

# Exploring The Religious Tourism Potential of Gayaji, Bihar: An Analytical Study of Pilgrimage Arrival Trends and Development Opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

Religious tourism being one of the ancient and most important segments of the tourism industry, enjoy a prominent place. India, a country that is well known for its diverse temples and holy places. Religious tourism emerged as dynamic tertiary sector contributing to shaping economic and socio-cultural landscape of pilgrimage site in India. Gaya, popularly known as Gayaji, is an internationally recognised Hindu and Buddhist centre of pilgrimage in Bihar and Bihar's second largest city located on the banks of river Phalgu. This research is based on the secondary data analysis using descriptive cum quantitative approach in terms of domestic and foreign tourists to measure the tourism patterns in Gaya. The findings show that Gaya topped in Bihar in terms of both domestic and foreign tourist destinations, and through their religious heritage that includes temples, rituals like Pind Daan, and the importance of Buddhist sites, Gaya plays a significant role in boosting the number of tourists on a national and world-level scale. Infrastructure projects such as Vishnupad and Mahabodhi Corridors are aimed at modernizing the pilgrimage facilities and maintaining the sacred heritage, but these also pose challenges such as seasonal overcrowding, environmental pressure and uneven development. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of sustainable tourism planning that balances the preservation of Gayaji's religious heritage with inclusive and balanced regional development.

**KEYWORDS:** Religious tourism, Foreigner and Domestic tourist arrival, Pilgrimage & Infrastructure development.

## INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism involves traveling to religious places not only to seek blessings but also to experience the art, culture, traditions, and architecture associated with these sites (Trivedi, 2020). Religious tourism has historically been one of the most enduring and rapidly expanding forms of cultural tourism It is driven not only by faith but also by cultural curiosity, with tourists seeking both spiritual fulfilment and cultural engagement (Sharpley, 2009). India is a land of

great religious diversity and a major destination for religious tourism. Among its many regions, Bihar is one province known for special significance, as there are rich religious and historical heritage sites, that offer unique and beautiful blend of cultural heritage and spiritual experience (Trivedi, 2020). Gayaji, situated in Bihar, is especially renowned for its sacred sites and serves as important pilgrimage destination for multiple religious communities (Kumari, 2024). In India, religious tourism constitutes a cornerstone of the tourism sector, contributing not only to the economy but also to the preservation of cultural identity and promotion of interfaith understanding (Jayswal et al., 2023). Among the Indian states, Bihar occupies a central position due to its historical, spiritual, and cultural legacy. The very name “Bihar” is derived from the Sanskrit word Vihara, meaning monastery, reflecting its deep association with monastic traditions and spirituality (Kumari & Kumar, 2025).

Bihar encompasses various prominent religious circuits, including the Buddhist Circuit, Jain Circuit, Ramayana Circuit, and the Shiv- Shakti Circuit that together draw millions of pilgrims every year (Upadhyaya et al., 2020). Among these, the Buddhist Circuit has found an international recognition and Bodhgaya, where Lord Buddha got enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, forms the epicentre of global Buddhist pilgrimage. Bodhgaya, which is a designated World Heritage Site, is not only a sacred site of Buddhist devotion, but one of the transnational centres of spiritual tourism that attracts domestic and international tourists who are looking for peace, meditation and cultural engagement. Within this much broadened religious setting, Gayaji (Gaya) comes out as another important centre of pilgrimage. Gaya has great religious significance in Hinduism, being the primary place for the ritual of Pind Daan for the salvation of their ancestors, yet it also has very strong historical ties with Buddhism and Jainism (Upadhyaya et al., 2020). Despite its prominence, the potential of Gayaji as a holistic religious tourism destination is still not explored enough in comparison with Bodhgaya. Developing Gayaji as a well-integrated hub of religious tourism can diversify the tourism profile in Bihar and can contribute towards the holistic growth of the region's economy and can also consolidate Bihar's position in the world map of spiritual tourism.

