

Sacred Journeys: Assessing Visitor Satisfaction and Loyalty in Ayodhya's Religious Tourism

¹Abhishek, ²Dr. Ashish Raina

¹Research Scholar, CT University, Ludhiana (Punjab)

²Professor, CT University, Ludhiana (Punjab)

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Abstract:

Religious tourism has emerged as a vital component of India's cultural and economic landscape, attracting millions of domestic and international visitors to sacred destinations. Ayodhya, a prominent pilgrimage city in Uttar Pradesh, has witnessed a significant influx of tourists following recent religious and infrastructural developments. This study aims to explore the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the context of religious tourism in Ayodhya. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research examines key dimensions influencing visitor satisfaction, including spiritual fulfillment, cultural engagement, service quality, infrastructure, and emotional experience. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews with both first-time and repeat visitors to Ayodhya. The study applies statistical techniques such as correlation and regression analysis to assess how various satisfaction attributes influence tourists' intention to revisit and recommend the destination. Additionally, thematic analysis of qualitative responses provides nuanced insights into the emotional and spiritual aspects of the visitor experience. Findings indicate that spiritual satisfaction, cleanliness, crowd management, and hospitality are critical drivers of tourist satisfaction, which in turn strongly correlates with destination loyalty. The study contributes to religious tourism literature by highlighting the unique motivational and experiential factors shaping tourist behavior in pilgrimage contexts.

Keywords: Religious tourism, tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, spiritual experience, Ayodhya, pilgrimage tourism.

1. Introduction

Religious tourism, as a significant branch of cultural tourism, continues to play a vital role in connecting people with their spiritual roots while also contributing to the socio-economic development of destinations. India, with its vast spiritual heritage and sacred landscapes, remains one of the most sought-after destinations for pilgrims and religious travelers from around the world. Among its many sacred cities, Ayodhya holds a unique position due to its association with Lord Rama, a revered figure in Hindu mythology. For centuries, Ayodhya has attracted devotees and pilgrims, but in recent years, the city has undergone a transformative journey.

The construction of the grand Ram Janmabhoomi temple, coupled with large-scale infrastructural developments such as the Ayodhya International Airport, revamped railway stations, widened roads, and improved civic amenities, has significantly boosted Ayodhya's visibility as a global religious destination. According to official reports, the city attracted over 13.44 crore visitors by September 2024, highlighting its emergence as a powerful center of faith-based tourism. These developments have not only elevated Ayodhya's status but also brought to

the forefront the importance of understanding the tourist experience, especially in the context of religious motivations and emotional fulfillment.

Despite Ayodhya's growing prominence, there remains a noticeable research gap when it comes to understanding what truly satisfies these religious tourists and what compels them to return or recommend the destination to others. Religious tourism is not just about sightseeing—it is deeply intertwined with emotional, spiritual, and cultural experiences. Yet, studies that explore these dimensions, especially in the Indian context, are limited.

This research aims to fill that gap by exploring the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in Ayodhya. It seeks to identify the key factors that shape a tourist's overall experience in the city factors that go beyond the physical infrastructure and touch upon spiritual satisfaction, emotional resonance, hospitality, safety, cleanliness, and the quality of services provided. For religious tourists, these experiences are often deeply personal and memorable, making it crucial to examine how they influence long-term loyalty to the destination.

The study is driven by the following core research questions:

1. What are the main factors contributing to tourist satisfaction in Ayodhya's religious tourism context?
2. How does tourist satisfaction impact destination loyalty among visitors?
3. What role does infrastructure development play in enhancing the visitor experience?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to offer valuable insights for tourism policymakers, urban planners, religious institutions, and other stakeholders involved in shaping Ayodhya's future. The ultimate goal is to support the sustainable development of Ayodhya as a spiritual and culturally significant destination that offers meaningful, satisfying, and memorable experiences for millions of religious tourists.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Religious Tourism and Tourist Satisfaction

Religious tourism is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of travel, deeply rooted in the human desire for spiritual connection and cultural engagement. It refers to travel undertaken primarily for spiritual purposes, such as pilgrimage, participation in religious events, or visits to sacred sites like temples, mosques, churches, or shrines. Globally, religious tourism has grown in scale and significance, with millions of travelers seeking not only spiritual enlightenment but also unique cultural and emotional experiences associated with sacred destinations. In the Indian context, religious tourism occupies a prominent place, with cities like Varanasi, Tirupati, Prayagraj, and Ayodhya serving as major hubs for faith-based travel.

