



# Cultural-Heritage Tourism in Kushinagar District, Uttar Pradesh: Scenario and Prospects

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## **Abstract:**

Cultural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions or products in a tourism destination. It encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions. In This way, tourism and cultural heritage are interrelated to each other. Kushinagar, nestled in the verdant landscapes of Uttar Pradesh, holds profound significance for history enthusiasts, spiritual seekers, and travellers alike. This town has been a silent witness to the final days of Lord Buddha. It was here that he delivered his last sermon, attained "Mahaparinirvana" and was cremated at Ramabhar (Kushinagar). The cremation site, known as "Mukut Bandhan," witnessed the construction of a grand stupa by the Mallas, later renovated by Ashoka the Great. Chinese travelers Fa Hien and Hieun Tsang also documented "Kushinara" in their travel memoirs. Beyond its religious and historical importance, Kushinagar offers visitors a chance to experience rural life in Uttar Pradesh. The surrounding villages and farmlands provide glimpses into traditional Indian lifestyle and agriculture. Archeological excavations have yielded a rich collection of antiquities, including artistic artifacts and statues of various gods and goddesses. Additionally, Kushinagar served as a crucial link route for ancient highways, such as Ayodhya–Janakpur, Rajgrih–Vaishali–Shrawasti, and Maharshi Valmiki's Ashram. This research paper explores the cultural and artistic heritage of Kushinagar. It delves into the prospects of cultural heritage tourism in the district, shedding light on its potential for sustainable development and preservation.

**Keywords:** Cultural-Heritage, Tourism, Tangible and intangible cultural heritage, Landscapes.

## **Introduction:**

Heritage is what we inherit from the past and use in the present day. Simply stated, history is the past, whereas heritage is the modern-day use of the past for tourism and other purposes (e.g. education and community development). In broad terms this includes both natural and cultural heritage. Natural heritage includes naturally-occurring phenomena, such as canyons, rain forests, lakes, rivers, glaciers, mountains, deserts and coastlines. Cultural heritage, on the other hand, is the past created by humankind and its various manifestations. While natural heritage is an important part of tourism, particularly in the growing realm of nature-based tourism, this book is concerned with the human past as a tourism resource. The cultural heritage we use today includes both tangible and intangible elements. It comes in the form of material objects such as buildings, rural landscapes and villages, cities, art collections, artifacts in museums, historic gardens, handicrafts and antiques, but it also encompasses non-material elements of culture,

including music, dance, beliefs, social mores, ceremonies, rituals and folklore. All of these are important components of heritage that are used for tourism and other purposes.

International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) defined “heritage” as a broad concept that include tangible assets such natural and cultural environment, encompassing landscape, historic places, and build environment as well as intangible assets such as collection, past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences (see ICOMOS Charter 2002).

Cultural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions or products in a tourism destination. These attractions or products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions. On the other hands Heritage tourism is a practice where people visit heritage sites within a country or travel abroad to historical places of significance to see centuries old past heritage and experience traditional heritage monuments, gardens, and places as recognized by UNESCO, archeological societies, and other places of historical, cultural, and natural significance.

