

# Saryu Ghat and its Cultural connection with People and the impact of Cultural tourism

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## **Abstract**

Rivers are essential natural resources and have historically served as the foundation for the development of civilizations. Ayodhya, located on the banks of the Saryu River, is a case study of the intricate connection between a river and its cultural significance to local communities. This paper investigates the deeply embedded cultural ties between the Saryu River and the people of Ayodhya, highlighting how cultural tourism shapes the social and economic dynamics of the region. While this form of tourism enhances infrastructure development and economic growth, offering diverse employment opportunities, it also brings challenges such as environmental deterioration and social tensions. Examining the dual impact of cultural tourism on Saryu Ghat underscores the necessity for sustainable practices to protect the river's sanctity while fostering economic advancement, ensuring the enduring legacy of Ayodhya's cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Saryu River, Saryu Ghat, Cultural Heritage, Ayodhya, Cultural Tourism, Economic Growth, Infrastructure Development.

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## **I. Introduction**

Culture is a set of beliefs shared by people, deeply intertwined with their historical and geographical contexts. In the case of Ayodhya, the Saryu River serves as a vital cultural thread that connects the local community to their heritage and spiritual practices. Flowing through the heart of Ayodhya, the Saryu River symbolizes the region's cultural identity, playing a crucial role in the lives of the residents. This river is notably lower than the Ghaghara River, which flows through the Awadh region. While Ghaghara is a permanent river traversing international borders, Saryu's significance lies in its local traditions and beliefs, which shape the identity of the people who live along its banks.

The Saryu River originates from the revered Mansarovar Lake and is also known as Ghaghara and Manas Nandini. Spanning a length of 350 kilometres, it is the largest tributary of the Sharda River, draining the central Kumaun region in Uttarakhand before merging with the Sharda at the Pancheswar Indo-Nepal border. Ultimately, the Saryu flows into the Ganga in the Saran district of Bihar. Its tributaries, including Gomti and Pannar on the right bank and Punger on the left, further enhance its significance in the regional ecosystem.

As cultural anthropologist Alfred Kroeber posits, culture is acquired through culturalization and socialization, shaping individuals while simultaneously being transmitted by them. The Saryu River embodies this dynamic, serving as a living testament to the customs, rituals, and beliefs of the local population. Zelinsky emphasizes that culture is intricately tied to specific economic systems, illustrating how the economic activities around the river, such as agriculture and tourism, are inseparable from the cultural practices of the people. Edward Burnett Tylor defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." This definition encapsulates the essence of Ayodhya, where the river influences everything from religious rituals to daily life.

Situated along the banks of the Saryu River in the Ayodhya district of Uttar Pradesh, the city of Ayodhya serves as a significant administrative and cultural centre. Geographically positioned at a latitude of 26.7922° N and a longitude of 82.1998° E, Ayodhya is well-connected through road, rail, and air transport, with the nearest airport, Maharishi Valmiki International Airport, located just 5 kilometres from the Ayodhya railway station. According to the 2011 Census, the city has a population composed of 56.7% males and 43.3% females, with an average literacy rate of 78.1%.

Ayodhya is renowned for its rich tapestry of ancient religious sites, including the iconic Lord Rama Mandir, Lord Hanuman Garhi, Kanak Bhawan, Nageshwar Nath, and many others. These sacred sites not only attract pilgrims and tourists but also serve as a focal point for cultural tourism, reinforcing the city's religious and cultural significance. As people come to pay their respects and partake in the spiritual activities associated with Saryu Ghat, the connection between the river and the community becomes ever more profound, demonstrating

how geographical and cultural tourism can profoundly impact the lives and beliefs of the people in this vibrant region.