Ayodhya, in particular, holds immense religious and mythological significance as the birthplace of Lord Rama, making it a revered site for Hindus across the world. The recent infrastructural transformation of the city, combined with the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, has led to a significant rise in pilgrim footfall. However, while the physical development of religious destinations has accelerated, understanding how these developments influence **tourist satisfaction** remains a relatively underexplored area in academic literature, especially within the Indian religious tourism landscape.

Tourist satisfaction in religious tourism is a complex, multi-dimensional concept. It goes beyond the standard indicators of hospitality or service quality to include deeply personal and spiritual aspects of the travel experience. According to Oliver (1997), tourist satisfaction is the result of the psychological comparison between expectations before the trip and the actual experiences during and after the visit. In a religious tourism context, this comparison includes emotional and spiritual fulfillment, the quality of rituals and services, cleanliness, safety, accessibility, and even the behavior of fellow pilgrims and service providers.

Studies have highlighted several dimensions that contribute to tourist satisfaction in religious settings. For instance, Raj and Morpeth (2007) emphasize that religious tourism is shaped by both sacred narratives and cultural contexts, making destinations spiritually charged spaces that fulfill more than just recreational needs. Nash et al.

(2006) further note that religious tourists evaluate their experiences not just in material terms, such as accommodation or transport, but also based on emotional resonance and spiritual awakening.

In this context, service quality, infrastructure, destination image, and safety emerge as significant components of the tourist experience. Verma and Sarangi (2019) found that in Indian religious tourism, key determinants of satisfaction include motivation, perceived service quality, safety, and the ability of a destination to meet spiritual expectations. However, they also observed that these factors are often generalized and underexamined in specific religious contexts like Ayodhya, where religious fervor, cultural symbolism, and emerging tourism dynamics intersect.

Moreover, modern religious tourists are increasingly influenced by a mix of traditional devotion and contemporary expectations, such as digital accessibility, crowd management, and comfort. This evolving profile of religious travelers necessitates a deeper understanding of what constitutes a satisfactory experience in sacred settings.

Therefore, evaluating tourist satisfaction in religious tourism particularly in destinations like Ayodhya requires a comprehensive approach that considers both tangible and intangible elements. Doing so is not only essential for enhancing visitor experience but also for fostering destination loyalty, promoting cultural preservation, and ensuring the sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in India.

2.2 Destination Loyalty

Destination loyalty, defined as a tourist's intention to revisit or recommend a destination, is a critical concept in tourism studies, particularly in the context of religious tourism. Yoon and Uysal (2005) established that loyalty is driven by a combination of motivational factors and destination attributes, with satisfaction playing a pivotal role. Their study emphasized that tourists who perceive a destination as fulfilling their expectations are more likely to return or advocate for it. This foundational understanding has been widely applied to various tourism contexts, including religious tourism, where emotional and spiritual dimensions add complexity to loyalty formation.

Satisfaction is consistently identified as a direct antecedent of destination loyalty. Chi and Qu (2008) demonstrated that tourists' overall satisfaction with a destination, encompassing aspects like service quality, accessibility, and experiences, strongly predicts their intention to revisit or recommend. In religious tourism, satisfaction often stems from spiritual fulfillment and the perceived sacredness of a site. Sharpley and Sundaram (2005) explored this in the context of pilgrimage tourism, finding that emotional attachment to sacred sites, such as temples or shrines, significantly enhances loyalty. Pilgrims often develop a deep connection with destinations due to their spiritual significance, which fosters a desire to return or share their experiences with others.

