

Revival Strategies for Branding & Positioning of Tourism & Hospitality Industry: A Case Study of Important Places of Bihar, India

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Abstract

Bihar the land of Magadha, the birthplace of Buddhism, Jainism and some of the world's earliest democratic traditions is one of India's most historically important yet low-performing tourism destinations. The state of Bihar, despite having the birthplace of Mahavira, the first sermon circuit of Buddha, the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Mahabodhi Temple Complex and ruins of Nalanda University, the world's largest stupa at Kesariya, and the former capital city, Pataliputra, one of the great cities of ancient times, brings in a mere 0.4% of international tourist arrivals to India and less than 2% of its tourism GDP. This research paper involves a thorough and in-depth study of the brand and positioning strategies that will help to bring the tourism and hospitality industry in Bihar back to life using a case study approach. The study examines the current brand equity, infrastructure conditions, quality of the visitor experience, and competitive positioning of each of the six major tourism destinations: Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, Patna, Madhubani (Mithila region) and finally they synthesise the cross-cutting strategies for revival of these. Primary data was collected through structured survey (n=420), in-depth stakeholder interviews (n=40), mystery visitor audits at 18 tourism sites, and content analysis of existing tourism marketing materials, while the secondary data consisted of reports produced by the Ministry of Tourism, publications by the UNWTO and literature on international destination branding. The study concludes that Bihar's tourism underperformance is a result of a cluster of interrelated weaknesses such as legacy media discourse on negative destination image, serious failures in connectivity and accommodation infrastructure, lack of a destination brand, poor experience design at the heritage sites, poor public-private governance of tourism development, and systematic exclusion of local communities and women artisans from the tourism value chain. The paper recommends specific branding and positioning actions for each of the deficits. There is a proposed Bihar Tourism Hospitality Revival Framework of five pillars: Brand Identity, Digital Transformation, Infrastructure & Experience, Community Empowerment and Governance Reform, along with a ten-year implementation roadmap with measurable tourism growth plan.

Keywords: Tourism Branding, Destination Positioning, Hospitality Industry, Tourism Revival Strategies, Destination Marketing, Heritage Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Tourist Destinations, Hospitality Management, Tourism Development, Brand Image, Tourism Promotion, Bihar Tourism, Religious Tourism, Tourism Competitiveness, Visitor Satisfaction, Tourism Policy.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Bihar Tourism Paradox

Bodh Gaya, Nalanda and Rajgir are a few names that have an unprecedented meaning in the concept of pilgrimage and heritage tourism in the world. It is where the world turned upside down: a prince became the Buddha; scholars from all over Asia came to discuss philosophy and mathematics, the first Buddhist councils were held, and one of the greatest empires in history was born. But for most of the visitors—whether Indians or foreigners—these sites are historical references, and not destinations to be visited for the real thing. Bihar has a story problem as much as it has a tourism problem and the solution of one is essential to the other.

The figures are shocking. According to India Tourism Statistics 2023, Bihar accounted for 3.8% of the domestic tourists and only 0.4% of the foreign tourists. The mean stay time for a Bihar visitor is 1.4 nights which is just

enough for a single site Bodh Gaya pilgrimage before going home, while national mean is 3.1 nights and Rajasthan's is 4.2 nights. The contribution of tourism to the economy of Bihar is around 1.8 of the state's GDP which is a small proportion of its potential compared to the 7.2 of tourism's contribution to Rajasthan's economy. This mismatch lie between heritage value and tourism performance of Bihar is the main issue addressed in the present paper.

1.2 Rationale for a Case-Study Approach

This paper, however, takes a case study approach to explore the challenges and opportunities for specific Bihar destinations in terms of their branding and positioning, as opposed to the macro-level studies of Bihar tourism conducted by Kumar & Singh (2021) and Mishra (2019). This granular approach is not accidental — the problems to which Bihar's tourism sector needs to address are not uniform. The problems are different at Bodh Gaya from those at Vaishali or Madhubani, where overall tourism is virtually absent, but the world-famous art tradition of Madhubani is completely disconnected from organised tours.

This paper provides insights to feed into place interventions as well as highlights cross-cutting governance, branding and infrastructure reforms needed at the state level for the Bihar tourism sector to respond to its destination-specific brand deficits and opportunities. The case study approach also allows the paper to draw on the rich primary data which was collected from mystery visitor audits, exit surveys and stakeholder interviews in certain locations and which allows seeing experiential realities that are not shown in any aggregate statistics of tourism.

1.3 Research Objectives

- 1 To study the actual tourism and hospitality brand equity of six major tourism destinations of Bihar as per primary research and stakeholder analysis.
- 2 To identify and understand the challenges in terms of branding, positioning, and quality of experience in Bihar's tourism and hospitality sector in destination specific and cross cutting manner.
- 3 To understand the competitive environment of Bihar as a tourist destination with respect to benchmark Indian and South Asian heritage tourism destinations.
- 4 To build a brand and position Bihar's tourism in the destination.
- 5 To evaluate the contribution of the hospitality sector (hotels, restaurants, guides and cultural business) towards Bihar's tourism brand and suggest revival strategies for the hospitality sector.
- 6 To suggest governance and implementation plan for revival of tourism and hospitality in Bihar for a period of 10 years.

1.4 Research Methodology

This study utilizes a sequential mixed-methods design that has four stages of research that are integrated into the study:

- Phase 1 — Mystery Visitor Audits: Site audits were conducted at 18 tourism sites across the 6 case study destinations, employing a standardised audit tool that scored on 48 criteria covering signage, cleanliness, accessibility, interpretation, hospitality service, food facilities, safety perception and digital connectivity. The audits took place from October 2023 to February 2024.
- Phase 2 involved conducting structured questionnaires with 420 respondents from five stakeholder groups: domestic tourists (148), international tourists/pilgrims (86), hotel and restaurant operators (62), local community members (artisans and guides) (76), and tourism policymakers and officials of the BTDC (48).
- Phase 3 — In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with 40 key informants in Bodh Gaya, such as experts on heritage conservation, destination marketing specialists, Buddhist circuit tour operators, Madhubani artists, luxury hotel investment analysts, and religious community leaders at Bodh Gaya.
- Phase 4 — Content Analysis: Building a logical framework of Bihar Tourism's digital footprint (website, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook), promotional brochures and media coverage (print and electronic) for the years 2018-2024., assessed against destination branding best-practice criteria.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Place Branding and Destination Positioning

Over the last 20 years, place branding, a strategic approach to the management of geographic destinations, has become one of the most fruitful fusions between the fields of marketing science and tourism research. Together, the Nation Brand Hexagon (2007) by Anholt, the Competitive Destination Model (2003) by Ritchie and Crouch, and the Destination Marketing (2012) by Pike, have created a framework of the three components of a destination's competitive advantage: its natural resources and attractions, enabling conditions, and its management ability.

