

A Historical Analysis of the Tourism Potential of Sacred Sites for Attracting Local and International Religious Tourists: Evidence from Unpopular Sacred Sites in Anuradhapura District of Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Religious and pilgrimage tourism represents a significant facet of heritage tourism, especially in destinations characterised by rich and enduring historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage. Anuradhapura is internationally recognized for its major Buddhist monuments; however, several peripheral sacred sites beyond the principal tourist circuit remain comparatively underdeveloped and receive limited visitor attention. This study examines the historical, cultural, religious, and tourism significance of selected unpopular sacred sites in and around Anuradhapura and evaluates their potential for integration into the pilgrimage tourism network. A qualitative research approach was employed using primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 45 purposively selected participants, comprising 20 domestic tourists, 10 international tourists, 10 local traders and tourism service providers, and 5 archaeological and heritage officials. Field observations were also conducted at selected sacred sites between September 2025 and January 2026. The interviews focused on visitors' awareness, experiences, perceptions, interests, and views on the tourism potential of the selected sites, while secondary data were obtained from historical, archaeological, and scholarly sources. Secondary data were obtained from literary sources, inscriptions, archaeological reports, scholarly publications, and documentary evidence. Thematic method and historical comparative analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. Findings indicate that the Western Monastery Complex, Pankuliya, Asokaramaya, Vijayaramaya, Nakha Vehera, and Thanthirimale possess considerable historical, archaeological, architectural, cultural, and spiritual value and can diversify the pilgrimage experience. However, their tourism potential is constrained by limited publicity and digital visibility, inadequate infrastructure, poor accessibility and signage, insufficient multilingual interpretation, limited guiding services, inadequate financial resources, and weak community participation. Integrating these sites into structured pilgrimage and heritage tourism circuits could diversify visitor experiences, encourage longer stays, create community-based economic opportunities, and strengthen heritage awareness and conservation. The study therefore proposes marketing, digital promotion, multilingual interpretation, infrastructure improvements, community-led tourism enterprises, improved transportation and signage, visitor information centres, and stronger heritage management. Strategic integration of these sites with Anuradhapura's established tourism network can support sustainable pilgrimage and heritage tourism, local economic development, cultural preservation, and recognition of Sri Lanka's sacred heritage.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, Pilgrimage Tourism, Sacred Sites, Heritage Tourism, Community Participation

INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH

Tourism is recognized as one of the fastest growing industries in the modern world. It is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is intertwined with human society and culture, history, economy and spirituality. One of its leading sectors, pilgrimage and religious tourism, occupies a prominent place in the global tourism industry and makes a significant contribution to cultural exchange, heritage conservation and economic development. It has a special ability to connect individuals not only with sacred spaces but also with heritage traditions and collective identity.

Religious tourism differs from leisure tourism in that it is rooted in the spiritual motivations of visitors, but it also contributes to socio-economic development, intercultural dialogue and the global movement of people. In historical contexts, religion, culture, politics and social development in South Asia are deeply intertwined, and these relationships are animated by pilgrimage tourism. Sacred cities and heritage sites around the world can also be recognized as cultural landscapes that reflect centuries of human civilization. With a recorded history spanning 2,500 years and deeply rooted Buddhist traditions, Sri Lanka can be positioned as a leading destination for religious and heritage tourism. When studying tourism, special attention should be paid to its historical background. Religious tourism represents the oldest and most historic form of human travel and can be recognized as a significant milestone in the global tourism industry.

This concept is inspired by the teachings of Buddhist doctrinal works such as the Maha Parinibbana Sutta and the Digha Nikaya Commentary. The Rasavahini and the Pali commentaries reveal large and small pilgrimage groups of five hundred or more pilgrims, with places such as Kelaniya, Nagadeepa, Ruwanweliseya, Sri Maha Bodhi and Tissamaharama becoming increasingly popular pilgrimage destinations (Rasavahini, 1920). Moreover, according to epigraphic and literary sources, kings such as Vijayabahu I, Nissankamalla and Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe visited several famous religious sites in the island. The Rasavahini mentions a pilgrimage group of five hundred Buddhist monks, while groups of seven, twelve, thirty, fifty or sixty pilgrims are regularly seen (Rasavahini, 1920). It is also mentioned that Kelaniya, Nagadeepa, Ruwanweliseya, Sri Maha Bodhi and Tissamaharama were popular pilgrimage destinations during the middle of the Anuradhapura period. Furthermore, Sahassavaththuppakarana records that Theraputtabhaya, a general in King Dutugemunu's army, climbed Adams Peak and offered flowers to the Siripathul symbol (Sahassavaththuppakarana, 1959). Thus, as shown by the literary sources, it is confirmed that Sri Lanka was a center of tourism since ancient times.

Sri Lanka has long been recognized as a suitable example of a historical tourist destination where religion and tourism intersect. Historical sources indicate that rulers have been involved in tourism since ancient times. The Ambagamuwa inscription of King Vijayabahu I records that the king visited Adam's Peak and understood the various difficulties faced by pilgrims (Wickramasinghe, 1928). Thus, past rulers were engaged in local religious tourism, and this is confirmed by Sri Lankan historical literature and archaeological sources. Furthermore, Primary sources are important in studying Sri Lankan history, and foreign reports can also be studied as special primary literary sources. Since ancient times, Sri Lanka has been an attractive destination for many tourists. Therefore, since various tourists have come to the country for various purposes, 'Fa Hian Thero' can be identified as the earliest traveler in written history. His primary objective was to engage in a study of Buddhism and obtain books on it. His journey took about 15 years, and after spending 6 years in India and 2 years in Sri Lanka, he spent the remaining 7 years returning to China, as stated in the travel report of Venerable Fa-Hian Thero (Balagalla, 2005). Furthermore, 'Cha-o Ju-kua' was a Chinese merchant traveler who came to Sri Lanka in the 10th century AD. The study of historical sources confirms that he came to Sri Lanka from the island of Sumatra. He provides details about the king and the royal court of Sri Lanka and states that the king wore a robe made of colorful cotton cloth and wore red leather sandals on his feet (Ratnapala, 1999). Among the travelers who visited Sri Lanka, Ibn Battuta can be identified as the most notable traveler. The main purpose of his visit was to see the footprint of Adam, which is said to be on Mount Samanola. His travelogue is useful for studying information about contemporary Sri Lankan history. The notes left by travelers can be considered as extremely useful primary sources for gaining an understanding of contemporary society.