Campón-Cerro et al. (2017) further expanded on this by proposing that satisfaction mediates the relationship between perceived value, emotional experiences, and destination loyalty. Their research highlighted that tourists who perceive a destination as offering unique cultural or spiritual value are more likely to develop loyalty. In religious tourism, this is particularly relevant, as pilgrims seek authentic experiences that align with their beliefs. For instance, the cultural authenticity of rituals, festivals, or sacred sites can deepen emotional bonds, reinforcing loyalty intentions. This aligns with findings by Verma and Sarangi (2019), who noted that motivation, service quality, and safety are critical drivers of satisfaction in religious tourism, indirectly influencing loyalty.

In the context of religious tourism in India, studies have shown that spiritual experiences are a dominant factor in shaping loyalty. Patwardhan et al. (2020) investigated pilgrimage sites in India and found that the spiritual ambiance and cultural heritage of destinations like Varanasi and Tirupati significantly enhance tourist satisfaction, leading to higher loyalty. Similarly, the perceived sacredness of a destination, as noted by Sharpley and Sundaram (2005), creates a unique emotional connection that distinguishes religious tourism from other forms. However, infrastructure and service quality also play crucial roles. Poor accessibility or inadequate facilities can detract from the overall experience, reducing satisfaction and loyalty (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

Despite these insights, gaps remain in understanding destination loyalty in emerging religious tourism hubs like Ayodhya, where recent infrastructure developments and cultural significance are reshaping visitor experiences. This review underscores the interplay of satisfaction, spiritual experiences, cultural authenticity, and infrastructure

in fostering destination loyalty, providing a foundation for further exploration in specific religious tourism contexts.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Based on existing literature and empirical findings, this study proposes a conceptual framework to understand the factors influencing tourist satisfaction and its subsequent impact on destination loyalty in the context of religious tourism in Ayodhya. The framework identifies four key dimensions—**spiritual experience**, **service quality**, **infrastructure**, and **cultural heritage**—as primary predictors of tourist satisfaction. Each of these components plays a unique role in shaping visitors' overall experience. The hypotheses are:

- H1: Spiritual experience positively influences tourist satisfaction.
- H2: Service quality positively influences tourist satisfaction.
- H3: Infrastructure positively influences tourist satisfaction.
- H4: Cultural heritage positively influences tourist satisfaction.
- H5: Tourist satisfaction positively influences destination loyalty.

Spiritual experience pertains to the sense of peace, fulfillment, and divine connection that visitors seek at sacred sites. Service quality includes the behavior of staff, availability of services, and responsiveness to tourist needs. Infrastructure encompasses transport, sanitation, accommodation, and safety facilities. Cultural heritage reflects the city's historical, architectural, and ritualistic value that connects tourists to the local traditions and beliefs.

These variables collectively shape the tourists' perception and contribute to their overall satisfaction. The framework posits that tourist satisfaction acts as a mediator, leading to destination loyalty, which includes tourists' intention to revisit and their likelihood of recommending the destination to others. The model proposes five hypotheses (H1 to H5), outlining the positive relationships between these variables, forming a basis for empirical testing and policy intervention.

Figure 1: A conceptual Framework shows Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty in Religious Tourism



The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the context of religious tourism, using Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, as a case study. It posits that tourist satisfaction acts as a central mediator, influenced by four key factors—spiritual experience, service quality, infrastructure, and cultural heritage—which collectively drive destination loyalty.

Spiritual experience, derived from the sacred ambiance and emotional connection to sites like the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, is a primary contributor to satisfaction. Service quality, encompassing hospitality and guidance, enhances the visitor experience. Infrastructure, including transportation and accommodation, supports accessibility and comfort, while cultural heritage, through traditions and festivals, enriches the spiritual journey. These factors converge to shape tourist satisfaction, which in turn fosters destination loyalty, reflected in intentions to revisit or recommend Ayodhya. The arrows indicate a directional influence, suggesting that improvements in these areas can enhance satisfaction and, consequently, loyalty, providing a foundation for sustainable religious tourism development.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a holistic understanding of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty in the religious tourism context of Ayodhya. The rationale for using a mixed-methods design lies in its ability to validate and enrich the findings by combining statistical rigor with in-depth contextual insights. The quantitative component involves a structured questionnaire designed to measure key constructs and relationships, while the qualitative component, based on semi-structured interviews, offers nuanced perspectives on tourists' emotional and spiritual experiences that may not be fully captured through numerical data alone.