This research examines the potential of Gayaji as a religious tourism destination in Bihar, focusing on cultural values, infrastructure & needs of arising opportunities for sustainable tourism. Despite its religious significance, Gayaji is not fully developed as a global spiritual tourism destination.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Blackwell (2007) noted that religious tourism involves diverse motivations, from devotion to cultural heritage exploration, and encompasses visits to temples, shrines, and sacred

landscapes. In the Indian context, the diversity of landscapes and religious traditions provides a wide range of pilgrimage opportunities. Gupta (2017) emphasized that religious tourism fosters intercultural exchange, as pilgrims often visit multiple religious sites across faiths, thereby strengthening social and cultural cohesion. Similarly, Goswami (2016) highlighted India's vast natural and cultural heritage — temples, rivers, forests, shrines, and sacred landscapes — which enhances the country's attractiveness for both domestic and international tourists. Religious tourism is also widely acknowledged as a tool for regional socio-economic development. Romanelli, Gazzola, Grechi, and Pollice (2021) argued that religious tourism has the potential to foster sustainable community development when approached collaboratively among stakeholders. Stranjančević (2019) similarly proposed an integrated model for developing underexplored pilgrimage destinations, stressing the importance of infrastructure, accommodation quality, and cultural promotion. These frameworks are particularly relevant for Gayaji, where infrastructural and marketing gaps currently limit its tourism potential.

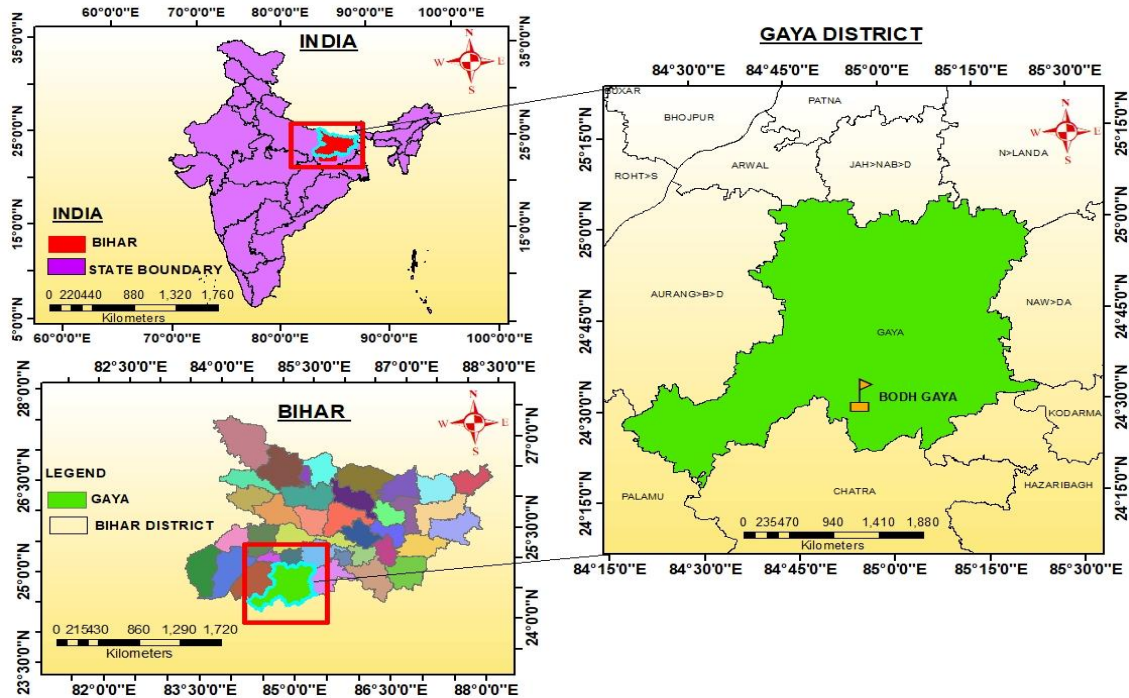
Bihar is globally recognized as the heartland of Buddhism. The Buddhist Circuit — including Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, and Vaishali — remains one of the most visited pilgrimage routes in South Asia (Hall, 2006). Nowhere is this more evident than Bodhgaya, where Siddhartha Gautam attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, making it the most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage site worldwide (Agrawal, Coningham, & Young, 2010). Upadhyaya et al. (2020) observed that while Bodhgaya has received global recognition and substantial government attention, other sacred sites in Bihar remain underdeveloped. They argued that tourism policies, both at the central and state levels, have enhanced international visibility for Bodhgaya but that Bihar still requires more robust policies to promote its wider spiritual heritage. Kumari and Kumar (2025) similarly noted that while domestic and international tourist arrivals in Bihar have increased, infrastructural deficits and limited promotional outreach hinder broader tourism growth.

