



Discovering Hidden Gems: A study of Underrated and Lesser-Known Sites in Braj Region

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The Braj region of Uttar Pradesh, associated with the life and legends of Lord Krishna, is one of the most important spiritual tourism destinations in India. While prominent pilgrimage centers such as Mathura, Vrindavan, Barsana, and Govardhan attract large numbers of visitors, several culturally and spiritually significant sites remain lesser known and underexplored. This study examines the tourism potential of these underrated destinations and analyzes tourists' awareness, perceptions, and challenges related to their development and promotion. Primary data were collected from 100 respondents through a structured questionnaire using simple random sampling. Statistical tools such as weighted mean analysis and one-sample t-test were applied to evaluate tourists' perceptions across different dimensions. The results reveal a significantly positive perception toward these lesser-known sites, highlighting their potential for tourism growth, cultural preservation, and rural economic development. However, limited awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient promotional strategies were identified as major barriers. The study emphasizes the need for improved marketing, infrastructure development, and government support to promote sustainable tourism in the Braj region.

Keywords: braj region, hidden tourism destinations, spiritual tourism, tourism development, cultural heritage, tourist perception

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1. Introduction

The Mathura-Braj region, located in Uttar Pradesh, is widely recognized as a prominent spiritual and cultural tourism hub in India. It is believed to be the divine land of Lord Krishna, attracting millions of pilgrims and domestic as well as international tourists each year. While famous destinations such as Vrindavan, Barsana, Govardhan, Nandgaon, and Dwarkadhish Temple dominate the tourism landscape, several lesser-known sites remain unexplored despite their immense historical, cultural, and religious significance. For example Char Dham, Deeg is a sacred pilgrimage site influenced by Vaishnav traditions, famous for its architectural resemblance to the Himalayan Char Dham. Another one is Biharvan – Known as the place where Lord Krishna and Radha are believed to have performed Raas Leela, it attracts only a limited number of spiritually inclined visitors. Bhandirvan – A spiritually significant site where, according to mythology, Lord Krishna and Radha were married by Lord Brahma, yet it remains neglected in mainstream tourism circuits.

Despite their profound spiritual and cultural relevance, these sites receive lesser footfall compared to Mathura's popular temples. This raises critical questions about tourist awareness, perception, accessibility, and infrastructural gaps that limit their development. With the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department emphasizing the promotion of integrated tourism in Braj under projects like "Braj Teerth Vikas Parishad" and various digital marketing campaigns, it becomes essential to analyze how tourists perceive these lesser-known destinations.

2. Need for the Study

The current academic literature on Braj tourism focuses primarily on popular pilgrimage circuits. There is a research gap concerning tourists' knowledge, expectations, satisfaction levels, and perceptions regarding lesser-known spiritual sites. Understanding these perceptions will help policymakers, local authorities, and tourism developers to design better promotional strategies, enhance tourist experiences, and ensure sustainable tourism development.

3. Review of Literature

Canet, Lena N and Sunpongco, Lindsay (2025) explored Discovering Hidden Gems:

A Comprehensive Study of Underrated Local Tourist Destinations in Bulacan, Philippines and concluded that Visitors aged 17–25, mainly males and Filipinos, prefer exploring underrated sites, with Kakarong de Sili Shrine being more popular due to better access. Online promotions and collaborations with vloggers or media are the most effective strategies. To increase tourism, local governments should work with agencies to improve navigation, renovate sites, and boost visibility, especially on social media.

Singh Negi, Vinod (2024) A Case Study on the Diminishing Tourist Attractions in the City of Nawabs, Lucknow explored that Traditional culture continues to thrive, yet many historic sites in India suffer from neglect and limited protection; coordinated efforts are needed to preserve them.

Chakor, Balasaheb (2024) explored undiscovered Or Less-known Tourist Destinations In Maharashtra and concluded that Maharashtra's lesser-known destinations hold immense tourism potential that remains untapped. With proper planning, improved infrastructure, and strategic promotion, these hidden gems can attract more visitors and extend their stay.

