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Article

Towards Developing a Sustainable Tourism Destination with Sustained Economic Growth by Leveraging Visitor Satisfaction in Global South: A Case of Golden Triangle in India

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Abstract

The Golden Triangle circuit (Delhi–Agra–Jaipur) is India's most iconic tourism product, yet it faces mounting pressure from overtourism, environmental degradation, and economic leakage. We argue that strategic management of visitor satisfaction can play a key role in transforming this high-volume circuit into a sustainable destination that delivers long-term economic growth. Drawing on expectancy disconfirmation theory (EDT), SERVQUAL, perceived value theory, social exchange theory (SET), destination competitiveness models, and a systematic classification of destination attributes, this study evaluates destination attributes and visitor satisfaction. The study assesses the importance of visitor satisfaction with the Golden Triangle and proposes a comprehensive framework for its measurement and application with destination attributes. It identifies key attributes driving tourist satisfaction in the Triangle and assesses the overall current state of the circuit. Furthermore, it identifies major challenges (harassment, congestion, leakage), and proposes actionable improvements through smart technology, community-based tourism, and real-time feedback. A comprehensive evaluation of visitor satisfaction with various destination attributes of the Golden Triangle reveals that it performs well as the outcome shows high overall satisfaction. The study also highlights that visitor satisfaction is an indirect economic lever that impacts the local economic activity by creating jobs and earning foreign currency. The Golden Triangle can serve as a replicable model for other heritage circuits in the Global South.

Keywords: visitor satisfaction; sustainable tourism; economic growth; Golden Triangle; expectancy disconfirmation theory; destination attributes; overtourism; destination competitiveness; India

1. Introduction

Tourism has been a cornerstone of India's economy, contributing 9.2% to GDP and employing over 42 million people [1]. The 'Golden Triangle' which comprises of Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur, forms the nation's most visited circuit and attracts nearly 40% of all foreign tourists to India. This circuit is home to three UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Qutub Minar and Humayun's Tomb (Delhi), the Taj Mahal (Agra), and Jantar Mantar and Amer Fort (Jaipur). The region has witnessed high visitor volumes over past few years. Interestingly, while arrivals increase, per-visitor expenditure, length of stay, and repeat visitation rates remain stagnant or declining [2]. This phenomenon may signal a disconnect between visitor satisfaction and destination performance.

A growing body of literature confirms that satisfaction directly influences behavioral intentions, including willingness to recommend, revisit, and higher spending [3,4]. While satisfied visitors become ambassadors of a tourist destination the dissatisfied ones amplify negative word-of-mouth and thus accelerate destination decline [5]. However, in the context of heritage destinations in the Global South, satisfaction has often been overshadowed by volume-based metrics [6]. This study

contrarily argues that deliberately leveraging visitor satisfaction is the most effective pathway to achieve both sustainability and sustained economic growth.

In addition, recent studies have reinforced visitor satisfaction as a key driver of sustained tourism flow. For instance, Chen et al. [7] demonstrated that recreation service quality strongly predicts satisfaction in heritage contexts, while Zhang et al. [8] highlighted tourist comfort as a critical mediator. Similarly, Liu and Liu [9] provided a diagnostic framework using online review mining that is directly applicable to the Golden Triangle's challenges.

This study reviews multiple theoretical perspectives; expectancy disconfirmation theory (EDT) [10,11], SERVQUAL [12], perceived value theory [13], social exchange theory (SET) [14,15], destination competitiveness models [16,17], and a systematic taxonomy of destination attributes [18,19]. It provides a granular, evidence-based assessment of the Golden Triangle's current satisfaction landscape based on expert reviews, including previously undocumented differences among the three cities. Consequently, it proposes a strategic roadmap that aligns with India's newly launched National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism and Travel for LiFE [2] and the Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (STCI).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Importance of Visitor Satisfaction

The most widely applied framework in tourism satisfaction research is Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) [10,20]. EDT posits that visitors form pre-trip expectations, compare them with actual performance, and experience either positive disconfirmation where performance exceeds expectations and leads to satisfaction, or negative disconfirmation where performance falls short and leads to dissatisfaction. Churchill and Surprenant [21] extended EDT by demonstrating that the disconfirmation effect is moderated by product performance. In tourism contexts, Yasa et al. [11] conducted a systematic literature review of EDT in tourism (1993–2025) and found that EDT remains the dominant paradigm, though value disconfirmation models sometimes have higher explanatory power. For the Golden Triangle, where iconic monuments create extremely high expectations, even minor service failures (e.g., long queues, touts) can trigger strong negative disconfirmation [22].

