

Preservation of Heritage and Promotion of Tourism in Ajmer: A Policy Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Ajmer, situated in the heart of Rajasthan, is one of India's most historically and culturally vibrant cities. Renowned for the Dargah Sharif of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and its proximity to Pushkar, Ajmer represents a unique synthesis of Sufi spirituality, Rajput valor, and Mughal architectural splendor. Over the past few decades, the city has evolved into a major heritage and pilgrimage tourism destination. However, rapid urbanization, commercialization, and inadequate policy implementation have posed challenges to heritage conservation. This research paper explores the relationship between heritage preservation and tourism promotion in Ajmer from a policy perspective. Drawing on government reports, academic studies, and field observations, it evaluates the effectiveness of current tourism policies and heritage management frameworks. The study concludes that an integrated, community-oriented, and sustainable policy approach is essential to ensure that Ajmer's rich cultural legacy is preserved even as tourism continues to grow.

INTRODUCTION

Ajmer, one of the oldest cities in Rajasthan, is a mirror of India's multicultural past and pluralistic identity. Founded in the 7th century by Raja Ajaypal Chauhan, it flourished under various dynasties including the Chauhans, Mughals, and British. Each period contributed to the development of the city's architecture, culture, and social life. Ajmer's fame today rests primarily on two major pilgrimage sites: the Dargah Sharif of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a sacred destination for Muslims and followers of Sufi traditions, and Pushkar, known for the Brahma Temple and the world-famous Pushkar Fair. Together, these sites attract millions of pilgrims and tourists from India and abroad every year. Tourism in Ajmer has emerged as a crucial economic activity, generating income, employment, and cultural exchange. Yet, the rapid growth of tourism has also placed significant pressure on the city's heritage resources. Historic monuments are facing degradation, while unplanned development and commercial encroachments threaten the visual and cultural integrity of heritage zones. Balancing heritage preservation with tourism development is therefore one of the major policy challenges facing Ajmer today.

Historical and Cultural Significance of Ajmer

Ajmer's historical significance is deeply rooted in its composite cultural heritage. During the medieval period, the city became a major center of Islamic learning and Sufi culture under the influence of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, who settled here in the 12th century. His shrine, the Dargah Sharif, is one of the most visited pilgrimage centers in South Asia. It symbolizes communal harmony, as people from all faiths visit to pay homage to the saint. The city's architectural heritage reflects a blend of Hindu, Islamic, and Mughal influences. The Adhai-din-ka-Jhonpra, initially a Sanskrit college later converted into a mosque, displays exquisite calligraphy and intricate stone carvings. The Taragarh Fort, overlooking the city, is a testimony to Rajput military architecture. The Ana Sagar Lake, Daulat Bagh, and Akbari Fort further enhance Ajmer's scenic and historical appeal. In close proximity lies Pushkar, which hosts the only Brahma Temple in the world and the famous Pushkar Fair—one of India's largest cultural events. This unique combination of religious, architectural, and natural heritage makes Ajmer a multidimensional destination that appeals to spiritual seekers, historians, and leisure tourists alike.

Tourism Growth and Development

Tourism in Ajmer began to gain prominence in the late 20th century and accelerated after the introduction of promotional campaigns such as "Padharo Mhare Desh" by the Rajasthan Tourism Department and "Incredible India" by the Ministry of Tourism. Improved infrastructure—such as the Delhi–Jaipur–Ajmer highway, the Ajmer Junction railway connectivity, and



the development of nearby Kishangarh Airport—has further boosted tourist inflow. The annual Urs festival at the Dargah Sharif and the Pushkar Fair attract large numbers of domestic and international visitors. According to data from the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC) between 2005 and 2010, Ajmer consistently ranked among the top five tourist destinations in the state. A wide range of accommodation facilities—from budget lodges and dharamshalas to heritage hotels—caters to diverse economic segments of travelers. However, this tourism expansion has not always been accompanied by adequate planning. Overcrowding during festival seasons, inadequate waste management, and encroachments near heritage sites have become common. The pressure of mass tourism has begun to compromise the authenticity and sustainability of Ajmer’s heritage resources.