Unlike Bodhgaya, which is primarily Buddhist, Gayaji represents a multi-religious pilgrimage site. Singh (2011) traced its mythological and historical roots, noting that Gayaji is central to Hindu practices of Pind Daan (ancestral offerings) while also being associated with Buddhist meditation and Jain traditions. This multi-faith sanctity makes Gayaji unique, positioning it as a potential hub for inclusive religious tourism. Despite its significance, Gayaji has not been fully developed as a comprehensive tourism destination. As highlighted by Kumari and Kumar (2025), Bihar's sub-regions with strong religious traditions often suffer from limited infrastructure and promotional neglect. Applying models like those of Stranjančević (2019) and sustainability-oriented frameworks (Romanelli et al., 2021) could help in transforming

Gayaji into a prominent religious tourism hub, complementing Bodhgaya and strengthening Bihar's religious tourism circuits.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY REGION

### ADMINISTRATIVE MAP OF THE GAYAJI DISTRICT



**Fig.1: Administrative map of the Gayaji district.**

Bihar's second largest city "Gaya" lies between  $84^{\circ} 4'$  to  $85^{\circ} 5'$  E longitudes and  $24^{\circ} 5'$  to  $25^{\circ} 1'$  N latitudes, it is 100km south of the capital Patana, situated on the bank of river Falgu. Total area of the district is about 4976 sq. km and total population is 43,79,383 (as per census 2011) bounded by Nawada district in the east, Aurangabad district in the west, Jehanabad - North and state of Jharkhand in the south. The district divided into four sub-division namely- Gaya-Sadar, Neemchak-Bathani, Serghati, And Tekari. These sub-division further divided into 24 blocks and 2886 number of villages. The city's biggest industry is religious tourism because the region is very important to Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. That is the location of Lord Buddha's enlightenment. The majority of people work in agriculture, and one of the major industries in the district that provides jobs is tourism. The major religious tourist spot in Gayaji region includes Mahabodhi Temple, Stone Railing, Vishnupad Temple, Bodhi Tree, Vajrasana, Mangla Gauri Temple, Muchalinda Tank, Bakraur and Guneri and so on.

## RSEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. The aim of the study to examine the potential of Gayaji as religious tourism hub.

2. To assess the scope for attracting the tourist to Bihar, with particular emphasis on Gayaji.

## DATABASE & RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a descriptive cum quantitative approach to analyse potential of Gayaji as religious tourism global hub in Bihar, based on secondary data. The secondary data is obtained from the multiple sources such as the Official Bihar Tourism website, Ministry of Tourism, Govt. Of India, District Census Handbook, and District Statistical Abstract of the study region as well as various research paper, and articles which provided statistical information for the period under review. For processed data is presented in tabular form and Graphical representation is done with help of tools like ArcGIS, MS Excel, to create maps and diagrams. These application of analytical and Graphical tools facilitated a systematic and comprehensive analysis of tourism patterns and regional variation within the Gayaji district of Bihar.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. TOURIST ARRIVAL TRENDS IN BIHAR FROM (2015 TO 2024):

The Bihar state ranked 11th nationally in terms of domestic tourism and 9th in foreign tourist arrivals according to data presented by Union Minister in Lok Sabha. To fulfil the first objectives, the study analysed the tourist inflow data of Bihar state from 2015 to 2024 highlights significant fluctuations in both domestic and foreign tourist arrivals, directly influencing the overall trend of religious tourism in the region.

**Table.1: Tourist Arrival in Bihar from 2015 to 2024.**

YEAR	DOMESTIC TOURISTS	FOREIGN TOURISTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOURISTS
2015	28029118	923737	28952855
2016	28516127	1010531	29526658
2017	28516127	1082705	33496768
2018	33621613	1087971	34709584
2019	33990038	1093141	35083179
2020	5644524	308080	5952604
2021	2501193	1046	2502239

2022	25330364	86829	25417193
2023	81585701	546576	82132277
2024	65344548	736653	66081201

Source: Bihar Tourism Department.