Furthermore, Perceived Value Theory' focuses on what visitors gain relative to what they sacrifice [23]. Gallarza et al. [13] identified five dimensions of perceived value in tourism: functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional. Chaichi et al. [24] applied consumption value theory to Scotland's tourism and concluded that functional value (e.g., convenience, price fairness) and emotional value (e.g., awe, heritage immersion) are the strongest predictors of satisfaction. For the Golden Triangle, value for money is often eroded by hidden costs such as overpriced souvenirs and unauthorized guides. This is an important factor that significantly reduces satisfaction among budget-conscious domestic and international tourists [25].

Lastly, SERVQUAL proposed by Parasuraman et al. [12] is also used in conjunction with tourist satisfaction. SERVQUAL operationalizes service quality into five dimensions such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Renganathan et al. [26] reviewed hospitality service quality and tourist satisfaction, concluding that SERVQUAL remains a robust diagnostic tool. In heritage tourism, the HOLSAT model (a hybrid of EDT and SERVQUAL) has been systematically reviewed and shown to be effective in capturing expectations–performance gaps [27]. For the Golden Triangle, SERVQUAL gaps appear to be particularly pronounced in responsiveness shown by slow grievance redressal and assurance reflected in safety concerns for solo female travelers [28].

2.2. Destination Attributes in Tourism

Understanding the destination attributes which are usually the tangible and intangible characteristics of a tourist destination and shape a tourist's perception, choice, and overall experience, is fundamental to any analysis of visitor satisfaction. Unlike a single product such as a tourism thrill ride, the destination is a compound variable that is composed of numerous attributes.

Building on the seminal works of Gearing, Swart and Var [18], Ritchie and Crouch [16], and Buhalis [19], destination attributes can be organized into four inter-related categories such as core resources and attractions, supporting infrastructure, destination management factors, and socio-cultural-environmental conditions.

Core resources and attractions are the primary motivators for visitation. According to Mill and Morrison [29], they include: (a) natural assets (climate, landscapes, wildlife); (b) cultural and heritage assets (monuments, archaeological sites, festivals); (c) purpose-built attractions (theme parks, convention centers); and (d) events and activities (fairs, religious pilgrimages). Mayo and Jarvis [30] argued that core attractions generate the initial pull factor, but they are insufficient to guarantee satisfaction unless complemented by other attributes.

Supporting infrastructure includes the essential services that enable access and comfort at the destination. Pearce [31] identified transportation (airports, roads, intra-destination mobility), accommodation (hotels, homestays), food and beverage services, and retail facilities as key factors in supporting infrastructure. Butler [32] noted that inadequate supporting infrastructure often accelerates the decline phase of a destination's lifecycle, which can be seen as a major risk visible in Agra's last-mile connectivity problems.

Destination management factors are the "software" components that coordinate the visitor experience with the destination. Dwyer and Kim [17] classified them as destination marketing and branding, service quality and hospitality (friendliness of locals, professionalism of guides), safety and security, and value for money. Crouch and Ritchie [16] showed that destinations with superior management attributes can overcome inadequacies in natural or cultural resources through effective positioning. Jaipur's success can be seen as an example of excellent destination management. Using the Kano model, Shin et al. [33] recently showed that certain attributes (cleanliness, safety) act as basic factors whose absence causes dissatisfaction – a finding highly relevant to Agra's current struggles.

Lastly, Socio-cultural-environmental conditions are increasingly recognized as critical for sustainable growth of a tourist destination. These include environmental quality (air and water cleanliness, waste management), social carrying capacity (resident attitudes toward tourists – Doxey [34]), authenticity and cultural integrity [35], and accessibility for all. Murphy [36] argued that ignoring these conditions leads to community resistance and eventual destination decline. This is a threat that constantly appears in parts of the Golden Triangle.

2.3. From Satisfaction to Economic Sustainability

Satisfaction has direct economic consequences. Baker and Crompton [3] established that satisfaction significantly influences behavioral intentions, which in turn drive destination loyalty and repeat visitation. Chen and Tsai [37] quantified that a one-standard-deviation increase in satisfaction increases revisit intention by 0.68 standard deviations. Respati et al. [38] conducted a PRISMA-based systematic review and found that satisfaction, destination image, and service quality are the three most dominant predictors of revisit intention.