### **Cultural connection of Saryu River with their people**

The Saryu River holds a profound cultural significance for the people of Ayodhya, serving as more than just a geographical feature; it embodies their spiritual identity and communal traditions. The narratives and rituals associated with the river connect the region's residents to their heritage, forming a unique bond that highlights the intertwining of culture, religion, and daily life. The Saryu River is deeply ingrained in local mythology, particularly linked to the life and legacy of Lord Rama. According to lore, it is believed that Lord Rama took Jal Samadhi (a form of water immersion leading to spiritual liberation) in the Saryu River, subsequently departing for Baikuntha Dham, the abode of Lord Vishnu. This significant event is not merely a historical reference but shapes the spiritual landscape of the region. It is said that in response to Rama's departure, the deity Shiva cursed the river, declaring that while people would bathe in its waters, the river's water would not be suitable for rituals poignant reflection on the complex relationship between the divine and the earthly realm.

The tale becomes a source of cultural identity, as illustrated in Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas. Here, the transformation of Lord Rama into his eternal form as Mahavishnu through the waters of Saryu emphasizes the river's role as a conduit of divine journeys and eternal truths. Such narratives reinforce the river's sanctity in the eyes of the community, making it a sacred space for reflection and reverence.

Cultural practices surrounding the Saryu River reflect the broader traditions of Sanatana (Hindu) culture, which values pilgrimage to holy sites. One significant event is Ram Navami, a festival celebrating the birth of Lord Rama, during which lakhs of devotees gather to bathe in the Saryu's waters. This ritual not only signifies a spiritual cleansing but also serves as a communal gathering that strengthens social ties and cultural solidarity among the participants.

The right bank of the Saryu River is dotted with numerous temples, each a testament to the region's rich spiritual heritage. These temples attract pilgrims and tourists alike, perpetuating the tradition of visiting holy places as an intrinsic part of Hindu culture. The Saryu River thus stands as a lifeline for both the spiritual and social fabric of Ayodhya, where the flow of water symbolizes the continuous passage of cultural traditions. Beyond its spiritual significance, the Saryu River offers livelihood opportunities for the residents of Ayodhya. The river supports local economies through activities such as fishing, agriculture, and tourism. The influx of tourists seeking spiritual experiences contributes to the economic vitality of the region, providing income for local artisans, vendors, and guides.

The cultural connection to the river is further highlighted during the festival of Diwali, rooted in the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after his exile. The people welcomed him by lighting thousands of earthen lamps, which led to the tradition of celebrating Deepawali. This festival, celebrated with great fervor, reflects the enduring values of hospitality, gratitude, and community. The preparation for these celebrations stimulates economic activity, encouraging local craftspeople to produce lamps and decorations, thereby enhancing their livelihoods.

The interplay of culture and tourism along the Saryu River exemplifies the definition of cultural tourism, which emphasizes the importance of experiencing and consuming cultural attractions. As tourists flock to Ayodhya for its religious significance, they engage with the local customs and practices, thereby enriching their understanding of Hindu traditions and values. This engagement fosters a reciprocal relationship, where visitors contribute to the local economy while gaining insights into the spiritual heritage of the area.

The celebrations at Saryu Ghat, particularly during significant festivals, not only attract pilgrims but also tourists who seek to experience the vibrant cultural tapestry of Ayodhya. The enthusiasm surrounding events such as Deepotsav and Ram Navami showcases how geographical cultural tourism can amplify community pride, promote local traditions, and enhance the region's visibility on a national and international platform.

The Saryu River and its ghat are emblematic of the cultural and spiritual identity of Ayodhya's residents. Their deep-rooted connection to the river, shaped by mythological narratives and religious practices, fosters a rich cultural milieu that continues to thrive through the influence of tourism. As cultural traditions are celebrated and passed down generations, Saryu Ghat remains a vital source of communal identity and economic opportunity, highlighting the profound impact of geographical cultural tourism on the people of Ayodhya.