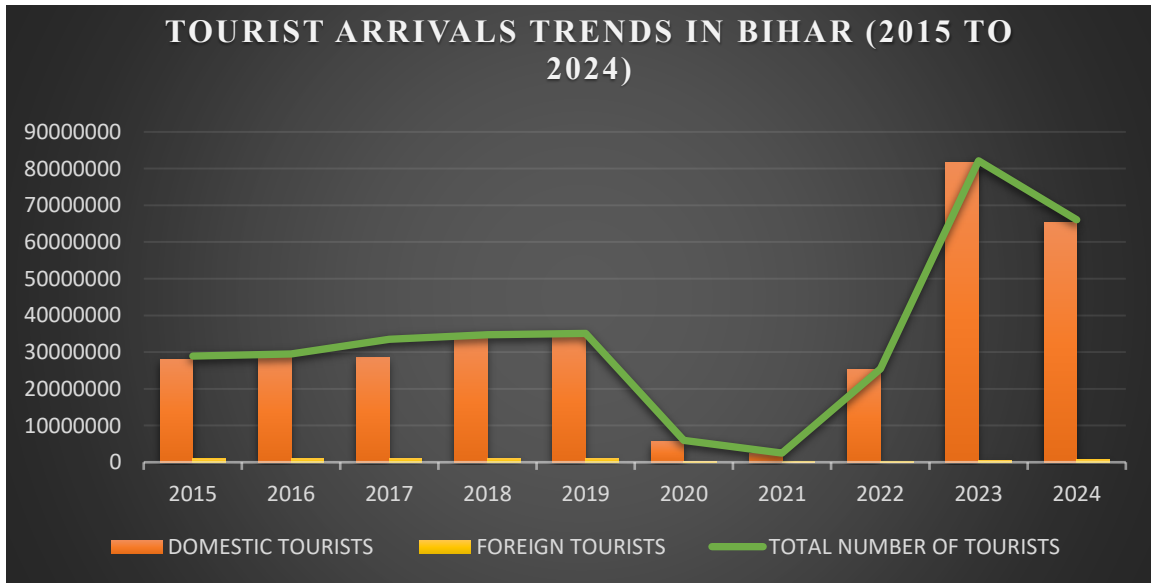


Fig.2: Tourists Inflow in Bihar from (2015 to 2024), Bihar Tourism Department.

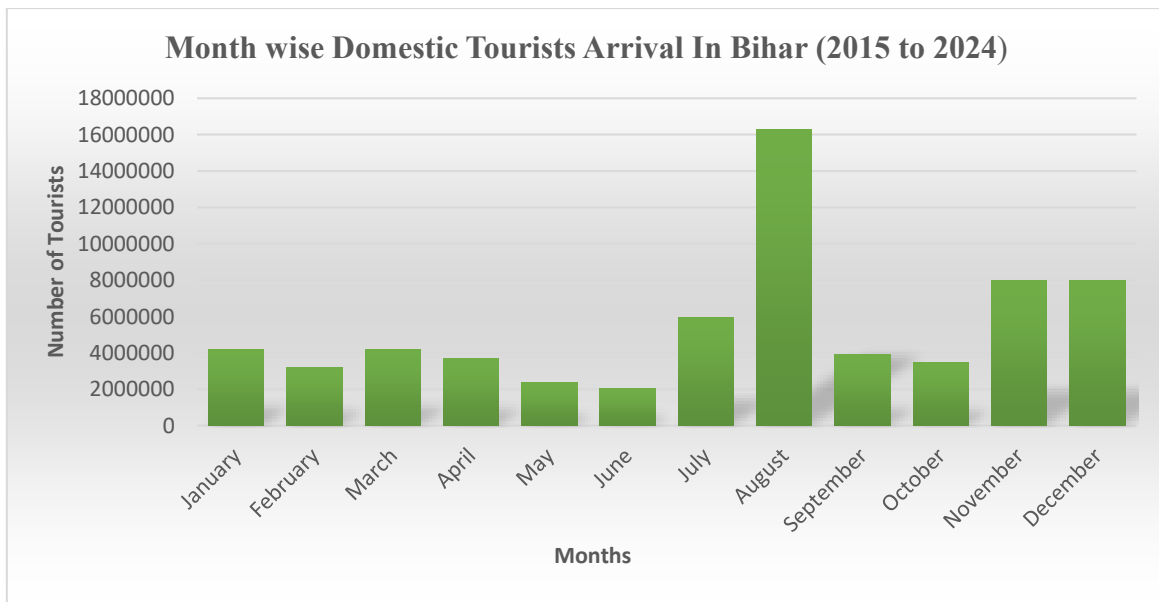


Fig 3: Month wise Domestic Tourist Inflow in Bihar (2015 to 2024), Bihar Tourism Department.