By combining both methods, the study aims to not only identify statistically significant factors but also to interpret the deeper meanings behind tourist behaviors and attitudes, thereby enhancing the richness and credibility of the research outcomes.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The target population for this study consisted of domestic and international tourists visiting Ayodhya, a major Hindu pilgrimage center, during the peak tourism window between January and March 2025. This period was chosen as it includes several major Hindu festivals and the inauguration period of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, ensuring high tourist footfall and diverse representation.

A convenience sampling technique was employed due to the high flow of visitors and practical constraints in accessing a randomized list of tourists. Although this method has limitations regarding generalizability, it was deemed appropriate for exploratory research in a real-world religious setting. A total of 350 valid responses were collected through on-site administration of the survey questionnaire in various locations including temple premises, hotels, local markets, and transportation hubs.

In addition to the survey, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected respondents who volunteered to share more about their personal experiences. These interviews aimed to capture deeper emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of their visit that could complement and contextualize the quantitative findings.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS software to test hypothesized relationships between constructs such as spiritual experience, service quality, infrastructure, cultural heritage, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. SEM was chosen for its ability to model complex relationships and assess latent variables, ensuring robust statistical analysis. Model fit was evaluated using indices like χ^2/df , CFI, TLI, and RMSEA. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes, such as

spiritual fulfillment and infrastructure challenges, providing deeper insights into tourist experiences and complementing quantitative findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Summary

Based on the responses of 350 tourists, the following variables showed high mean values (on a 5-point Likert scale)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Spiritual Experience	4.53	0.61
Service Quality	4.21	0.74
Infrastructure	4.02	0.78
Cultural Heritage	4.36	0.69
Tourist Satisfaction	4.28	0.66
Destination Loyalty	4.18	0.72

Interpretation: All variables scored above 4.0 on the 5-point Likert scale, indicating a generally **positive perception** of Ayodhya among tourists. **Spiritual experience** scored the highest (Mean = 4.53), emphasizing its centrality in religious tourism. **Infrastructure**, while still rated positively, had the lowest mean, suggesting a potential area for improvement.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients showed strong positive relationships between variables

Variable Pair	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)
Spiritual Experience ↔ Tourist Satisfaction	0.68	p < 0.01
Service Quality ↔ Tourist Satisfaction	0.61	p < 0.01
Infrastructure ↔ Tourist Satisfaction	0.55	p < 0.01
Cultural Heritage ↔ Tourist Satisfaction	0.59	p < 0.01
Tourist Satisfaction ↔ Destination Loyalty	0.71	p < 0.01

Interpretation: All correlation values were statistically significant at the 1% level, confirming strong positive relationships between the key factors and tourist satisfaction. The strongest link was between Tourist Satisfaction and Destination Loyalty ($r = 0.71$), emphasizing that satisfied tourists are more likely to revisit and recommend Ayodhya. Among satisfaction predictors, Spiritual Experience showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.68$).

Table 3: Regression Analysis

4.2 Model 1 – Predicting Tourist Satisfaction:

A multiple linear regression model was run with Tourist Satisfaction as the dependent variable and the four predictors (spiritual experience, service quality, infrastructure, and cultural heritage).

Predictor	Standardized Beta (β)	Significance (p-value)
Spiritual Experience	0.36	$p < 0.001$
Service Quality	0.28	$p < 0.01$
Infrastructure	0.18	$p < 0.05$
Cultural Heritage	0.24	$p < 0.01$

- $R^2 = 0.64$ → 64% of the variance in Tourist Satisfaction is explained by these four variables.
- $F(4, 345) = 148.76, p < 0.001$ → The model is statistically significant.