In the book, *Destination branding: The challenge of making 'potential' 'presence'*, Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2011) explain the essence of destination branding as the process of 'making potential presence' - that is, 'making an objective heritage and cultural element into a subjective impression in tourist's imagination'. This is especially so for Bihar, the objective heritage is extraordinary but the subjective presence of the state in the tourist mind is either very low or even negative. There is a space between potential and presence – and that's the space effective destination branding strategy inhabits.

A model that can prove useful to diagnose Bihar's tourism brand challenges at the destination level is that of Keller's (2008) Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model. When applied to place branding, brand success requires making sure that tourists know that the place exists and have a clear idea of what it stands for (Brand Salience); that the destination fulfills its central promise by providing an appropriate quality of experience (Brand Performance); that the destination evokes the right associations, emotions, and links to identity (Brand Imagery); that visitors form positive quality and credibility judgements (Brand Judgements); that the destination generates positive emotional responses (Brand Feelings); and that the destination inspires loyalty, advocacy, and deep connections (Brand Resonance).

The level of brand equity of Bihar, as measured within this framework, is missing at all six levels, albeit to different extents and in different forms in the six case-study destinations analyzed in Section 3.

2.2 Heritage Tourism and Hospitality Integration

Heritage tourism and the hospitality industry are intertwined and dependent ecosystems; the quality of the accommodation, food service, guiding and visitor experience management is what creates the type of visitor experience a tourist has to a heritage site, whether positive or negative; and a high level of influence on whether it is the first or repeat visit and whether they are tourists or advocates. Poria, Butler and Airey (2003) show that heritage tourists' satisfaction is not just related to the significance of the heritage they experience but also to the overall quality of the experience context, such as the hostelry, food, authenticity, and guide competence.

Bihar's example is that the hospitality infrastructure at most locations is poorly developed in relation to the heritage values of the attractions. So even the most impressed visitors coming to Bodh Gaya for the spiritual aura or Nalanda for the archaeological heritage often come back to Bihar with a dual sense of 'extraordinary site, terrible everything else', which results in less endorsement and no return. It is, therefore, not just a business goal but a business necessity that the quality and cultural expressiveness of the hospitality industry be increased to make Bihar's heritage tourism brand more prominent.

2.3 The ABCDE Branding Diagnostic Framework

A framework of five dimensions Bihar Tourism Branding Diagnostic (BTBD) was developed to conduct case study analysis for the purposes of this paper, based on existing literature on destination branding. Each case-study destination is evaluated on five areas:

- A. Awareness: What percentage of target market segments are aware of the destination and correctly attribute its main heritage value?
- B. Brand Association: What associations does the destination evoke spontaneously and how do these relate to its intended heritage image?
- C. Connectivity & Infrastructure: How easy is it to reach the destination by air, rail and road and how well equipped is the hospitality infrastructure?

- D. Destination Experience Quality: How well does the on-ground visitor experience (site interpretation, hospitality, cleanliness, safety and food) deliver on the destination's heritage promise?
- E. Economic & Community Impact: How much value does tourism bring to local communities and are local communities involved in tourism value creation?

3. Bihar's Tourism & Hospitality Sector: Current Profile

Before examining individual case-study destinations, it is essential to establish the state-level quantitative baseline of Bihar's tourism and hospitality sector performance.

Table 1: Bihar Tourism & Hospitality Sector — Key Performance Indicators (2022–23)

<i>Performance Indicator</i>	<i>Bihar</i>	<i>National Benchmark</i>
<i>Domestic Tourist Arrivals</i>	<i>38.2 million</i>	<i>National Total: 1,400 mn</i>
<i>International Tourist Arrivals</i>	<i>0.41 million</i>	<i>National Total: 6.44 mn</i>
<i>Tourism GDP Share</i>	<i>1.8%</i>	<i>National Average: 6.8%</i>
<i>Average Tourist Stay (nights)</i>	<i>1.4</i>	<i>National Average: 3.1</i>
<i>Per-Capita Tourism Spend (INR)</i>	<i>1,240</i>	<i>National Average: 3,480</i>
<i>Classified Hotels (total)</i>	<i>682</i>	<i>Rajasthan: 3,200+</i>
<i>4-Star & Above Hotels</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>Rajasthan: 180+</i>
<i>Heritage Hotels</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Rajasthan: 127</i>
<i>UNESCO World Heritage Sites</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>India Total: 42</i>
<i>Registered Tour Guides</i>	<i>~1,200</i>	<i>Rajasthan: ~18,000</i>
<i>Tourism Budget (State, INR cr.)</i>	<i>~350</i>	<i>Rajasthan: ~2,200</i>

Source: Ministry of Tourism, India Tourism Statistics 2023; BTDC Annual Report 2022–23; Rajasthan Tourism reports; Authors' compilation.

The comparative data further substantiates the extent of the shortage of hospitality infrastructure in Bihar. Bihar simply does not have enough hotels with 4-star and above ratings, and the demand for premium international class tourist rates as should be generated by its Buddhist heritage circuit, is almost completely absent. The ratio of registered tour guides to tourists is about 1:32,000, which is far from ideal for providing and delivering heritage interpretation services. The state tourism budget of INR 350 crore is one-sixth of that of Rajasthan, which has equal number of UNESCO heritages and a similar population.

4. Case Studies: Important Tourism Destinations of Bihar

The following six case studies are the empirical heart of this research. Each examines a major Bihar tourism destination through the ABCDE Branding Diagnostic Framework, drawing on mystery visitor audit data, survey findings, and stakeholder interview insights.

Case Study 1: Bodh Gaya — The Seat of Enlightenment

Heritage Significance

The Buddha acquired his nirvana, or enlightenment, under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, the holiest place in the Buddhist tradition, about 2500 years ago. The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2002, and the center of one of the world's most important religious pilgrimage circuits. The Mahabodhi Temple (5th–6th century CE tower, built over a location of the original temple commissioned by Emperor Ashoka) and the sacred Bodhi tree (a sapling of the original tree) are part of the complex, as well as the Animesh Lochana Chaitya, the Ratnachakrama and the Lotus Pond. The complex is surrounded by more than 80 international Buddhist monasteries and temples constructed by countries such as Japan, Thailand, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Myanmar, China and Tibet, forming a unique scene of global Buddhist culture that can hardly be found elsewhere in the world.

ABCDE Diagnostic Assessment

Table 2: Bodh Gaya — ABCDE Branding Diagnostic

Dimension	Score (/10)	Strength	Key Gap	Priority
Awareness	6.4	Strong in Buddhist Asia	Low in Western markets	Medium
Brand Association	5.8	“Holy Buddhist site”	No broader Bihar narrative	High
Connectivity	4.9	Gaya airport, NH connectivity	No direct international flights	Critical
Destination Experience	5.2	Temple complex is world-class	Surrounding area chaotic	High
Economic Impact	3.7	Significant footfall	Value leaks to outside operators	High

Source: Mystery visitor audits, primary surveys, and stakeholder interviews; Authors' analysis.

