

MYTHOLOGY, PILGRIMAGE, AND PLANNING: A DATA-DRIVEN STUDY OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN NAIMISHARANYA, UTTAR PRADESH

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Abstract

Naimisharanya, located in the Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh, is one of India's most sacred pilgrimage sites, deeply rooted in mythological and spiritual narratives found in the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and various Puranas. In recent years, this holy town has come under the spotlight through the Government of India's Swadesh Darshan 2.0 initiative, which aims to transform heritage and spiritual destinations into hubs of sustainable tourism. This research paper offers a comprehensive examination of Naimisharanya's religious significance, socio-economic profile, tourism trends, and infrastructural development, using primary data from the Draft Destination Master Plan (2023) along with scholarly literature. The study analyses critical indicators such as tourist footfall, demographic patterns, literacy rates, and workforce participation. It also presents a phased investment strategy worth ₹754 crore proposed under the Master Plan and visualizes these insights through relevant tables and graphs. Beyond quantitative data, the paper evaluates pressing challenges such as poor sanitation, informal encroachments, and the lack of digital visitor infrastructure. The discussion highlights how religious tourism can serve as a vehicle for inclusive rural development when supported by sound governance, cultural sensitivity, and community participation. This research positions Naimisharanya as a living example of India's sacred geography and advocates for a development model that balances spiritual preservation with modern-day planning imperatives.

Keywords: Naimisharanya, Religious Tourism, Swadesh Darshan 2.0, Heritage Development, Rural Economy, Pilgrimage Infrastructure

1. Introduction

The town of Naimisharanya, also known as Neemsar, is located in the Misrikh subdivision of Sitapur district in Uttar Pradesh, India. As one of the oldest pilgrimage sites in the country, it holds a sacred place in the Indian spiritual imagination. Mythologically, it is believed that Lord

Brahma released his divine chakra to identify the most sacred place on Earth, and it landed in Naimisharanya, making it a divine ground for penance and knowledge. It is said that 88,000 sages once assembled here to perform yajnas (sacrificial rituals) for the welfare of humanity. This unique spiritual legacy has made the site an important part of religious tourism, where beliefs and traditions continue to shape the socio-cultural and economic activities of the region.

In recent years, the Government of India, under its flagship Swadesh Darshan 2.0 Scheme, has recognized the potential of such mythologically significant sites for sustainable tourism development. The "Draft Destination Master Plan, Strategy and Action Plan for Naimisharanya" developed by Deloitte and IBI Group (2023) offers a comprehensive roadmap for turning this sacred geography into a well-planned, eco-conscious, and economically vibrant religious tourism circuit. Through a multi-phase investment model and planned infrastructure interventions, the plan aims to modernize the physical infrastructure while maintaining the spiritual ethos of the site.

This paper seeks to bridge the gap between heritage preservation and tourism development by analyzing the mythological relevance, socio-economic indicators, tourist footfall trends, and infrastructure plans related to Naimisharanya. Using data and figures from the official Master Plan and secondary academic sources, the study aims to critically assess how well-structured government interventions can unlock rural economic potential without compromising on cultural sanctity.

2. Review of Literature

The spiritual and cultural landscapes of India have long served as engines of tourism-driven growth, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where economic opportunities are otherwise limited. Several scholars have studied the intersection of religious tourism, heritage management, and local development in the Indian context.

Joshi, Rana, and Singh (2021) in their case study published in the International Journal of Modern Agriculture highlighted the infrastructural deficiencies surrounding Naimisharanya, particularly concerning sanitation, lodging, and basic tourism facilities. They emphasized the need for a participatory approach to development that would include local stakeholders in planning and implementation. Their work also noted that despite its spiritual richness, the town lacked long-term vision and urban regulation mechanisms.

Pande et al. (2022) examined the spiritual tourism potential of Naimisharanya and advocated for its integration into India's broader cultural tourism circuits. They proposed that mythological storytelling, heritage-based experience curation, and infrastructural enhancements could help transform it into a flagship spiritual tourism destination. Their findings echoed the notion that while heritage is intrinsic to such destinations, modern tourists also expect basic amenities, guided information, and cleanliness.

