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## Challenges And Prospects Of Sustainable Tourism In Bihar

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### Abstract

Tourism is a vital driver of socio-economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional development. In Bihar, a state with rich historical and cultural heritage, tourism offers immense potential for sustainable development. The state is home to globally significant heritage such as the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya and Nalanda University, along with major Hindu, Jain, and Sufi religious sites. Despite this potential, Bihar has faced challenges in converting its heritage into sustainable tourism outcomes, including poor infrastructure, weak branding, and environmental vulnerabilities. This paper evaluates the challenges and prospects of sustainable tourism in Bihar by integrating data analysis, maps, and stakeholder perspectives. It uses a geographical framework supported by secondary data from government reports, census statistics, and international guidelines. The findings show that while domestic tourism has steadily grown, foreign tourist arrivals remain low. Opportunities exist in expanding eco-tourism, cross-border circuits with Nepal, and community-based tourism. The paper concludes that sustainable tourism in Bihar requires infrastructure development, institutional reforms, community participation, and effective policy implementation aligned with global best practices.

### Keywords

Tourism Geography, Sustainable Tourism, Bihar, Cultural Heritage, Pilgrimage Tourism, Eco-tourism, Policy Planning

### 1. Introduction

Tourism is widely recognized as one of the fastest growing sectors globally<sup>1</sup>. In India, tourism contributes significantly to GDP and employment<sup>2</sup>. Bihar occupies an important position in the country's tourism map due to its association with Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism<sup>3</sup>. The presence of UNESCO World Heritage sites such as the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya and Nalanda University makes Bihar a site of global significance<sup>3</sup>. Despite this, Bihar lags behind states like Rajasthan, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh

in terms of tourist arrivals<sup>4</sup>. Weak infrastructure, low promotional efforts, and environmental challenges remain barriers to sustainable development<sup>5</sup>. The objective of this paper is to explore the challenges and prospects of sustainable tourism in Bihar using a geographical and developmental perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

Singh<sup>6</sup> emphasized the cultural continuity of the Mithila region as a foundation for heritage tourism. Jha<sup>7</sup> highlighted the significance of local traditions and festivals in sustaining tourist flows. The Bihar Tourism Department<sup>1</sup> reported growth in domestic tourism between 2015 and 2022, though foreign arrivals remained stagnant. Sharma<sup>8</sup> compared pilgrimage circuits across India and noted Bihar's weak infrastructure as a constraint. The World Bank<sup>9</sup> identified public-private partnerships as key to unlocking Bihar's potential. UNWTO<sup>10</sup> stressed eco-friendly infrastructure and community participation as vital to sustainable tourism. Kerala and Rajasthan provide lessons in eco-tourism and heritage branding<sup>11</sup>. Kumar<sup>12</sup> argued that religious tourism in Bihar remains underutilized, while Sinha<sup>13</sup> suggested community-based tourism could link livelihoods and heritage. These studies demonstrate that while Bihar is rich in resources, it requires institutional reforms, policy innovation, and investment for sustainable tourism.