**Steady Growth before COVID-19 (2015–2019):** Tourist arrivals gradually increased from 28.95 million in 2015 to 35.08 million in 2019. Domestic tourism remained the dominant

contributor, with a steady upward trajectory. Foreign tourist arrivals, though small in proportion (around 1 million annually), showed consistent stability, reinforcing Gaya's international religious importance (particularly for Buddhist pilgrimage). **COVID-19 Impact (2020–2021):** There was a drastic decline in 2020 and 2021 due to pandemic restrictions. Total arrivals fell to just 5.95 million in 2020 and further dipped to 2.5 million in 2021, with foreign arrivals almost collapsing (only 1,046 foreign tourists in 2021). This highlights the severe vulnerability of tourism to global crises, especially foreign inflows. **Post-Pandemic Recovery (2022–2024):** Recovery began in 2022 with 25.4 million total tourists, predominantly domestic visitors. In 2023 saw a remarkable surge with 82.13 million tourists, the highest in the decade. This reflects both pent-up travel demand and Gaya's growing recognition as a spiritual hub. In 2024, arrivals slightly declined to 66.08 million, but the figures remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels, indicating sustainable growth potential. **Domestic vs Foreign Contribution:** The data shows that Gaya's tourism is overwhelmingly domestic-driven (over 95%). Foreign tourist arrivals, though small, are symbolically important as they emphasize Gaya's role in international Buddhist pilgrimage tourism, particularly for visitors from Southeast Asia and East Asia.

## 2. TOURIST ARRIVAL TRENDS IN GAYAJI REGION FROM (2015 TO 2024):

### 2.1. Trends in Domestic Tourist Arrivals (2015–2024)

The domestic tourist inflow to Gaya over the ten-year period (2015–2024) reflects both resilience and vulnerability in response to socio-economic and global factors. From 2015 to 2019, Gaya consistently recorded high domestic tourist arrivals, ranging from 2.89 million (2016) to 3.74 million (2019). This indicates a stable and growing domestic religious tourism base, driven primarily by pilgrimages to the Vishnupad Temple, Bodh Gaya, and associated ritual events such as Pitrapaksha Mela. In 2020, the number of domestic tourists dropped sharply to 720,176, followed by an even deeper decline in 2021 (172,650). This can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, travel restrictions, and nationwide lockdowns that disrupted pilgrimage tourism across India. From 2022 onwards, a strong recovery trend is evident. Domestic arrivals rose to 454,893 in 2022, nearly doubled in 2023 (1,037,085), and further increased to 1,152,438 in 2024. This steady rebound suggests a post-pandemic revival of faith-based and ritual tourism, with Gaya regaining its significance as one of India's foremost pilgrimage destinations. Overall, domestic tourism dominates the total visitor inflow, averaging over 95% of total arrivals annually, reaffirming Gaya's strong internal religious tourism potential within India.

### Table.2: Tourists Arrival in Gayaji Region (2015 to 2024).

YEAR	DOMESTIC TOURISTS	FOREIGN TOURISTS	TOTAL NUMBER OF TOURISTS
2015	3701226	238617	3939843
2016	2890268	288914	3179182
2017	3639728	313817	3953545
2018	3603628	326228	3929856
2019	3741250	344934	4089184
2020	720176	83339	803515
2021	172650	162	172812
2022	454893	20464	475357
2023	1037085	96238	1133323
2024	1152438	97004	1249442

Source: Bihar Tourism Department.