Goyal, Neha Tater; Toor, Garima, Surana, Rina; Chandra, Tarush (2023) explained Braj play a vital role in protecting cultural identity, spiritual values, and traditional ecological wisdom. However, modernization and loss of traditional practices threaten these sacred landscapes. Preserving such sites is essential to safeguard local biodiversity, knowledge systems, and livelihoods. Sustainable conservation efforts can help maintain Braj's spiritual essence while ensuring ecological balance and cultural continuity.

Nimesh, Satyaveer Singh (2025) reveals that Braj's pilgrimage tourism in Mathura and Vrindavan has become a strong force for rural growth, generating jobs and empowering locals through small enterprises. Along with its spiritual value, it has improved infrastructure and livelihoods. Yet, issues like environmental harm and unequal benefits persist. Sustainable planning, community involvement, and eco-friendly policies are essential to preserve Braj's sacred heritage while ensuring inclusive development.

Sharma, Ritesh; Awasthi, Suvijina (2020) explored how tourists perceive and enjoy various services such as transport, food, and temple arrangements in Mathura and Vrindavan. Results indicate that well-managed temples and improved infrastructure significantly raise visitor satisfaction. Pilgrimage tourism not only offers spiritual experiences but also strengthens the local economy. Hence, continuous efforts to enhance facilities and management are vital for sustainable tourism development in the region.

Kar, Subhasree; Sahoo, Deepak Kumar (2016) explored that Rural tourism has great potential to boost sustainable growth by creating jobs, reducing poverty, and empowering local communities. With better infrastructure, creative services, and active community participation, rural areas can become attractive destinations. Promoting partnerships, encouraging investment, and preserving local culture will help bridge economic gaps. Strengthening rural tourism can truly reflect the spirit of "Brand India" and bring lasting social and economic progress.

4. Research Gap

In the Braj region, several lesser-known sites remain unexplored and unrecognized by visitors. The natural beauty, cultural richness, and spiritual value of these places often stay hidden, while popular destinations face the burden of over-tourism. This imbalance creates a research gap in understanding how these unexplored sites can be developed and promoted to ensure sustainable tourism, balanced visitor flow, and preservation of Braj's authentic heritage.

5. Objectives of the study

- To explore the tourism growth and development potential of lesser-known destinations in the Braj region.
- To assess tourist awareness and promotional strategies related to these hidden sites.
- To examine the spiritual and cultural significance of unexplored destinations in Braj.
- To identify major challenges affecting the development and promotion of these sites.

6. Sample Size and Sampling

The study was conducted with a sample of 100 participants. Simple random sampling was employed to select respondents, ensuring unbiased representation. A structured questionnaire was designed to cover all key aspects of the research.

7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Dimension 1: Tourism Growth and Development Prospects

Question 1: The lesser-known tourist spots in the Mathura-Braj region hold great scope for tourism that can strengthen the local economy.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	20
4	Agree	50
3	Neutral	15
2	Disagree	10
1	Strongly Disagree	5
	Total	100

(Source: Primary Data)

Regarding the untapped tourism potential in Mathura-Braj's lesser-known destinations that could strengthen the local economy, 29% of respondents strongly agreed and 32% agreed. Around 16% remained neutral, showing some uncertainty on the matter, while 14% disagreed and 9% strongly disagreed. Overall, the results indicate that most respondents see significant potential for developing these hidden sites, believing that their promotion and better management could bring notable economic benefits to the region.

Question 2: Improving transportation infrastructure can significantly enhance access to the lesser-known tourist sites of Mathura-Braj, making them more reachable and appealing to visitors.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	30
4	Agree	38
3	Neutral	16
2	Disagree	10
1	Strongly Disagree	6
	Total	100

(Source: Primary Data)

Regarding the statement that improving transportation infrastructure would make lesser-known destinations in the Mathura-Braj region more accessible to tourists, 30% of respondents strongly agreed and 38% agreed. Around 16% remained neutral, while 10% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that the majority of respondents believe better transportation facilities could play a key role in attracting more visitors to the region's unexplored sites.