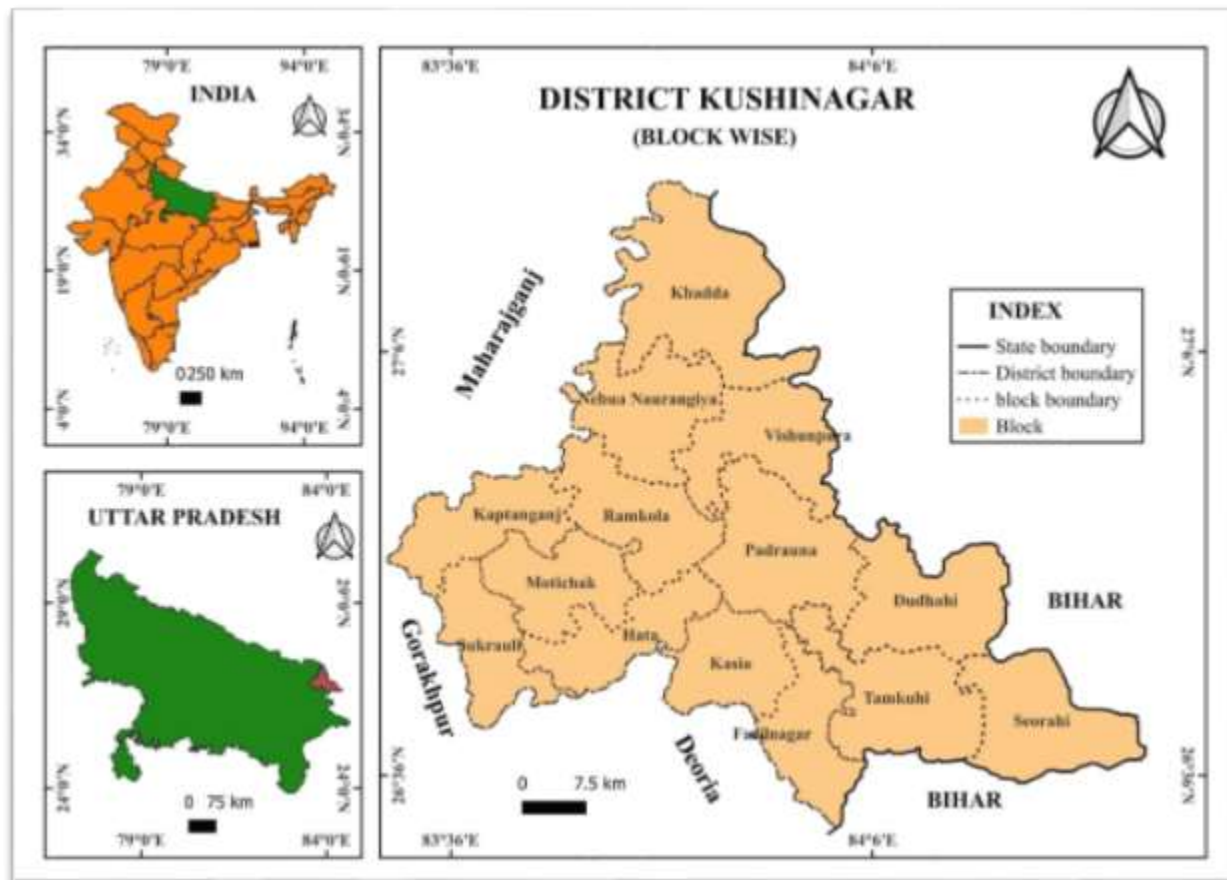
The terms ‘cultural tourism’ and ‘heritage tourism’ are often used in the industry and in scholarly writing as being two separate but related, or overlapping, phenomena. Cultural tourism is sometimes used to refer to people visiting or participating in living cultures, contemporary art and music or other elements of modern culture. Some observers suggest that heritage tourism is based upon antiquated relics; it tends to occur in rural areas and is more place-bound, while cultural tourism is dominant in urban areas and is less place-bound, so that the ‘content is the same while the context is different’ (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2010).

If we talk about the history of heritage tourism, its earliest form was pilgrimage. Early pilgrims – people who travel in search of spiritual experiences or for religious reasons – visited places that were important from religious or spiritual perspectives. Burial sites of famous leaders, locations where miracles occurred, or places of mystical importance, believed to have healing powers, were all seen as salient destinations for religious travelers. The earliest pilgrims, therefore, visited places of spiritual heritage importance, many with global appeal. The Grand Tour is another important historical phase of heritage tourism. From the 1600s until the mid-1800s, it was common for young men of social and financial means in Europe to travel with tutors and other entourage to the classical art cities and architectural wonders. Learning languages, art, history, and architecture was among the main objectives of that type of tourism. Perhaps the best-known modern origins of heritage tourism were the experiences of Thomas Cook, the father of modern travel agents, tour operators, and group tours.

