



## AN INTER-CIRCUIT COMPARISON OF ANNUAL TOURIST VISITS AMONGST RELIGIOUS CIRCUITS IN UTTAR PRADESH

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**Abstract:** India is a land of rich cultural heritage and religious dispersion. Besides scatteredness in religious beliefs of its people, the country is home to various religious sites that serve as pious places of worship as well as notable tourist attractions. States like Uttar Pradesh are abode to various pilgrimage sites that attract domestic tourism as well as inbound tourism in the country. Uttar Pradesh, in specific, attracts 14.1% of the total domestic tourism of the nation making it the second-highest tourist attraction in the country (*source: Statista.com*). To develop a better understanding of the state's contribution in the respective field, this study attempts to further analyse the annual tourist visits to different religious circuits viz. Buddhist Circuit, Bundelkhand Circuit, Braj Circuit, Awadh Circuit, and Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit (as identified by the state government of Uttar Pradesh), thereby comparing the trends in tourist visits amongst the identified circuits. Based on secondary data sources, this empirical research deploys panel data of annual tourist visits to the state for a period ranging from the year 2013 to 2022. The study finds an upsurging trend in the domestic business for the pandemic-hit tourism industry after the year 2020. The study reports that there have been significant differences in annual tourist visits to the identified religious circuits during the period of study as the former seems to be highly dispersed and varied amongst the circuits.

**Keywords** - Religious tourism, religious circuits, annual tourist visits, domestic tourist visits, foreign tourist visits

### I. Introduction

“Religious tourism, spiritual tourism, sacred tourism, or faith tourism, is a type of tourism with two main subtypes: pilgrimage, meaning travel for religious or spiritual purposes, and the viewing of religious monuments and artefacts, a branch of sightseeing.” (*Source: Wikipedia.com*). Religiously motivated tourism is probably as old as religion itself and is consequently the oldest type of tourism (Rinschede, 1992). The literature emphasises that religious travel is the first form of tourism. In the early 1990s, new approaches and concepts of religious tourism emerged (Iliev, 2020). The universe of religious tourism can be conceptualized in terms of three overlapping categories. These are (a) pilgrimage shrines, defined as places that serve as the goals of religiously motivated journeys from beyond the immediate locality; (b) religious tourist attractions, in the form of structures or sites of religious significance with historic and/or artistic importance; and (c) festivals with religious associations (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Conventionally, travelling to a pious place has been referred to as a pilgrimage, in which travellers make long treks on foot from remote locations to reach a sacred destination while motivated by a strong religious or spiritual conviction. While this basic structure of religious travel to sacred places has remained unaltered, it has evolved in contemporary societies in ways that are different in its manifestation: motives and needs of travellers become complex and diversified and such travel exhibits a mix of religious and ‘tourism-like’ characteristics and therefore is referred to as religious tourism (Shinde & Rizzello, 2014).

One of the oldest types of tourism and a worldwide phenomenon of religious history, it can be differentiated into various forms. The short-term religious tourism is distinguished by excursions to nearby pilgrimage centers or religious conferences. The longterm describes visits of several days or weeks to national and international pilgrimage sites or conferences (Rinschede, 1992). These two forms of religious tourism can be expressly denoted as domestic and foreign tourist visits to place of religious as well as historic importance. Studies have mentioned the prominence of domestic tourists visiting the religious sites in India. As per a report published on September 8, 2022, domestic visitor spending contributed 94% to the travel and tourism GDP in India while foreign spending accounted for 6% of the total travel and tourism GDP in the country (*Source: statista.com*). Another report published in the Hindustan Times on March 21, 2023, says “The number of domestic tourists that visited places of pilgrimage were 1,433 million in 2022, while 6.64 million foreign tourists visited India. In 2021, the numbers stood at 677 million and 1.05 million, respectively.”