### **Ghats of Saryu River**

The Saryu Ghat, located along the banks of the Saryu River in Ayodhya, serves as a pivotal cultural and spiritual hub for the local community and visitors. This ghat, particularly Ram Ghat or Saryu Ghat, holds immense significance as it is believed to be the site of Lord Rama's cremation, making it a sacred place for Hindus. The ghat is not only a site for ritual bathing but also a focal point for various cultural activities and festivals that strengthen the community's cultural identity. The Saryu River is lined with several ghats, each with its unique significance. The Swargdwar, which stretches from Sahastradhara to the Nageshwarnath Temple, is a prominent

feature of the riverbank. The structures that overlook the river were predominantly constructed during the reign of Nawab Safa Jung and his Hindu minister, Naval Rai. Other important ghats include Lakshman Ghat and Chaudhri Charan Ghat, with some being pakka (cemented) ghats and others kutchha (earthen) (Kumar Sarvesh, 2017). The oldest name of Naya Ghat is Dharmraj Ghat, which is one of the oldest holy places in Ayodhya, housing the temple dedicated to Dharmaraja, the Lord of Death, and his scribe, Chitrugupta (Bakker, 1986). These historical connections enhance the cultural richness of the Saryu Ghat, making it a site of both reverence and community gathering (Veer der Peter, 2004).

One of the most significant cultural events associated with Saryu Ghat is the Deepotsav celebration during Diwali (The Times of India, 2024). Since 2017, the Uttar Pradesh government has organized this festival on the ghats of the Saryu River, where thousands of lamps are lit to commemorate the festival of lights. In 2023, a record 22.23 lakh lamps were lit, earning a place in the Guinness World Records. The plan for 2024 aims to surpass this by lighting 25 lakh lamps (UP Tourism). This event not only attracts tourists but also fosters a sense of unity and community among the locals. The preparation for Deepotsav has a tangible economic impact, particularly on local potters who are commissioned to create earthen lamps. To light an earthen lamp, one lamp, wick, oil and match sticks are required. A large number of orders are being given to potters for making earthen lamps, which is increasing their income. This demand increases their income and supports local craftsmanship. The festival encourages residents to spend on essential goods and services, expanding their economic capacity and mental maps of what is affordable and accessible. As people participate in the celebrations, they not only contribute to the local economy but also reinforce their cultural identity and community ties.

Cultural tourism at Saryu Ghat exemplifies the definition adopted by the UN Tourism General Assembly, at its 22nd session (2017), which describes cultural tourism as a type of tourism where the primary motivation of visitors is to learn, discover, and experience cultural attractions. Mac Cannell's assertion that all tourism is a cultural experience further highlights the importance of cultural elements in attracting visitors. As tourists flock to Saryu Ghat for its spiritual significance and vibrant festivals, they engage with the local culture, traditions, and practices, thereby enriching their understanding of the community. This interaction fosters a mutual appreciation, where visitors gain insights into the cultural heritage of Ayodhya while providing economic benefits to the local populace.

Saryu Ghat serves as a vital cultural nexus for the people of Ayodhya, deeply intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and daily lives. The ghats not only provide a space for ritual practices but also act as a catalyst for cultural tourism, enhancing the local economy and reinforcing community bonds. Saryu Ghat stands as a testament to the enduring connection between culture, spirituality, and community in shaping the identity of the region. It has positive and negative impacts on the areas which are mentioned below-

#### **A. Positive impact of Cultural tourism**

Cultural tourism in Ayodhya has significant positive impacts on the local economy, community, and cultural heritage. Here's an elaboration on each point:

##### **1. Increase in the Number of Tourists**

The influx of tourists to Ayodhya, a city of immense religious and cultural significance, leads to increased government revenue. Tourists utilize various modes of transportation—such as trains, buses, and personal vehicles—to reach Ayodhya. This surge in travel not only boosts the local economy but also enhances tax revenues for the government, which can be reinvested into infrastructure and public services. Improved transportation facilities and services are often developed in response to rising tourist numbers, further facilitating access to the region.