Identify gaps in current branding and positioning.

Bodh Gaya's current image is 'Buddhist Pilgrimage Site' which is correct but very narrow and constricting. The destination has marketed itself primarily to the existing Buddhist community in Asia and not to the much greater audience of culturally curious, historically interested, spiritually seeking visitors from Europe, North America and Australia who would be very intrigued about Bodh Gaya when they visit it with an appropriate narrative frame. According to survey data, non-Buddhist domestic tourists and Western tourists had visited Bodh Gaya as a potential destination to visit, only 18% and 9% respectively, not because they were uninterested in its heritage, but because they never came across a convincing story of it.

The immediate environment of the Mahabodhi Temple complex, where a visitor has to walk to reach the holy site, has high levels of pedestrian congestion, aggressive commercial solicitation, poor pedestrian infrastructure, poor sanitation, and poor food service. The scores from four mystery visitor audit visits averaged 3.1/10 for the ‘approach experience’, compared to scores of 8.4/10 for the temple complex interior. Inversion, disruption and

fragmentation of the experiential continuum — transcendent heritage, chaotic surrounds — is the brand problem of Bodh Gaya and one that can be resolved through planned investment in urban development.

Revival Strategy for Bodh Gaya (2014)

The narrative will be extended from 'Buddhist pilgrimage site' to 'The Place Where One of Humanity's Greatest Ideas Was Born' — an idea that resonates with culturally curious non-Buddhist visitors as much as it does to Buddhist pilgrims. Employ storytelling content that is documentary quality that tells the story of Siddhartha's transformation, the spread of Buddhist thought around the world, and contemporary interfaith dialogue in Bodh Gaya.

- **Experience Overhaul:** Engage a world-class urban design firm to create a 'Sacred Mile' pedestrian corridor from the commercial centre of Bodh Gaya to the Mahabodhi Temple, a pedestrian friendly approach zone that is calm, shaded, interpretative, has good wayfinding, a filtered commercial zone, clean street food zones, meditation zones and public art.
- **International Connectivity:** Seek direct charter and scheduled flights from Bangkok, Colombo, Seoul, Kathmandu and Yangon to Gaya Airport through Ministry of Civil Aviation, with BTDC's seat guarantee facility to de-risk the initial flights.
- **Hospitality Cluster Development:** Set up a 'Bodh Gaya Heritage Hospitality Zone' with investment friendly incentives to develop 5-6 boutique international standard hotels and a luxury meditation retreat, catering for the spiritual wellness travellers coming from Europe, USA and Japan.
- **Monastery Cultural Tourism:** Establish a 'Living Monasteries Trail' with 80+ international Buddhist monasteries around the Mahabodhi complex, providing guided cultural immersion tours, vegetarian monastery meal experiences, introductory meditation and dharma sessions — diversifying visitor revenue and enhancing cultural engagement.

Case Study 2: Nalanda — The World's First University

Heritage Significance

From the 5th to the 12th century CE, Nalanda University was the largest school of education in the ancient world and the world's first university to be a residential institution. Nalanda had more than 10,000 students and over 2,000 teachers at its peak; its students came from China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and were the most brilliant minds of their time. They studied Buddhist philosophy, Hindu philosophy, logic, epistemology, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, fine arts and grammar. In 1193, eyewitnesses said that the huge library of the university of Nalanda, called Dharmaganja, burned for three months when Bakhtiyar Khilji's army sacked and burned it. Excavated from 1915, the ruins were added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2016.

ABCDE Diagnostic Assessment

Nalanda has a high level of heritage significance and a critical score on almost all operational aspects of tourism. According to the results of the Mystery Visitor Audits: no audio guide available in any language; interpretation panels mainly in Hindi and English and no provision in Asian language – despite the fact that the site is of primary international importance to the Buddhist community of East and Southeast Asia; the visitor centre facilities are described as 'basic' by 78% of international visitors survey respondents; road access from Bodh Gaya (approx. 90 km, 3-3.5 hours by road) deters multi site tours; no evening illumination or experiential programming exists to make a Nalanda visit distinguishable from reading an article in Wikipedia.

The ABCDE gap is at its highest in two dimensions: Connectivity (3.8/10) and Destination Experience (4.1/10). Although the Nalanda Archaeological Museum has many important relics such as bronze Buddhas, terracotta fragments and copper inscriptions, it is not equipped with the interpretive infrastructure that can be found in comparable UNESCO heritage museums in Thailand, Cambodia or Sri Lanka.

Revitalisation Strategy for Nalanda

- World-Class Visitor Experience Centre: Development of a Nalanda World Knowledge Centre, a purpose built interpretive institution adjacent to the excavation site, which will contain immersive exhibitions of the history of Nalanda University, its intellectual legacy (Indian contributions to mathematics, medicine, and philosophy), its international scholarly network, and its destruction and rediscovery. Design brief: towards an ambitious interpretive approach in the conservation museum of Angkor, Cambodia and the museum of Anokhi in Jaipur.
- Nalanda Connection Programme: Link with Nalanda's modern descendants, the international academic scholars who are present in the academic circles of Japan, South Korea, China, Germany and USA, to establish academic tourism programmes to bring academic study groups to Nalanda every year and generate continuous demand for international intellectual tourism.
- Night at Nalanda: A 'Nalanda After Dark' sound-and-light show that tells the story of the foundation, flowering and destruction of Nalanda, set against the lights of the ruins and with professionally scripted narration in five languages. This can impact numbers of visitors to heritage sites around the world in transformative ways (Rajasthan's night experiences at Amber Fort and Mehrangarh attract hundreds of thousands of visitors per year).
- Make the Bodh Gaya – Nalanda – Rajgir (a 4-hour road journey that should take 1.5 hours) road upgrade the No. 1 physical infrastructure project in Bihar's Buddhist circuit.
- Hotel Development at Nalanda: Carry out development of 2-3 quality boutique hotels within 5 km of Nalanda to facilitate multi-night stay facility where both Nalanda and Rajgir are available — which is not available currently due to lack of accommodation.

Case Study 3: Rajgir — Valley of Multiple Faiths

Heritage Significance

Rajgir site is one of the most multi-layered heritage sites of Bihar, a valley enveloped by hills of Cyclopean stone walls, the oldest surviving man-made structures in India, the site of profound significance for Buddhism (Buddha spent many rainy seasons in Rajgir; the Griddhakuta or Vulture Peak is one of the most sacred locations in Buddhism; the first Buddhist Council was held at Saptaparni cave) and Jainism (Mahavira spent 14 rainy seasons in Rajgir) and Hinduism (association with the Mahabharata; the hot spring complex at Brahma Kund). Rajgir was also the first capital of the Magadha empire of King Bimbisara, which is the political beginnings of the Mauryan imperial tradition.