Uttar Pradesh, in specific, attracts 14.1% of the total domestic tourism of the nation making it the second-highest tourist attraction in the country just after the state of Tamil Nadu (*source: Statista.com*). The state, on the other hand, accounted for 4.24% of the total foreign tourist visits (FTV) in India in the year 2021 (*source: Annual report of Ministry of Tourism*). As per the annual report of Ministry of Tourism published for the year 2021, the state of Uttar Pradesh was ranked second in total domestic tourist

visits (DTV) across the country while the foreign tourist visits (FTV) brought to it seventh position in the list. There are various religious/pilgrimage sites that serve as pious places of worship as well as notable tourist attractions in Uttar Pradesh. Some prominent religious sites in the state are Varanasi, Ayodhya, and Vindhyachal. The state government of Uttar Pradesh has segregated the state into six distinct divisions based on their religious importance and has named them as 'tourist circuits' to facilitate ease in site identification by the tourists and further promote tourism in the state. These circuits are- Buddhist Circuit, Bundelkhand Circuit, Braj Circuit, Awadh Circuit, Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit, and Ramayana Circuit. Nevertheless, the identified circuits mostly encapsulate the religious sites falling within their periphery, hence the study incorporates the term 'religious circuits' instead of tourist circuits in further analysis. Based on these developments, this study attempts to analyse the performance of the pre-identified religious circuits of Uttar Pradesh and make an inter-circuit comparison of annual tourist visits (TV) during the period ranging from the year 2013 to 2022.

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 History of Religious Tourism

Religiously motivated tourism is probably as old as religion itself and is consequently the oldest type of tourism (Rinschede, 1992). The earliest studies on religion-induced travel appeared in various tourism journals in the 1980s (Kim, Kim, & King, 2019). In the early 1990s, new approaches and concepts of religious tourism emerged (Iliev, 2020). Rinschede (1992) defined the concept as religious tourism is that type of tourism whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons, and exhibits a mix of religious and 'tourism-like' characteristics (Shinde & Rizzello, 2014). The universe of religious tourism can be conceptualized in terms of three overlapping categories. These are (a) pilgrimage shrines, defined as places that serve as the goals of religiously motivated journeys from beyond the immediate locality; (b) religious tourist attractions, in the form of structures or sites of religious significance with historic and/or artistic importance; and (c) festivals with religious associations (Nolan & Nolan, 1992). Although religious tourism is often compared to pilgrimage and spiritual tourism, however, religious tourism has a broader understanding and meaning. Thus, the tourism industry has identified a new niche known as religious tourism (Iliev, 2020).

### 2.2 Religious Tourism and India

Religious tourism constitutes the dominant form of tourism in India (Shinde K. , 2018). In India, religious tourism has largely evolved from the tradition of pilgrimage. The purpose, motivation, and essence remain religious, but the journey exhibits touristic features (Shinde K. , 2012). As per a report published in the Hindustan Times on March 21, 2023, "The number of domestic tourists that visited places of pilgrimage were 1,433 million in 2022, while 6.64 million foreign tourists visited India. In 2021, the numbers stood at 677 million and 1.05 million, respectively." Along with state governments and the centre's Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD), infrastructure and tourist amenities have improved recently. This was directed at the tier 3 and tier 4 cities, which are home to a sizable number of religious sites nationwide. Most frequently, the Indian Railways and these destinations work together to develop the travel routes. Even though religious tourist routes or circuits have been discovered and are still being developed, religion continues to play a significant role in India's political environment. With or without political controversy, there is no doubt that faith-based tourism is a revenue-generator for India, estimated at 902 million U.S. dollars in 2022, approximately accounting for six to 11 percent of the global faith-based travel market (Source: *statista.com*).

### 2.3 Religious Circuits of Uttar Pradesh

Religious tourism has only recently begun to appear in tourism policy which itself does not have a long history (Shinde K. , 2018). At the state level, the government tourism agencies have identified pilgrimage sites as repositories of religious and cultural resources and therefore began to promote them as destinations for different kinds of tourism including cultural tourism and heritage tourism. Several states including Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra have formulated specific policies towards this goal (Shinde K. , 2018). Following the footprints of the central government with regard to the PRASHAD scheme, the state government of Uttar Pradesh has identified destination-based six major tourist circuits viz., Buddhist Circuit, Bundelkhand Circuit, Braj Circuit, Awadh Circuit, Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit, and Ramayana Circuit. Though the site identification within the Ramayana circuit is a work-in-progress, the other circuits make up for the religious sacredness of the state. For instance, Buddhist circuit involves all the major sites in Uttar Pradesh that have been associated with the birth and spread of the religion such as Kapilvastu, Kaushambi, Sarnath, Sankisa, Sravasti, and Kushinagar. Bundelkhand circuit connects places like Bithoor, Chitrakut, Jhansi, Kalinjar, and Mahoba. Braj Circuit, on the other hand, wires through the places like Agra, Mathura, and Vrindavan that majorly revolve around lord Krishna and his life. Next, Awadh circuit connects the points of lord Rama's life including Dewa Sharif, Naimisharanya, and Ayodhya. Lastly, the Vindhya-Varanasi circuit covers the oldest city Kashi and the abode of goddess Vindhyawasini. Table 1 in the research methodology section provides an account of religious sites that are part of these circuits along with their historical/religious association.

