

Development and Prospects of Historical and Tourist Sites in Dhar District

Prem Singh Singare

PhD Research Scholar, History, Devi Ahilya University, Indore, Madhya Pradesh

Abstract

This research paper presents an analysis of the development and prospects of historical and tourist sites in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. The main objective of the study is to evaluate the historical heritage, cultural significance, and current tourism status of Dhar district and to understand its overall development potential. Dhar district has been an important historical center since ancient times, particularly during the rule of the Paramara dynasty, which witnessed remarkable progress in art, architecture, and education. Major sites such as Mandu, Bhojshala, and Dhar Fort reflect the rich cultural heritage of the region. The study is based on secondary data sources, including books, research articles, government reports, and tourism publications, and follows a descriptive and analytical research approach. At present, despite its tourism significance, the region has not achieved the expected level of development. Lack of infrastructure, inadequate conservation, and weak promotional strategies have limited its potential. The study concludes that with systematic planning, effective conservation strategies, and active community participation, Dhar district has the potential to emerge as a significant tourism destination in Madhya Pradesh.

Keywords: Dhar District, Historical Heritage, Tourism Development, Mandu, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

India is a country with a multidimensional cultural and historical heritage, where tourism is not only a means of recreation but also an important instrument of economic development, cultural preservation, and social integration (Bhatia, 2021). The tourism industry plays a significant role in generating employment, earning foreign exchange, and promoting regional development (Ministry of Tourism, 2021).

Madhya Pradesh is known as the “Heart of India” and is famous for its rich historical heritage, wildlife resources, and cultural diversity (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2018). The state has world-renowned tourist destinations such as Khajuraho, Sanchi, and Bhimbetka, which attract both national and international tourists (Ministry of Tourism, 2023).

*Corresponding Author Email: prem0singare@gmail.com

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However, tourism development in Madhya Pradesh has not yet reached its full potential, particularly in districts where available resources remain underutilized (Kamra, 2019). Dhar district presents an important example in this context.

This district is highly rich from historical, cultural, and geographical perspectives. During the rule of the Paramara dynasty, this region was a major center of education and architecture (Sharma, 2012). Sites like Mandu represent excellent examples of medieval architecture (Chandra, 2007). In addition, Bhojshala and Dhar Fort reflect the glorious heritage of this region (ASI, 2020).

Despite this, tourism development in Dhar district is relatively slow, indicating a gap between potential and actual development (Bhatia, 2021).

Review of Literature

Tourism development has emerged as a significant area of academic research, particularly in relation to regional development, cultural preservation, and sustainable growth. Various scholars have contributed theoretical and empirical insights into the dynamics of tourism, especially heritage and community-based tourism.

Butler (2011) proposed the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, which explains how tourism destinations evolve through stages such as exploration, development, consolidation, and stagnation. This model is useful in understanding the current stage of tourism development in regions like Dhar, which appear to be in a transition phase between development and stagnation due to lack of strategic planning.

Timothy (2015) emphasized the role of heritage tourism in preserving cultural identity while generating economic benefits. However, he highlighted that inadequate conservation practices and over-commercialization can lead to the degradation of historical monuments, a concern that is relevant in the context of sites like Mandu and Bhojshala.

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the role of local communities in tourism development. Moscardo (2018) argued that community-based tourism enhances sustainability by involving local populations in decision-making processes, improving both tourist experiences and socio-economic outcomes. This perspective is particularly important for tribal regions such as Dhar district.

In the Indian context, Kamra (2019) observed that tourism development in many regions is hindered by infrastructural deficiencies, lack of awareness, and ineffective implementation of policies. These structural challenges are clearly visible in Dhar district, especially in terms of accommodation, transportation, and tourism services.

More recent contributions highlight the role of integrated planning and digital promotion. Bhatia (2021) noted that despite India's vast heritage potential, tourism growth remains uneven due to weak marketing strategies and lack of coordinated planning. The study suggests that the development of heritage circuits and the use of digital platforms can significantly enhance tourist inflow.

Goodwin (2022) emphasized the importance of responsible and sustainable tourism, advocating for a balance between economic growth, environmental conservation, and community welfare. His approach is particularly relevant for promoting eco-tourism and rural tourism in areas like Dhar.

Recent Indian policy-oriented studies also highlight the importance of destination development, infrastructure enhancement, and digital tourism initiatives (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2023). These initiatives provide a policy backdrop for developing lesser-known destinations like Dhar.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that tourism has strong potential as a driver of economic development and cultural preservation. However, its success depends on effective planning, infrastructure development, community participation, and sustainable management. A significant research gap exists in the context of district-level studies, particularly for regions like Dhar, where localized analysis is limited. This justifies the relevance and necessity of the present study.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical research approach to examine the development and prospects of historical and tourist sites in Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. The research is primarily based on secondary data sources, including books, peer-reviewed research articles, government reports, district gazetteers, and tourism publications.

Data has also been collected from reports of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, and Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation to understand tourist inflow and infrastructure development.

The study uses both descriptive and analytical methods. The descriptive approach explains the historical and geographical aspects, while the analytical approach evaluates tourism development, challenges, and future prospects.