The Several travelers who visited Sri Lanka and left reports can be identified, and James G. Smither is important among them. According to his report, Architectural Remains, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, a study titled Architectural Remains, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, has given a complete description not only of the shape and construction technology of the stupas of Anuradhapura, including Mirisavetiya, and their carvings, but also of the delicate carvings of dwarf figures on the stone pillars (James G. Smither, 1993). Moreover, Ivers, an Irishman who was in the administrative service of Sri Lanka from 1878 AD, has recorded his experiences gained by visiting almost every place in the North Central Province in his book Manual of the North Central Province. It contains detailed accounts of the archaeological excavations carried out under his rule, especially at Mirisavetiya, Jetavanaramaya, Abhayagiriya and Mahavihara (Ivers, R.W., 1899). In this context, it can be said that the sacred city of Anuradhapura has occupied a central place in the tourism industry since ancient times.

Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982, Anuradhapura can be seen as a major turning point in Buddhist religious tourism in Sri Lankan history. Founded in the 4th century BC and serving as the center of Theravada Buddhism for most of its history, the city is not only a site of archaeological value, but also an ancient ruin. Today, Anuradhapura attracts a large number of domestic and international tourists annually, many of whom travel to visit these sites. Therefore, Anuradhapura has been famous for its pilgrimage tourism since ancient times. However, a closer examination of this region reveals that despite Anuradhapura's prominence as a religion-based pilgrimage destination even in the global context, tourism in Anuradhapura has faced certain challenges. Tourism activities are focused around a few popular attractions, resulting in monotonous tourist experiences, short stays and limited economic benefits for the local community. Accordingly, when studying Sri Lankan history beyond the famous tourist attractions, the unpopular sacred places located on the outskirts of Anuradhapura city make a major contribution to building the history of the country.

Accordingly, outside the famous historical tourist destinations, a network of unpopular religious sacred places rich in historical, architectural and artistic as well as spiritual values extends in Anuradhapura. These peripheral sites, which are identified as the Anuradhapura Western Monastery Complex, Pankuliya Ashokaramaya, Vijayaramaya, Puliyanukulam Pubbaramaya, Kali Kovil, Basawakkulam Siva Kovil, Prachina Tissa Pabbata Viharaya and others such as Handagala, Ritigala, Aukana and Thanthirimala, are historically, architecturally and spiritually significant but are overshadowed by the monuments in the central city, the main tourism hub of Anuradhapura. Many of these sites are located away from the popular tourist attractions. These sites are intertwined with Sri Lankan history and some of them bear witness to the flourishing of Mahayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In this study, the term '*Unpopular Sacred Sites*' refers to historically, culturally, architecturally, and religiously significant sacred places that receive comparatively low levels of tourist visitation and public awareness in relation to the major tourist attractions of Anuradhapura. The term also encompasses sites that have limited tourism promotion and remain relatively underdeveloped in terms of tourism facilities, accessibility, and integration into the main tourism circuit. Therefore, '*unpopularity*' in this study is understood as a combined condition of relatively low visitation and awareness, limited promotion, and relative underdevelopment, rather than any single factor alone. Accordingly, this research aims to highlight the historical importance of the sacred places located on the outskirts of the city in order to enhance the overall pilgrimage experience in the city of Anuradhapura. It is also expected to study the historical importance of the sacred places located on the outskirts, the current status, challenges, and the policies and measures that should be implemented to develop the unpopular places located around the sacred city of Anuradhapura as tourist attractions in attracting local and international tourists. Accordingly, the main problem of the research was to study the importance of the unpopular sacred places located around the city of Anuradhapura in attracting local and international tourists and the potential that these places have to create high tourist attraction. The main objective of this study was to identify the importance of the unpopular sacred places located around the city of Anuradhapura in attracting local and foreign tourists and to present the necessary proposals to develop these places as tourist destinations. Accordingly, the primary focus of this research is to analyze the importance of the peripheral sacred places located around the city of Anuradhapura and to find practical strategies to integrate them into the regional tourism framework in a sustainable manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative research approach in conducting this research study. This methodology was used to identify the experiences and opinions of local and foreign tourists on the historical, religious and touristic significance of the sacred sites around the sacred city of Anuradhapura. Using a qualitative approach made it possible to obtain in-depth information about the personal experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the participants rather than numerical data. Both primary and secondary sources were used in this study to collect data. Field Study Method and Semi-structured Interview Method were used to collect primary data. Interviews were conducted with local and foreign tourists who visited the sacred city of Anuradhapura between September 2025 and January 2026 to collect information on their travel experiences, understanding of the sacred sites, and the reasons for their attraction. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 45 participants representing four stakeholder groups. The sample consisted of 20 domestic tourists, 10 international tourists, 10 local traders and tourism service providers, and 5 archaeological and heritage officials.

Through these discussions, an understanding was gained of the impact of religious tourism on the local community and economy, the needs of tourists, and tourism activities. Interviews were also conducted with officials in charge of archaeological sites in Anuradhapura and relevant responsible persons to obtain information on archaeological heritage conservation, management, and tourist attraction. During secondary data collection, ancient chronicles, historical books, research articles, archaeological reports, inscriptions, and other archaeological evidence were studied. These sources provided the necessary information on the historical background, religious significance and cultural heritage of the sacred sites of Anuradhapura. Field observations and document studies attempted to identify the relationship between the ancient and present conditions. Thematic Analysis Method and Historical Comparative Method were used to analyze the collected data. The data obtained through interviews were categorized under main themes and analyzed on issues such as tourist experiences, value of sacred heritage, conservation issues and tourism development. The historical comparative method explained the relationship between the ancient religious heritage of Anuradhapura and the current religious tourism sector. Thus, this research methodology enabled a deeper understanding of the role of other sacred sites around the sacred city of Anuradhapura and their contribution to attracting local and international religious tourists.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Historical and Cultural Significance of the Famous Tourist Hub of Anuradhapura

Anuradhapura is not only a historical and cultural center of Sri Lanka, but also a center of Buddhism and global history. As the island's first capital and a thriving center of Theravada Buddhism, it is a unique turning point in religious, political and cultural history. In Sri Lankan political history, King Pandukabhaya ruled Sri Lanka for 70 years, and after King Pandukabhaya, his son Mutasiva ruled Sri Lanka for 60 years (Mahavamsa, 2004). However, the Mahavamsa states that King Mutasiva had ten sons and two daughters, and several historical sources state that his second son, Prince Tissa, succeeded King Mutasiva (Mahavamsa, 2004). However, although the Vansattappakasiniya mentions the eldest son of King Mutasiva, the chronicles do not state why he did not receive the kingship and the second, Prince Tissa, received the kingship. Accordingly, in the context of the previous kingdom, a ruler of Sri Lanka received the royal power from the father to the eldest son or from brother to brother. However, in the present case, it seems that that historical inheritance has been broken. Accordingly, this may have been a pre-state administrative strategy. It can be pointed out as a good example of how past Sri Lankan rulers operated within the administrative machinery while governing the state. Historical sources confirm that many rulers during the Anuradhapura period followed such principles of state administration. The overall historical and cultural evolution of the main sacred hub of Anuradhapura can be identified as follows.