### Research Gap

After a thorough review of the concerned literature, it was observed that there is extant literature available on the theme- religious tourism. Various studies have addressed the forms, implications, roles, challenges, and viewpoints related to religious tourism. However, the studies in the tourism industry that conspicuously study these religious circuits of Uttar Pradesh were absent in the literature.

### Research Objectives

Therefore, having cognizance of the reviewed literature and based on the research gap identified, this study aims to fulfil the following objectives:

1. To estimate the contribution of different religious circuits to Uttar Pradesh's overall religious tourism.
2. To analyse the differences in inter-circuit annual tourist visits amongst the religious circuits.

## III. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Problem Statement

States like Uttar Pradesh are abode to various pilgrimage sites that attract domestic tourism as well as inbound tourism in the country. Uttar Pradesh, in specific, attracts 14.1% of the total domestic tourism of the nation making it the second-highest tourist attraction in the country after Tamil Nadu (Source: *statista.com*). Therefore, this study attempts to further analyse the contribution of the identified religious circuits to the religious tourism of the state by analysing the annual DTV as well as FTV to different religious circuits as identified by the state government viz. Buddhist Circuit, Bundelkhand Circuit, Braj Circuit, Awadh Circuit, and Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit.

### 3.2 Hypotheses Development

To find answers to the proposed research problem, the following hypotheses are developed in this research study:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is a significant difference in the annual domestic tourist visits amongst the religious circuits

**H<sub>2</sub>:** There is a significant difference in the annual foreign tourist visits amongst the religious circuits

**H<sub>3</sub>:** There is a significant difference in the annual tourist visits amongst the religious circuits

### 3.3 Research Design

This research is an empirical one that is based primarily on secondary data sources. The data for this study has been extracted from the official website of the Ministry of Tourism of Uttar Pradesh ([uptourism.gov.in](http://uptourism.gov.in)). Data related to annual tourist visits, both domestic and foreign, to the identified religious circuits, was collected from the website for the period starting from the year 2013 to 2022. Table 1 provides an account of places within the religious circuits that were incorporated in the study. Kruskal Wallis H-test was applied to the data to draw relevant analyses for testing the developed hypotheses. Additionally, some descriptive statistics were used to give an insight into the collected data.