Today, heritage properties and living cultures are among the most popular attractions everywhere. Few countries have tourism industries devoid of cultural heritage products. It is safe to assume that a majority of tourist attractions and destinations in the world today are based on elements of cultural heritage. In the context of heritage tourism includes two main kinds of heritages, viz. natural heritage and cultural heritage. Natural heritage includes naturally occurring phenomena, such as forest, lakes, rivers, mountains, deserts, and coastlines. Cultural heritage, on the other is the past created by humankind and its various manifestations, while natural heritage is an important part of tourism, particularly in the growing realm of nature-based tourism (Timothy 2011: 3). Cultural heritage and tourism closely connected with the various forms of urban tourism, rural tourism, and ecotourism, which are the core of heritage tourism. Present study identifies the varying components of cultural heritage and analyses the scenario and prospects of tourism development in the study area. The study is based on the primary field survey, questionnaire method and analysis of information collected from regional tourist office, and reports of the Archaeological Survey of India.

## About the study area:

Kushinagar district is situated in the north-eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. Its geographical location is between 26°33' north latitude to 27°18' north latitude and 83°29' east longitude to 84°26' east longitude. Kushinagar district is divided into 14 development blocks and 06 tehsils. Its border is with Maharajganj and Gorakhpur districts in the west. It is surrounded by Bihar state in the east and south-east and Deoria district in the south.



**Fig. 1:** Location Map of the Study area.

Budhi Gandak and Chhoti Gandak are the main rivers in the district, which flows from north-west to south-east. The total area of the district is 2906.0 square kilometers. The total population here according to census 2011 is 3564544. The rural population in the district is 95.3 percent and the urban population is 4.7 percent. Most of the population of the district lives in rural areas, whose main means of livelihood is agriculture.

The present Kushinagar is identified with Kusavati (in the pre-Buddha period) and Kushinara (in the post-Buddha period). Kushinara was the capital of Mallas which was one of the sixteen Mahajanpads of the 6th Century BCE. Since then, it remained an integral part of the erstwhile empires of Maurya, Shunga, Kushana, Gupta, Harsha, and Pala dynasties. In the medieval period, Kushinagar had passed under the suzerainty of Kuryu Kings. Kushinara continued to be a living city till the 12th century CE and was thereafter lost into oblivion. Padrauna is believed to be ruled over by a Rajput adventurer, Madan Singh, in the 15th century CE. However, modern Kushinagar came into prominence in the 19th century with archeological excavations carried out by Alexander Cunningham, the first Archeological Surveyor of India and later followed by C.L. Carllyle who exposed the main stupa and also discovered a 6.10 meters long statue of reclining Buddha in 1876. Excavations continued in the early twentieth century under J. Ph. Vogel. He conducted archaeological campaigns in 1904-5, 1905-6 and 1906-7, uncovering a wealth of Buddhist materials. Chandra Swami, a Burmese monk, came to India in 1903 and made Mahaparinirvana Temple into a living shrine. After independence, Kushinagar remained part of the district of Deoria. On 13 May 1994, it came into being as a new district of Uttar Pradesh.