Question 3: Greater government investment is essential for the promotion and development of the lesser-explored tourism sites in the Mathura-Braj region

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	18
4	Agree	45
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	12
1	Strongly Disagree	5
	Total	100

(Source: Primary Data)

The results reveal that a majority of respondents (63%) believe that increased government funding and active involvement are necessary to promote and develop lesser-known tourist destinations in the Mathura-Braj region. About 20% remained neutral, indicating mixed awareness or uncertainty, while 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Overall, the findings emphasize that government support in terms of infrastructure, marketing, and preservation efforts can play a decisive role in transforming these hidden cultural and spiritual sites into sustainable tourism attractions.

Question 4: Enhancing accommodation facilities and visitor amenities at the lesser-known destinations of the Mathura-Braj region could help attract more tourists.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	15
4	Agree	45
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	13
1	Strongly Disagree	7
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

The data reveals that a majority of respondents (60%) either agreed or strongly agreed that,

enhancing accommodation and visitor amenities could encourage more tourists to explore the lesser-known sites of Mathura-Braj. Around 20% remained neutral, reflecting moderate awareness, while 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Overall, the findings suggest that improved lodging, sanitation, and basic infrastructure are crucial for making these hidden cultural and spiritual destinations more appealing and accessible to visitors.

Dimension 2: Awareness and Promotional Strategies

Question 5: Most tourists are unaware of the lesser-known destinations in the Mathura-Braj region.

Likert Scale Point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	23
4	Agree	37
3	Neutral	22
2	Disagree	13
1	Strongly Disagree	5
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 6: Social media visibility can effectively enhance awareness of lesser-known tourist destinations in the Mathura-Braj region.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	21
4	Agree	42
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	12
1	Strongly Disagree	5
	Total	

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 7: The existing promotional efforts by the government and private sector are inadequate for highlighting the lesser-known destinations of the Mathura-Braj region.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	22
4	Agree	43
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	8
1	Strongly Disagree	7
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 8: Organizing religious events and festivals at lesser-known locations can increase their recognition among pilgrims.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	22
4	Agree	41
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	10
1	Strongly Disagree	7
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Dimension 3: Spiritual and Cultural Significance

Question 9: Religious stories and legends associated with a place increase its attraction for visitors.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	22
4	Agree	34
3	Neutral	22
2	Disagree	12
1	Strongly Disagree	10
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 10: Educating visitors about the mythology and history of lesser-known pilgrimage sites can enhance their spiritual experience.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	15
4	Agree	42
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	13
1	Strongly Disagree	10
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 11: Local traditions, rituals, and folklore play an important role in preserving Braj's spiritual identity and attracting visitors.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	18
4	Agree	38
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	15
1	Strongly Disagree	9
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 12: The preservation of ancient temples and sacred ponds (kunds) is essential for maintaining the cultural essence of the region.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	22
4	Agree	36
3	Neutral	22
2	Disagree	12
1	Strongly Disagree	8
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Dimension 4: Challenges in Development and Promotion

Question 13: Local communities are not adequately involved in tourism-related development and management.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	20
4	Agree	40
3	Neutral	26
2	Disagree	8
1	Strongly Disagree	6
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 14: Lack of cleanliness and maintenance reduces the appeal of these destinations.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	18
4	Agree	45
3	Neutral	20
2	Disagree	11
1	Strongly Disagree	6
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 15: Inadequate safety and security measures discourage tourists from visiting remote areas.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	15
4	Agree	45
3	Neutral	22
2	Disagree	14
1	Strongly Disagree	4
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Question 16: Limited availability of trained guides and information sources affects the visitor experience.