## 3. Objectives and Methodology

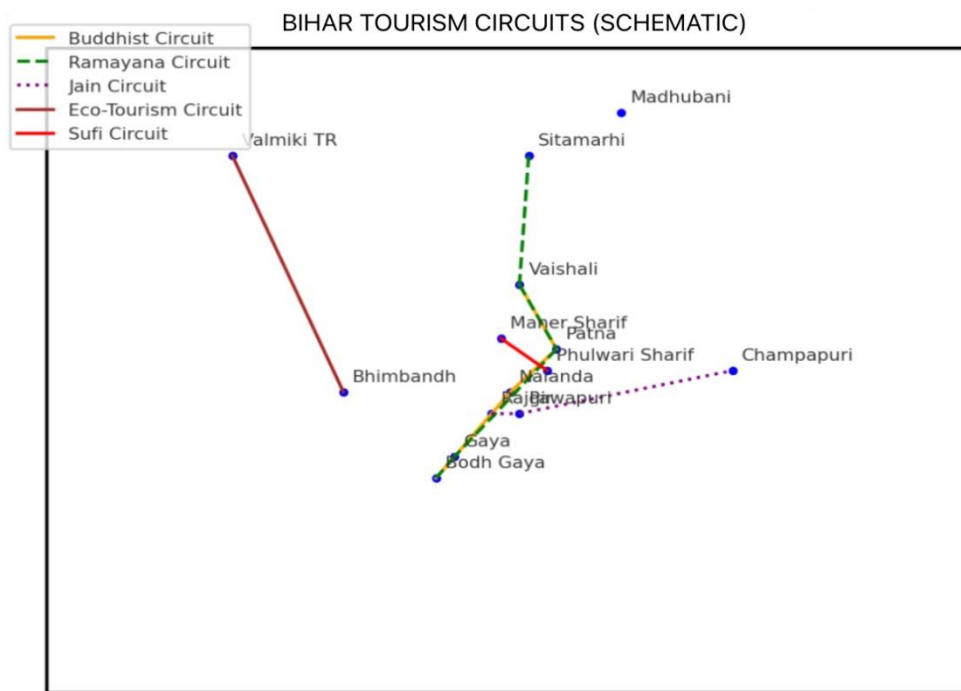
The objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the spatial distribution of tourism resources in Bihar.
2. To examine the challenges of tourism development.
3. To assess opportunities for sustainable tourism.
4. To recommend strategies for sustainable growth.

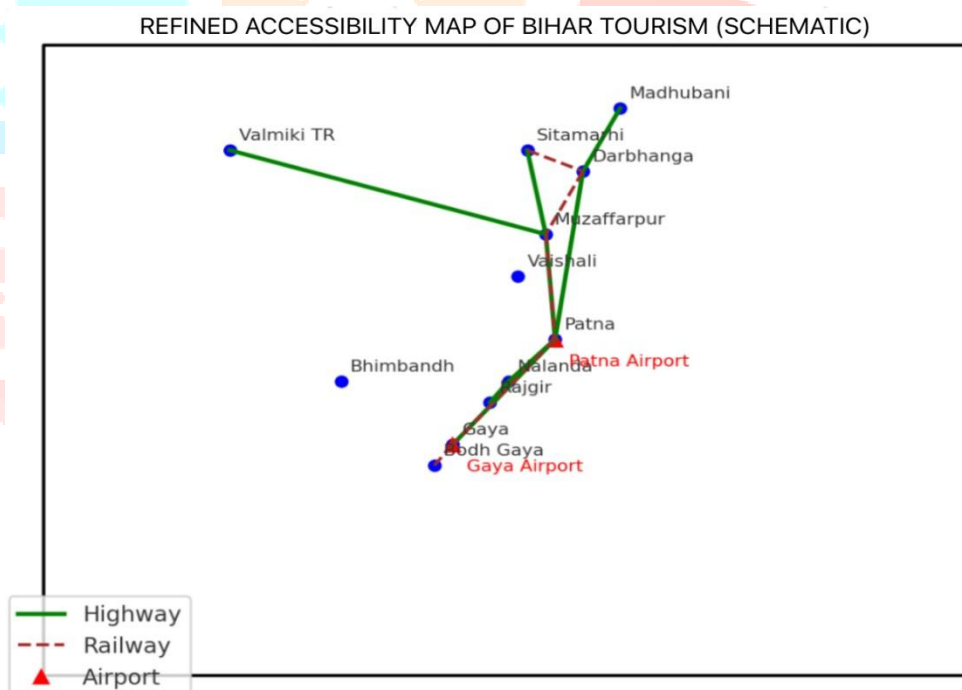
**Methodology:** The study relies on secondary data from Bihar Tourism Department, Census of India, and Ministry of Tourism. Analytical tools include SWOT analysis, trend analysis of tourist arrivals, and GIS mapping of circuits. Diagrams and maps have been prepared to illustrate the findings.