## Discussion:

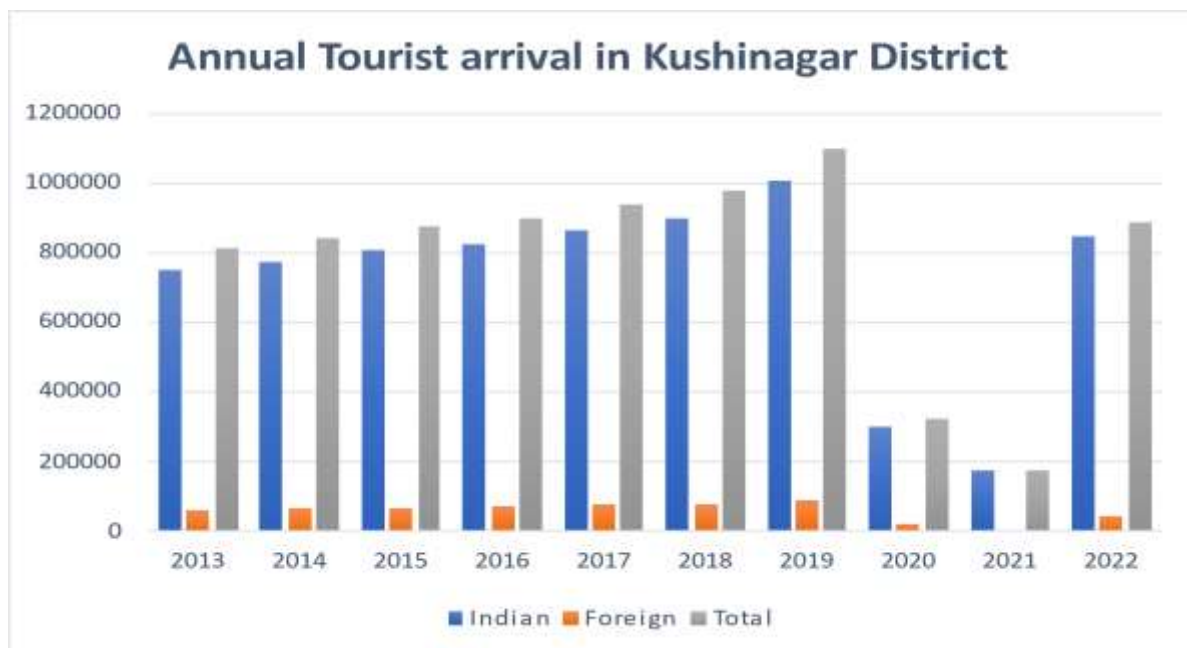
Kushinagar, located in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, is a significant pilgrimage site for Buddhists around the world. It holds immense historical and religious importance as it is believed to be the place where Gautama Buddha attained Parinirvana, or final enlightenment, and passed away. As a result, Kushinagar attracts a large number of devotees and tourists who come to pay their respects and explore the rich Buddhist heritage of the region.

Kushinagar is also home to several monasteries and meditation centers that offer retreats and courses on Buddhist philosophy and meditation. These institutions provide visitors with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the teachings of Buddhism and experience a sense of inner peace and tranquility. For those interested in history and archaeology, the Kushinagar Museum is a must-visit. The museum houses a collection of ancient artifacts and sculptures that date back to the Gupta and Maurya periods. It provides valuable insights into the cultural and artistic heritage of the region. Apart from its religious and historical significance, Kushinagar offers visitors a chance to experience rural life in Uttar Pradesh. The surrounding villages and farmlands provide a glimpse into traditional Indian lifestyle and agriculture. Tourists can take part in activities like bullock cart rides, village walks, and interacting with local artisans. The historical and pilgrimage city possesses rich cultural heritage that attracts more than more than eight lakhs tourists visit Kushinagar alone in a year on various religious occasions. Over 90% of these visitors are Indians. (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Annual Pilgrims/Tourist arrivals in Kushinagar District.

S. No.	Year	Tourist		
		Indian	Foreign	Total
1.	2013	750171	62292	812463
2.	2014	774872	65435	840307
3.	2015	805553	68833	874383
4.	2016	825218	73514	898732
5.	2017	861760	76221	937981
6.	2018	897546	80147	977693
7.	2019	1006764	89693	1096457
8.	2020	301434	22465	323889
9.	2021	177002	00	177002
10.	2022	848631	41058	889689

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Uttar Pradesh.



**Fig. 2:** Annual Tourist arrivals in Kushinagar District.

According to personal experiences and understanding it is estimated that presently more than eight lakhs pilgrims pay visit to Kushinagar every year. But in 2021 and 2022 the number of tourists dropped to well below 8 lakhs, the main reason for this was Covid-19. According to Kushinagar Regional Tourist Office, no foreign tourists came in the year 2021.