##### **2. Increase in Donations to Temples**

Ayodhya is home to numerous temples, where pilgrims and tourists often donate both online and in cash. This practice significantly increases the financial resources available to temple management, which can be used for maintenance, community services, and charitable activities. Additionally, the government benefits from increased tax revenues associated with these donations. The spiritual significance of these contributions fosters a sense of community and shared purpose among visitors, reinforcing the cultural fabric of Ayodhya.

##### **3. Increase in Income of Street Vendors, Hotels, and Guest Houses**

The rise in tourist numbers directly contributes to the livelihoods of local street vendors, hotel owners, and guest house operators. As visitors seek food, souvenirs, and accommodations, these businesses experience increased demand, leading to higher incomes and job creation. Local artisans and craftsmen also benefit from cultural tourism as tourists often seek authentic handicrafts and traditional products, further supporting the local economy.

##### **4. Tradition of Throwing Coins in the River**

The ancient tradition of throwing coins, gold, and silver into the Saryu River for good luck and to make wishes has both cultural and ecological significance. Historically, coins were made of copper, which has natural water-purifying properties. The practice, believed to date back to 600 BCE, not only maintains cultural continuity but also contributes to local livelihoods. Individuals who collect these coins, often using magnets, can earn a modest

income, thus supporting themselves and their families. This practice highlights the intersection of tradition, spirituality, and economic activity in Ayodhya.

**5. Increase in Income of Sailors**

The Saryu River serves as a popular attraction for tourists seeking boat rides. Local sailors capitalize on this demand, significantly increasing their income through tourism-related activities. The growth of cultural tourism has led to a rise in boat rental services, creating jobs and enhancing the livelihoods of those who depend on the river for their income. This economic boost helps sustain local families and contributes to the overall vibrancy of the Ayodhya tourism sector.

**6. Women's Groups and Cultural Tourism**

Cultural tourism provides opportunities for women to gather and engage in community activities along the banks of the Saryu River and at temple sites. These gatherings foster social connections and allow women to spend quality time away from their daily responsibilities. Participating in rituals such as offering alms, bathing, and seeking Darshana (viewing the deity) enriches their spiritual lives and strengthens community bonds. This aspect of cultural tourism empowers women by giving them a platform to connect with each other and their cultural heritage.

**7. Increased Opportunities for Women on Amavasya**

On auspicious occasions like Amavasya (New Moon), Ayodhya sees a significant influx of visitors, particularly women. The development of the area to accommodate these visitors can lead to improved facilities and services tailored to their needs. This includes better access to healthcare, sanitation, and recreational opportunities. As the region develops, women will have more avenues to participate in cultural and religious activities, enhancing their overall experience and engagement with the community.

Cultural tourism in Ayodhya is a powerful driver of economic growth, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. By enhancing the livelihoods of local residents, fostering community engagement, and promoting the region's rich heritage, cultural tourism contributes to the sustainable development of Ayodhya as a significant religious and cultural destination.

**B. Negative impact of cultural Tourism**

Cultural tourism in Ayodhya, while beneficial in many ways, also brings several negative impacts that can affect both the local community and the environment. Here's an elaboration on each point:

**1. Crowd Effect on People**

The influx of tourists for spiritual tourism leads to overcrowding in various areas, including railway stations, airports, bus terminals, temples, and hotels. This crowding can create a chaotic environment, causing stress and discomfort for both tourists and locals. Visitors often experience fatigue from long waits in queues, and the sheer volume of people can lead to feelings of suffocation. Additionally, the risk of individuals getting lost in the crowd increases, which can be particularly distressing for those unfamiliar with the area.

**2. Impact on Residents' Daily Activities**

Local residents face significant challenges due to the increased tourist traffic. Daily activities, such as commuting to work, can become arduous due to traffic jams and congested roads. The increased number of vehicles can lead to longer travel times and frustration among residents, disrupting their routines and quality of life.