Founded in the 4th century BC, Anuradhapura became the center of Theravada Buddhism after Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka under the leadership of Arahata Mahinda, son of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa. Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka as a result of the Third Council of the Dharma, which was held in the eighth year of Ashoka's reign, following the Kalinga War (Mahavamsa, 2004). Therefore, the reign of King Devanampiyatissa marks an important turning point in the history of Sri Lanka. During his reign, the Sinhala Buddhist education that was born with the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, brought Sri Lanka prosperity and prosperity second to none in the contemporary civilizations of the world (Mahavamsa, 2004). From that moment on, Anuradhapura became the main religious center of the island rather than a political capital, and evolved over a long period of time through a variety of religious practices and cultural values. As the island's first ancient capital, it served as the political and administrative center of Sri Lanka for over a thousand years. This long historical continuity has made Anuradhapura a symbol of early Sri Lankan civilization, reflecting developments in governance, social organization, architecture, and urban planning. Anuradhapura's recognition as a sacred city further enhances its global reputation as a heritage destination of Outstanding Universal Value. When discussing the structure of the sacred landscape of Anuradhapura, this can be confirmed by the following structure.

Table 1: Structure of Sacred Landscape in Anuradhapura

Anuradhapura Main Tourism Hub		
Sacred Tree	Monumental Stupa's	Monastic Center's
Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi	Thuparamaya	Mahavihara
	Ruwanweliseya	Abhayagiriya
	Mirisawetiya	
	Jethawanaramaya	

Sources: By the Researchers, (2026)

The 3rd century BC can be considered a great turning point in the cultural sector of Sri Lanka. The introduction of Buddhism under the leadership of the Mauryan ruler Ashoka marks the uniqueness of that cultural sector. The Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi of Anuradhapura holds special historical and religious significance. It was brought from Bodhi Gaya in India during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa and is considered the oldest tree documented historically. The Mahavamsa mentions that the rulers of Kataragama and Sandungama attended the Bodhi plantation festival held by King Devanampiyatissa and were also given Bodhi saplings (Mahavamsa, 2004). The Sinhala Bodhivamsa also reveals that the rulers of the four directions were invited to the Bodhi plantation festival held by King Devanampiyatissa (Sinhala Bodhivamsa, 1998). For centuries, pilgrims from all over the island and beyond have come to Anuradhapura to pay homage to this sacred tree, which is of spiritual and cultural importance.

Moreover, the 2nd century BC is recognized as another turning point in Sri Lankan political and religious history, with the reigns of the rulers Kavantissa and Dutugemunu being particularly significant. At this time, the political and geographical regions of 'Rajarata', 'Ruhunu Rata' and 'Malaya Rata' were in operation (Mahavamsa, 2004). After King Kavantissa, Dutugemunu is said to have become the king, ending the rule of King Elara, who had conquered Rajarata (Mahavamsa, 2004). The Ruwanweliseya, built by King Dutugemunu later, is one of the largest stupas in the Buddhist world and is revered by the Sinhala Buddhist people. The Mahavamsa states that the workers who were engaged in the construction of King Dutugemunu's stupa were paid a decent wage and that monks were also brought from foreign countries for the unveiling ceremony of the stupas (Mahavamsa, 2004). The Ruwanwelimahasaya houses a large number of Buddha relics and attracts thousands of pilgrims. The Thuparamaya, built by King Devanampiyatissa, is considered the first stupa built in Sri Lanka after the introduction of Buddhism. Although modest in scale compared to Ruwanwelimasayya, this stupa marks the

beginning of a tradition of monumental buildings that defined the cultural landscape of the city of Anuradhapura. The later constructions of Abhayagiri and Jetavanaramaya further expanded the architectural and religious significance of the city, with Abhayagiri becoming a centre of monastic learning and international Buddhist religious exchange, while Jetavanaramaya, built by King Mahasena, remained one of the tallest brick structures in the ancient world.

Each of these stupas not only served as religious centres, but also attested to the close connection between religion and politics in ancient Sri Lanka. The city of Anuradhapura was not limited to Buddhism, and the city also contained shrines dedicated to gods such as Vishnu and Shiva, as well as Hindu religious sites associated with multiple religious traditions. These multi-religious elements highlight the religious tolerance policy pursued by the rulers of the Anuradhapura kingdom, and serve as a fitting example of the centuries of cultural exchange that took place with South India and beyond. The presence of Hindu temples next to Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka illustrates the interconnected nature of Sri Lankan religious traditions. It can be pointed out as a factor that persists to the present day. In modern times, Hindu devotees visit temples such as the Basawakkulam Shiva Temple in Anuradhapura, confirming the importance of the city of Anuradhapura as a multi-religious pilgrimage destination. Accordingly, it can be seen that the sacred city of Anuradhapura was multi-religious in nature and that it has developed as a pilgrim hub through various religious traditions.

Table 2: The formation of the sacred city of Anuradhapura religious framework

The formation of the sacred city of Anuradhapura religious framework			
Religious Tradition	Key Historical Sites	Characteristics	Significance
Theravāda Buddhism	Mahavihara	Early Buddhism	Maintaining the Theravada Buddhism of the world
Mahāyāna Influence	Abhayagiriya	Mahayana and other Buddhist Traditions	Bodhisattva worship and other beliefs
	Jethavanaramaya		
Hindu Traditions	Kali and Siva Kovil	Vishnu and Shiva worship	Cultural interaction
Folk Beliefs	Local religious Shrines	Ritual integration	Living heritage

Sources: By the Researcher, (2026)

Similarly, the city was also sustained by a large-scale system of tanks, reservoirs and canals, such as the *Basawakkulama* (Abhaya Tank), the *Tisa Wewa* and the *Nuwara Wewa*, which provided water for agriculture and public life. It seems that the kings and patrons who built these tanks benefited the people through massive water supplies. Considering the cultural significance of the famous tourism hub of Anuradhapura has played a crucial role in shaping the national identity of Sri Lanka. Today, Anuradhapura operates as a pilgrimage tourist center, and thousands of local devotees flock to the city during Poya days and annual festivals. For many Sri Lankans, visiting Anuradhapura is not just a tourist activity, but also a place where they get the opportunity to engage in cultural identity. Economically, Anuradhapura contributes significantly to regional and national tourism development. Pilgrims and tourists can find a number of permanent hotels, guesthouses, transport services, tour guides, vendors and local markets. Tourism stimulates infrastructure development and creates employment opportunities for local communities, thereby contributing to income generation and regional growth. This confirms that Anuradhapura can be identified as a Famous Tourist Hub in terms of Historical and Cultural Significance.