## Cultural Heritage (Tangible):

### A) Buddhist-Pilgrims Sites

#### 1. Parinirvana Stupa and Temple: Serenity's Symbol

Nestled in Kushinagar, India, the Parinirvana Stupa, also known as the Mahaparinirvana Temple, marks the revered site where the sage Gautama Buddha is believed to have passed away. The temple gained historical validation through the efforts of Alexander Cunningham, whose research confirmed Buddha's demise in this location. Erected by the Indian Government in 1956, the temple commemorates the 2,500th anniversary of Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, corresponding to the year 2500 in the Buddhist calendar. Within its sacred confines, a majestic Reclining Buddha statue lies in eternal rest on its right side, head oriented northward, measuring 6.1 meters in length atop a stone platform.



**Fig. 3:** Reclining Buddha statue Kushinagar, India.

## 2. Ramabhar Stupa: A Divine Farewell's Testament

The Ramabhar Stupa, located in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India, is a revered historical and pilgrimage site. It is believed to be the place where Lord Buddha was cremated and attained Mahaparinirvana after his death in 483 BC. The stupa, constructed by the Malla Kings, is made of bricks and stands at a height of 14.9 meters. It is also known as Mukut-Bandhan Chaitya or Mukta-Bandhan Vihara in ancient Buddhist texts. The circular drum of the stupa has a diameter of 34.14 meters at the top and 47.24 meters at the bottom, and it is situated near a pond-like water body.



**Fig. 4:** Ramabhar Stupa, Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.

## 3. Mathakuar Shrine:

Mathakuar Shrine is a significant historical and pilgrimage site located just outside the Parinirvana Stupa complex in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India. It is renowned for housing a colossal statue of Buddha, which stands 3.05 meters tall and is carved from a single block of bluestone sourced from the Gaya region in Bihar<sup>12</sup>. This shrine is believed to be the spot where Lord Buddha delivered his last sermon before his death. The statue is notable for its depiction of Buddha in the Bhumi Sparsh Mudra, symbolizing the moments before he attained Enlightenment and Nirvana. The shrine is a must-visit for those touring Kushinagar, offering a profound glimpse into the spiritual heritage of Buddhism.



**Fig. 5:** Mathakuar Shrine, Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.

#### **4. Wat Thai Temple:**

The Wat Thai Temple, located in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, is a significant Buddhist pilgrimage site. It was built to commemorate the golden jubilee of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne of Thailand. The temple complex, which spans 10 acres, showcases traditional Thai-Buddhist architectural style and includes a monastery, garden, health center, school, and library. It's known for its serene environment and is particularly visited by Thai pilgrims every year. It also houses relics of the Buddha and the late king of Thailand.

#### **5. Indo-Japan-Sri Lanka Temple:**

The Indo-Japan-Sri Lanka Temple in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, is a symbol of the collaboration between Buddhist communities from India, Japan, and Sri Lanka. This temple is a joint venture between the AIK World Buddhist Culture Association Japan and the Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre<sup>1</sup>. It features a main shrine on the first floor, which is a domed brick structure containing an image of Buddha surrounded by ritualistic objects<sup>1</sup>. The temple also houses an Ashta Dhatu (eight metal alloy) idol of Buddha that was brought from Japan and whose construction was primarily funded by the Japanese monarchy. The architectural design was executed by the Atago Isshin World Buddhist Cultural Association.

#### **6. Japanese Garden: Nature's Tranquil Embrace**

The Japanese Garden in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, is a serene spot that combines traditional Japanese landscaping techniques with Indian flora, offering a tranquil retreat. It's one of the rock gardens in the city, appreciated for its greenery and sculpted rock figures with an Oriental touch. This garden is part of Kushinagar's array of tourist attractions, which include ancient relics and sites significant to Buddhism, such as the Mahaparinirvana Temple and the Ramabhar Stupa. The garden adds to the beauty of Kushinagar, a town known for its historical and spiritual importance as the place where Lord Buddha attained Mahaparinirvana.