The physical environment of Rajgir is one of the most visually interesting in Bihar: a green valley surrounded by hills Vaibhava, Vipula, Ratna, Chatha and Sona, and dominated by Griddhakuta mountain, which can be seen from the top by a rope-way. The recently-built Vishwa Shanti Stupa – World Peace Pagoda – atop Ratnagiri hill via ropeway – is a modern icon of aesthetic and spiritual significance.

Current State and Brand Gaps

Rajgir sees about 340,000 visitors each year, mostly domestic day-trippers from Patna and Bodh Gaya and they visit here, travel up the ropeway, visit to the Brahma Kund and return in about 4–5 hours. There is no mid- or high-quality accommodation to support multiple night stops; the quality of restaurants is universally low; the site interpretation for the several layers of historical and religious significance is virtually absent; and, the extraordinary archaeological landscape of Cyclopean walls and early Buddhist sites on the hilltop is inaccessible to visitors without specialised guides, and even these are in extremely short supply.

Mystery visitors rated interpretation and food service quality as two of the lowest scores in the study (2.4/10 and 2.8/10, respectively). Rajgir also has a unique eco-tourism and wellness dimensions: The natural hot springs at Brahma Kund, if made available to modern therapeutic standards, could be the base for a real premium value eco-tourism product.

Revival Strategy for Rajgir

- The Multi-Faith Heritage Trail includes a formal, guided ‘Rajgir Multi-Faith Trail’ with trained multilingual heritage guides, a print map of the trail in 6 languages, QR code audio interpretation for each site, and a digital heritage trail app, connecting Buddhist sites (Griddhakuta, Saptarni Cave, Venuvan Bamboo Grove), Jain sites (Vipulachal, Sona Bhandar), Hindu sites (Brahma Kund), and Magadhan archaeological sites (Cyclopean walls, Jail of Bimbisara).
- Rajgir Hot Spring Wellness Resort: Engage a private developer to develop a wellness resort based on the therapeutic hot springs (Brahma Kund) in the presence of traditional Ayurvedic therapy, Buddhist Meditations, hilltop yoga and modern hydrotherapy. This is a one-of-a-kind product for the high end wellness travel segment from urban India, Japan and Europe.
- Due to its proximity, and its historical setting, leverage Nalanda University and Rajgir to develop Rajgir as a centre for international Buddhist conferences, interfaith summits, academic symposia, and spiritual retreats, a MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions) segment which brings in high spend per participant and prestigious media coverage.
- Rajgir Cuisine Revival: Coordinate with the hospitality management institutions and the networks of Slow Food in Patna to recognize, document and restore traditional Magadhan cuisine for presentation in restaurants as part of the gastronomic offer at Rajgir, complementing the spiritual and archaeological offer.

Case Study 4: Vaishali – Cradle of Democracy and Compassion

Heritage Significance

By any measure Vaishali is one of the most under recognized important locations in world history. In the 6th century BCE, the Licchavis of Vaishali adopted what many historians consider as the world's first republic — a form of government where elected representatives ruled. In the 6th century BCE, the Licchavis of Vaishali adopted the first form of the Republic, a system of government by elected representatives, decades before the Athens Republic. Vardhamana Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara (founder of Jainism as a living religion), was born in the same city. The Buddha's visits to Vaishali were numerous and here he made some of the most significant of his teachings, as well as his last journey before Nirvana. The next Buddhist Council took place at Vaishali, where the shape of the Buddhist sangha was decided. The Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, one of the best-preserved Ashokan pillars in India, is a 7.6-metre polished sandstone column topped with a single lion capital, which stands quietly in the fields of rice. The Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali is a 7.6-metre polished sandstone pillar topped by a single lion capital, one of the best-preserved Ashokan pillars in India, virtually unknown to the world.

Current State: A Heritage in Invisible Crisis

Roughly 120,000 visitors come to Vaishali each year, a fact that should be a source of embarrassment for the destination marketing organization and a place for the organization to begin to make a dramatic turnaround. It is a site that is not visible in tourist marketing, at the domestic or international level. Poor access roads, zero quality hospitality facilities and an almost unmarked archaeological landscape with limited interpretation means that the Ashokan Pillar, the Ananda Stupa, the Abhishek Pushkarini (Coronation Tank where Licchavi leaders were consecrated) and the Bhumiputra (World Peace) Stupa are out there and waiting to be accessed.

During the mystery visitor audits, the site of Vaishali was found to have the poorest physical state, with many of the boundary walls collapsing, the approach paths overgrown, and a museum (Vaishali Museum) with non-functioning exhibits and no staff on two of the three audit visits, and with a lack of facilities for food and water in the archaeological park. All of the international visitors who were identified on the site (nine in the course of the audit visits) were frustrated: the site was of importance, but the experience of visiting was characterised as ‘neglected’, ‘confusing’ and ‘disappointing’.

Revival Strategy for Vaishali

- The World's First Republic Brand: Make Vaishali's claim to being the birthplace of republican democracy brand it for the extraordinary political and intellectual significance of its story, that appeals to visitors from democratic nations around the world. The idea of 'Vaishali: Where Democracy Was Born' has the possibility of attracting an altogether different kind of religious pilgrim, media attention and political-cultural tourism.
- Emergency Heritage Infrastructure Investment: Make sure that Vaishali is given a top priority in terms of physical infrastructure investment, including restoration of the site boundary, construction of a path, illumination, interpretation panels in eight languages, a good visitor reception area, and the establishment of a temporary heritage interpretation tent until a permanent centre can be built.
- To integrate Jain heritage with Jain organizations of the Indian community and Jain communities in the Diaspora around the world, such as Vaishali, in the form of economic resources and rich spiritual interest in Mahavira's birthplace. The potential for Jain pilgrimage tourism at Vaishali is very large and unexploited.

Case Study 5: Patna (Pataliputra) – The Eternal City

Heritage Significance

The ancient city of Pataliputra (modern-day Patna) is one of the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world, having been inhabited for more than 2,500 years. It was the capital of the Nanda, Mauryan, Shunga and Gupta empires, and described by Megasthenes (the Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court) as equal in size to Persepolis and Susa. The city's heritage sites include the Mauryan archaeological sites (Kumhrar, where a huge hypostyle hall with 80 polished sandstone columns has been excavated), the striking architectural geometry of the Gol Ghar (granary built in 1786 CE), the Didarganj Yakshi of one of India's finest archaeological collections housed in the Patna Museum, the Padri-ki-Haveli (one of the oldest Catholic churches in India), and the Har Mandir Takht Sahib (the 5th Takht of Sikhism) in the old city quarter surrounding Patna Sahib.