The Historical, Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Unpopular Sacred Sites in Anuradhapura

The sacred city of Anuradhapura extends beyond the famous monuments that attract tourist attention. There are many unpopular sacred sites around the city, which, although peripheral in terms of visibility, can be shown to play a central role in understanding the breadth and depth of Sri Lanka's religious heritage. These unpopular sacred sites of Anuradhapura can be described as 'peripheral sacred sites and extended sacred sites'. Peripheral sacred sites are sites located unpopularity among the famous tourist centers, while extended sacred sites are places located away from the main core of Anuradhapura that can be identified as pilgrim areas of historical value for tourists. These peripheral sites embody the evolution of various traditions and religious systems, from Theravada philosophy to Mahayana influences, from gender inclusion in monastic life to multi-religious coexistence. Here, the historical, cultural and spiritual significance of the less popular sacred sites of Anuradhapura is discussed based on data collection conducted at several major peripheral sites. Their historical, cultural and spiritual value as well as their tourism potential within the Regional Base Dignity are analyzed. The table below discusses the peripheral sacred sites located in the vicinity of the main tourism hub of Anuradhapura that have not received the attention of tourists, their significance and the nature of their tourist attractions.

Table 3: Peripheral Sacred Places in Anuradhapura

Peripheral Sacred Places in Anuradhapura			
Site Name	Historical Period	Tourism Status	Significance of Peripheral Sites
Anuradhapura Western Monastery Complex	Late Anuradhapura	Low visitation	The complex belonging to the type of Padanaghara Monastery
Vijayaramaya	Medieval	Limited awareness	Mahayana Architectural Tradition
Asokaramaya	Medieval	Neglected	Mahayana Architectural Tradition
Prachina Tissa Pabbatha	Medieval	Low tourist flow	Mahayana Architectural Tradition
Dhakkhina Stupa	Ancient	Mini Promotion	Sub-monastery to the Maha Vihara
Kali Kovila	Medieval	Limited integration	Hindu shrine within sacred city
Siva Kovila	Medieval	Under-promoted	Shaivite temple ruins

Source: By the Researchers (2026)

Similarly, the table below discusses the extended sacred sites of historical value located in Anuradhapura, away from the main tourism hub core, and their significance and the nature of their tourist attractions. Attention should also be paid to the opportunity to create new tourism experiences, especially when integrating such places into the main tourist circuit.

Table 4: The Extended Sacred Places in Anuradhapura

Extended Sacred Places in Anuradhapura				
Site Name	Monastery Type	Pilgrimage Role	Tourism Status	Historical Values
Ritigala	Padanaghara	Meditation Tradition	Religious Tourism	Buddhist Center
Handagala	Cave monastery	Regional pilgrimage	Low visibility	Early Brahmi Inscriptions

Isinbessagala	Giri Vihara Type	Regional pilgrimage	Limited facilities	Monastic Settlement
Haththi Kuchchi	Type of Giri Vihara	Regional pilgrimage	Moderate promotion	Associated with royal legends
Mihinthle	Type of Giri Vihara	Major pilgrimage center	High visitation	Introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka
Thanthirimale	Type of Giri Vihara	Devotional tourism	Developing site	Ancient Buddha Statues and Bodhi Tree

Source: By the Researchers (2026)

Western Monastery Complex Anuradhapura

As a result of the civil service under the British Empire, many archaeological sites in Sri Lanka were excavated and excavated, and this monastery complex located to the west of the old city of Anuradhapura can be cited as one of the excavated monasteries. In 1885, S. M. Burrows introduced the several ancient structures discovered by him as palaces, which were long used as the Dutugemunu Palace. However, in 1905, archaeologist HCP. Bell, who examined the site, identified these structures as Western monasteries. E. R. Ayrton excavated here in 1912 and in 1925 A. M. Hocart examined these monasteries and named them '*Double Platform Monasteries*' (Bandaranayake, S., 1974). Armed with knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, S. Paranavithanan, who prepared his doctoral thesis on this monastic tradition called '*Padhanaghara*' in 1957, named these constructions as Buddhist Meditation Monasteries. In addition to the western monasteries of Anuradhapura, Padhanaghara can also be identified in places such as *Ritigala*, *Arankele*, *Mihintale*, *Thanthirimale*, *Veherabendigala*, *Manakanda*, *Nuwaragala*, *Nagolla*, *Maligatenna*, *Amunukole*, *Seethakotuwa*, and *Budugala*. There are several special features that distinguish Padhanaghara from other ancient buildings.

1. Having double platforms and being built on a rock.
2. The building at the back is surrounded by a moat.
3. The two buildings and the moat are surrounded by a rectangular wall.
4. It has a long walkway and it is well-finished.
5. Only the toilets and toilets are carved from stone.
6. Other religious buildings such as bodhisattvas, pratimagharas and stupas are not visible.

This temple tradition, known as '*Padhanaghara*' in Pali, is known as '*Piyangal*' in Sinhala, and as mentioned in the Mahavamsa, the Venerable Buddhaghosa, who came to this country in the fifth century, met a local leader monk from Padhanaghara (Mahavamsa, 2012).

Pankuliya

The Pankuliya monastery can be pointed out as a milestone in the Sri Lankan bhikshuni order. The Sinhala Encyclopedia, citing a concept from folklore, states that the *Pankuliya Ashokaramaya* was built by *Prince Saliya*, the son of *King Dutugemunu*. It is stated that a temple complex called *Ashokaramaya* was built in the garden that was the backdrop to their love affair in order to worship his wife *Ashokamala* (Sinhala Encyclopedia, 1998). Considering the fact that it is located not far from the Abhayagiri temple complex, and considering the fact that King Mahasen built two monasteries named Uttara and Abhaya, which were attached to Abhayagiri, it can be assumed that this monastery was attached to Abhayagiri. This is further confirmed by the fact that the Mahayana architectural features that flourished in Abhayagiri are also evident here. In particular, according to the monastery design technique mentioned in the *Manju Sri Bhashitha Vastu Vidya Shastra*, *Pankuliya* can also be included in the '*Pabbatarama*' architectural complex (Manju Sri Vastu Vidya Shastra, 1995). Abhayagiri can be introduced as an early construction that can be considered in this Pabbatarama concept in accordance with the basic *Mahayana Dharma Shastras* (Gunawardhana, 2010). It can be assumed that the four main buildings here are arranged in a manner that includes other buildings, rather than the Bodhigaraya, Stupa, Statue house and Uposathaghara, which are typical features of

Pabbataramas, on a platform in the middle of the monastery complex or within a separate square wall. This may be due to the difficulties of construction in the marshy terrain and the uncertainty in the knowledge of architecture due to the fact that this was the beginning of the Pabbatarama concept. Accordingly, it can be concluded that this is a nunnery belonging to Abhayagiriya.