For a destination like the Golden Triangle, where foreign tourist arrivals have plateaued [2], improving satisfaction is a more cost-effective growth strategy than aggressive marketing. A satisfied visitor stays 0.7 days longer and spends 22% more per day [1]. Moreover, satisfied visitors generate positive word-of-mouth, which reduces customer acquisition costs. Conversely, dissatisfied visitors in the era of social media can damage a destination's brand equity for years [39].

Finally, satisfaction is intrinsically linked to sustainable destination management. Papageorgiou et al. [40] argued that when visitors are satisfied, they are more likely to respect site rules, disperse to less crowded areas, and accept higher prices or entry fees, all of which reduce the negative impacts of overtourism. Bertocchi et al. [41] simulated sustainable development scenarios for Venice and found that a 10% improvement in visitor satisfaction could reduce peak-day congestion by 18% through voluntary time-slot redistribution. The same logic applies to the Taj Mahal, where satisfaction-driven visitor management could alleviate current overcrowding. Yu et al. [42] further

demonstrated that multi-stakeholder satisfaction (including residents and business operators) is a prerequisite for sustainable heritage renewal.

3. Tourism as a Lever for Sustained Economic Growth in India

India's travel and tourism sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience and growth potential in the post-pandemic period. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism sector contributed nearly ₹21 lakh crore to the Indian economy in 2024 that represented 6.6 per cent of national GDP. Additionally, employment in the tourism sector reached an all-time high of over 46 million jobs, which was 9% more than the total employment in the country [63,64]. Projections for 2025 indicated that the tourism sector's economic contribution could surpass ₹22 lakh crore and likely to generate over 48 million jobs. International visitor spending was also forecasted to reach ₹3.2 lakh crore [63,64]. The Ministry of Tourism's Annual Report 2025–26 confirms that India recorded 9.02 million Foreign Tourist Arrivals in 2025, with Foreign Exchange Earnings from tourism standing at ₹2,73,638 crore. This highlights the Indian tourism sector's strategic role in driving trade-led growth and enhancing macroeconomic strength [65].

For the Golden Triangle circuit, this macroeconomic growth has direct local implications. India welcomed over 20 million foreign tourist visits in 2024, and a significant share of these journeys passed through the Golden Triangle corridor [66]. Entire local economies in cities like Agra and Jaipur for example hotels, transport providers, guides, craftsmen, and local markets, depend heavily on inbound traffic. The local craft traditions, from marble inlay work to textiles and jewelry, continue to survive largely because of sustained global demand directed through this circuit [66].

Empirical research has noted the tourism-growth nexus in India. Suresh et al. [67] employed a frequency-domain causality approach and found bidirectional causality between tourism and economic output, suggesting a multiplier effect of tourism on the Indian economy. Their results show that tourism not only responds to economic growth but actively stimulates it across various frequency bands. Shukla and Shamurailatpam [68] examined the poverty-alleviation effects of tourism development in India using panel regression for the period 2005–2018 and found that tourism development has significant and positive outcomes in reducing poverty, with an estimated coefficient of -0.0655 while controlling for the state-specific variables. This indicates that the growth and expansion of the tourism industry correlate meaningfully with poverty reduction standards across Indian states.

For a destination like the Golden Triangle, foreign tourist arrivals have shown signs of plateauing despite high number of visitors. The strategic focus must align with improving visitor satisfaction, which is a more cost-effective growth lever than aggressive marketing. A satisfied visitor stays longer, spends more, and generates positive word-of-mouth, which reduces customer acquisition costs [3,4]. Conversely, visitor dissatisfaction as driven by touts, congestion, and poor service quality, accelerates economic leakage and erodes destination competitiveness. The Ministry of Tourism has explicitly incorporated economic growth targets into its National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism [2], aiming to double foreign exchange earnings from tourism by 2030. Achieving this target requires not only increasing arrival numbers but also enhancing local value retention through community-based models, domestic supply chains, and sustained improvements in visitor satisfaction [40]. When combined with the visitor satisfaction strategies outlined in Sections 2.1–2.3, tourism becomes a virtuous cycle: satisfied visitors spend more, stay longer, and recommend the destination, attracting higher-yielding segments and generating reinvestment capital for infrastructure and conservation.

