred hotel projects, including from groups like Taj, Marriott, Oberoi, Leela and Lalit, have got their projects approved for the three holy cities.

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