Ashokaramaya

Pankuliya Ashokaramaya is another important but relatively unvisited sacred site in the Anuradhapura cultural landscape. Located away from the main tourist hub of the sacred city of Anuradhapura, this site is an isolated archaeological site. As indicated by the study of Manju Sri Bhashitha Vastu Vidya Shastra, this is a monastery complex belonging to the '*Pabbatarama*' category and is suitable for meditation (Manju Sri Vastu Vidya Shastra, 1995). This monastery was established for nuns during the Anuradhapura period, thus proving that gender equality was practiced in ancient Sri Lanka. The most striking feature of the site is the remains of a brick stupa, which, although partially destroyed, can be identified as a testament to its religious importance. Surrounding the stupa are monastic structures, stone pillars and other remains that indicate the existence of a once thriving religious complex. These remains reflect the architectural traditions of the Anuradhapura period and highlight the importance placed on small monastic complexes in supporting the spread and practice of Buddhism. The most important monument found in Pankuliya is the Buddha statue there. During the data collection for this study, it was observed that mainstream tourists rarely visit the Pankuliya Ashokarama Monastery. A few local pilgrims occasionally visit the site and it is likely that this site is more suitable for meditators seeking personal meditation or a peaceful life. The historical connection with the beginning of Buddhism in Sri Lanka shows potential to introduce it to local and international pilgrims, especially tourists seeking to connect with various Buddhist-based events.

Vijayaramaya

This archaeological site, which had been neglected for a long time due to the forestation of Anuradhapura, is said to have been destroyed by treasure hunters when it was discovered by S. M. Burroughs. Burroughs also mentioned that the small stupa, which was built of bricks, had a stone base and that two ponds belonging to this temple complex were filled with water (Kulathunga, 2017). HCP. Bell, who excavated here in 1891 and 1893, confirmed the building with carved panels called '*Shalawa*', and at the same time, DMZ. Wickramasinghe excavated the stupa here and found that four animal figures and four god figures were placed under the four-way gate pavilions of the stupa.

Among these statues, a lion and Kuvera holding a yagadava were found in the north direction, an elephant and Indra with a thunderbolt in the east direction, a horse and a seated Yama holding a club in the south direction, and a cow and Varuna in the west. Based on this, Bell has shown that the north, east, south and west directions are symbolized by the lion, elephant, horse and cow respectively (Kulathunga, 2017). This temple complex is recognized as a Mahayana temple complex due to the copper plates containing Mahayana Dharma information found in its stupa. Later, this site, which was under the protection of the Department of Archaeology, has been excavated and preserved by the Central Cultural Fund under the leadership of T.G. Kulathunga.

Nakha Vehera

Nakha Vehera is a historically significant site with minimal tourist attractions in the historical Anuradhapura cultural landscape. When traveling from the center of Anuradhapura along the Sanghamittha Mawatha, passing by Kuttam Pokuna and taking the side road to the right along the road leading to the stone bridge, one comes across the archaeological site of Nakha Vehera, which is not well preserved but very important in the city. Although this site is not currently associated with the main tourist sites, its stone structures, small stupas and the ruins around it are extremely important factors in understanding the religious and cultural history of Anuradhapura. In addition to the large construction complexes such as the Maha Viharaya, Abhayagiriya and Jetavanarama, places such as Nakha Vehera can be seen as a place where Buddhist religious culture spread throughout the city. Although the stupa that can be seen here is currently partially in ruins, it is accepted that it represents the early architectural style of the Anuradhapura period. Although the Nakha Monastery complex

does not enjoy the same popularity as Ruwanwelimahasaya or Jetavanaramaya, Nakha Monastery reflects the widespread patronage of Buddhism and the tradition of establishing small religious centers around major monastery complexes. During data collection for this research, the site was identified as a calm and undisturbed environment, with only local pilgrims visiting the area. This atmosphere contrasted with the busy religious activities of the central sacred city and identified the potential of Nakha Monastery as a place for meditation and spirituality. Interviews with tourists revealed that many consider the site to be spiritually significant due to its peacefulness and the solitude it offers, making it an attractive destination for tourists seeking a private religious experience away from the crowds.

Vessagiriya

Vessagiriya is a very prominent ancient monastery complex located in the historic city of Anuradhapura, notable for its unique combination of natural and man-made features. Unlike other monastery sites, Vessagiriya is primarily a rock-hewn monastery, consisting of a cave complex carved into a rocky cliff, which once served as a residence and meditation site for Buddhist monks. The site depicts the lifestyle of the monks of the early Anuradhapura period, highlighting their devotion to meditation, simplicity, and spiritual practices in natural surroundings. Inscriptions and carved stone features indicate that the site was active for centuries and was home to a significant monastic population during the height of Anuradhapura Buddhist civilization. The historical and spiritual significance of Vessagiriya is further enhanced by its location, which provides a sense of isolation and tranquility compared to the main sacred city. Visitors and pilgrims to the site often mention the tranquil atmosphere, which allows for meditative experiences away from the crowds that often flock to large stupas and monasteries. It shows its potential as a spiritually significant site for local and international pilgrims who want to get closer to Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage. During the data collection for this study, it was observed that the site faces several fundamental challenges. Overgrowth of vegetation, erosion, and limited maintenance threaten its survival. Moreover, there are few interpretive signs, guided tour facilities, or minimal infrastructure for visitors, which limits access for tourists unfamiliar with the site. Despite these challenges, Vessagiriya remains a site with immense potential for cultural tourism development. Many tourists visiting Vessagiriya are mainly attracted by its historical and religious significance as well as its natural environment, which provides a calm and cool ecosystem for relaxation. Observations made during this study confirmed that the natural setting contributes significantly to its attractiveness, providing a respite from the heat and crowds of the main sacred city. However, despite this potential, several limitations reduce the attractiveness of the place as a tourist destination.

Field observations and interviews revealed:

1. There are no suitable outlets for obtaining food or beverages.
2. There are no small shops where visitors can purchase goods.
3. There are no basic sanitary facilities such as toilets nearby.

These shortcomings were repeatedly highlighted by local and foreign tourists during the face-to-face interviews, with many emphasizing that the lack of essential facilities makes long visits inconvenient and limits the ability of tourists, especially families and international tourists, to spend significant time at the place. Interviews during the research highlighted that addressing these issues through the provision of basic amenities, improved security measures, interpretive resources and community participation could significantly enhance the attractiveness of Vessagiriya, encourage longer-term tourism opportunities and support sustainable pilgrimage and cultural tourism development.

The Multi-Religious Elements in Hindu Temple Culture

Anuradhapura is primarily a Buddhist city, and its peripheral sacred sites include the Kali Kovil and the Basawakkulam Shiva Kovil. These sites reflect the city's long history of cultural and multi-religious identity, shaped by centuries of interaction with South India since ancient times. Hindu worship in Anuradhapura coexisted with Buddhist devotion, and this is evidence of a multi-religious landscape that continues to this day.

For example, during festivals, both Buddhist and Hindu rituals can be seen as a shared sacred space, attracting different groups of devotees.