Patna as Tourism Gateway: Missed Opportunity

Patna is also the main air gateway of Bihar as its Jay Prakash Narayan International Airport has around 40 domestic routes. It receives nearly all the international and most of the domestic tourist traffic to Bihar. But Patna is actually a transit hub and not a tourist destination: tourists come and go, but do not stay in Patna. Results of primary survey indicate that 67% of tourists went directly from the airport to destination while 23% of them stayed for more than four hours in Patna.

This is a huge loss of economic benefit. Patna's tourist numbers can increase by another day or two, with interesting city heritage offerings, good city hospitality, and a right-on-door-step 'Patna Heritage Walk' product, and the benefits to the state's tourism revenues would be significant.

Revival Strategy for Patna

- Patna Heritage Circuit: World-class 'Pataliputra Heritage Walk' with trained heritage guides, a heritage walk app, a premium street food stop where visitors will be able to enjoy authentic Bihari cuisine, and evening lighting of key monuments at Patna. Model: Ahmedabad's UNESCO inscribed Heritage walk has changed the Ahmedabad tourism.
- Ganga Riverfront Development: Patna's location on the Ganga is a tourism opportunity which is not being utilised. A tour of the Ganga cruise linking the heritage ghats, sunset viewpoints and cultural activities at the evening hours would give a unique experience which is instagrammable in the tourism sector.
- Urban Boutique Hotel Cluster: Pattern and facilitate the development of 8-10 upscale urban boutique hotels in the heritage areas of Ashok Rajpath, Bankipore and Old Patna which are currently lacking to

provide the quality hotel accommodation base that is forcing the foreign tourists to settle for poor quality hotels or leave Patna with haste.

- Patna as MICE Destination: Invest in Building Conventions Centre Facilities that position Patna as a business tourism destination of Bihar due to its connectivity, Government presence and an emerging corporate sector in order to build MICE tourism along with leisure tourism.
- Food Tourism- Patna is the natural home of a Bihari food tourism economy, with its rich diversity of local cuisine and culinary traditions. Patna is the natural home of a Bihari food tourism economy, characterized by its rich diversity of local cuisine and culinary traditions. This curated 'Bihari Table' experience would bring in the culinary tourists and create real and meaningful hospitality jobs in the communities of Patna's historic bazaars.

Case Study 6: Madhubani (Mithila) – The Canvas That Spans Centuries

Heritage Significance

Madhubani painting, or Mithila painting, is one of the most internationally acclaimed folk art traditions of India and one of the world's longest unbroken traditions of painting, going back at least 2,500 years. The art form was traditionally used by women on walls and floors of homes, and originated in the Mithila region of northern Bihar (the districts of Madhubani, Sitamarhi, Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur) and involved depicting religious scenes, social events (marriage, birth, etc.), and the natural world with lively geometric designs, idealized human and animal figures, and an amazing palette of colours. There is some IP protection for Madhubani painting under the Geographical Indication (GI) system, which was granted to this art as a regional product of Mithila in 2011, but the system is not well enforced.

Madhubani painting became internationally recognised, starting in the late 1960s, when a government official named Bhaskar Kulkarni campaigned on behalf of the Madhubani women to have their wall paintings transferred onto paper and canvas to help alleviate the effects of famine. The resulting paintings were then displayed internationally and added to museum collections all over the world, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Smithsonian Institution and the Pompidou Centre.

The Art-Tourism Disconnect

Although Madhubani is now a recognized art form globally, there are no meaningful infrastructure developments to support the living art form in Madhubani district. No special Madhubani Art and Culture Centre, no organised artist village trail, no proper and reliable system for linking the interested visitors with practising artists and no quality accommodation within the district to facilitate an overnight art tourism visit. Visitors who do reach Madhubani are collectors or researchers who have identified specific artists, and are motivated by a specific interest; such visits provide little economic benefit to the community.

The difference between Blue Pottery craft tourism circuit of Jaipur or Textile heritage tourism circuit of Kutch (Gujarat) is stark as both illustrate that, when organised, interpreted and marketed right, world class craft heritage can give birth to a significant tourism economy. Unlike either, Madhubani is as well known, if not more, internationally and yet receives a small percentage of their tourism benefit.

Revive the art of Madhubani.

Mithila Living Art Village Network: To form a network of 15-20 designated "Mithila Living Art Villages", where practicing Madhubani artists (mainly women) are organized into cooperatives, receive training to be good hosts of tourism, conduct art workshops for tourists and sell directly authenticated artwork. Based on the responsible tourism village network in Kerala.

- Madhubani Art & Heritage Centre: Build a world class cultural centre to promote and showcase Madhubani's artistic heritage with permanent exhibits; a contemporary gallery for the current artist; open printmaking & workshop studios for the visitors; library of Mithila art scholarship; a high-end art shop with authentication.

- Mithila Arts Festival: Organize an annual 'Mithila Arts Festival' in Madhubani with a combination of art exhibitions, live painting demonstration by master artists, folk music performances, Jat-Jatin Dance, traditional Mithila food, workshop for national and international art lovers for 4 days. Target for the Year 3: 15,000 festival goers with INR 8-12 crore of local economic impact.
- Women Artisans Empowerment Programme: Madhubani's art is virtually a women-centric tradition. A women artisans empowerment programme with the various components as entrepreneurship training, digital marketing skill development, art authentication and support for GI certification, access to national and international market platforms would make tourism a tool of economic empowerment as well.
- Digital Art Tourism: Commission a high-end Digital Art site 'Mithila Live' to enable international collectors and art lovers to observe artists at work in real-time through a live stream, order customized art works and receive digital authenticated art with a certificate of authenticity. This makes Madhubani's art accessible to the world without having to travel physically.

5. Cross-Cutting Analysis: Common Themes and Systemic Issues

5.1 Composite ABCDE Scorecard

Table 3: Comparative ABCDE Diagnostic Scores — Six Case Study Destinations

Destination	A-Awareness	B-Brand Assoc.	C-Connectivity	D-Dest. Exp.	E-Econ. Impact	Overall
Bodh Gaya	6.4	5.8	4.9	5.2	3.7	5.2
Nalanda	5.1	5.4	3.8	4.1	3.2	4.3
Rajgir	4.8	4.2	4.4	3.9	3.4	4.1
Vaishali	2.9	3.1	3.2	2.6	2.3	2.8
Patna	5.8	4.6	6.2	4.4	4.1	5.0
Madhubani	4.2	6.1	3.0	2.8	2.6	3.7
Bihar Average	4.9	4.9	4.3	3.8	3.2	4.2

Scores on a 10-point scale. Source: Mystery visitor audits, primary surveys, stakeholder interviews; Authors' analysis, 2024.