## 4. Study Area

Bihar is located in eastern India, bordered by Nepal to the north and West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. It lies between 24°20'N to 27°31'N latitude and 83°19'E to 88°17'E longitude. The state covers an area of 94,163 sq. km. The Ganga river divides the state into north and south regions, with fertile alluvial plains prone to floods. Bihar's population exceeds 104 million (Census 2011). Culturally, it is associated with the origins of Buddhism and Jainism, the Ramayana tradition, and Sufi saints. Its tourism resources are clustered into Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Sufi, and eco-tourism circuits.



Map 1. Bihar Tourism Circuits (schematic)



Map 2. Refined Accessibility Map of Bihar Tourism (schematic)

## 5. Tourism Resources of Bihar

**Bihar's tourism resources can be classified into circuits:**

Buddhist Circuit

Bihar is the heartland of Buddhism, making this circuit globally renowned.

Bodh Gaya is the site of Buddha's enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree and hosts the



Mahabodhi Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Photo 1. Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya.

- Nalanda was once the world's first residential university, attracting scholars from Asia between the 5th–12th centuries CE.



-Rajgir is closely linked with Buddha's sermons, meditation caves, and the first Buddhist Council.

Photo 2. Nalanda world's first residential university.

Vaishali was an ancient republic visited by Buddha and also the birthplace of Mahavira (Jainism), making it a shared heritage site.

#### Jain Circuit

Bihar is sacred to Jainism as the place where Lord Mahavira attained Nirvana.

-Pawapuri is revered for the Jal Mandir, built at the site of Mahavira's cremation.

-Champapuri is associated with the 12th Tirthankara, Vasupujya.

-Rajgir contains several Jain temples and hills that hold significance for Jain devotees.

#### Ramayana Circuit

The Ramayana Circuit links places associated with the epic of Ramayana.





Sitamarhi is believed to be the birthplace of Goddess Sita and houses the Janaki Mandir.

Photo 3. Janaki Mandir, Sitamarhi

-Darbhanga is part of the Mithila region, associated with Sita's marriage to Lord Rama.

-Buxar is tied to episodes from Lord Rama's early life and Sage Vishwamitra's hermitage.

#### Sufi Circuit

Bihar has a rich Sufi tradition reflecting its composite culture.

-Maner Sharif, near Patna, is home to the shrine of Makhdoom Yahya Maneri, attracting pilgrims of different faiths.

-Phulwari Sharif houses mosques and khanqahs that were once active centers of Sufi learning.

#### Eco-Tourism Circuit

In addition to religious and cultural heritage, Bihar also offers biodiversity-based attractions.

-Valmiki Tiger Reserve in West Champaran is Bihar's only tiger reserve and part of the Himalayan Terai ecosystem, rich in flora and fauna.

-Bhimbandh Wildlife Sanctuary in Munger is known for its hot springs and forests.

#### Cultural Heritage Additions

Beyond formal circuits, Bihar's intangible cultural resources enrich the tourist experience:

-Mithila Paintings (Madhubani art): Globally recognized folk art style, practiced mainly by women of the Mithila region.



*Mithila Painting*

Photo 4. Mithila Painting.

-Festivals: Chhath Puja is Bihar's most iconic festival, celebrated with devotion and attracting global attention.

-Crafts and Cuisine: Traditional textiles, handicrafts, and local foods such as litti-chokha enhance the cultural appeal.