A significant advancement in planning came with the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 Master Plan for Naimisharanya (2023) by the Ministry of Tourism. Unlike past ad-hoc approaches, the document presents a data-backed strategy with planned investments of ₹754 crore over four phases. The Plan incorporates spatial mapping, demographic profiling, and infrastructure designs to convert Naimisharanya into a world-class religious tourism hub while addressing environmental, cultural, and social sustainability goals. The Master Plan also integrates community engagement through a Destination Management Committee, and institutionalizes development through the Uttar Pradesh Shree Naimisharanya Dham Teerth Vikas Parishad Act (2022).

Furthermore, Sharma (2021), in a paper published on ResearchGate, analyzed religious tourism in rural India with reference to Naimisharanya. She underlined how pilgrimage sites often create seasonal and gendered employment, especially for women engaged in prasad-selling, flower-vending, and homestays. She also warned about the dangers of over-commercialization and the need for capacity regulations during festivals such as Amavasya or Kartik Purnima, which attract lakhs of visitors in a single day.

Together, these works present a rich body of knowledge, suggesting that religious tourism must be planned with a dual lens: one that respects the sacred traditions and another that acknowledges the socioeconomic realities of the local population. This paper draws from that literature to assess how recent government interventions are shaping the development narrative of Naimisharanya.

3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the role of religious and mythological heritage in shaping the tourism potential and economic development of Naimisharanya. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- Analyze footfall and demographic trends using official data;
- Examine infrastructure investments under the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 scheme;
- Evaluate the socio-economic impact of religious tourism on the local population;
- Highlight key challenges and propose strategies for sustainable development of pilgrimage towns in India.

4. Methodology

This research is based on secondary data analysis and document review. The primary source of empirical data is the Draft Destination Master Plan, Strategy and Action Plan for Naimisharanya (2023), prepared by Deloitte and IBI Group for the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. This includes statistics on tourism footfall, demographic details, investment estimates, and infrastructure planning. Supplementary data has been drawn from Census 2011, published

literature, academic journal articles, and legislative documents such as the Uttar Pradesh Shree Naimisharanya Dham Teerth Vikas Parishad Act (2022). The paper also uses charts and tables to present data visually and interpret trends relevant to tourism development.

5. Tourist Inflows and Cultural Significance

The spiritual magnetism of Naimisharanya is evident in the substantial annual tourist footfall recorded across its key sites. The Chakra Tirth, considered the holiest site where Lord Brahma's chakra halted, attracts pilgrims throughout the year. Other sites such as Lalita Devi Temple, Hanuman Garhi, Soot Gaddi, and Dadhichi Kund also hold immense mythological relevance. According to the primary survey conducted as part of the Swadesh Darshan Master Plan (2023), both Chakra Tirth and Lalita Devi Temple record an annual footfall of approximately 45 lakh visitors each, while Soot Gaddi and Hanuman Garhi each witness about 25 lakh visitors annually.

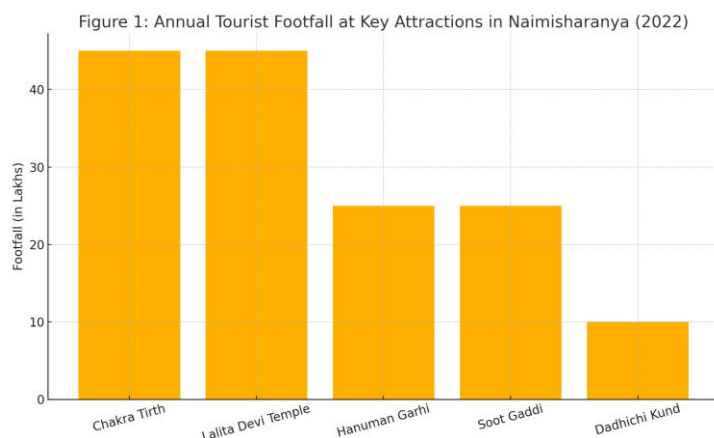


Figure 1: Annual Tourist Footfall at Key Attractions in Naimisharanya (2022)

Source: Draft Master Plan, pp. 40–45

Table 1: Tourist Footfall at Key Sites (2022)

Source: Draft Master Plan, pp. 40–45

Attraction	Annual Footfall (in lakhs)
Chakra Tirth	45
Lalita Devi Temple	45
Hanuman Garhi	25
Soot Gaddi	25

4. Demographic and Literacy Profile

According to Census 2011 data cited in the Draft Master Plan (p. 38), the population of Misrikh-cum-Naimisharanya stood at 18,388, with a literacy rate of 70.31% and a workforce participation rate of approximately 28.74%. The sex ratio of 897 females per 1000 males reflects a modest gender imbalance. Importantly, a significant share of the working population—about 73%—is employed in service-based sectors closely tied to tourism. A comparison of 2001 and 2011 census data shows a marked improvement in literacy, with the number of literates increasing from 9,743 to 12,929 and the number of illiterates slightly declining. This trend signals growing educational access and offers a positive outlook for skill-based employment in tourism-related services.