4. Key Tourism Attributes Driving Satisfaction in the Golden Triangle

4.1. Heritage and Cultural Assets

The core attraction of the Golden Triangle circuit is its unparalleled heritage of the Taj Mahal at Agra, Amer Fort and Hawa Mahal at Jaipur, and Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb, and Red Fort in

Delhi. These sites generate strong positive initial affect, the “aesthetic experiences” as described by Pine and Gilmore [43]. However, visitor satisfaction depends on how access to these assets is managed. Çelik and Dedeoğlu [44] showed that destination image, formed by iconic landmarks, is a necessary but insufficient condition for satisfaction. The created destination image must be reinforced by positive service interactions at the destination. In the Triangle circuit, many first-time visitors reported that the Taj Mahal exceeded their visual expectations, but the approach experience marred by crowds, touts, and long security queues, caused negative disconfirmation (TripAdvisor data cited in Wang et al. [22]).

4.2. *Experiential Elements*

Visitors seek immersive experiences beyond monuments. These include bazaar shopping at Johari Bazaar in Jaipur, Chandni Chowk in Delhi; culinary tours such as street food in Old Delhi, and Rajasthani thalis; and cultural performances like folk dances in Jaipur’s Chokhi Dhani. These experiences contribute to the emotional value dimension of the perceived value [24]. However, the quality of these experiences varies a lot. While Jaipur has successfully curated craft walks and heritage precincts, Agra’s Sadar bazaar is often described as chaotic and aggressively commercial [45].

4.3. *Infrastructure and Connectivity*

One of the main advantages the Golden Triangle circuit has is the world-class connectivity. The Yamuna Expressway connects Delhi to Agra, the Delhi to Jaipur National Highway, and the semi-high-speed Gatimaan Express train. Dwyer and Kim [17] identified accessibility as a core determinant of destination competitiveness. However, last-mile connectivity to monuments still remains poor. For example, from the Taj Mahal’s parking lot to the East Gate, visitors face a 1.5 km walk with no shade or wheelchair access. This can be viewed as a tangible failure in the tangibles dimension of SERVQUAL [12]. Similarly, Delhi’s traffic congestion and air pollution, particularly in the winter, have become major hinderance to visitor satisfaction as noted in a recent study on perceived value in destinations facing crises [46].

4.4. *Hospitality and Services*

This encompasses the hotels, guides, and transportation providers form the service delivery system in and around the tourist destination. Research by Renganathan et al. [26] indicates that hotel service quality has the strongest direct effect on overall destination satisfaction among international tourists. In the Golden Triangle circuit, the luxury heritage hotels such as the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, and The Oberoi in Delhi perform very well, but mid-range and budget segments often lack basic reliability and assurance for the visitors. Furthermore, although there is no dearth of authorized and reliable travel agents in the circuit but the problem of unauthorized solicitors posing as government-approved guides is problematic. This is very severe in Agra and near the Red Fort in Delhi. This directly undermines the assurance dimension of SERVQUAL and has been linked to lower revisit intention [5].

5. Current State of Visitor Satisfaction in the Golden Triangle

5.1. *Quantitative Trends*

Overall visitor satisfaction for the Golden Triangle before COVID-19 as measured through exit surveys by the Ministry of Tourism [2], averaged 3.9 on a 5-point scale. Visitor satisfaction scores for Delhi were 3.7, Agra 3.6, and Jaipur 4.2. Post-COVID (2023–2025), satisfaction recovered to a 4.0 overall but with significant differences amongst the cities. Jaipur improved to 4.4, Delhi stagnated at 3.8, and Agra declined slightly to 3.5. The key drivers of improvement in Jaipur were the introduction of a “Pink City Heritage Pass”, better-trained guides, and a zero-tolerance policy for touting [47].

Online review data from TripAdvisor and Google Maps show that the Taj Mahal receives 4.7 stars (excellent) for the monument itself but only 2.8 stars for the “visitor experience” as gauged through long queues at gates and ticket counters, and an unorganized crowd management. This discrepancy is a classic EDT case of high expectations colliding with poor service delivery [10]. For Delhi, reviewers frequently mention air quality and traffic as the worst aspects, whereas in Jaipur the complaints mainly centered around summer heat, which is beyond destination control, rather than service failures. The diagnostic approach of Liu and Liu [9] confirms that such sentiment gaps are common in over touristed heritage sites.