Heritage Preservation Efforts

Preserving Ajmer’s heritage requires a multidimensional approach involving physical conservation, community engagement, and sustainable policy planning. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is responsible for maintaining protected monuments such as Adhai-din-ka-Jhonpra and Taragarh Fort, while the Rajasthan State Department of Archaeology oversees several local heritage structures. The **Rajasthan Heritage Conservation Policy (2006)** introduced guidelines for identifying, documenting, and conserving heritage properties. The **Ajmer–Pushkar Heritage Corridor Project**, initiated in the late 2000s, sought to create a tourism circuit linking major sites while improving infrastructure, signage, and public amenities. The **Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH)** has also played a key role in heritage listing, documentation, and awareness campaigns. Moreover, initiatives like “Heritage Walks” and “Adopt-a-Monument” programs have helped foster public involvement. Despite these efforts, many heritage structures remain under threat due to insufficient maintenance, lack of coordination between agencies, and limited funding. Preservation work often focuses on monuments rather than on broader cultural landscapes, neglecting traditional neighborhoods, crafts, and intangible heritage associated with Ajmer’s historical identity.

Policy Framework and Institutional Mechanisms

Rajasthan’s tourism and heritage policies provide an overarching framework for managing cultural resources. The **Rajasthan Tourism Policy (2001)** emphasized developing tourism infrastructure, promoting lesser-known destinations, and encouraging public–private partnerships (PPPs). It recognized heritage tourism as a major economic opportunity for the state. The subsequent **Heritage Conservation Policy (2006)** focused on protecting built heritage, traditional art forms, and local culture. Institutions such as the **Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC)**, **Department of Archaeology and Museums**, **Ajmer Municipal Corporation**, and **Tourism Department of India** play crucial roles in policy formulation and implementation. However, overlapping jurisdictions often lead to inefficiency and duplication of efforts. The absence of a unified heritage management authority for Ajmer has been a major obstacle to coherent planning. UNESCO’s global guidelines on cultural heritage management advocate integrated and participatory approaches. While India has adopted these principles at the national level, their practical implementation in smaller cities like Ajmer remains limited. Heritage preservation continues to be viewed more as a government responsibility rather than a community-driven initiative.

Challenges to Heritage Preservation

The preservation of heritage in Ajmer faces numerous challenges arising from both internal and external factors. **Unplanned urbanization** is one of the most significant threats. Rapid construction, particularly in and around the Dargah area, has led to congestion, encroachment, and alteration of the historic urban fabric. The traditional skyline and approach routes to heritage monuments have been disrupted by modern structures that lack architectural harmony. **Pollution and waste management** present another serious problem. The influx of tourists, especially during Urs and fairs, generates large quantities of solid waste and sewage, overwhelming the city’s infrastructure. Water bodies such as Ana Sagar Lake have suffered from pollution and encroachments. **Commercialization** around heritage zones—such as unregulated shops, hotels, and vendors—further detracts from the aesthetic and spiritual value of sites like the Dargah Sharif. Moreover, **lack of skilled manpower and financial resources** hampers conservation efforts. Many monuments receive only temporary maintenance rather than systematic restoration. **Community participation** in heritage management remains low, as local residents often perceive tourism development as benefiting outsiders rather than themselves. Finally, there is an absence of **data-driven planning** and impact assessment mechanisms to evaluate how tourism activities affect heritage assets.