The composite scorecard reveals four systemic patterns that transcend individual destinations. First, Destination Experience quality (average 3.8/10) is the dimension with the greatest gap between heritage significance and visitor experience — every destination scores substantially below its heritage significance rating on this dimension. Second, Economic Impact (average 3.2/10) is universally low, indicating that even where visitors do arrive, tourism's economic benefit to local communities is poorly distributed. Third, Connectivity (average 4.3/10) is a significant constraint for all sites except Patna. Fourth, Vaishali is in crisis — its score of 2.8/10 overall represents a critical heritage emergency requiring immediate intervention.

5.2 The Hospitality Industry's Role in Bihar's Brand

Primary survey data reveals that accommodation and food service quality significantly shapes visitors' overall Bihar tourism brand perceptions. When asked 'What most negatively affected your impression of Bihar as a tourism destination?', the top five responses were:

Table 4: Top Factors Negatively Affecting Bihar Tourism Brand Perceptions (n=420)

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factor</i>	<i>% Citing as Top Concern</i>	<i>Implications for Hospitality</i>
1	<i>Poor road connectivity between sites</i>	68.4%	<i>Limits multi-site tourism packages</i>
2	<i>Lack of quality accommodation</i>	61.2%	<i>Forces visitors to leave; prevents overnight stays</i>
3	<i>Poor site cleanliness / sanitation</i>	57.8%	<i>Creates negative ambient brand impression</i>
4	<i>Inadequate food options / quality</i>	51.4%	<i>Reduces per-visitor spending; negative memories</i>
5	<i>No professional guides available</i>	49.3%	<i>Heritage interpretation gap; no context for visits</i>

Source: Primary exit surveys across six case-study destinations (n=420 total). Multiple responses permitted; top responses shown.

Backing up this assertion, an analysis of Bihar Tourism's digital marketing assets shows a clear trend of underinvestment and strategic incoherence. Bihar Tourism has 92,000 followers on its official Instagram page whereas Rajasthan Tourism has 1.5 million followers, Kerala Tourism 2.3 million and Madhya Pradesh Tourism 780,000 followers (as of December 2024). The posts in the account are mostly static photos of the archaeological sites, and they have lower engagement rates than those typically found in the tourism sector (around 1.2%, compared with 3-5%).

5.3 The Digital Presence Gap

Backing up this assertion, an analysis of Bihar Tourism's digital marketing assets shows a clear trend of underinvestment and strategic incoherence. Bihar Tourism has 92,000 followers on its official Instagram page whereas Rajasthan Tourism has 1.5 million followers, Kerala Tourism 2.3 million and Madhya Pradesh Tourism 780,000 followers (as of December 2024). The posts in the account are mostly static photos of the archaeological sites, and they have lower engagement rates than those typically found in the tourism sector (around 1.2%, compared with 3-5%).

The number of subscribers for the Bihar Tourism’s YouTube channel is less than 15,000, and its content hasn't been viewed more than 100,000 times compared to Kerala Tourism's flagship 'Why I Love Kerala' campaign, which has garnered over 50 million views on YouTube and is said to have played a major role in boosting Kerala's international tourism numbers. The official website has recently been redesigned, but still does not have virtual tours, interactive site maps, trip planning tools, integration of user-generated content (in languages other than English and Hindi), and more.

There was no evidence of coordinated influencer marketing campaigns, nor were there travel content partnerships with key target markets (Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Germany, the UK) and there was no systematic approach to creating earned media coverage in international travel newspapers. The earned media presence of Bihar Tourism in international media is negligible as compared to Rajasthan Tourism's regular media presence in Condé Nast Traveller, National Geographic Traveller and Lonely Planet.

6. Bihar Tourism & Hospitality Revival Framework

Drawing on the case-study analysis, diagnostic findings, stakeholder interviews, and comparative destination benchmarking, this section proposes the Bihar Tourism and Hospitality Revival Framework — a five-pillar strategic architecture for transforming Bihar's tourism and hospitality sector over a ten-year horizon.

"Bihar: Where the World Learned to Wonder"

The master destination brand for Bihar, 'Where the World Learned to Wonder' puts it to Bihar as the cradle of wonder itself or 'Bihar wonder', which has been the enlightenment (Bodh Gaya); the knowledge (Nalanda); the democracy (Vaishali); the empire (Pataliputra); the art (Madhubani). This proposition is for anyone who wants to travel, see the world, and appreciates history, culture, and the arts, whether or not they are a Buddhist pilgrim, a history buff, an intellectual, an artist, a wellness enthusiast or simply someone who thinks that the birthplace of great ideas is a great place to travel.

6.1 Pillar 1 — Brand Identity & Narrative

Strategy 1.1: Unified Destination Brand Architecture.

The approach of Bihar Tourism needs to shift from a 'site-centric marketing' to a single destination approach, i.e. each site as a chapter in a single, catchy 'state-wide brand story'. The architecture should reflect the successful models in the state tourism branding, e.g., the state of Rajasthan with its 'Incredible Heritage' story, the state of Kerala with its 'Responsible Paradise' branding, and Tamil Nadu with its 'The Land of Temples' branding. The brand architecture of Bihar puts the heritage of the state in the hearts of the world as a gift of civilisational values — the source of the ideas which changed the face of humanity.

Strategy 1.2: Tier-1 Destination Marketing Investment

The state tourism marketing budget for Bihar should be kept at least 400 per cent higher than the current level in five years (by Year 5) — from INR 350 crore to INR 1,500 crore per year. It should be divided into the following areas: 30% for digital marketing and content production, 25% for market development abroad (Buddhist Asia, Europe, North America), 20% for domestic market campaigns, 15% for trade and industry partnerships, and 10% for research, data collection and performance monitoring.

Strategy 1.3: The Bihar Storytelling Studio

Introduce 'Bihar Storytelling Studio' — a dedicated content production unit in BTDC with the help of their professional film makers, writers, photographers and digital marketers for the production of world class digital content on Bihar's heritage, culture, food and people on a regular basis. Annual production goal: 4 documentary format videos; 2 podcast series; 12 brand videos for social media; 150+ Instagram reels/shorts; and a high-quality media-ready photography library.

6.2 Pillar 2 — Digital Transformation

Strategy 2.1: Bihar Heritage Digital Ecosystem

Create a full-fledged Bihar Heritage Digital Ecosystem that includes: an AI-powered trip planning app on the official site; multilingual visitor apps (with offline support) for all significant heritage sites in Bihar, creating a unique experience for visitors to each site; QR code audio interpretation at all major heritage sites, in 8 languages; AR overlays at key sites, allowing visitors to visualize Nalanda University in the full glory of its scholarly achievements or Bodh Gaya during the glory of the Mauryans; and a Bihar Heritage digital passport that will reward visits to multiple sites with curated experiences and discounts.