5.2. Positive Drivers

Despite the challenges at the circuit, several positive drivers have emerged. Firstly, the upgraded railway connectivity especially the Gatimaan Express between Delhi and Agra, and the Tejas Express between Delhi and Jaipur, has improved reliability and comfort. This has been boosting satisfaction among domestic and international tourists. Secondly, the increase of heritage homestays in Jaipur's walled city has added unique lodging options that increase experiential quality for foreign visitors [48]. Thirdly, the digitalization of ticketing for monuments under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has reduced waiting times, though currently only 40% of visitors use the online system [2]. Lastly, the Swachh Bharat (Clean India) campaign has visibly improved cleanliness at major sites, partially addressing the destination tangibles gap [26].

5.3. Negative Detractors

The most persistent detractors at tourism destinations based on a synthesis of visitor reviews and academic audits [45,49], came up as (1) touts or unofficial solicitors and aggressive vendors, were very visible especially in Agra's Taj Ganj area and Delhi's Paharganj; (2) scalability of waste management, observed through overflowing bins at peak hours; (3) harassment of solo female travelers, more frequent in Delhi and Agra than in Jaipur; (4) lack of clean public toilets near monuments; and (5) transparent pricing, foreign tourists face a 20-fold price differential for monument entry. Naturally, this creates resentment and perceptions of unfairness reflecting value disconfirmation. These detractors are not only merely irritants but significantly reduce revisit intentions by an estimated 31% of the visitors [22]. Shin et al. [33] would classify these as basic factors whose absence directly causes dissatisfaction.

6. Major Challenges at The Golden Triangle Circuit

6.1. Overtourism and Carrying Capacity

The Taj Mahal receives over 7 million visitors annually, with peak days exceeding 50,000. If we apply Butler's [32] Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, Agra would be placed in the “stagnation” stage. It appears to be heading toward decline if no intervention is done by the authorities. Bertocchi et al. [41] argued that overtourism erodes visitor utility beyond a certain density threshold, and the concept of ‘carrying capacity’ must be reframed as a visitor-oriented attribute [50]. In the Golden Triangle circuit, the density at the Taj Mahal's main mausoleum often exceeds 20 persons per square meter which makes it impossible to appreciate the architecture or enjoy a serene experience. Thus, this directly triggers negative disconfirmation [11].

6.2. Environmental Degradation

The Taj Mahal stands on the banks of ‘Yamuna River’ which is severely polluted. The marble's yellowing due to acid rain and insect droppings from the polluted river has been well documented. A recent study [46] found that environmental quality significantly affects perceived value; 67% of surveyed visitors said that seeing the Taj surrounded by a polluted river diminished their overall satisfaction. Additionally, Delhi's air quality, especially in November–December, has become a major

deterrent for foreign visitors. In 2024, several foreign tour operators cancelled trips due to “hazardous” AQI levels, causing an estimated \$50 million loss to the local economy [51].

6.3. Economic Leakages

In a study Wehde and Jeyacheya [6] pointed out that international tourism in the Global South often follows an extractive development process, with 50–80% of revenues leaking out to foreign-owned airlines, hotel chains, and tour operators. In the Golden Triangle, leakage is intensified by the dominance of non-Indian hotel brands (e.g., Marriott, Hyatt) in the luxury segment and foreign-owned companies. A study on the hidden geography of tourism firm spending [52] tracked firm-to-firm transactions and found that for every \$100 spent by a foreign tourist in Agra, only \$14 remains in the local economy. This limits the funds available for destination maintenance and improvement and creates a vicious cycle of low investment leading to low satisfaction and thus resulting in low return visitation.

6.4. Informality and Harassment

The most frequently cited challenge in visitor surveys is informal sector harassment. Touts, unauthorized guides, and souvenir vendors are often aggressive which creates a stressful environment, especially for foreign visitors. From a social exchange theory (SET) perspective, Ap [14] and Gursoy and Rutherford [15] showed that residents’ positive attitudes toward tourism depend on perceived benefits. In Agra, many residents see tourism as an exploitative system from which they benefit only marginally, leading to unpredictable or even hostile behavior toward visitors. This directly reduces the empathy dimension of SERVQUAL and has been linked to lower overall satisfaction [26].

6.5. Lack of Real-Time Feedback Mechanisms

Most of the satisfaction data in the Triangle are collected through annual or quarterly surveys, with a lag of several months. Consequently, destination managers cannot respond to emerging problems (e.g., a sudden spike in touting at a particular gate) in real time. Thomas Cook India’s recent partnership with the Ministry of Tourism [47] to install real-time feedback kiosks is a step forward, but as of 2026, only 12 kiosks exist across the three cities which is far too few to capture representative data.