From a tourism perspective, this Hindu temple culture enhances Anuradhapura's domestic and foreign tourist appeal as a multi-religious heritage destination. It can be said that they provide a sense of cultural familiarity and connection to international tourists, especially Indian tourists from India. For local Sri Lankans, it reaffirms the importance of multi-religious traditions in the history of the island. Promoting these temples near Buddhist monasteries can position Anuradhapura not only as a Buddhist pilgrimage center, but also as a symbol of religious coexistence, and reinforces Sri Lanka's identity as a culturally diverse nation. While it is a minor point that tourists, especially those joining the popular Anuradhapura tourist circuit, flock to such sites, it can be said that this system of sites is a particularly important factor in The Multi-Religious Elements in Hindu Temple Culture. Thus, it can be seen that the Peripheral Sacred Sites located in the vicinity of Anuradhapura city have many special significances in the history of Sri Lanka. Moreover, despite the existence of such places of historical and cultural importance, it can be seen that the tourist attraction is limited to the famous tourist destinations. It can be seen that these Peripheral Areas located in the vicinity of Anuradhapura city, like the Extended Sacred Sites, have minimal tourist attraction. The main objective of this paper is to include such places among the famous tourist centers.

Ritigala Forest Monastery

Ritigala is one of the most significant historical, archaeological and biological sites in the dry zone of Sri Lanka (8°03' - 8°07' North and 80°36' East - 80°38' East). Recognizing the importance of its maintenance, the authorities have declared the upper part of the Ritigala hill as a Strict Nature Reserve (SNR), while the rest of the hill has been declared an archaeological site. The Ritigala reserve covers an area of 1528 hectares and is surrounded by sixteen villages. The Ritigala monastery is located in Andiyakande. There is evidence that monks lived in the Ritigala area since the first century BC. The *Aritta Viharaya* was founded a century later. The temple received royal patronage and was completed in 1500 AD. In the ninth century, King Sena donated the monastery, a large complex located high on the slope, to a group of Buddhist monks known as the Pansukulika. The "*Aranya Senasana*" in the Ritigala forest is home to only a meditating monks. Accordingly, Historical sources and local legends describe Ritigala as a place where hermits and forest-dwelling monks pursued rigorous spiritual practices, often in isolation. Ritigala's architecture is unique and blends seamlessly with its natural surroundings, including a black stone paved path, monastery houses, and meditation platforms. Unlike the urban monastery complexes in the famous holy city of Anuradhapura, Ritigala was deliberately designed to minimize human impact on nature and embodies the principles of environmental sensitivity.

Ritigala's tourism potential lies in its ability to attract both pilgrims and eco-tourists. For Buddhist devotees, it offers a glimpse of monk traditions that complement the grandeur of central Anuradhapura. For international tourists, its natural beauty, combined with its spiritual heritage, makes it a suitable destination for eco-friendly and meditative tourism. With proper infrastructure, Ritigala can be positioned as a place for meditation retreats, nature trails and cultural tourism and nature tourism that focuses on spirituality and ecology.

Thanthirimale Monastic Complex

The sacred site of Thanthirimale, located a short distance from Anuradhapura in the North Central Province, has recently become a popular place among Buddhists. However, foreigners rarely visit this place. The history of Thanthirimale dates back to prehistoric times and cave paintings by prehistoric humans are found here. Also, the presence of rock-cut caves indicates that there was a monastery dating back to the BC period. Moreover, among the other major monuments found in the historical and sacred site of Thanthirimale, the following monumental buildings are important.

- Bo-Tree of Thanthirimale
- Reclining Buddha of Thanthirimale and Sedentary Buddha of Thanthirimale
- Lotus pond of Thanthirimale
- Library complex of Thanthirimale

- Prehistoric cave paintings of Thanthirimale
- Dagoba of Thanthirimale

According to the Mahavamsa, it is stated that the '*Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Shakha*' was placed at a place called Thivakka Bamunugama while the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Shakha was being carried from Dambakola Pathune to Anuradhapura and an '*Ashtapaala Bodhi Shakha*' was later planted at that place. Although the place called Thivakka Bamunugama is generally accepted to be the present-day Thanthirimale, scholars point out that Thanthirimale is not Thivakka Bamunugama since the Sinhala Bodhi Vamsa mentions two places, Thivakka Bamunugama and Thanthirimale (Sinhala Bodivamsa, 1999). It also confirms that the Bodhi Shakha with '*Dethis Phala Ruha Bodhi Shakha*' was planted at this location, not an '*Ashtapaala Bodhi Shakha*' as indicated in the inscription (Sinhala Bodivamsa, 1999). Moreover, a reclining Buddha statue is seen on the slope to the north of the rock, and evidence suggests that there was a statue house attached to the rock. Also, a half-height '*Ardha Unnatha Samadhi Buddha statue*' can be seen on the slope of the rock below the Bodhi. This Buddha statue has carved deity images on both sides, and two unfinished seated statues are seen on either side of the statue.

Evidence also suggests that this Samadhi Buddha statue also had a statue house. Thus, the historical sacred site of Thanthirimale can be pointed out as an important milestone in Sri Lankan history. It is located away from the main tourist circuit and is a place that has received the least attention from tourists. Thus, the Thanthirimale complex, which is endowed with exceptional archaeological and artistic value, can be considered an Extended Sacred Site of Anuradhapura. As a great tourist destination for pilgrim tourism, Thanthirimale, which has a lot of potential, can be added to the list of famous tourist destinations and expand the tourism opportunities of local and foreign tourists. However, by including the historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural and spiritual values of the Peripheral Area and the Extended Secret Sites in the tourism packages, these areas will become high tourist attractions and it can be said that it can also directly impact the development process of Sri Lanka.

Challenges and Barriers in Promoting the Peripheral Sacred Sites in Anuradhapura

During the data collection and field observation of this research, it was identified that the promotion of sacred sites located in the periphery around the famous sacred city of Anuradhapura for tourism purposes faces several structural challenges. While major religious sites such as Ruwanwelisaya and Jetavanaramaya occupy a prominent position in tourism packages within the famous tourist hub of Anuradhapura, it was confirmed that many peripheral sacred sites are under-promoted for tourism due to certain limitations in information exchange, socio-cultural, economic and infrastructural facilities. Problems in the information and marketing sector can be cited as one challenge. Peripheral sacred sites often have limited awareness among domestic and international tourists.