table 1. religious sites used in the study

Sites	Religious/historical association
<b><u>Buddhist Circuit</u></b>	
<b>Kapilvastu</b>	This is the pious place where Prince Siddharth grew up as a child.
<b>Kaushambi</b>	It is thought that Buddha preached numerous sermons here. In addition to numerous sculptures and figurines, cast coins, and terracotta artefacts, excavations have uncovered the ruins of an Ashokan Pillar, an ancient fort, and a large monastery.
<b>Sarnath</b>	Here, after being enlightened, Lord Buddha gave his first discourse. The Buddha's teachings can still be heard echoing from the remains of the enormous Dhamekh Stupa. Emperor Ashoka built the slick, gleaming pillar that served as the Buddhist Sangha's first permanent home in 273-232 B.C. India's national emblem is currently the Lion Capital atop this pillar.
<b>Sankisa</b>	According to legend, Lord Buddha came here after preaching to his mother in heaven.
<b>Shravasti</b>	Believed to be founded by the mythological king Sravast, it is the location where Buddha spent numerous monsoons and delivered significant sermons.
<b>Kushinagar</b>	It is the location where the Lord Buddha abandoned his physical body and gained Maha Parinirvana.
<b><u>Bundelkhand Circuit</u></b>	
<b>Bithoor</b>	Valmiki Ashram, Brahmavart Ghat, Dhruv Teela, and Nana Saheb's palace are a few of the historical sites in this area.
<b>Chitrakut</b>	It is well-known in Hindu mythology and the epic Ramayana as the location of Lord Ram and Sita's prolonged exile.
<b>Jhansi</b>	It is connected to the tale of Rani Laxmibai, a freedom fighter who, at the age of 22, led an uprising against the British. It is a charming town with a number of lakes and temples under the imposing Jhansi Fort's watch.
<b>Kalinjar</b>	According to tradition, the Neelkanth Temple is located where Lord Shiva allegedly slept for a while after ingesting the poison that arose from the churning ocean.
<b>Mahoba</b>	It is a modest town distinguished by the numerous lakes and temples perched on hills and gorges. Engineering marvels include the unconquerable hilltop fort and the man-made lakes constructed by Chandela monarchs. Ballads extol its former glories and recount the heroic tale of Alha and Udal, two mythical warrior brothers who gave their lives in defence of their homeland. Rahila's Sun Temple is a distinctive granite building from the ninth century. Its fundamental structural layout is reminiscent of Khajuraho temples.
<b><u>Braj Circuit</u></b>	
<b>Agra</b>	Agra is the birthplace of the religion known as Dīn-i Ilāhī, which flourished during the reign of Akbar and also of the Radhaswami Faith, which has around two million followers worldwide. Agra has historic linkages with Shauripur of Jainism and Runukta of Hinduism, of 1000 BC. It is also the city of the Taj Mahal and capital of the erstwhile Mughal empire.
<b>Mathura</b>	Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, provides a magnificent glimpse into Krishna's life.
<b>Vrindavan</b>	Lord Krishna played his flute here and performed leelas in this location.
<b><u>Awadh Circuit</u></b>	
<b>Deva Sharif</b>	A renowned shrine of Sufi Saint Haji Waris Ali Shah.
<b>Naimisharanya</b>	A holy site of pilgrimage for Hindus with origins in the Vedic era. The ancient structures of Chakra Teerth, Vyas Gaddi, and Suraj Kund are places of worship.
<b>Ayodhya</b>	Ayodhya, known as the birthplace of Lord Ram, is a significant site for pilgrimage. Suraj Kund, Kanak Bhawan, Hanumangarhi, and Ramkot seem to emerge from the pages of history.
<b><u>Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit</u></b>	
<b>Varanasi</b>	One of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities is Varanasi. All Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists revere this location along the Ganga.
<b>Vindhyachal</b>	It is a revered pilgrimage spot and is located on the banks of the Ganga in the Vindhya hills close to Mirzapur. The home of heavenly power and blessings is said to be the Shaktipeeth of the goddess Vindhyavasini.

Source: www.uptourism.gov.in

**IV. Results and Discussion**

Since the data collected for the study did not fit into the assumptions of a normal distribution, therefore, a parametric test could not produce accurate results. Thus, a non-parametric test i.e., Kruskal Wallis H-test, was applied to the dataset to make the final analysis. Furthermore, descriptive statistics was used to draw some useful insights from the data.

**4.1 Descriptive Analysis**

The adjacent figures provide a descriptive account of annual DTV, annual FTV, and annual TV to the religious circuits. Following connotations have been used to represent the religious circuits in the diagrammatic representation of data:

- BUC = Buddhist Circuit
- BC = Braj Circuit
- VVC = Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit
- BKC = Bundelkhand Circuit
- AC = Awadh Circuit

*Note: Due to the non-availability of data for the year 2022, forecasts have been used to determine the Annual DTV and Annual FTV to Ayodhya region within the Awadh Circuit (AC). Extrapolation was used to draw the required forecasts using 'Create a forecast sheet' feature of MS-Excel.*