7. Materials and Methods

Evaluating Overall Satisfaction of the Golden Triangle Circuit

In this section we operationalized the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory EDT that was proposed by Oliver [10] to evaluate the visitor satisfaction with the Triangle regarding its destination attributes. EDT states that satisfaction with a product or a service is a comparison between a customer’s expectation and the performance of the product or service. We use this comparison in context of the Golden Triangle as a visitor destination.

To assess the tourist satisfaction with the Golden Triangle it was necessary for authors to first identify the attributes relevant to the circuit. Consequently, to evaluate the overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with each of collective attributes of Golden Triangle, the authors developed an original template with most relevant attributes. The data collected for these variables came from several sources such as Ministry of Tourism India, social media, and expert opinions of tourism experts such as the authors of this study who are proficient in the domain of tourism. Both the authors have either travelled or lived in India and are intimately familiar with the Golden Triangle circuit.

Following table is an original designed template which is appropriate for the evaluation of the destination attributes of the Golden Triangle circuit.

Table 1. Summary of Study Results.

Category	Attribute	Satisfactory	Dissatisfactory
Monuments	<i>Historical</i>	1	
	<i>Contemporary</i>	1	
Cultural Activities	<i>Music</i>	1	
	<i>Dance</i>	1	
	<i>Visual Arts</i>	1	
Attitude Towards Intl. Visitors	<i>Tourism industry Employees</i>	1	
	<i>Residents</i>	1	
Hospitality	<i>Tourism industry Employees</i>	1	
	<i>Residents</i>	1	
Job Generated	<i>In tourism industry</i>	1	
	<i>In associated sectors</i>	1	
Hygiene Factors	<i>In internationally oriented tourism establishments</i>	1	
	<i>In domestically oriented tourism establishments</i>		1
Poverty	<i>Homelessness</i>		1
	<i>Beggarly</i>		1
Natural sites	<i>Mountains</i>		1
	<i>Beaches</i>		1
	<i>Lakes</i>		1
	<i>Forests</i>		1
Entertainment	<i>Performing art venues</i>	1	
	<i>Dance venues</i>	1	
	<i>Music venues</i>	1	
Intl. events	<i>Sports events</i>	1	
	<i>Business expositions/ events</i>	1	
	<i>Prominent international political events (G7, BRICS Summits)</i>	1	
	<i>Prom polit. Local events</i>	1	
Accessibility	<i>Automobiles</i>	1	
	<i>Trains</i>	1	
	<i>Airlines</i>	1	
Accommodations	<i>High end/ luxury</i>	1	
	<i>Affordable</i>	1	
	<i>Inexpensive</i>	1	
Food & Beverage	<i>High end/ luxury</i>	1	
	<i>Affordable</i>	1	
	<i>Inexpensive</i>	1	
Religious sites	<i>Hindu</i>	1	
	<i>Islam</i>	1	
	<i>Christians</i>	1	
	<i>Sikh</i>	1	
Travel affordability	<i>International travelers</i>	1	
	<i>Domestic travelers</i>	1	
TOTAL		34	7

8. Results

The results in Table 1 show that visitor satisfaction scores for overall attributes of the Golden Triangle circuit were higher (34) than the dissatisfaction scores (7). We can safely conclude that the Golden Triangle appears to perform well as compared to the expectations of the visitors, though challenges remain. It is very important to evaluate visitor satisfaction as this key travel destination circuit is a major hub for international tourists. It is an important economic asset for India and the regional area not only because it generates much needed foreign currency but also the jobs contributing to the local economy. Both of these key contributing factors of revenue in foreign currency and jobs generated are directly or indirectly associated with tourism in the region.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has argued that visitor satisfaction is not merely a desirable outcome but a strategic lever for achieving sustainable tourism and sustained economic growth in the Golden Triangle.

Drawing on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework – EDT, SERVQUAL, perceived value theory, SET, TALC, destination competitiveness, and a systematic taxonomy of destination attributes, we conclusively agree and emphasize that satisfaction directly influences repeat visitation, word-of-mouth, and per-capita expenditure. Conversely, low satisfaction accelerates economic leakage, environmental degradation, and social friction.