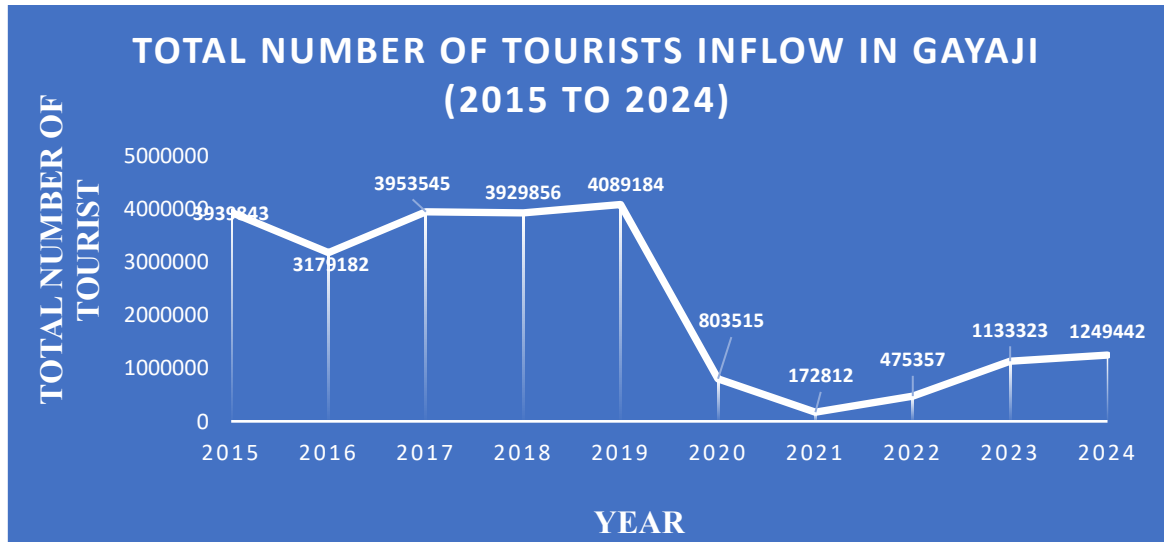
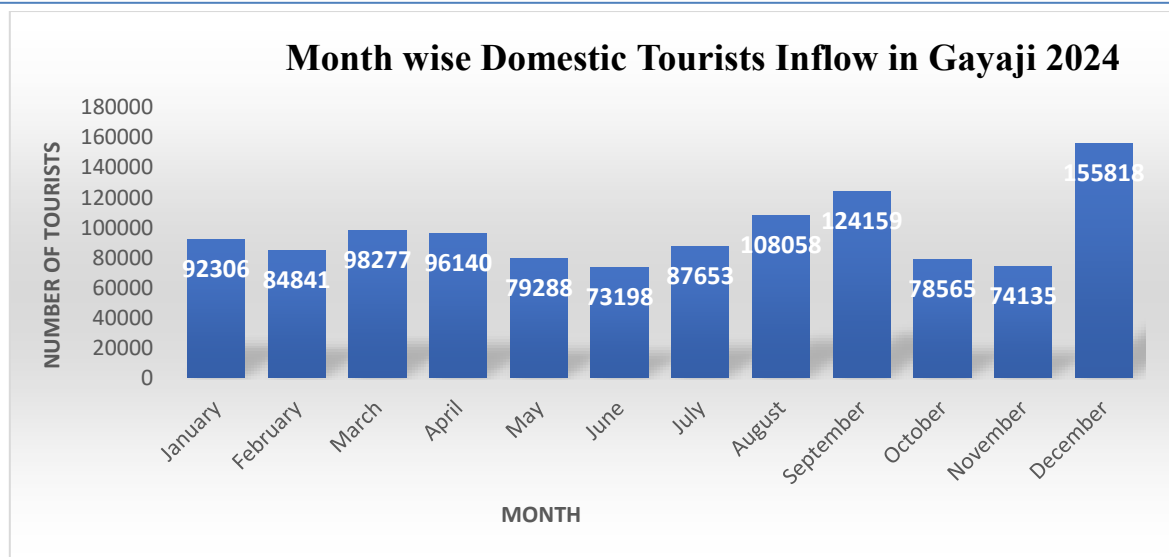


Fig.4: Tourists Inflow in Gayaji from (2015 to 2024), Bihar Tourism Department.