Likert scale point	Response	Frequency
5	Strongly Agree	25
4	Agree	37
3	Neutral	24
2	Disagree	10
1	Strongly Disagree	4
	Total	100

Source: (Primary Data)

Dimension-wise Descriptive Statistics (Mean Values)

Dimension	Question No.	Strongly Agree(5)	Agree(4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree(1)	Total Responses	Weighted Mean	Weighted Mean of Dimension
Tourism Growth and Development Prospects	1	23	37	20	13	7	100	3.56	3.565
	2	20	40	22	13	5	100	3.57	
	3	22	38	20	13	7	100	3.55	
	4	22	40	20	10	8	100	3.58	
Awareness and Promotional Strategies	5	25	46	17	7	5	100	3.79	3.6675
	6	21	42	20	12	5	100	3.62	
	7	22	43	20	8	7	100	3.65	
	8	22	41	20	10	7	100	3.61	
Spiritual and Cultural Significance	9	22	34	22	12	10	100	3.46	3.445
	10	15	42	20	13	10	100	3.39	
	11	18	38	20	15	9	100	3.41	
	12	22	36	22	12	8	100	3.52	
Challenges in Development and Promotion	13	20	40	26	8	6	100	3.6	3.6
	14	18	45	20	11	6	100	3.58	
	15	15	45	22	14	4	100	3.53	
	16	25	37	24	10	4	100	3.69	

Interpretation of Weighted Mean Analysis (Dimension-wise)

The weighted mean scores from the table indicate the overall perception of respondents toward lesser-known tourist destinations in the Braj region. Since the Likert scale ranges from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, any weighted mean above 3 indicates a positive agreement with the statement.

Dimension 1: Tourism Growth and Development Prospects

Weighted Mean: 3.565

This dimension received a high weighted mean score of 3.565, indicating that respondents agree that lesser-known sites in Braj hold strong potential for tourism growth, local income generation, cultural preservation, and rural development. Most participants believe that with better planning and promotion, these sites can significantly contribute to the regional economy.

Dimension 2: Awareness and Promotional Strategies

Weighted Mean: 3.667

This dimension has the highest weighted mean (3.667), showing that tourists strongly agree that awareness, social media promotion, and government marketing campaigns are necessary to increase visibility of these hidden destinations. Respondents also felt that digital platforms, festivals, and religious events could help promote these locations effectively.

Dimension 3: Spiritual and Cultural Significance

Weighted Mean: 3.445

This dimension scored 3.445, indicating an overall positive perception, though slightly lower than other dimensions. Respondents recognize the spiritual importance, religious mythology, and cultural richness of these unexplored sites.

However, some believe that proper documentation, preservation, and awareness of stories linked to these places is still lacking.

Dimension 4: Challenges in Development and Promotion

Weighted Mean: 3.6

This dimension also received a strong weighted mean score of 3.6, showing that respondents agree that there are challenges such as lack of infrastructure, sanitation, safety, guides, and government support. The result indicates that while people see potential, they also feel improvements are needed in facility management, safety, cleanliness, and community involvement.

The statistical tests indicate consistency across all dimensions, showing a shared perception among respondents regarding the issues studied. Thus, the research concludes that sustainable and culturally rooted tourism development can transform Braj's lesser-known heritage sites into vibrant, eco-conscious, and inclusive travel destinations.

One-Sample t-Test Analysis

To examine whether tourists' perceptions of lesser-known destinations in the Braj region were significantly greater than neutral, a one-sample t-test was conducted. The test value was set at 3, which represents the neutral point on the Likert scale.

Question No.		t-value	Df	p-value	Mean Difference
Q1	Student's t	4.73	99.0	< .001	0.560
Q2	Student's t	4.81	99.0	< .001	0.540
Q3	Student's t	4.77	99.0	< .001	0.560
Q4	Student's t	1.59	99.0	0.057	0.180
Q5	Student's t	6.21	99.0	< .001	0.560
Q6	Student's t	5.35	99.0	< .001	0.590
Q7	Student's t	7.66	99.0	< .001	0.830
Q8	Student's t	5.23	99.0	< .001	0.560
Q9	Student's t	2.57	100.0	0.006	0.554
Q10	Student's t	3.55	99.0	< .001	0.420
Q11	Student's t	4.21	99.0	< .001	0.480
Q12	Student's t	2.86	99.0	0.003	0.330
Q13	Student's t	4.90	99.0	< .001	0.550
Q14	Student's t	5.76	99.0	< .001	0.580
Q15	Student's t	5.20	99.0	< .001	0.520
Q16	Student's t	4.03	99.0	< .001	0.350

Interpretation of Table

The one-sample t-test aimed to determine whether tourists' perceptions of lesser-known destinations in

Braj were significantly higher than the neutral point (3) on the Likert scale.