## 6. Challenges of Sustainable Tourism

### Infrastructure Deficit

One of the most pressing issues is the inadequacy of infrastructure. Although Bihar is rich in cultural and natural resources, the road and rail connectivity to several important destinations remains underdeveloped. Many rural pilgrimage centers are connected through narrow or poorly maintained roads, making access difficult for tourists. Similarly, the shortage of quality hotels, guest houses, and sanitation facilities limits the capacity to accommodate domestic and international visitors. Without reliable infrastructure, even sites of global importance such as Bodh Gaya and Nalanda struggle to provide a seamless tourist experience.

## Environmental Constraints

Bihar's geographical location in the flood-prone Indo-Gangetic plain poses significant environmental challenges. Annual flooding in North Bihar disrupts connectivity, damages infrastructure, and discourages tourist inflows during peak monsoon months. Moreover, improper waste management during large religious gatherings, such as Chhath Puja and Sufi Urs festivals, leads to pollution of rivers and open spaces. Climate change adds another layer of risk, increasing the frequency of extreme weather events. These environmental vulnerabilities make sustainable tourism planning more difficult.

## Socio-Economic Barriers

Tourism development in Bihar is hindered by limited private investment and weak entrepreneurship in the hospitality sector. Local communities often lack access to training, credit, and marketing opportunities, preventing them from participating effectively in tourism value chains. Poverty and unemployment in rural areas also discourage local involvement in tourism-related services. Unlike states such as Kerala, where community-based tourism has flourished, Bihar is yet to integrate its local population fully into the tourism economy.

## Institutional Weaknesses

Policy and governance gaps remain a major obstacle to sustainable tourism. Although Bihar Tourism Department has launched schemes for circuit development, implementation on the ground is slow and often fragmented. There is limited coordination between government agencies, private stakeholders, and local communities. Marketing and promotional campaigns at the international level remain weak, which contributes to Bihar's low share in foreign tourist arrivals. The absence of consistent policy support reduces investor confidence and weakens long-term sustainability.

These challenges collectively reduce Bihar's competitiveness compared to other Indian states that have successfully developed strong tourism brands. Without addressing infrastructure gaps, environmental risks, socio-economic barriers, and institutional weaknesses, Bihar will find it difficult to fully realize its rich cultural and natural potential.

## 7. Prospects of Sustainable Tourism

### Development of Pilgrimage and Heritage Circuits

Bihar's rich cultural and spiritual heritage provides a strong foundation for sustainable tourism growth. The Buddhist Circuit (Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali), the Jain Circuit (Pawapuri, Champapuri, Rajgir), the Ramayana Circuit (Sitamarhi, Darbhanga, Buxar), and the Sufi Circuit (Maner Sharif, Phulwari Sharif) are already recognized for their religious significance. By improving infrastructure, ensuring visitor amenities, and integrating these sites into cohesive tourism packages, Bihar can position itself as a global hub for pilgrimage tourism. Heritage conservation programs, if linked with local employment, can also enhance both sustainability and community benefits.



## Promotion of Eco-Tourism and Wildlife Conservation

The Valmiki Tiger Reserve and Bhimbandh Wildlife Sanctuary offer opportunities to diversify Bihar's image beyond cultural and religious tourism. Eco-tourism, when planned responsibly, attracts nature lovers and wildlife enthusiasts while promoting conservation. Activities such as guided forest trails, bird watching, and conservation awareness camps can be designed to involve local communities. This not only generates alternative livelihoods but also fosters environmental stewardship. Linking eco-tourism initiatives with state and national conservation policies can create long-term ecological and economic benefits.

## Rural and Community-Based Tourism Initiatives

Bihar's rural landscapes and cultural traditions hold great potential for community-driven tourism. Villages in Mithila, known for Madhubani art, can host workshops and homestays, providing visitors with immersive cultural experiences. Community-based tourism ensures that economic benefits directly reach local households, empowering women and artisans. By integrating handicrafts, local cuisine, and folk performances into tourism circuits, Bihar can strengthen its identity while reducing urban-centric tourism pressures. Such initiatives align with sustainable development principles by promoting equity and inclusivity.

