

**RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND SMART CITY DEVELOPMENT:
ASSESSING ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND URBAN GROWTH
IN VARANASI**

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ABSTRACT

Varanasi, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities and the holiest of Hindu sites, has seen a remarkable economic and urban transformation since being selected under India's Smart Cities Mission (SCM) in 2016. This paper provides a holistic assessment of the economic growth, job creation, infrastructural upgrading and urban spatial reordering stimulated by the confluence of religious tourism and smart city development in Varanasi during 2015–2024. Using secondary data from the Ministry of Tourism, Varanasi Smart City Limited (VSCL), UP Tourism, Varanasi Municipal Corporation (VMC), NASSCOM and international organizations, the study investigates trends in tourist arrivals, expenses on smart city projects, employment impacts, contribution to GDP and environmental benefits. The findings showed that smart city investments, especially the transformative Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor project, systematic ghat restoration and digital infrastructure deployment have significantly amplified the economic multiplier effect of religious tourism, pushing the city's GDDP growth rate from 6.8% (2015–18) to 12.4% (2021–24). However the benefits have not been shared evenly: formal sector workers and heritage property owners have been disproportionately benefited, while traditional informal sector workers like boatmen, small-scale artisans and street vendors are facing displacement and economic marginalisation. The paper claims that sustainable smart-city-enabled religious tourism needs an inclusive governance framework that combines economic growth with heritage conservation, social equity, and environmental regeneration.

KEYWORDS: *Religious Tourism · Smart Cities Mission · Varanasi · Urban Economic Transformation · Kashi Vishwanath Corridor · Heritage Conservation · Ganga Rejuvenation · Inclusive Growth.*

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