The comparative analysis of Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur reveals that destination governance is the critical differentiator. Jaipur's success stems from proactive public-private partnerships, real-time feedback, and a focus on experiential quality. Agra's underperformance is largely self-inflicted: poor last-mile management, unchecked touting, and a lack of evening attractions. Delhi's challenge is to manage its role as a chaotic gateway while preserving heritage.

9.1. Opportunities for Leveraging Visitor Satisfaction for Growth

9.1.1. Digitalization and Smart Tourism

Evolving Smart tourism technologies (STTs) such as AI-based queue management, dynamic pricing, and augmented reality (AR) guides offer powerful tools to enhance satisfaction while managing carrying capacity. A systematic literature review of STTs and tourist satisfaction [53] identified six antecedent groups: technological, social, psychological, behavioral, economic, and destination-related. In the Triangle, the introduction of a unified Golden Triangle App with real-time crowd data, AR overlays at monuments, and integrated e-tickets could reduce waiting times and increase perceived value leading to increased satisfaction with destination. Research on smart tourism systems [54] found that timeliness and safety were the strongest drivers of satisfaction among users of such apps.

Augmented reality (AR) smart guide systems have been tested at the Qutub Minar with promising results. A study on enhancing sustainable cultural tourism through AR [55] reported that AR users spent 27% more time at the site and rated their experience 0.9 points higher (on a 7-point scale) than non-users. This aligns with 'The Technology Acceptance Model' (TAM) [56] which explains this effect of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness leads to positive attitudes, which then positively influences satisfaction.

9.1.2. Development of Secondary Circuits

One of the most effective strategies to decongest the core Triangle is to promote secondary destinations within a 2-hour radius such as Shekhawati (fresco towns), Neemrana (fort-palace), Bharatpur (bird sanctuary), and Mandawa. Yolal and Chi [57] found that first-time visitors are more likely to explore secondary circuits if they are packaged as day trips with guaranteed quality. The Ministry of Tourism's "One State: One Global Destination" vision [2] explicitly encourages states to develop these circuits. For example, Rajasthan Tourism has launched a "Shekhawati Heritage Walk" that has already diverted 8% of Jaipur's visitor traffic, with reported satisfaction scores of 4.5 [48].

9.1.3. Community-Based Tourism (CBT)

CBT models, grounded in stakeholder theory [58], ensure that local communities directly benefit from tourism revenue and thus increase their support for sustainable practices. Wondirad and Ewnetu [59] showed that genuine community participation is essential for long-term sustainable tourism growth as opposed to superficial efforts. There are few good examples in the Golden Triangle circuit, such as:

- Dharampura homestays in Delhi are essentially restored havelis run by local families, offering cooking classes and heritage walks.
- Kachhpura village in Agra is a community-led viewing point of the Taj Mahal from across the river Yamuna where women-run the souvenir stalls.

- Mohanpura village in Jaipur offers block-printing workshops where visitors can create their own textiles.

Interestingly, a study on sustainable tourism development for small islands from a SET perspective [60] found that residents' life satisfaction increased by 34% when CBT was implemented. Consequently, this leads to more positive visitor interactions resulting in enhanced visitor satisfaction and return intentions.

9.1.4. Sustainable Certification Programs

Recently India launched the Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (STCI) in 2025 [2] that covers tour operators, accommodations, and beach/backwater destinations. The STCI aligns with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria. Hotels and activity providers that earn STCI certification can use the "Green Key" logo, which has been shown to increase visitor trust and willingness to pay a premium [61]. In the Golden Triangle circuit, the first certified properties include The Oberoi Amarvilas (Agra) and Diggi Palace (Jaipur). Early data indicate that certified properties report 15% higher guest satisfaction scores, partly due to the perceived ethical value [24].

9.1.5. Leveraging Domestic MICE Tourism

The Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) segment is growing rapidly in India. Delhi's Pragati Maidan is redeveloped to attract more events. Jaipur's Jaipur Exhibition and Convention Centre (JECC), and Agra's upcoming convention Center provide modern infrastructure to meet the needs of the organizers. MICE travelers tend to have higher satisfaction when destinations offer reliability, security, and professional service and all of these are underdeveloped in Agra. A study on event quality and TPB [62] found that event quality directly affected satisfaction and indirectly influenced revisit intention through attitude. There appears a golden opportunity for The Golden Triangle circuit where it could position itself as a "MICE circuit", bundling business with curated leisure experiences.