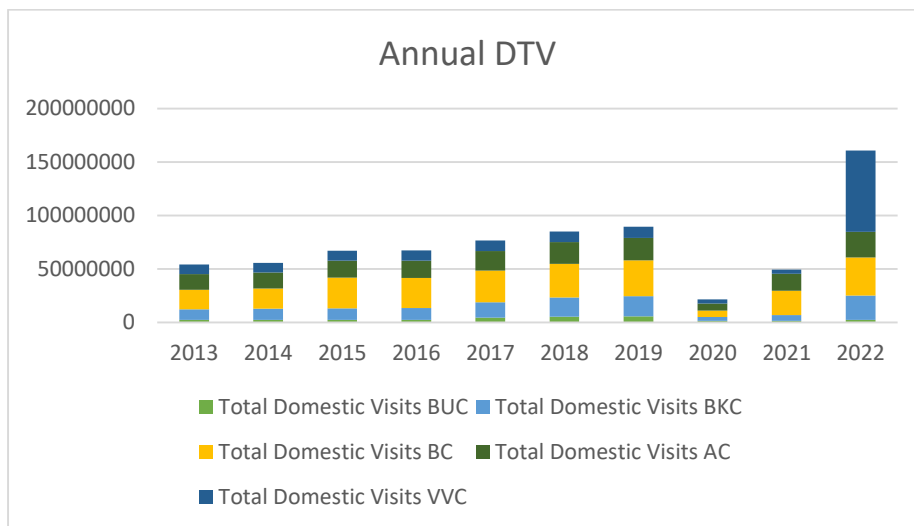


fig.1. Annual Domestic Tourist Visits for the period 2013-2022  
(Source: Compiled by author)

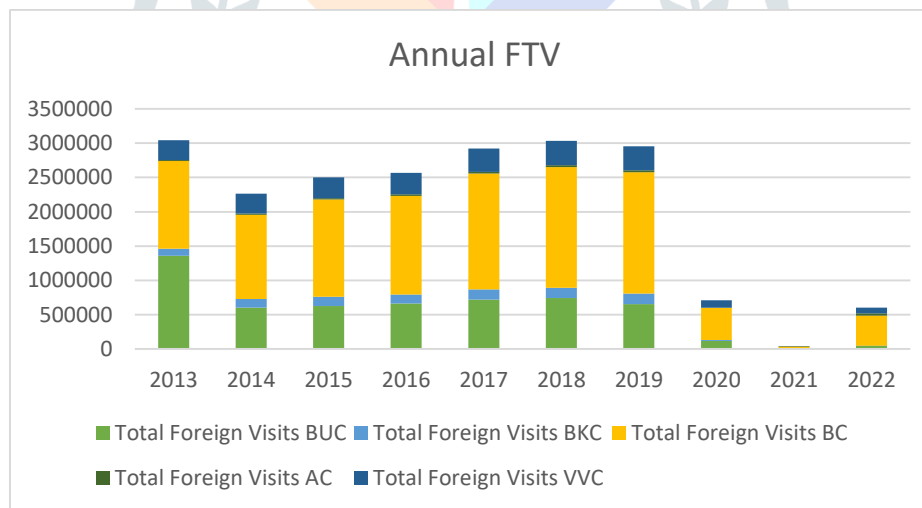


fig.2. Annual Domestic Tourist Visits for the period 2013-2022  
(Source: Compiled by author)

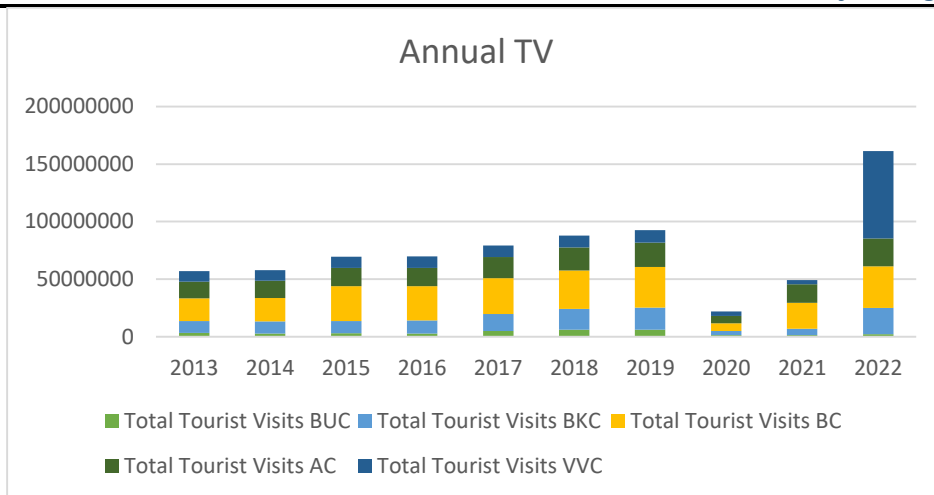


fig.3. Annual Tourist Visits for the period 2013-2022  
(Source: Compiled by author)