#### **7. Burmese Temple:**

The Burmese Temple, also known as the Golden Temple by locals, is a significant Buddhist site located in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. It's situated near the Parinirvana Stupa and is one of the unique structures in the area, attracting tourists from all over the world. The temple showcases Buddhist architectural grandeur of modern times and features a singular circular chamber with a magnificent Buddha statue made of eight metals

or Ashta dhatu. This statue was originally brought from Japan in a dismantled form and assembled on-site. The temple complex also includes life-size statues of monks and religious figures, contributing to its spiritual atmosphere.



**Fig. 6:** Burmese Temple (Golden Temple), Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.

## 8. Kushinagar Museum: Stepping into Historical Chronicles

The Kushinagar Museum, also known as the Buddha Museum, is a repository of artifacts that illuminate the history and culture of Kushinagar and its significance in Buddhism. Established in 1992-1993, the museum is placed opposite the Indo-Japan Sri Lankan Buddhist center. Museum's collection is a treasure trove of historical and religious artifacts that provide a window into the past. Among the archaeological finds are statues that capture the essence of ancient artistry, coins that tell tales of commerce and trade, and architectural fragments that hint at the grandeur of bygone structures. The museum also houses a significant collection of relics associated with the Buddha, offering insights into his life and the Kushana period, which was instrumental in the spread of Buddhism. Additionally, the exhibits meticulously depict the life of the Buddha and trace the history of Buddhism in the region, allowing visitors to step back in time and experience the spiritual and historical journey of this ancient tradition.

## B) Hindus-Pilgrims Sites:

### 1. Birla Temple:

The Birla Temple in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, is a relatively new addition to the ancient city's array of spiritual sites. It is situated close to the Parinirvana Stupa, amidst centuries-old stupas, sculptures, monuments, and relics. This temple, built by the Birla family, is dedicated to Lord Shiva and features a marble statue of him in a meditative posture, symbolizing the union of the individual soul with the universal soul.



## 2. Sun Temple – Turkpatti:

The Sun Temple at Turkpatti near Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, is an ancient shrine that dates back to the Gupta Period. It is revered for its idol of the Sun God, which is carved from a special black stone known as Neelmani Stone. This idol was discovered during excavations between the 4th and 5th centuries. The temple is mentioned in the Puranas and is a sacred site for worship, especially on Sundays. Additionally, the Sun Festival in November each year attracts many visitors.



Fig. 7: Sun Temple at Turkpatti, Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.

## 3. Sidhua Asthan:

Sidhua Asthan is a religious site located in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. It's described as a temple-like place that is not very famous among locals but is appreciated for its calmness. It's situated on the main road, making it easily accessible for visitors. The site also hosts festivals on specific days like the 13th day of the month of Falgun and the 2nd day of Deepawali, attracting a large number of devotees. It is considered the site where saints achieved perfection or siddhi in their spiritual pursuits. The temple is dedicated to Saint Siddhnath Ji, and it's believed that the name Sidhua Asthan derives from being the seat of this revered saint. The presence of temples for Hanuman, Goddess Durga, a Dhuni (sacred fire pit), and a Yagyashala (place for conducting Hawans) further adds to its religious importance.

## 4. Kuber Asthan:

Kuber Asthan is a significant religious site located approximately 9 km from Padrauna and 21 km from Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh. It is dedicated to Lord Kuber, the Hindu god of wealth, who is also a devotee of Lord Shiva. A temple known as Kuber Asthan was built here to honor Lord Shiva. The site is famous for its ancient Lord Shiva temple and is known for its serene atmosphere that reflects the essence of eastern Uttar Pradesh life. It is generally not crowded, but it does attract a large number of devotees on Mondays and during the Shivratri festival, when a big mela (fair) is held. The celebrations of Shivratri are particularly auspicious and attract thousands of people who offer water to the idol of Shiva Ling.