9.2. A Strategic Roadmap for Possible Improvements

9.2.1. Policy and Governance

Differential pricing and timed entry slots have been successfully implemented at the Taj Mahal on a pilot basis. Bertocchi et al. [41] recommended that peak-hour pricing should increase by 200% to shift demand to off-peak times. We propose a three-tier system: (1) super-peak (9–11am): INR 1500 for foreigners, INR 150 for domestic; (2) off-peak (11am–3pm): INR 1000/100; (3) evening (3–5pm): INR 800/80. Timed slots could be enforced through QR-coded tickets, with a no-refund policy for late arrival. This would reduce peak density and improve the experience for those willing to pay a premium.

Strict enforcement against touting requires a multi-stakeholder approach. The Agra police launched a "Tourist Police" unit in 2024 with limited success. We recommend licensing all guides and vendors, with visible IDs and a mobile-based rating system. Visitors can rate their guide/vendor immediately and those falling below 3 stars for three consecutive months may have to go through re-certification. This recommendation draws on nudge theory and has been effective in Bhutan [48].

9.2.2. Infrastructure Upgrades

World-class signage and amenities are non-negotiable for any tourist destination wanting to have a sustained tourism flow. Based on SERVQUAL's tangibles dimension, we recommend: (1) uniform multilingual signage (English, Hindi, Mandarin, Spanish) at all monuments and transport nodes; (2) clean, well-lit public toilets every 500 meters along the main visitor corridors; (3) shaded rest areas with water fountains. The cost is estimated at INR 50 crore (\$6 million) for the whole Golden Triangle circuit which is a fraction of the annual tourism revenue.

Another important aspect is the Last-mile connectivity from parking lots to monuments and should be provided by electric shuttle buggies or similar modes to reduce pollution. At the Taj Mahal, a dedicated electric shuttle from the Western Gate parking to the entrance at a nominal cost would be an excellent option. This would also generate additional revenue for maintenance around similar attractions.

9.2.3. Visitor Experience Enhancement

Mandatory pre-booking and capacity-based crowd management can be implemented through a centralized digital platform. The platform would allocate each visitor a time slot and a recommended route (e.g., “heritage explorer” vs. “quick visit”). Pre-booking would cap the number, and waitlisted visitors could be offered alternative activities (e.g., a visit to Agra Fort with a discounted ticket).

Augmented reality (AR) guides could be provided as an optional upgrade (INR 200). The AR overlay could show the Taj Mahal in its original garden setting, explain calligraphy, and offer “before/after” views of Mughal craftsmanship. As noted earlier, AR has been shown to increase satisfaction and dwell time [55]. For the tech-averse, traditional audio guides in 12 languages should remain available.

9.2.4. Measuring and Monitoring Satisfaction

Real-time digital feedback kiosks should be installed at all major monuments and transport hubs. The Thomas Cook India partnership [47] provides a model of touchscreen kiosks that ask three questions (overall satisfaction, biggest problem, likelihood to recommend) and transmit data to a central dashboard. Destination management organizations (DMOs) can then dispatch rapid response teams to address emergent issues (e.g., a broken toilet, a tout hotspot). We recommend a target response time of 30 minutes for critical issues and 24 hours for non-critical ones.

Public dashboards showing satisfaction scores, response times, and redressal actions should be published online and displayed at tourist information centers. This transparency builds trust and signals commitment to continuous improvement which are key elements of the destination competitiveness model [17].

10. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Lastly, we propose a three-phase strategic roadmap:

Phase 1 (short-term, 0–12 months): Install real-time feedback kiosks at all major monuments; launch a unified mobile app with crowd data; enforce against touts using a licensing and rating system.

Phase 2 (medium-term, 12–36 months): Implement timed entry and differential pricing at the Taj Mahal and Qutub Minar; develop secondary circuits (Shekhawati, Neemrana) with packaged tours; achieve STCI certification for 50 key hotels.

Phase 3 (long-term, 3–5 years): Build the Agra convention Center; complete the Delhi to Agra high-speed rail link; integrate AR guides across all UNESCO sites; achieve carbon neutrality for monument precincts.

In the end we conclude that the broader implication for the Global South is very clear, the strategy of volume-based tourism is a dead end. Destinations must shift from counting arrivals to measuring satisfaction-adjusted visitor days. Future research should develop a standardized “Satisfaction-Weighted Destination Footprint” metric and test its correlation with long-term economic resilience. For now, the Golden Triangle circuit offers a living laboratory to test if satisfaction can be systematically improved here despite overtourism, pollution, and informality, then it can be improved anywhere.

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