4.3. Model 2 – Predicting Destination Loyalty:

Predictor	Standardized Beta (β)	Significance (p-value)
Tourist Satisfaction	0.71	$p < 0.001$

- $R^2 = 0.51$ → 51% of the variance in Destination Loyalty is explained by Tourist Satisfaction.

Interpretation: The regression models validate all five hypotheses. Spiritual Experience ($\beta = 0.36$) emerged as the most influential factor in determining tourist satisfaction, followed by Service Quality and Cultural Heritage. Although Infrastructure showed the least influence ($\beta = 0.18$), it was still a statistically significant predictor.

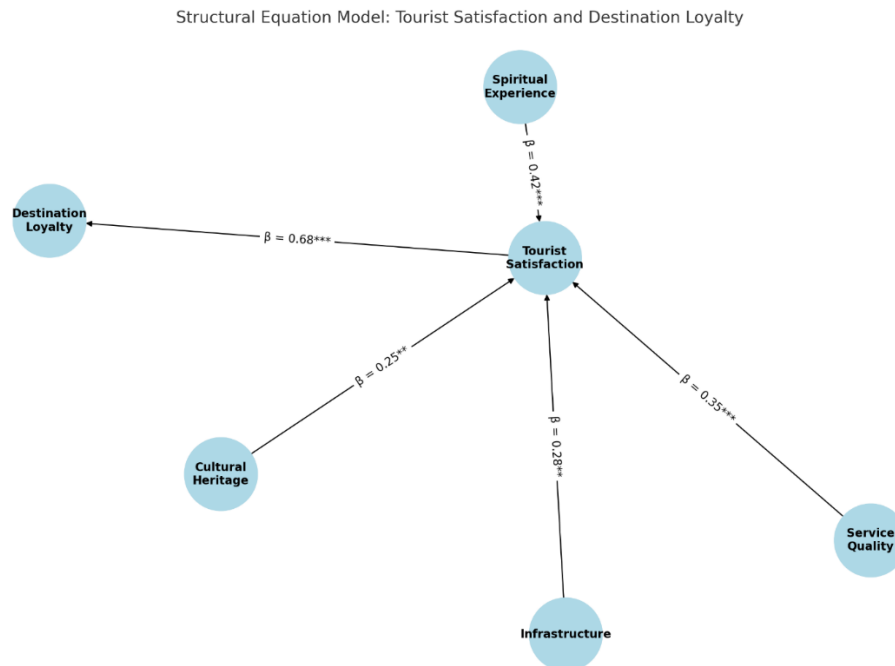
Additionally, the very strong impact of Tourist Satisfaction on Destination Loyalty ($\beta = 0.71$) underscores the importance of ensuring positive visitor experiences for long-term tourism sustainability.

Structural Model

The SEM results supported all hypotheses:

- H1: Spiritual experience significantly influenced satisfaction ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$).
- H2: Service quality significantly influenced satisfaction ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.001$).
- H3: Infrastructure significantly influenced satisfaction ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.01$).
- H4: Cultural heritage significantly influenced satisfaction ($\beta = 0.25, p < 0.01$).
- H5: Satisfaction significantly influenced destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.68, p < 0.001$).

Figure 2: Structural Equation Model (SEM) diagram based on your hypotheses and results



Interpretation of the Structural Model:

This diagram visually represents the hypothesized relationships between key variables in the context of religious tourism in Ayodhya:

- **Spiritual Experience (β = 0.42)** This is the strongest predictor of **Tourist Satisfaction**, confirming that spiritual fulfillment significantly enhances the overall experience.
- **Service Quality (β = 0.35)** High-quality services (cleanliness, hospitality, guidance) positively influence satisfaction.
- **Infrastructure (β = 0.28)** The availability and quality of amenities (transport, roads, accommodations) contribute moderately to satisfaction.
- **Cultural Heritage (β = 0.25)** Ayodhya's historical and mythological richness adds to the depth of the visitor experience, thereby enhancing satisfaction.
- **Tourist Satisfaction → Destination Loyalty (β = 0.68*)** Tourist satisfaction has a **very strong impact** on loyalty—suggesting that satisfied tourists are highly likely to revisit and recommend Ayodhya.