**Fig 5: Month wise Domestic Tourist Inflow in Gayaji (2024), Bihar Tourism Department.**

**2.2. Trends in Foreign Tourist Arrivals (2015–2024)**

Foreign tourist arrivals exhibit a similar pattern, though with greater volatility. Between 2015 and 2019, Gaya attracted between 238,000 to 345,000 foreign visitors annually, reflecting its global prominence as a cultural and pilgrimage site. However, the pandemic years 2020–2021 saw a catastrophic fall from 83,339 foreign tourists in 2020 to merely 162 in 2021, marking a near-total cessation of international tourism. A gradual revival occurred in 2022 (20,464) and 2023 (96,238), reaching 97,004 foreign visitors by 2024. Although not yet at pre-pandemic levels, this recovery suggests growing confidence among international pilgrims and improved global connectivity to the region. Foreign tourist arrivals, though smaller in absolute numbers, are strategically important because they represent high-value spiritual and cultural visitors. Their consistent return demonstrates Gaya’s international religious significance within the Buddhist tourism circuit of Bihar. The total number of tourists (domestic + foreign) decreased drastically during 2020–2021 but has since rebounded strongly, reaching 1.25 million in 2024.

**Table.3: Overall Tourists Flow in Gayaji Region from (2015 to 2024).**

Period	Trend	Interpretation
2015-2019	Steady growth	Strong domestic base, stable foreign inflow
2020–2021	Sharp decline	COVID-19 pandemic impact

2022–2024	Rapid recovery	Domestic tourism revival and gradual foreign return
Overall (2015–2024)	Long Term Potential	Gaya remains a vital religious tourism hub.

This upward trend highlights Gaya’s potential for sustained religious tourism growth, especially with policy focus on infrastructure, heritage conservation, and global promotional strategies such as the Buddhist Circuit initiative under India’s Ministry of Tourism and Bihar Tourism Department.

### 3. EVALUATION OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN BIHAR WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE GAYAJI REGION:

To fulfil the second objectives, the analysis reveals significant potential for attracting tourists to Bihar, particularly to Gayaji, owing to its profound religious, cultural, and spiritual significance. The steady post-pandemic recovery in tourist inflows indicates a growing domestic pilgrimage base and renewed international interest. The significance of Gayaji bound to some of the important Hindu rituals such as Pitrapaksha Mela and its nearness to the Buddhist circuit adds even more flavour to it. Better infrastructure as well as connectivity and targeted promotion can ensure Gayaji’s commanding position in religious tourism – this would not only considerably boost Bihar’s tourism economy, but also contribute towards the conservation of its culture. The Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation (BSTDC) has been playing a very significant role in popularizing tourism in the state by developing the infrastructure which has implications in tourism, providing package tours and in establishing information centres. Thus, while the efforts are praiseworthy, there is a felt need for a more focused and region-specific strategy in respect of the Gayaji region. Enhancement of tourism infrastructure, improvement of transport and digital connectivity, the quality of local hospitality services and the enhancement of heritage and eco-tourism products and services can all be used to advance Gayaji as one of the leading religious and cultural tourism destinations.

#### SUGGESTIONS

To excel the Gayaji as a global religious tourist hub, attention need to be given on improvement of infrastructure development, upgrade connectivity and better tourists facilities. Blending Gayaji with other spiritual and cultural places like Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Nalanda can strengthen its appeal within broader pilgrimage circuits. There should be enough consciousness given for promotion and publicity campaign through Digital media and marketing initiatives to attract both domestic and foreign visitors. Active community participation through skill development

and local enterprises is one way to ensure the inclusive benefits and focused efforts should also prioritizing sustainable practices which safeguard the regions ecological and cultural integrity. Further successful management and encouragement of major events like the Pitrapaksha Mela can further boost Gayaji's tourism profile.

## CONCLUSION

The finding reveals that Gayaji possesses enormous potential as a major religious tourism destination within Bihar's spiritual landscape. The analysis of tourist inflows reveals a dominant domestic segment and a gradual resurgence of foreign visitors, reflecting both cultural continuity and growing global interest. The region's association with major religious traditions—particularly Hinduism and Buddhism—enhances its multidimensional appeal. Despite substantial progress in infrastructure and promotion, Gayaji's tourism development remains underutilized due to limited regional planning, inadequate facilities, and weak connectivity. Strengthening infrastructure, improving service quality, and adopting sustainable tourism practices are essential to harness Gayaji's full potential for regional and economic growth.

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