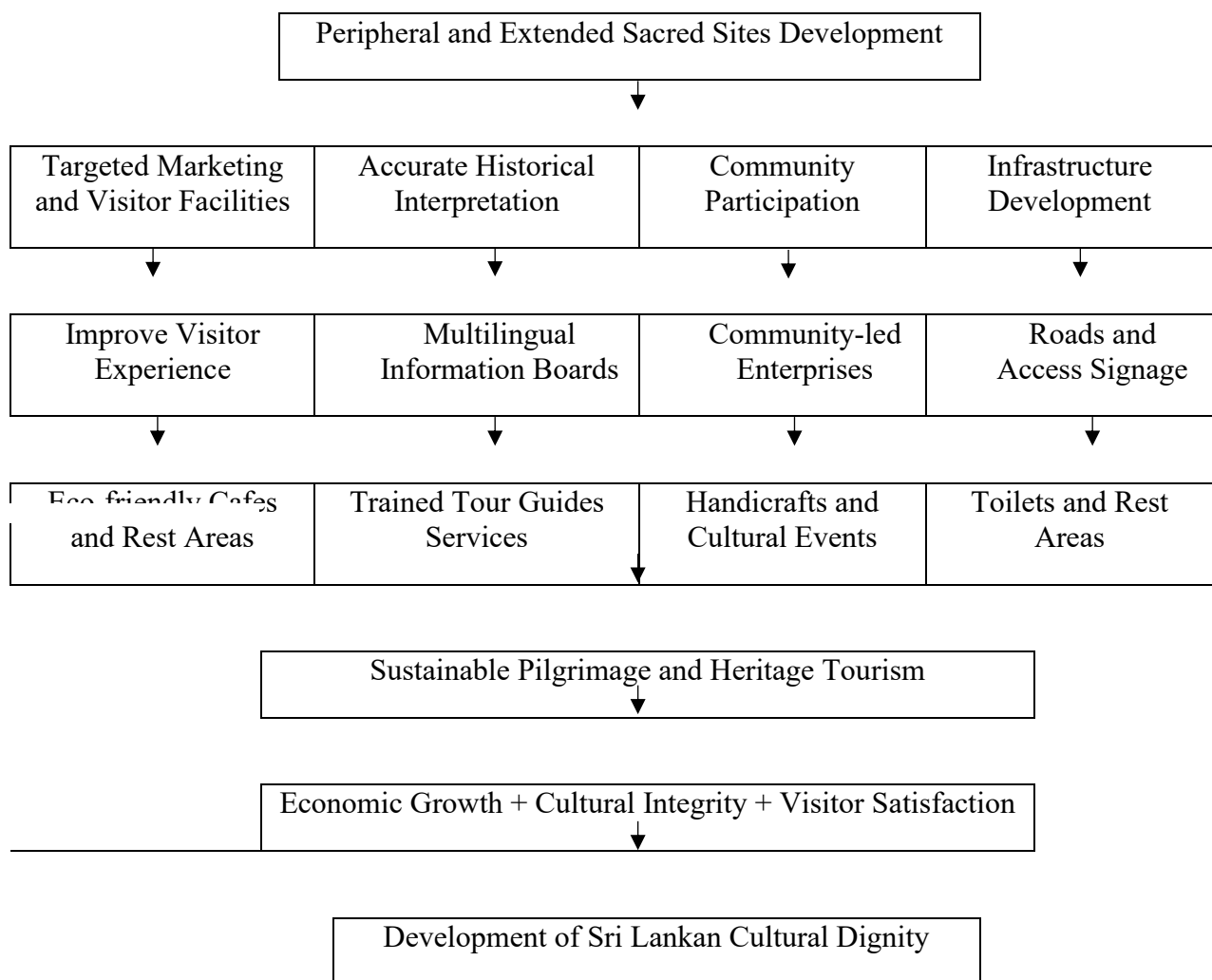
Local promotional materials, tourist brochures and tour packages generally highlight only prominent monuments, while smaller monasteries, ancient hermitages and archaeological ruins are largely ignored. Limited official websites, minimal social media presence, lack of online awareness campaigns and poor digital literacy have limited the tourist attraction of these places. Therefore, while prominent tourist attractions such as Ruwanwelisaya and Jetavanaramaya, which are considered popular tourist attractions in Anuradhapura city, receive significant attention, little attention is paid to historical sites located in the periphery. Moreover, the isolated location of these peripheral sacred sites, far from the local community, has limited the opportunities for tourism attraction. When tourism is not actively involved in guiding, storytelling or heritage management, sites in the periphery fail to benefit from local knowledge. In addition, over-promotion without proper guidance can disrupt spiritual practices and create problems between religious values and tourism activities. Language barriers further complicate promotion, and limited multilingual signage and guide services limit opportunities for providing accurate historical interpretation.

Economically, there are also various challenges and barriers, with many peripheral sacred sites operating with limited financial resources, often relying primarily on religious site-based donations rather than structured tourism revenue. The decline in visitor numbers translates into tourism revenue, which limits investment in site maintenance, interpretive centres or promotional campaigns. Government and private sector funding is often prioritized for major monuments within the main sacred areas, and the maintenance and operation of peripheral

sites has been erratic, without adequate financial support for sustainable development. Moreover, infrastructure challenges have also hampered tourism promotion. Poor road facilities, limited public transport services, and inadequate directional signage have particularly reduced tourist visits to unpopular sacred sites. Reaching these sites can be difficult without private transport. Many peripheral sites lack essential visitor facilities such as rest areas, sanitation services, information boards, and security services. It can be said that by addressing the challenges and barriers in areas such as socio-cultural, economic and infrastructural facilities to promote the peripheral sacred sites of Anuradhapura, it is possible to incorporate such unpopular historical sites into the famous sacred landscape by addressing these challenges through heritage management, digital marketing, community participation and financial investments.

Accordingly, during the data collection in this research, several unique challenges and barriers were identified in proposing tourism promotion and tourist attractions for Peripheral and Extended Sacred Sites. Based on the data collected, the researchers can propose several Development Strategies for Peripheral and Extended Sacred Sites in Anuradhapura to address these issues and challenges.

Figure 8: Development Strategies for Peripheral and Extended Sacred Sites in Anuradhapura



Sources: By the Researcher (2026)

Targeted marketing approaches are essential to promote peripheral sacred sites, such as Vessagiriya, especially around Anuradhapura. According to interviews with two French tourists, visitors usually stop at Vessagiriya in the morning or afternoon, often bringing their own food and using the area mainly as a resting place. This indicates that the site functions more as a natural retreat than as an attractive heritage destination. The interviews revealed that the lack of proper visitor facilities, including hygienic food stalls, small café centres, shaded resting areas and organised seating, has detracted from the overall visitor experience. However, this challenge also presents new employment opportunities for local residents. The development of small-scale, eco-friendly

restaurants and rest areas managed by local communities can extend the length of stay of tourists, generate local employment and encourage repeat visits (Interview with two French tourists, 10th August 2025).