## C) Currently being Developed Sites:

### 1. Kukuttha River Front:

The site lies on the banks of river Kukuttha connected via a narrow lane off NH 28 near Aadhya in Uttar Pradesh. There is a bathing ghat built in brick and small stepped religious structures (also in brick) used

during Chhat Puja are existing at the site. There are small other structures on the site include a small canopy with Buddha's statue enshrined in it and an octagonal bird feeding shed.

## 2. Pedestrian Bridge on Hirnyavati River:

The site is located in the campus of Ramabhar Stupa. There exists a small open paved area with seats at the entrance to the complex. Along the Hiranyavati river, both banks of the river have been previously developed with pitching and some steps. There is a boating facility with some shed like structures containing facilities. There also exists one pedestrian bridge across the river at the eastern edge of the ghats and Stupa.



**Fig. 8:** Hirnyavati River, Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh.

## 3. Vipassana Upvan:

Vipassana Upvan is owned by tourism department and maintained by Forest Department, Kushinagar who planted trees and converted it into a forest. This area has developed biological diversity or biodiversity due to presence of dense vegetation and availability of source of water. It is also a Sacred Grove associated with Lord Buddha and yogis, monks and other travelers come here to meditate in peace.

## Contemporary Challenges:

### ➤ Lack of Awareness and Promotion:

1. Despite being a crucial Buddhist pilgrimage site, Kushinagar receives relatively low footfall from international Buddhist pilgrims.
2. The lack of effective marketing and promotion hinders its visibility on the global tourism map.

### ➤ Infrastructure and Connectivity:

1. While the recent inauguration of the Kushinagar international airport is a positive step, further improvements in infrastructure are needed.
2. Better road connectivity, accommodation options, and amenities for tourists are essential.

### ➤ Cultural Preservation:

1. Kushinagar's historical and cultural heritage needs preservation.
  2. Ensuring responsible tourism practices that respect local traditions and monuments is vital.
- Inadequate integration of cultural heritage protection and management laws and practices in promoting issues of social, economic, political, legislative, and cultural development that may be use

as base for making sustainable policies and strategies for protection and conservation of cultural heritage over time.

- Lacks of optimal and rationally required basic facilities such as transport, Hotels, Hospice, Inn, Public Houses etc. for tourists and pilgrims.

## Prospects and Potentials:

1. Kushinagar holds immense historical and religious significance as a prominent Buddhist pilgrimage site. It is widely recognized as the place where Gautam Buddha attained Mahaparinirvana, making it an international destination for Buddhist followers. The town boasts architectural heritage, with the Mahaparinirvana Stupa being a focal point. This stupa, erected by Emperor Ashoka, marks the parinirvana site and houses a reclining nirvana statue of Buddha. Other notable sites include the Nirvana Chaitya, Rambhar Stupa and Matha Kuar Shrine.
2. Kushinagar's economy thrives on its growing tourism industry. The annual celebration of Buddha Purnima attracts both locals and pilgrims, creating a vibrant atmosphere. Architecturally, the town showcases ancient expertise through strategically built monasteries and life-like sculptures of deities. The main road is adorned with temples run by various Buddhist nations, providing spaces for contemplation and interaction with monks.
3. Tourists flock to Kushinagar for its peaceful environment. Meditation centers offer solace to those seeking inner peace, while the lush greenery and fragrant flowers in Meditation Park create a serene ambiance. The Wat Thai Temple, established by Thai Buddhists, serves as a place of worship and cultural exchange.

## Conclusion and Suggestions:

Kushinagar embodies a distinctive cultural and historical landscape, encompassing monuments, artifacts, water features, traditional performances, mythology, customs, festivities, and intangible heritage. These elements attract pilgrims and tourists, yet their significance often lacks proper presentation and communication. Insufficient awareness can impede public and governmental support for preserving these heritage sites. To safeguard them for future generations, the government should devise sustainable strategies, involve local communities, and provide necessary infrastructure.

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