Tourism Promotion Policies and Their Impacts

Government policies over the past two decades have aimed at positioning Ajmer as a key destination on Rajasthan’s cultural tourism map. The introduction of “Rajasthan Heritage Week,” cultural festivals, and rural tourism schemes under the Ministry of Tourism have contributed to increased visibility. The promotion of **Ajmer–Pushkar as a twin destination** has been particularly successful in attracting both spiritual and leisure tourists. However, the benefits of tourism growth have not been evenly distributed. While major hotels and transport operators profit from the rising influx, local artisans and small



traders often struggle to sustain themselves amidst increasing competition and inflation. The lack of adequate regulation has also led to issues such as overpricing, poor sanitation, and exploitation of tourists. The push for tourism promotion without corresponding heritage protection has resulted in **heritage commodification**, where cultural symbols are used primarily for commercial gain rather than for preserving authenticity. The challenge for policymakers is to reconcile economic goals with the need to maintain cultural integrity and environmental sustainability.

Policy Gaps and Limitations

A review of the existing frameworks reveals several gaps. Firstly, there is no comprehensive **Heritage Management Plan** specific to Ajmer that integrates urban planning, tourism, and conservation. Different agencies work in silos without coordination, leading to inefficiency. Secondly, heritage zoning regulations are weakly enforced, allowing unplanned construction near protected monuments. Thirdly, **financial allocations for restoration projects** are inadequate, and most funding is directed towards a few prominent sites, leaving smaller but equally important monuments neglected. Another gap lies in the **lack of community participation**. Heritage management policies often overlook the role of local stakeholders such as residents, artisans, and temple or shrine committees. Public–Private Partnership models have potential but require stricter regulatory mechanisms to prevent misuse. Additionally, **training and capacity-building programs** for guides, vendors, and tourism officials are insufficient, resulting in poor visitor experience and misinformation. The absence of a digital database or **GIS-based heritage inventory** further limits monitoring and planning. Effective heritage tourism management requires real-time data on visitor numbers, site conditions, and economic contributions, which are currently unavailable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE TOURISM

To achieve a balance between heritage preservation and tourism promotion, a comprehensive and sustainable policy framework is necessary. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integrated Heritage Management Plan:** A city-specific plan should be developed that integrates conservation, infrastructure, and tourism. It should include zoning regulations, visitor management strategies, and guidelines for urban aesthetics.
2. **Community-Based Tourism Development:** Local residents should be actively involved in tourism initiatives through training programs, handicraft promotion, and heritage walks. Their participation will ensure equitable distribution of benefits and foster a sense of ownership.
3. **Public–Private Partnerships (PPP):** Carefully structured PPPs can help mobilize funds for restoration and maintenance of heritage sites, provided they adhere to strict conservation norms.
4. **Capacity Building and Awareness:** Regular workshops for guides, shopkeepers, and tourism workers should emphasize heritage interpretation, sustainable practices, and hospitality.
5. **Infrastructure and Sanitation Improvement:** Upgrading amenities such as parking, restrooms, and waste disposal near heritage sites will enhance the tourist experience while protecting the environment.
6. **Digital Heritage Documentation:** The creation of a GIS-based database of heritage sites will help monitor structural conditions and guide policy decisions.
7. **Eco-friendly Practices:** Promoting green transport, reducing plastic waste, and regulating visitor numbers during peak seasons will support sustainable tourism.
8. **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Heritage education should be incorporated into school curricula and community programs to cultivate awareness and pride among citizens.

CONCLUSION

Ajmer, with its deep historical roots and vibrant cultural heritage, is a shining example of India's diversity and spiritual unity. The city's growing tourism potential offers immense opportunities for economic development, but unregulated expansion poses serious risks to its heritage integrity. The preservation of Ajmer's heritage and the promotion of its tourism must therefore proceed hand in hand through carefully designed policies and inclusive governance. The key to sustainable heritage tourism lies in adopting an integrated approach that combines government regulation, community participation, private investment, and environmental responsibility. If these measures are implemented effectively, Ajmer can emerge as a model city for heritage management in India—one that safeguards its timeless traditions while embracing the opportunities of modern tourism. By harmonizing preservation with progress, Ajmer can continue to inspire generations as a living monument of India's cultural richness and spiritual legacy.



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