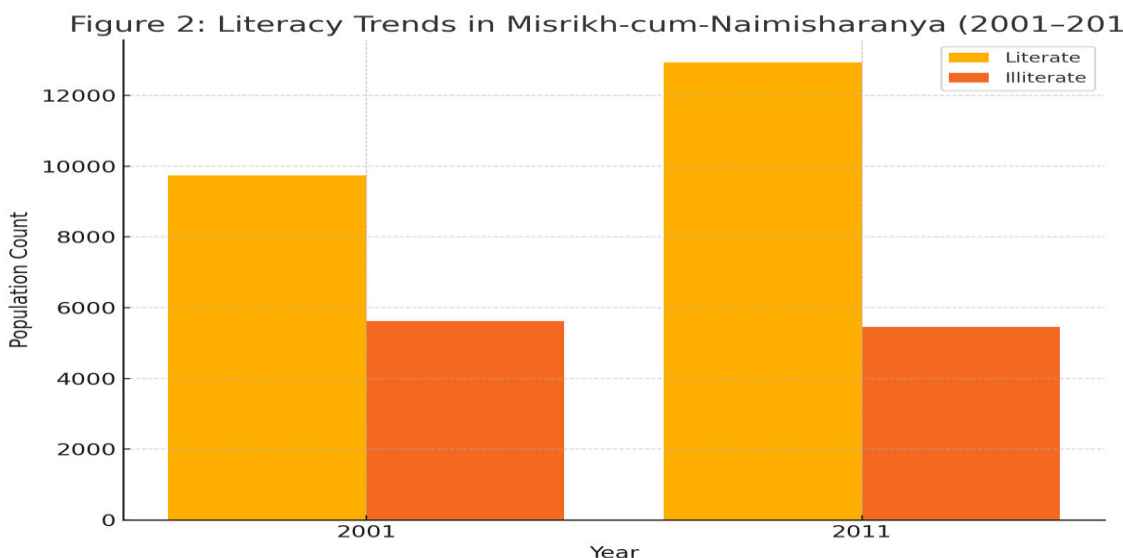


Figure 2: Literacy Trends in Misrikh-cum-Naimisharanya (2001–2011)

Source: Draft Master Plan, p. 38

Table 2: Literacy Profile of Misrikh-cum-Naimisharanya

Source: Draft Master Plan, p. 38

Year	Literate Population	Illiterate Population
2001	9743	5622
2011	12929	5459

5. Investment Planning

A major highlight of the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 initiative is its well-defined infrastructure investment strategy. The Draft Master Plan outlines a phased approach with a total allocation of ₹754 crore over four phases. Phase 1 (₹124 Cr) focuses on foundational works like ghat development and signage, while Phase 2 (₹131 Cr) expands facilities through mural walks and promenade development. Phase 3 (₹247 Cr) includes expansion of tourist accommodations and an eco-park named 'Aranya'. Phase 4 (₹252 Cr) envisions large-scale spiritual complexes, a yagyashala, and a Vedic learning centre. This staggered investment plan is designed to avoid environmental burden and improve execution efficiency.