**3. Increase in Transport Fares**

With the rise in tourist numbers, there is often a corresponding increase in transport fares. Local transport providers, such as e-rickshaw drivers and private cab operators, may raise their prices, taking advantage of tourists who may not be familiar with the standard fare rates. This can lead to financial strain on visitors and create a perception of unfair pricing.

**4. Rise in Professional Begging**

The presence of tourists can lead to an increase in professional begging, particularly near temples and other tourist attractions. Some individuals may adopt begging as a profession, dressing in shabby clothes to elicit sympathy from visitors. This not only affects the overall experience of tourists but can also create an uncomfortable atmosphere for both tourists and locals.

**5. Price Hike by Street Vendors**

Street vendors often raise their prices in response to the influx of tourists, seeking to maximize profits. This price inflation can make it difficult for both tourists and residents to afford goods and services. Tourists may feel exploited, while locals may struggle to purchase everyday items at reasonable prices.

**6. Deterioration of Air Quality**

The rapid development of infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of tourists can negatively impact the environment, particularly air quality. Construction activities, increased vehicular traffic, and the establishment of new facilities can lead to dust and pollution, which may adversely affect the respiratory health of residents. As the area becomes dustier, it can contribute to health issues, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly.

While cultural tourism in Ayodhya brings economic benefits and promotes cultural exchange, it also poses challenges that must be addressed. The negative impacts on local residents, infrastructure, and the environment highlight the need for sustainable tourism practices that balance the interests of tourists and the local community. Implementing measures to manage crowds, regulate transport fares, and maintain air quality will be essential in mitigating these adverse effects.

## II. Conclusion

The Saryu River and its ghat stand as powerful symbols of the cultural and spiritual identity of Ayodhya's residents. They reflect a complex interplay of mythological narratives, religious traditions, and communal practices that have flourished over centuries. The profound connection between the people and the river not only underscores the cultural richness of the region but also highlights the vital role of Saryu Ghat in shaping the social and economic landscape of Ayodhya.

As we have explored, the spiritual significance of the Saryu River acts as a magnet, drawing large numbers of pilgrims and tourists seeking to experience its sanctity. This influx of visitors catalyzes economic opportunities, supports local artisans, and enhances community engagement, demonstrating the positive impact of geographical cultural tourism. By illuminating the region's cultural identity, Ayodhya not only preserves its heritage but also fosters a vibrant environment conducive to growth and development. The Saryu Ghats facilitate a deeper understanding of the area's spiritual significance, transforming it into a dynamic cultural destination.

Furthermore, the connection between the Saryu River and the community underscores the security and accessibility of religious sites. The increased focus on developing necessary facilities—such as toilets, changing rooms, medical care, and food services—improves the overall experience for visitors and promotes a sense of safety, particularly for women. This feminization of public spaces fosters confidence among travellers, thereby contributing to the region's social fabric.

However, the thriving cultural tourism sector does not come without challenges. The heavy footfall during religious festivals can lead to overcrowding, resulting in littering and environmental degradation. Moreover, rising transportation costs can disproportionately affect economically vulnerable groups, forcing them to walk long distances. This situation may exacerbate urban sprawl and strain local infrastructure. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that prioritizes sustainable tourism practices, ensuring that the cultural heritage of Ayodhya is preserved while accommodating the growing number of visitors.

In conclusion, the Saryu River and its ghats encapsulate the essence of Ayodhya, serving as a locus of cultural identity, economic opportunity, and spiritual significance. The inherent beliefs surrounding the river not only attract pilgrims but also contribute to the broader narrative of human connection to the natural world. As Ayodhya evolves, it stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernization, where the journey of cultural tourism can pave the way for holistic development while nurturing the values and heritage that define its people. Embracing both the opportunities and challenges of this evolution will ensure that the legacy of Saryu Ghat endures, continuing to enrich the lives of its residents and visitors alike.

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