

India’s Heritage: From Pilgrimage to Sustainable Tourism

Heritage is more than a collection of monuments, traditions, and cultural practices inherited from the past. It is a repository of collective memory, identity, and civilisational continuity that shapes how societies understand themselves and their place in the world. Increasingly, heritage is also recognised as an economic resource. When linked with tourism, it can generate employment, stimulate local enterprise, support regional development, and create opportunities for sustainable growth.

Ancient India did not have tourism in the modern sense. There were no travel agencies, no packaged itineraries, no government schemes to promote leisure travel. What India had instead was something older and, in many ways, more sophisticated: *tirthayatra*. As noted in the Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva.

नास्ति तीर्थसमं पुण्यं नास्ति तीर्थसमं तपः।
नास्ति तीर्थसमं दानं तस्मात् तीर्थं समाश्रयेत्॥
(verse 13.108.16 from the Mahabharata (Anusasana Parva).

"There is no merit equal to that obtained from a sacred pilgrimage; there is no austerity equal to pilgrimage; there is no gift equal to pilgrimage. Therefore, one should resort to sacred places (tirthas)."

Ancient pilgrimage networks connected distant regions of the subcontinent, creating centres of religious devotion, economic activity, and social interaction whose vitality depended on the sustained movement of pilgrims and commerce. The Mahabharata's Tirthaparvan and texts like the Matsya Purana enumerate pilgrimage routes that doubled as trade routes. In this sense, *tirthayatra* functioned as heritage tourism—travel that generates employment, supports local economies and connects people to cultural traditions and spiritual practices.

At its core, *tirthayatra* was an immersive form of cultural engagement. Pilgrims participated in rituals, festivals, and community life, ensuring that economic benefits accrued directly to local custodians of heritage. In modern terminology, *tirthayatra* may be understood as an indigenous model of heritage governance in which cultural preservation, economic exchange, and community stewardship were embedded within the same institutional ecosystem. Many of the principles embedded in this historical model continue to shape contemporary understandings of heritage tourism.

Tourists today want to participate in local traditions, understand spiritual practices, and connect with communities. This shift has led to what can be called experience-based tourism. Heritage is no longer presented as something static but as something living and interactive. Initiatives like *Subah-*



JUSTICE VINEET SARAN
FORMER JUDGE,
SUPREME COURT
OF INDIA



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e-Banaras allow visitors to experience cultural practices such as yoga, music, and rituals in a meaningful way. It works because it is rooted in something real—a living tradition that the city has sustained over centuries.

Recognising the economic, cultural, and social potential of such forms of heritage engagement, the Government of India has launched a number of initiatives aimed at integrating cultural preservation with tourism, infrastructure, and local livelihoods. Programmes such as PRASAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive), HRIDAY (Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana), and Swadesh Darshan seek not merely to improve visitor facilities but to strengthen the cultural, economic, and social ecosystems that sustain heritage destinations. Together, these initiatives reflect an increasingly integrated approach in which heritage is viewed not as a relic of the past but as a living asset capable of generating employment, supporting local enterprise, revitalising historic urban centres, and strengthening cultural identity. In many respects, these efforts represent a contemporary attempt to reconnect tourism, community welfare, and cultural continuity in ways that echo

INDIA'S ANCIENT PILGRIMAGE TRADITIONS CAN INFORM A MODERN MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE HERITAGE TOURISM BY LINKING CULTURAL PRESERVATION, COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP, LOCAL LIVELIHOODS, RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL, AND DEVELOPMENT.

the historical logic of *tirthayatra*.

Ancient India developed a model in which heritage, mobility, community welfare, and economic activity were interconnected; contemporary policy is seeking to revive and adapt that logic for modern development. Yet the long-term sustainability of heritage tourism ultimately depends on the communities that sustain these traditions. Temples, pilgrimage routes, festivals, traditional crafts, oral histories, and ritual practices survive only when the communities that sustain them remain economically and socially viable. In the Indian context, this principle resonates strongly with the civilisational ethos of *tirthayatra*, where sacred places were maintained through collective responsibility and sustained community engagement.

However, challenges remain. Excessive commercialisation can transform living traditions into performances staged solely for visitors, while unchecked tourist flows may strain local resources, generate waste, and erode the very cultural authenticity that attracts visitors in the first place. Cleanliness and environmental management, waste disposal, sanitation, river conservation, crowd management, and the maintenance of public spaces are not merely municipal concerns but heritage concerns. The success of heritage tourism ultimately depends upon whether local communities, religious institutions and devotees themselves regard preservation as a shared responsibility rather than a governmental obligation alone.

As reflected in the *Vishnu Purana*, the responsibility of preservation has long been recognised.

A widely cited tirtha-mahatmya verse (traditional) declares,

“पृथिव्यां यानि तीर्थानि पुण्यान्यायतनानि च।
तानि सर्वाणि रक्ष्याणि मानवैर्मूर्तिमिच्छता॥”
(All sacred places on earth must be protected by those who seek well-being and prosperity)

CONCLUSION: The significance of the Indian experience lies in the fact that it offers not merely examples of heritage tourism but a civilisational framework for thinking about the relationship between culture, economy, and society. The institution of *tirthayatra* demonstrated that mobility, devotion, commerce, and community welfare could coexist within a mutually reinforcing system. The lesson for contemporary policy is therefore not simply to attract more tourists, but to create conditions under which heritage remains meaningful, communities remain empowered, and economic benefits remain locally rooted. Heritage survives not because it is protected by law, but because communities continue to find value in preserving it. The future of heritage tourism in India will depend on how successfully this principle is translated into practice.