## Cross-Border Circuits with Nepal

Bihar's geographical location creates opportunities for cross-border tourism, particularly with Nepal. The Ramayana Circuit linking Sitamarhi (India) with Janakpur (Nepal) could be jointly promoted as an international heritage route. Similarly, Buddhist pilgrims visiting Lumbini in Nepal can be encouraged to extend their journey to Bodh Gaya and Nalanda. Cross-border collaborations not only enhance tourist inflows but also foster cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation. This could make Bihar a vital node in South Asia's religious and cultural tourism networks.

## Digital Branding and Global Promotion

Modern tourism is heavily influenced by digital presence. At present, Bihar's tourism suffers from low international visibility. By adopting aggressive digital marketing strategies, such as virtual tours, mobile applications, and social media campaigns, Bihar can reach global audiences. Collaborations with international travel platforms, influencers, and online booking portals can further enhance its image. Branding initiatives under the "Incredible India" campaign should highlight Bihar's unique circuits, art forms, and festivals. A strong digital identity will help attract younger, tech-savvy travelers and international tourists.

## Sustainable Practices Aligned with SDGs

For long-term viability, Bihar must adopt sustainability frameworks aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Eco-friendly infrastructure, renewable energy in tourist zones,

waste management systems, and water conservation practices can make tourism more resilient. Involving local communities in planning ensures inclusivity (SDG 8: Decent Work, SDG 11: Sustainable Cities, SDG 13: Climate Action). By adopting these principles, Bihar can set an example of tourism that balances economic growth with cultural preservation and environmental responsibility.

Despite current constraints, Bihar has immense potential to develop sustainable, inclusive, and globally competitive tourism. By integrating cultural circuits, eco-tourism, rural participation, cross-border linkages, and digital branding, the state can transform its tourism sector into a model for heritage-led development.

SWOT ANALYSIS OF BIHAR TOURISM (UP TO 2022)

| Strengths                          | Weaknesses                   | Opportunities            | Threats      |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Rich cultural & religious heritage | Poor infrastructure          | Global heritage interest | Flood risks  |
| UNESCO sites (Bodh Gaya, Nalanda)  | Low foreign arrivals         | Cross-border linkages    | Competition  |
| Large domestic flow                | Lack of luxury accommodation | Digital promotion        | Overcrowding |

## SWOT Analysis of Bihar Tourism :-

### Strengths

**Rich cultural and religious heritage:** Bihar is the birthplace of Buddhism and Jainism, and closely linked with Hindu and Sufi traditions. Sites such as Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Vaishali, and Pawapuri give Bihar a unique spiritual identity that attracts pilgrims and researchers worldwide.

**UNESCO World Heritage Sites:** The Mahabodhi Temple (Bodh Gaya) and Nalanda ruins are recognized globally, enhancing Bihar's brand value. Their UNESCO status provides authenticity and global recognition.

**Large domestic tourist flow:** Despite weak foreign arrivals, domestic tourism has shown consistent growth, especially during festivals such as Chhath Puja and in circuits like Bodh Gaya. This ensures a steady demand base for the tourism industry.

### Weaknesses

**Poor infrastructure:** Limited airports, weak road networks, and shortage of quality hotels and sanitation facilities reduce Bihar's competitiveness compared to developed states like Kerala or Rajasthan.

**Low foreign arrivals:** Despite having world-famous Buddhist sites, Bihar attracts far fewer international visitors than expected. Poor international promotion and lack of tourist-friendly facilities are major causes.

Lack of luxury accommodation: International tourists often expect high-end hotels and modern amenities. The limited availability of such infrastructure restricts Bihar's ability to host global conferences or luxury tourism.

## Opportunities

Global heritage interest: With rising interest in cultural and heritage tourism worldwide, Bihar can leverage its Buddhist and Jain heritage to attract global pilgrims, scholars, and cultural tourists.