Strategy 2.2: International Influencer and Media Programme

Set up a systematic international influencer and media familiarisation (FAM) program with at least 100,000 followers from Japan, South Korea, Thailand, UK, Germany, France, Australia and USA in the travel industry. Conduct 60 international creators and 20 travel journalists visits in Bihar annually for customised experiences and

professional photography support. Estimated value of earned media earned: INR 40-60 crore per year on an investment of INR 4 crore into the programme.

6.3 Pillar 3 — Infrastructure & Experience Upgrade

Strategy 3.1: Buddhist Circuit Highway

Commission and establish a Buddhist Circuit Highway, a four lane well maintained road, linking Gaya Airport, Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir and Vaishali with consistent bilingual signage, clean rest areas every 30 km, emergency assistance points and tourist information kiosks. Target travel time: Bodh Gaya - Nalanda less than 75 minutes, Nalanda - Rajgir less than 30 minutes. Estimated Investment: INR 1400 crore; eligible for funding under Bharatmala Pariyojana.

Strategy 3.2: Hospitality Infrastructure Investment Incentives

Introduce Bihar Heritage Hospitality Investment Incentive Scheme comprising of 100% stamp duty waiver on tourism hospitality projects, 50% capital subsidy (up to INR 6 crore per project) on development of boutique heritage hotel, single window clearance in 60 days on projects, 5 year GST reimbursement on new tourism hospitality ventures and preferential land allotment in designated Tourism Investment Zones at Bodh Gaya, Nalanda-Rajgir, Vaishali, Madhubani etc.

Strategy 3.3: Site Experience Quality Standards

Apply mandatory 'Bihar Heritage Site Quality Standards' for all tourism sites managed by BTDC/ASI covering: cleanliness audit (monthly); provision of multilingual interpretation; quality of food facility; accessible design; waste management; requirements for the certification of guides; digital connectivity; and visitor safety. Poorly performing sites within 18 months of standards should be reviewed and consideration be given to outsourcing to capable private operators.

6.4 Pillar 4 — Community Empowerment & Hospitality Workforce

Strategy 4.1: Bihar Heritage Guide Corps

Set up Bihar Heritage Guide Corps – a professionally trained and centrally certified organisation of heritage guides at all the major tourism sites offering interpretation services. Target: 5,000 trained guides by Year 5, including experts on Buddhist/Mauryan heritage, Jain heritage, Mithila heritage, and language experts such as Japanese, Korean, Chinese, German, French, and Spanish language experts. Training collaboration with Nalanda University, National Institute of Tourism & Hospitality Management (NITHM) and overseas guide certification organizations.

Strategy 4.2: Mithila Women Artisans Tourism Enterprise Programme

Develop a unique scheme to make Mithila women artisans proactive participants in the value chain of tourism; namely, through homestay hosting, art workshop facilitation, cultural performance and sale of authentic arts through existing certified channels. To create average annual income uplift of INR 1.5-2 lakh per artisan and 2,000 women artisan enterprises in tourism income within 5 years through the programme.

Strategy 4.3: Bihar Village Homestay Network

To create a quality certified 'Bihar Village Homestay Network' comprising 500 homestay properties in the tourism zones of Bihar, based on the model of 'Responsible Tourism' homestay network in Kerala and 'rural tourism villages' network in Rajasthan. The homestays offer tourists a true cultural experience and also offer significant incomes to the rural populace. Hospitality training, providing basic infrastructure support and listing on the official Bihar Tourism digital platform are provided to each participating household.

6.5 Pillar 5 — Governance & Institutional Reform

Strategy 5.1: Bihar Tourism Authority

Make BTDC a stronger Bihar Tourism Authority (BTA) with a stronger mandate, greater operational autonomy, professional leadership from the private sector (CEO from national or international tourism sector), and greater annual budgets, while also holding it to account to a Tourism Advisory Board with representation from industry, academia, community groups and bodies involved in heritage conservation.

Strategy 5.2: Buddhist Circuit Governance Compact

To conclude, a formal Buddhist Circuit Governance Compact, a memorandum of understanding between BTDC, ASI, Bihar Road Construction Department, Ministry of Civil Aviation, Ministry of External Affairs (for diplomatic coordination with Buddhist majority countries) and Nalanda University, outlining shared responsibilities for the development of the Buddhist circuit, coordinated investment planning and joint monitoring mechanisms. Reviewed by Bihar Tourism Development Council at the level of Cabinet every year.

Strategy 5.3: Public-Private Partnership Pipeline

Create a Bihar Tourism Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Pipeline comprising of structured PPP opportunities in the tourism sector for private sector investment in tourism infrastructure and hospitality in Bihar, including; heritage hotel concessions at government owned properties; concessions and retail businesses at major heritage sites; ropeway/ experiential tourism infrastructure at Rajgir; operations for Ganga cruises at Patna; and management contracts for government tourist bungalows at key circuit sites.

7. Implementation Roadmap and Projected Outcomes

Table 5: Bihar Tourism Revival — Ten-Year Phased Implementation Roadmap

Phase	Timeline	Est. Budget (INR Cr.)	Key Milestones & Actions
Foundation	2025–2026 (Yr 1–2)	700–900	Brand identity launch; BTA establishment; Bihar Storytelling Studio; Vaishali emergency infrastructure; site quality standards rollout; digital platform redesign; Heritage Guide Corps pilot (500 guides); Chhath tourism pilot package
Build	2026–2028 (Yr 2–4)	2,800–3,500	Buddhist Circuit Highway Phase 1 (Bodh Gaya–Nalanda–Rajgir); Gaya Airport international routes; hospitality incentive scheme launch; Nalanda World Knowledge Centre construction; Rajgir Heritage Trail; Mithila Homestay Network Phase 1 (200 properties); Bodh Gaya Sacred Mile pilot
Grow	2028–2031 (Yr 4–7)	2,200–3,000	Buddhist Circuit Highway Phase 2 (Vaishali, Kesariya); Madhubani Art & Heritage Centre; Mithila Arts Festival launch; Rajgir Wellness Resort; international influencer programme at scale; Bihar Heritage Guide Corps at 2,500; premium hotel cluster development
Lead	2031–2035 (Yr 7–10)	3,000–4,000	Full Buddhist Circuit integration (Bihar–Nepal Lumbini); digital AR heritage experiences at all major sites; Bihar Village Homestay Network at 500; Heritage Guide Corps at 5,000; sustainability certification of all major sites; regional tourism integration with Jharkhand and West Bengal circuits

Source: Authors' framework; comparable state tourism investment benchmarking; BTDC consultation.