Figure 3: Estimated Tourism Infrastructure Investment in Naimisharanya by Phase

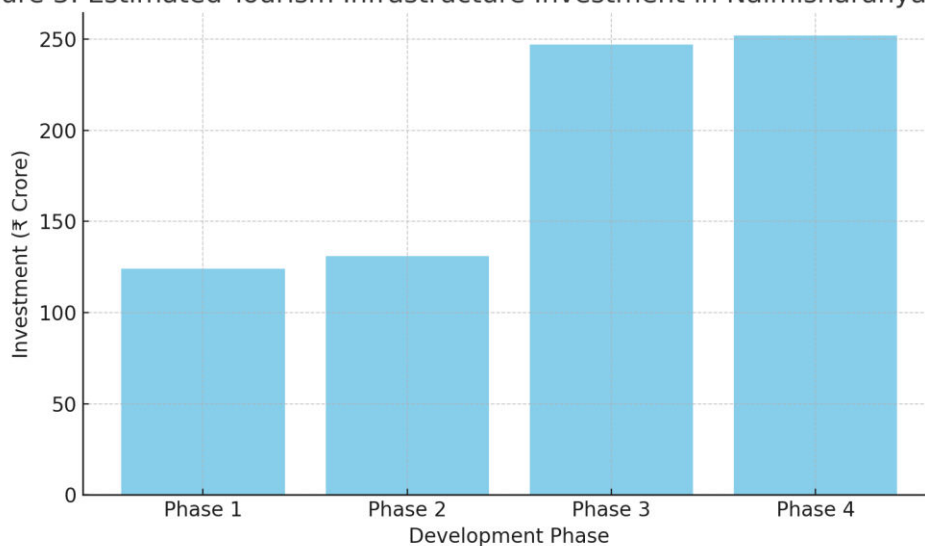


Figure 3: Estimated Tourism Infrastructure Investment in Naimisharanya by Phase

Source: Master Plan, Table 2, pp. 20–22

Table 3: Phase-wise Investment Plan under Swadesh Darshan 2.0

Source: Master Plan, Table 2, pp. 20–22

Phase	Estimated Investment (₹ Cr)
Phase 1	124
Phase 2	131
Phase 3	247
Phase 4	252

6. Challenges and Sanitation Issues

While the Master Plan for Naimisharanya presents an ambitious vision, several pressing challenges threaten to hinder its successful execution. One of the most critical issues is inadequate sanitation. The draft plan identifies problems such as unregulated dumping of solid waste near Chakra Tirth and the lack of a structured waste management system, particularly during high-footfall events like Amavasya and Kartik Purnima (Master Plan, p. 30). These events can attract over four to five lakh visitors in a single day, overwhelming the town's limited sanitation infrastructure. Encroachment near temple complexes, unmanaged vendor stalls, and illegal constructions further obstruct access, diminish visual appeal, and reduce the cultural sanctity of the pilgrimage experience. Another concern is the lack of formal tourist information services. Absence of digital infrastructure, wayfinding signage, and multilingual guidance facilities make it difficult for first-time visitors to navigate or appreciate the historical context of the sacred geography. If left unaddressed, these challenges could compromise both visitor satisfaction and the site's long-term spiritual and environmental integrity.

7. Discussion

The transformation of Naimisharanya into a modern pilgrimage-tourism hub rests on a delicate balance between spiritual preservation and urban development. The extensive infrastructure investments proposed under the Swadesh Darshan 2.0 initiative are both timely and essential, given the current deficiencies in public services and tourist amenities. However, the site's unique religious context demands that any infrastructural changes be rooted in cultural sensitivity and community engagement. Religious tourism can become a catalyst for rural development only when the benefits of growth are equitably distributed. In the case of Naimisharanya, the Master Plan wisely proposes the creation of a Destination Management Committee and the strengthening of local institutions. However, its success will ultimately depend on continuous stakeholder dialogue, skill development for local youth, and sustainability in operations. Lessons from other pilgrimage cities in India, such as Varanasi or Haridwar, indicate that maintaining the spiritual character of a place while expanding infrastructure is a continuous challenge that requires active monitoring and public participation.

8. Conclusion

Naimisharanya stands at the crossroads of ancient mythology and modern development. As a sacred landscape revered across generations, it carries profound religious significance. Yet, as this paper demonstrates through government data, planning reports, and field surveys, it is also a promising engine for economic rejuvenation. If developed inclusively, respectfully, and sustainably, the town can offer both spiritual fulfilment and livelihood opportunities. The Master Plan and legislative support laid out by the Government of Uttar Pradesh represent a robust foundation. However, actualizing this vision requires consistent monitoring, adaptive planning, and a participatory model of governance. Naimisharanya's future lies in its ability to honor the

past while embracing carefully managed transformation. This balance, once achieved, can serve as a model for pilgrimage-town planning across India.

9. References

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