Cross-border linkages: The proximity to Nepal creates opportunities to link the Ramayana Circuit (Sitamarhi–Janakpur) and Buddhist sites (Lumbini–Bodh Gaya). These circuits can enhance international tourist flows through regional cooperation.

Digital promotion: The use of digital platforms, virtual tours, and targeted social media campaigns can transform Bihar's global visibility. Young travelers, especially from Asia and Europe, can be reached through online engagement.

## Threats

Flood risks: North Bihar faces annual flooding, which disrupts connectivity and damages infrastructure. Climate change could intensify these risks, affecting tourism seasonality.

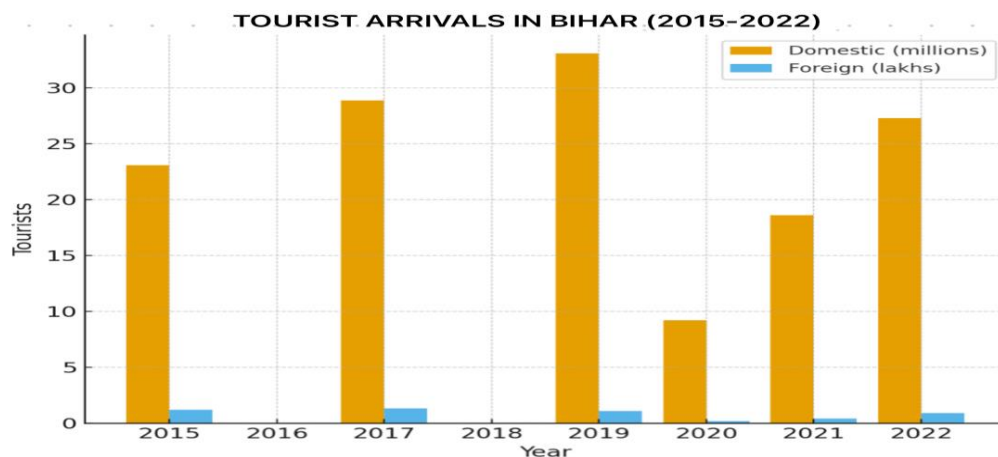
Competition from other states: Rajasthan, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh have stronger tourism infrastructure, better branding, and greater visibility. Bihar risks being overshadowed unless it invests strategically.

Overcrowding and mismanagement: Popular pilgrimage sites like Bodh Gaya face overcrowding during peak seasons. Without proper waste management, visitor regulation, and conservation, heritage sites risk environmental degradation.

The SWOT analysis shows that while Bihar has unmatched cultural strengths and growth opportunities, its weaknesses in infrastructure and governance, combined with threats from environmental risks and regional competition, limit its full potential. Addressing these gaps through strategic planning, investment, and community involvement can transform Bihar into a sustainable tourism hub.

## 8. Discussion

Kerala's eco-tourism model and Rajasthan's heritage branding provide lessons for Bihar. UNWTO<sup>10</sup> emphasizes balancing economic benefits with environmental sustainability. Bihar's reliance on religious tourism needs diversification. Community participation and public-private partnerships can improve outcomes. Comparative analysis shows that states that invested in digital promotion and infrastructure achieved stronger results.