Fable with Moral

King Shibi and the Dove

(Mahabharata, Vana Parva)



King Shibi, a famously generous and just monarch of the lunar dynasty, faced a divine test of character when Dharmaraj and Indra descended to evaluate his virtue.

While the king sat on his palace terrace, a terrified dove flew into his lap, desperately seeking refuge from a chasing eagle. King Shibi had vowed to protect anyone who sought his shelter. Believing that animals and birds deserve the same protection as human beings, he promised to keep the dove safe from harm.

The eagle landed and demanded its rightful prey to appease its hunger. When Shibi offered regular meat from his kitchen, the eagle refused. Instead, the eagle agreed to free the dove on two strict conditions: Shibi must provide an equal weight of flesh cut from his own body, and not a single tear could fall from the king's eyes, as food given in distress would be unacceptable.

Shibi readily agreed and called for a balance scale. He placed the dove on one side and began cutting flesh from his own body to place on the other. Miraculously, no matter how much flesh the king added, the pan holding the

small dove always weighed heavier. As the king continued carving away nearly his entire right side, a tear finally escaped his left eye.

The eagle immediately protested, assuming the king regretted his choice. Shibi smiled and clarified that his eye wept tears of joy, grateful that the remaining half of his body could also be sacrificed to fulfill his sacred promise.

Instantly, the eagle and the dove vanished, revealing the gods Dharmaraj and Indra in their true forms. They showered the king with flowers, restored his body to health, and granted him divine boons. King Shibi ruled righteously for many years before ascending to heaven, leaving behind an eternal lesson on the absolute duty of protecting the vulnerable and the supreme value of selfless sacrifice.

Moral of the fable: Always help the helpless

UNJUMBLE

1. Unjumble these scrambled words to form the terms often used in Economy, Commerce & Finance in Ancient India:

HECTIT

NARI

KULASH

GABHA

2. Arrange the circled letters to answer the following:

A river crossing, ferry site, or inland water port for collection of transit tolls: _____



Answer: 1. Chethi, Rima, Shulika, Bhaga; 2. Tirtha

Marvels of India

PUNCH-MARKED COINS

Bharat's Earliest Monetary Marvel

Punch-marked coins (*karshapanas*), circulating from roughly the 6th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, are recognised as the earliest standardised currency in the Indian subcontinent. Cut from silver (occasionally copper) sheets and stamped with symbols such as the sun, animals and trees, they emerged during the second urbanisation (the first being that of the Harappan civilisation) and the expansion of trade networks among the *Mahajanapadas*.

Facilitating Commerce

These coins marked the shift from barter to a currency-based economy, with denominations such as *pana*, *ardha-pana*, *masaka* and *kakini* attested in literary sources including Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*. Archaeological hoards spanning present-day Bharat, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh reveal their wide circulation, integrating regional markets into interconnected trade circuits and routes.

State Finance and Metallurgy

Under the Mauryas, minting shifted from merchant guilds toward centralised authority, supporting taxation and administration. Scientific analysis of coin hoards confirms silver as the predominant metal, alongside copper, lead and trace amounts of gold. At the same time, later series unravel progressive silver decrease, reflecting political transitions. The punch-marked coins constitute physical evidence of Bharat's fiscal history as a leading economic power and a global economic force to reckon with.



QUIZ

Economy, Commerce & Finance

Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1 The people from the Indus Valley Civilisation used a highly standardised system of weights made of a specific type of stone for trade and commerce. What is the name of this stone?	Lapis Lazuli	Carnelian	Chert	Steatite
2 Which ancient overland highway connected Pataliputra through Taxila to Central Asian branches of the main Silk Road?	Uttarapatha	Dakshinapatha	Vyapar Marg	Rajamarg
3 Which ancient Indian dynasty's rulers were officially called as "Dakshinapathapati" due to their control over the critical southern trade highway?	Mauryan	Satavahana	Chola	Chalukya
4 Which dynasty is credited with being the first to exercise significant control over the 'Great Silk Route' branch passing through Central Asia to India, facilitating a massive gold influx?	Mauryan	Saka	Kushana	Gupta

Answers: 1 - C, 2 - A, 3 - B, 4 - C

nitikatha

The King's New Palace

1 The King was proud. His new palace was magnificent - tall towers, wide halls, and glittering marble floors.

2 The King showed it off to everyone... and asked Gopal to inspect it as well.

3 Gopal, I want you to inspect every corner. Your opinion matters.

4 Gopal wandered through the palace, tapping walls, peering into corners, and checking every detail.

5 "Majesty, you may need to rebuild this step."

6 Why? What is wrong with it?

7 A palace isn't just for looks... it's for people to use.

8 Well said, Gopal! You have once again opened my eyes.

Finally, he stopped at a grand staircase.

TRUE WISDOM SEES BEYOND BEAUTY AND THINKS OF PEOPLE.