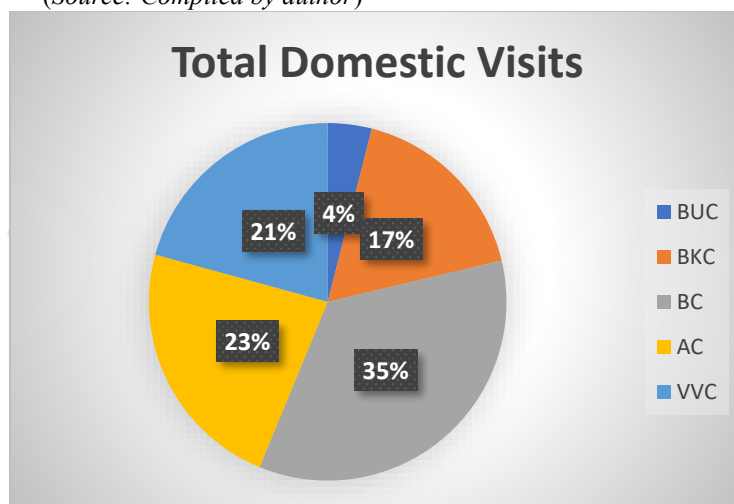


fig.4. Total Domestic Visits across the years to the circuits  
(Source: Compiled by author)

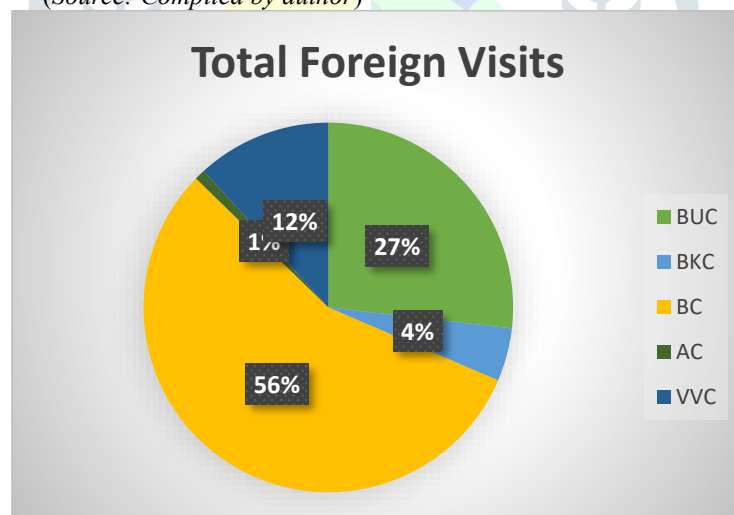


fig.5. Total Foreign Visits across the years to the circuits  
(Source: Compiled by author)

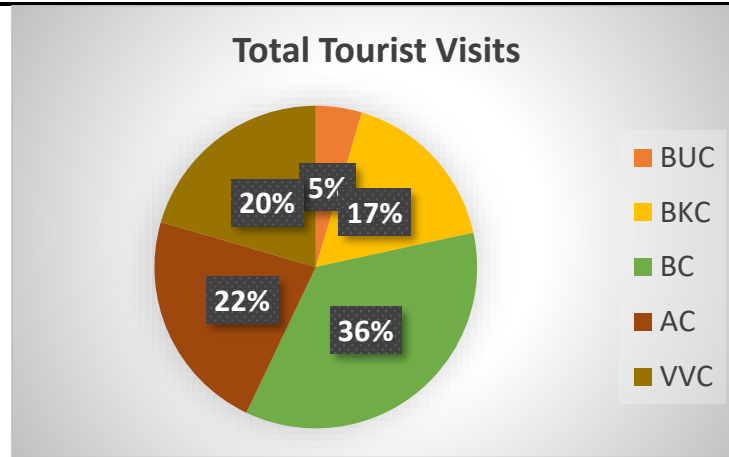


fig.6. Total Tourist Visits across the years to the circuits  
(Source: Compiled by author)

**4.2 Empirical Analysis**

To test the hypotheses of the study, Kruskal Wallis H-test was applied to the dataset. The results of the test verified the rejection of the null hypothesis for all the three cases as has been reported in the adjacent SPSS output table (refer to fig. 4.).