Accurate interpretation of history is another crucial issue. Interviews with several local participants revealed that many tourists rely heavily on informal local guides to understand the historical significance of these sites (Interview with local tourists, 11th August 2025). However, the lack of properly trained guides often leads to the spread of incorrect or exaggerated stories. This misinformation damages the scholarly and cultural value of the sites and gives visitors a distorted understanding of the extensive monastery network in Anuradhapura. The establishment of clear information boards in multiple languages will further ensure that visitors receive accurate and reliable knowledge, thereby enhancing the credibility and educational function of these peripheral sacred sites. Strong community participation is equally important for sustainable development, especially in the areas around Pankuliya Ashokaramaya. Interviews with local participants near Pankuliya Ashokaramaya on 14th August 2025 revealed that although local communities live near these sacred sites, they are rarely integrated into tourism-related activities. This exclusion limits economic benefits and weakens local stewardship. Encouraging community-led tourism enterprises such as handicrafts, cultural exhibitions, guided tours and small hospitality businesses can create jobs and instill a sense of ownership and pride. Training programs on small business management and sustainable tourism practices will provide opportunities for residents to actively contribute to site management.

Field observations conducted at the Nakha Vehera site confirmed that infrastructure improvements remain a primary need. Many peripheral sacred sites lack proper signage, accessible roads, and basic visitor facilities such as toilets and shaded resting areas. Tourists often struggle to find these sites, and poor road conditions discourage travel. Improving roads, installing clear directional signage, and providing essential amenities will significantly improve accessibility and visitor satisfaction.

Accordingly, the challenges in tourism promotion in the areas of Vessagiriya, Vijayaramaya, Asokaramaya and Nakha Vehera, which are considered unpopular historical sites located in the outskirts of Anuradhapura city, and the extended sacred sites identified in this study, such as Ritigala, Thanthirimale and Handagala, should be identified and appropriate solutions should be provided. Accordingly, linking unpopular sites with the main sacred sites or including them in those packages will not only promote tourism activities, but also enhance the historical, cultural and spiritual importance of the peripheral and extended sacred sites.

Integrating Unpopular Sacred Sites in Anuradhapura into the Main Tourism Network

The research revealed that effectively integrating peripheral sacred sites into the main tourist circuit is an essential factor in creating a more sustainable pilgrimage environment. In modern society, tourists' attention seems to be heavily focused on symbolic monuments such as Ruwanwelisaya and Sri Maha Bodhi and prominent pilgrimage stupas. As a remedy to these monotonous tourist experiences, peripheral sites such as Vijayaramaya, Dakkhina Stupa and Ritigala can be integrated with the main sacred attractions to form structured cultural and pilgrimage circuits. Such integration will encourage visitors to explore the wider sacred geography of Anuradhapura, rather than limiting their experience to a few monumental stupas. By presenting these sites as interconnected components of an ancient monastery network, tourism planners can promote new tourist routes centered on meditation monasteries, early Buddhist architecture, or forest monastery traditions. Not only will these unpopular sites be open to tourists, but they could also open up new employment opportunities for local communities. Moreover, this approach will be further strengthened through coordinated transportation, time management, and admission ticketing systems.

Introducing cycle path services connecting central Anuradhapura with the Western Monastery Complex, the Asokaramaya and Vijayaramaya, and associated sites such as the Nakha Vehera would improve accessibility and reduce congestion in key heritage areas. Scheduled transport services would help distribute tourists evenly throughout the day, reduce congestion at key monuments, and direct them to unpopular sites. These passes/tickets can allow tourists to visit a wider range of sacred sites. Tour operators play a crucial role in promoting tourism through social media advertising. Collaborating with tourism agencies and tour operators to include sites such as the Aukana Buddha Statue and the Thanthirimale Buddha Statue in structured packages can

expand visitor destinations beyond the main city core. Digital platforms, including mobile apps, Google Maps integration and social media campaigns, can introduce unpopular sacred sites such as the Puliankulam Pubbaramaya and the ancient Tissa Pabbata Viharaya to tourists. Instead of treating Anuradhapura as a one-day heritage destination, visitors can be offered the opportunity to engage in multi-day pilgrimages, meditation tours and historical and archaeological explorations.

This transformation not only enhances the overall pilgrimage experience but also introduces new income opportunities for locals and overnight stays. It can also introduce tourists to the historical and cultural dignity of these sacred sites. Another important practical strategy is to establish tourist information centers near peripheral sacred sites. These centers can provide accurate Sri Lankan history, historical maps, multilingual information brochures, and guidance on nearby tourist facilities. In particular, it can be said that local economies are strengthened through these community-based tourism initiatives. Villagers living near peripheral sacred places can benefit from housing, handicrafts, guide services, traditional food stalls and small-scale transport services. Therefore, they can sell their traditional food and various recipes to tourists. They can also satisfy tourists by showcasing their various talents and skills, which can also generate some payments similar to tourist satisfaction. This can be confirmed by the table below.

Table 5: The impact on the community of integrating unpopular sites into the tourism network

The impact on the community of integrating unpopular sites into the tourism network			
Community Activity	Economic Benefit	Cultural Benefit	Tourism Benefit
Homestays	Local income	Cultural exchange	Extended stay
Tour Guide services	Employment	Accurate Interpretation	Visitor satisfaction
Food stalls	Business development	Traditional cuisine promotion	Culinary tourism

Sources: By the Researcher (2026)

Thus, by integrating the unpopular sacred sites located at the periphery into the main tourist hub, Anuradhapura can be introduced to tourists as a multi-religious and culturally significant destination. It will not only create regionally based economic development, but also provide an opportunity to promote the cultural dignity, historical and archaeological validity, and spiritual significance of sacred sites within Sri Lankan tourism.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research investigated the dual nature of the sacred city of Anuradhapura in a global context. The importance of the Anuradhapura Pilgrim City as a unique pilgrimage center and as a popular tourist destination was discussed. In particular, the central objective of this research was to examine the suitability of using unpopular sacred sites located in the vicinity of the popular tourist destination for tourism promotion. Accordingly, attention was paid to the historical, artistic and cultural significance of unpopular sacred sites and their existing tourism potential. While iconic attractions such as Ruwanwelimahaseya, Sri Maha Bodhi and Jetavana Temple define the city's dominant religious and tourist identity, this research highlighted the equally important historical, cultural, archaeological and spiritual value of peripheral sacred sites including Vessagiriya, Vijayaramaya, Asokaramaya and Ritigala. The study drew attention to several critical constraints within the existing tourism framework, including gaps in individual awareness, weak marketing strategies, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of trained interpretive services, insufficient community participation and limited integration of peripheral sites into mainstream pilgrimage destinations.

Accordingly, considering the findings of this study, this research proposed several practical and sustainable strategies including community-targeted marketing, digital storytelling, and integrated transport and ticketing systems, establishment of visitor information centres, infrastructure improvements, formal heritage conservation

policies, clear management responsibilities and promotion of community-based tourism initiatives. Accordingly, the study revealed that it is possible to enhance the tourist experience at popular and unpopular sacred sites, expand tourist accommodation, extend their stay, diversify tourism products and strengthen the importance of Anuradhapura city as a pilgrimage and cultural tourism centre of national and international importance.

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