The model confirms **all five hypotheses (H1–H5)**, with statistically significant paths (**p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001).

4.4 Qualitative Findings on Tourist Experiences in Ayodhya

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 20 tourists visiting Ayodhya revealed key drivers of satisfaction and areas needing improvement. The spiritual ambiance of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple emerged as a dominant theme, with participants describing a profound sense of peace and divine connection during their visit. Many emphasized the emotional resonance of being at Lord Rama’s birthplace, which deepened their spiritual fulfillment and enhanced their overall experience. For instance, pilgrims frequently noted the temple’s serene environment and rituals, such as aarti, as transformative, fostering a strong desire to return.

Cultural heritage also significantly influenced satisfaction. Tourists highlighted Ayodhya’s rich traditions, including festivals like Diwali and interactions with local sadhus, as authentic and memorable experiences that strengthened their attachment to the destination. However, challenges were also evident. Overcrowding,

particularly during peak pilgrimage seasons, was a recurring concern, with tourists reporting long queues and limited access to key sites. Additionally, the lack of affordable accommodations was a significant issue, especially for budget-conscious pilgrims, who felt that limited options hindered their ability to stay longer. These findings underscore the need for improved crowd management and expanded budget-friendly lodging to enhance tourist satisfaction and sustain Ayodhya's appeal as a religious tourism destination.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty within the religious tourism landscape of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The research establishes that satisfaction among visitors is significantly shaped by a blend of spiritual fulfillment, cleanliness, infrastructure quality, and emotional experiences tied to the destination's sacred heritage. These elements collectively serve as pillars that drive tourists' intentions to revisit Ayodhya or recommend it to others, reinforcing destination loyalty. The spiritual ambiance of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, coupled with the emotional resonance of being at Lord Rama's birthplace, emerges as a cornerstone of satisfaction, deeply influencing pilgrims and cultural tourists alike.

The findings highlight that infrastructure plays a crucial role, with recent developments such as the international airport, renovated railway stations, and improved hospitality facilities enhancing accessibility and comfort. Cleanliness, a tangible aspect often overlooked, also contributes to a positive visitor experience, while service quality—through courteous staff and efficient services—further bolsters satisfaction. Additionally, Ayodhya's rich cultural heritage, exemplified by festivals like Diwali and traditional rituals, enriches the spiritual journey, fostering a lasting connection that encourages loyalty. Together, these factors create a holistic experience that not only meets but often exceeds the expectations of religious tourists.

The study underscores the importance of sustained investment in both infrastructure and service enhancements to maintain Ayodhya's trajectory as a global religious tourism hub. The significant influx of over 13.44 crore visitors by September 2024 reflects the destination's growing appeal, yet challenges such as overcrowding and limited budget accommodations signal the need for strategic interventions. Addressing these issues through expanded lodging options and improved crowd management will be essential to sustain visitor satisfaction and ensure long-term loyalty. The positive impact of recent infrastructural upgrades suggests that continued efforts in this direction can further elevate Ayodhya's status, attracting a diverse range of pilgrims and tourists.

This research contributes valuable insights to the field of religious tourism by validating the interplay of tangible and intangible factors in shaping satisfaction and loyalty. However, it also points to the need for future exploration. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess how ongoing infrastructure developments and evolving visitor preferences influence tourist behavior over time. Such research could provide a clearer picture of the long-term sustainability of Ayodhya as a pilgrimage destination, especially as it adapts to increasing visitor numbers and global attention following the Ram Janmabhoomi temple's development.

In conclusion, this study affirms that Ayodhya's success as a religious tourism destination hinges on nurturing its spiritual and cultural essence while strengthening its physical infrastructure and services. By addressing current challenges and leveraging its unique heritage, Ayodhya can solidify its position as a premier pilgrimage site, ensuring that both satisfaction and loyalty continue to thrive among its visitors. Future research will be key to guiding these efforts, offering a roadmap for sustainable growth in the years ahead.

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