**Hypothesis Test Summary**

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of Domestic is the same across categories of Circuits.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Foreign is the same across categories of Circuits.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Total is the same across categories of Circuits.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.000	Reject the null hypothesis.

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

fig.7. SPSS output table for hypotheses testing

The H-test analysis reveals that the Annual DTV across the religious circuits are not similarly distributed. In other words, there were found significant differences in Annual Domestic Tourist Visits to different religious circuits. Similar results were produced in case of Annual FTV and Annual TV. The results of pairwise comparisons of circuits for each hypothetical assumption are reported in the next section.

**V. Findings and Conclusion**

Diagrammatic representation reveals the following:

- Tourist visits to the religious circuits are highly dispersed and varied amongst the circuits.
- As the analysis reflects, the year 2020 registered a steep fall in domestic tourist visits to the religious circuits due to the advent of the global pandemic Covid-19. However, the year 2021 shows a recovery from the dip in the previous year.
- In case of foreign tourist visits, 2021 registered a sharp downfall lesser than the year 2020 as the global pandemic halted international movements across the national boundaries during the period 2020-21. However, the pace could be observed to normalise gradually in the recent year of 2022.
- The Braj Circuit seems to be contributing the most to the U.P.’s religious domestic tourism counts later followed by the Awadh Circuit. The Bundelkhand Circuit and the Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit seem to be in a rigorous competition for third place. Last and yet least contributes the Buddhist Circuit to the overall count of domestic tourists to religious destinations.
- Alike domestic religious tourism, foreign tourism is attracted to the state mostly by the Braj Circuit. Later, come the Buddhist Circuit, the Vindhya Varanasi Circuit, the Bundelkhand Circuit and the least in the list is from the Awadh Circuit.
- Combining both annual DTV and FTV, total tourist visits to the state are in majority within the Braj Circuit, then the Awadh Circuit, followed by the Vindhya Varanasi Circuit, the Bundelkhand Circuit, and lastly the Buddhist Circuit.

Below mentioned are the results of H-test applied to the dataset:

- There were significant differences found in the Annual DTV between Buddhist Circuit & Bundelkhand Circuit, Buddhist Circuit & Awadh Circuit, Buddhist Circuit & Braj Circuit, and Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit.

- There were significant differences found in the Annual FTV between Awadh Circuit & Buddhist Circuit, Awadh Circuit & Braj Circuit, and Bundelkhand Circuit & Braj Circuit.

- In case of Annual TV, significant differences existed between the pairs of Buddhist Circuit & Bundelkhand Circuit, Buddhist Circuit & Awadh Circuit, Buddhist Circuit & Braj Circuit, and Vindhya-Varanasi Circuit & Braj Circuit.

Hence, the null hypotheses drawn for the study are rejected altogether as there were found significant differences in the tourist visits amongst the circuits.

#### VI. Recommendations and Future Scope of Study

Although, the state tourism seems to be recovering from the unprecedented setbacks caused by the covid-19 pandemic and its related restrictions in the year 2020. The state government must make additional efforts to promote religious tourism in the state after the setback. There is a need to focus on the less contributing circuits like the Buddhist circuit in order to promote tourism development in the state. Though the Buddhist circuit attracts a significant amount of foreign tourist traffic in the state, attention needs to be paid on the domestic section as well. To increase the foreign exchange earnings (FEE) of the state, government needs to focus on less contributing zones like the Awadh Circuit and the Bundelkhand Circuit. More sites of religious and historic importance need to be identified and included in the Awadh Circuit to attract enhanced inbound tourism. Further, for the overall increment in the inbound religious tourist statistics, it is important to fasten the pace of basic infrastructural developments, provide more recreational facilities, and responsibly promote the religious heritage of the state.

This study is a short-sighted one as it is limited only to the state of Uttar Pradesh. Also, due to the lack of abundant data related to the tourist statistics of the state such as tourist receipts and expenditure, not much insights could be drawn for the study. Therefore, future studies can be conducted using the data of religious tourist visits to other states as well as religious sites across the country and try to build their study over a stronger database.

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