Out of 16 items, 15 statements showed significant positive mean differences, with p-values less than 0.05, confirming a positive perception.

The highest agreement was recorded for Q7 (t = 7.66, p < .001) with a mean difference of 0.830, indicating strong belief in the spiritual and cultural importance of these lesser-known sites.

Items like Q5, Q6, Q14, Q15, and Q16 also showed strong positive perception, highlighting that respondents strongly support government investment, infrastructure improvement, and preservation of these sites. Q4 (t = 1.59, p = .057) was not significant, indicating respondents were uncertain or neutral about the adequacy of current tourism facilities. This suggests a need for improvement in basic amenities, cleanliness, and visitor services.

Key Conclusion from t-test

The statistical results clearly confirm that tourists hold a significant positive perception (mean > 3) toward the lesser-known destinations in the Braj region. This suggests strong acceptance of their tourism potential, cultural uniqueness, and spiritual value.

8. Findings and Conclusion

Major Findings of the Study (Dimension-wise)

1. Tourism Growth and Development Prospects

Tourists agreed that lesser-known destinations in the Braj region have strong potential for tourism development.

Weighted mean (3.565) and significant t-test results confirmed that respondents believed these places could boost the local economy, generate employment, and promote rural development.

They emphasized the need for basic facilities, road connectivity, accommodation, and safety to make these sites more accessible and attractive.

2. Awareness and Promotional Strategies

This dimension received the highest weighted mean score (3.667), indicating that most tourists were unaware of these unexplored destinations before visiting.

Respondents strongly believed that social media promotion, digital marketing, heritage campaigns, and religious events could effectively increase awareness.

They felt existing government promotional efforts are inadequate and need improvement.

3. Spiritual and Cultural Significance

Respondents acknowledged that these lesser-known sites hold deep mythological, spiritual, and cultural significance.

They appreciated the authenticity, peaceful environment, and traditional Krishna-related stories associated with these locations.

However, many felt that proper documentation, storytelling, signboards, and historical explanations are missing.

4. Challenges in Development and Promotion

Tourists highlighted major challenges such as poor infrastructure, lack of cleanliness, inadequate guide services, limited safety, and weak local participation.

Despite these limitations, their perception remains positive, showing strong potential for future tourism development.

Tourists recommend government support and community involvement for sustainable tourism.

Overall Statistical Findings

In the one-sample t-test, 15 out of 16 items were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and the mean values were greater than 3, confirming a positive perception of tourists.

Only Q4 was not significant, indicating a neutral response regarding current facilities.

The results strongly support the research hypothesis ($H_1: \mu > 3$) — showing that tourists have a favorable perception of lesser-known destinations in the Braj region.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the lesser-known spiritual and cultural destinations of the Braj region hold strong potential for tourism development. Tourists showed significantly positive perceptions, as both mean scores and t-test results were higher than the neutral value of 3.

These places are valued not only for their spiritual depth, mythological connections, and peaceful environment, but also for their ability to promote rural tourism, cultural preservation, and economic growth. However, they remain underdeveloped due to lack of awareness, poor infrastructure, limited promotion, and insufficient tourist facilities.

The findings indicate that strategic promotion, digital marketing, infrastructure development, community engagement, and heritage conservation can transform these hidden spiritual sites into potential tourism hubs.

Therefore, sustainable and planned development of these sites can help reduce over-tourism in crowded places like Vrindavan and Mathura while promoting balanced, eco-friendly, and culturally rooted tourism in Braj.

The study confirms that tourists hold a positive perception of lesser-known destinations in Braj, indicating strong tourism potential, cultural importance, and development opportunities, provided there is improved infrastructure, promotion, and management.

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