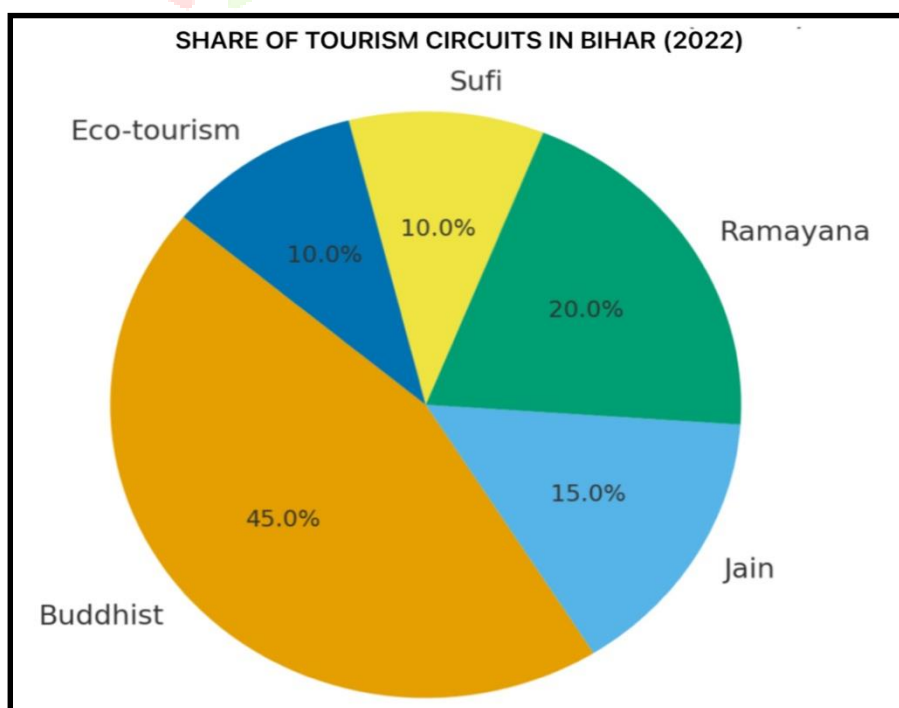


Tourist Arrivals in Bihar (2015–2022):-  
Figure 2. Tourist Arrivals in Bihar (2015–2022)

**The bar diagram shows the trends in domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in Bihar from 2015 to 2022.**

**Domestic tourism:** The number of domestic visitors has generally shown an upward trend. Between 2015 and 2019, arrivals increased steadily, reflecting growing interest in Bihar's religious and heritage circuits. However, a sharp decline was recorded in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with tourist numbers falling drastically as restrictions on travel were enforced nationwide. By 2021 and 2022, the figures began to recover, although they have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels. This indicates resilience in the domestic tourism market and the potential for rapid recovery with better promotion and infrastructure.

**Foreign tourism:** The foreign tourist arrivals remained relatively low and stable, fluctuating between 0.9 and 1.3 million before 2020. During the pandemic, arrivals collapsed almost completely, with negligible numbers in 2020 and 2021. The slow recovery in 2022 suggests that Bihar continues to face challenges in attracting international visitors, despite hosting globally significant Buddhist sites.





### • Share of Tourism Circuits in Bihar:-

Figure 3. Share of Tourism Circuits in Bihar (2022)

- The pie chart represents the proportional contribution of different tourism circuits in Bihar for the year 2022.
- Buddhist Circuit (45%): Occupies nearly half of Bihar's tourism share, reflecting its strong international and domestic importance. Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, and Rajgir remain the most visited sites.
- Ramayana Circuit (20%): Holds the second-largest share, emphasizing the importance of Hindu pilgrimage tourism, especially in Sitamarhi and Darbhanga.
- Jain Circuit (15%): Has moderate representation, highlighting niche potential among Jain devotees and scope for growth with better promotion.
- Sufi Circuit (10%): Plays a smaller role, but represents Bihar's unique syncretic culture and interfaith heritage.
- Eco-Tourism (10%): Remains underdeveloped, though it offers promising opportunities for diversification through Valmiki Tiger Reserve and Bhimbandh.

## 9. Conclusion and Suggestions

Bihar has abundant cultural and natural resources, but challenges in infrastructure, governance, and environmental management hinder tourism growth. Sustainable tourism requires a multi-stakeholder approach including government reforms, private investment, and community involvement. Policy recommendations include developing integrated circuits, improving accessibility, promoting digital branding, and ensuring environmental safeguards. With coordinated efforts, Bihar can emerge as a sustainable tourism hub in eastern India.

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