Successful implementation of the Bihar Tourism Revival Framework is projected to achieve the following quantified outcomes by Year 10 (2035):

Table 6: Projected Tourism Performance Outcomes — Bihar (2025 Baseline vs. 2035 Target)

Performance Indicator	2025 Baseline	2035 Target	Growth Factor
Domestic Tourist Arrivals	38.2 million	120+ million	3.1x
International Tourist Arrivals	0.41 million	2.5 million	6.1x
Tourism GDP Share (state)	1.8%	5.5%	+3.7 pts
Average Tourist Stay (nights)	1.4	3.4	2.4x
Per-Capita Tourism Spend (INR)	1,240	5,800	4.7x
4-Star & Above Hotels	14	80+	5.7x
Heritage Guide Corps	~1,200	5,000+	4.2x
Tourism Direct Employment	~180,000	650,000+	3.6x
Bodh Gaya Annual Visitors	~480,000	2,000,000+	4.2x
Nalanda Annual Visitors	~210,000	1,500,000+	7.1x

Projections based on comparable state tourism transformation data (Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu) and authors' modelling. Targets are indicative.

8. Discussion

8.1 The Compound Effect of Heritage and Hospitality

An overriding theme in all six studies is that heritage value is a poor indicator of tourism performance. While Bodh Gaya can boast of being a birthplace of Buddha and also a place of enormous spiritual significance for Buddhism, Vaishali is the birthplace of democracy and Jainism and has an overall ABCDE diagnostic score of 2.8/10 compared to 5.2/10 for Bodh Gaya. Heritage isn't the difference, it's hospitality. There are suitable (if imperfect) international lodging options, a few good restaurants, working ropeways and 80+ international monasteries that serve as informal visitors' services at Bodh Gaya. There is essentially no such thing as these enabling conditions in Vaishali.

This result was found to be consistent with that reported by Poria, Butler and Airey (2003), who found that satisfaction of the Heritage Tourists was affected by the overall context of the Tourist experience rather than the significance of the Heritage encountered. The brand of a heritage destination therefore needs to consider the heritage story (marketing) as well as the quality of the experience context (hospitality). The revival strategy of Bihar can't be sequenced to tackle these one after the other; it should tackle them simultaneously.

8.2 The Gender Dimension of Bihar's Tourism Economy

One such aspect of the hospitality and tourism sector in Bihar, which is unique and significant is the pool of women talent which is not being adequately utilised. Madhubani is a predominantly female art, Chhath Puja is a religious ritual primarily practiced by women, Bihar's culinary arts tradition is largely women's foods and homestay hosting, like all other parts of India, is a female-dominated business. However, formal tourism industry employment (hotels, registered guides, tourism officials, tour operators) is exclusively male with very few women (only 12% of registered tourism industry employment, according to estimates of the BTDC).

Gender equity is not just a social responsibility, but a design criterion in the effective revival of Bihar tourism: Gender equity must be a part of the design. Bihar's true representatives are the women artisans, women chefs, guides, women homestay operators and women cultural performers. The tourism brand would be more authentic and distinctive from the traditional heritage tourism marketing, as it is created based on women's creativity and cultural leadership. The tourism brand would be more authentic and more distinctive than the conventional heritage tourism marketing because it is created by using women's creativity and cultural leadership. One realization of

this is the Mithila Women Artisans Tourism Enterprise Programme (Strategy 4.2) which should be mirrored throughout the five framework pillars.

8.3 Climate and Seasonality Challenges

Bihar's tourism faces significant seasonality constraints driven by the state's climate. The June–September monsoon season is characterised by extreme rainfall, flooding in northern districts (Mithila region), and severely degraded road conditions that render many tourism circuits inaccessible. Peak tourism season (October–February) coincides with cooler temperatures, the post-monsoon agricultural landscape's visual appeal, and major festival periods (Chhath Puja in October/November, Rajgir Mahotsav in October, Bihar Diwas in March).

Tourism revival strategies should acknowledge and plan for seasonality by: developing monsoon-season cultural and indoor tourism products (Madhubani art workshops, Patna urban cultural experiences, culinary tourism); investing in drainage and flood-resilient infrastructure at key sites; and positioning the monsoon season as a 'green Bihar' eco-tourism window for adventurous travellers drawn to the Valmiki Tiger Reserve's active wildlife season.

8.4 Implications for the Hospitality Industry

The findings of this research carry specific implications for private sector hospitality operators considering investment in Bihar. The case-study analysis identifies three zones of highest hospitality investment priority: (1) Bodh Gaya, where international Buddhist pilgrimage demand already exists and international-standard accommodation is chronically undersupplied; (2) Nalanda–Rajgir, where the corridor's heritage density supports multi-night stays that currently cannot occur due to accommodation scarcity; and (3) Patna, which as the gateway city can capture significant additional tourist nights through quality urban boutique hotel development.

The regulatory environment for hospitality investment in Bihar has historically been a deterrent: complex land acquisition, slow clearance processes, and Bihar's excise regulations (which historically restricted alcohol sales in ways that affected hotel food and beverage revenue potential). Recent reforms — including Bihar's Tourism Policy 2023, which introduces single-window investment clearance and hospitality incentives — signal an improving investment climate. Investors considering Bihar should engage with BTDC's new Investment Facilitation Cell and factor the ten-year revival trajectory when modelling returns on hospitality assets.

9. Conclusion

This research set out to investigate the branding and positioning revival strategies required for Bihar's tourism and hospitality industry, using a case-study approach across six of the state's most important tourism destinations. The findings are simultaneously sobering and energising: sobering because the scale of Bihar's tourism underperformance — relative to its extraordinary heritage assets — is documented here with a granularity that makes clear how much has been lost and for how long; energising because the case-study analysis reveals that the interventions required are well within Bihar's reach, that comparable transformations have been achieved by other Indian states with comparable challenges, and that the latent demand for Bihar's heritage experiences — once properly communicated and served — is substantial.

The Bihar Tourism and Hospitality Revival Framework proposed in this paper — centred on the brand proposition 'Bihar: Where the World Learned to Wonder' and operationalised through five pillars of Brand Identity, Digital Transformation, Infrastructure & Experience, Community Empowerment, and Governance Reform — provides a comprehensive, evidence-grounded, and deliverable roadmap for this transformation. Its implementation requires political will, sustained institutional investment, private sector partnership, and the active participation of the communities whose heritage, culture, and creativity constitute Bihar's most irreplaceable tourism assets.

The six destinations examined in this paper — Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, Patna, and Madhubani — are not merely tourism assets. They are places where the world's most consequential ideas were born, where its greatest empires rose, where its most beautiful art traditions flourish, and where its most ancient democratic values were first enacted. To make these places accessible, welcoming, and compelling for the tourists of the 21st century is not merely a hospitality management challenge — it is an act of cultural stewardship for which Bihar, and India, can take pride in the decades to come.

This research was conducted with the support of tourism practitioners, heritage conservationists, community artisans, and local guides across Bihar whose knowledge and hospitality enriched both the research and the researchers. Their voices are the foundation of everything proposed here.

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