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model proposed by Butler (2011) has been used as a conceptual framework to analyze the stage of tourism development in Dhar district.

Although the study provides a comprehensive analysis, it is limited by its dependence on secondary data.

Study Area Profile

Geographical Location

Dhar district is located in the western part of Madhya Pradesh and comes under the Indore division (Census of India, 2011). Geographically, it extends between 21°57' to 23°15' north latitude and 74°28' to 76°15' east longitude. It is bounded by Ratlam in the north, Indore in the east, Khargone (Nimar region) in the south, and Jhabua and Alirajpur in the west. This geographical location establishes Dhar as a link between the Malwa and Nimar regions.

The topography of Dhar district is diverse. A large part of it lies in the Malwa plateau, which is known for fertile black soil and flat land. This region is highly important from an agricultural

perspective. The southern part of the district lies in the Narmada valley, where fertile land and abundant water resources are found. In addition, the influence of the Vindhya mountain range is also visible in the geographical structure of this region, which brings diversity in climate and natural resources (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2018).

Rivers such as Narmada, Mahi, and Chambal are the lifelines of this region, which not only serve as a major source of irrigation but also influence the regional economy. Thus, the geographical location of Dhar district makes it important from agricultural, natural resource, and tourism perspectives.

Historical Background

Dhar district has been a center of a rich historical tradition since ancient times. Especially during the rule of the Paramara dynasty, this region became famous for its cultural and educational advancement. Among the Paramara rulers, King Bhoja holds a prominent place, who made Dhar a major center of education, literature, and architecture (Sharma, 2012). During his reign, many temples, tanks, and educational institutions were constructed, which made this region a center of knowledge and culture.

In the medieval period, in the early 14th century, various Sultanate and later Mughal rulers established their control over this region. During this period, Mandu was made the capital and several magnificent architectural structures were built here, such as Jahaz Mahal, Hindola Mahal, and Jama Masjid. These monuments still represent excellent examples of the architecture and craftsmanship of that period.

Later, during the Maratha period, the Pawar rulers established their rule over Dhar. Administrative structures were reorganized during this time. Thus, the history of Dhar district reflects a synthesis of different rulers and cultures, which enriched its cultural diversity.

Socio-Cultural Features

Dhar district is also very unique from a social and cultural perspective. A large part of its population belongs to tribal communities, mainly Bhil and Bhilala. These communities are known for their traditional lifestyle, customs, and deep connection with nature. Their livelihood is mainly based on agriculture, forest produce, and traditional occupations.

The folk culture of Dhar district is very rich and diverse. Folk dances, songs, fairs, and festivals clearly reflect tribal life. Bhagoria Haat is a traditional fair that represents the cultural identity of this region, where social and economic activities can be seen together.

In addition, traditional art, handicrafts, and folk traditions also highlight the uniqueness of this region. The simple lifestyle, collective spirit, and respect for nature among rural and tribal communities further strengthen the cultural identity of this region.

Major Historical Sites of Dhar District

Dhar district is considered one of the important tourism centers of Madhya Pradesh due to its rich historical sites. These monuments are not only excellent examples of architecture but also reflect the cultural and political conditions of different historical periods.

Dhar Fort

Dhar Fort is an important symbol of ancient and medieval history. It is believed that its present structure was mainly developed during the 14th century under the rule of Muhammad bin Tughlaq (ASI, 2020), although its foundation may belong to an earlier period.

This fort is constructed of red sandstone and shows a blend of Hindu and Islamic architectural styles. The high walls, massive gates, and strong structure make it significant from a strategic perspective.

At present, it is developing as a major tourist site, but several challenges remain in terms of conservation. Due to lack of proper maintenance and promotion, its full potential is not being utilized.

Bhojshala

Bhojshala is a highly significant historical site of Dhar district, believed to have been established by the Paramara ruler King Bhoja. It was an important center of knowledge, education, and learning in ancient times.

It is known as a prominent center of Sanskrit education (Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 2010), where scholars engaged in teaching and research. It is also associated with the worship of Goddess Saraswati, which enhances its cultural importance.

In the present time, Bhojshala is also seen as a sensitive and disputed site with claims from different religious communities. Despite this, it continues to hold immense historical, cultural, and religious significance and remains an important tourist attraction.

Mandu – Major Attractions

Mandu, also known as the “Royal City of Malwa,” is the most important tourist center of Dhar district. It is located on the Vindhya hills and is famous for its natural beauty and architectural excellence. The monuments here are mainly built in Afghan architectural style and reflect the grandeur of medieval history (Chandra, 2007).

Jahaz Mahal

Jahaz Mahal is the most famous monument of Mandu. It is situated between two water bodies in such a way that it appears like a floating ship. It was constructed during the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Khilji. It is known for its architectural beauty, water management system, and cool environment (ASI, 2020).

Hindola Mahal

Hindola Mahal is known for its unique structure. Its walls appear inclined, giving it the appearance of a swing. It was used as a durbar hall and represents a distinctive architectural style (ASI, 2020).

Rani Roopmati Palace

This palace is famous for its romantic historical background associated with Rani Roopmati

and Baz Bahadur. It also offers a scenic view of the Narmada River and represents a perfect blend of natural beauty and historical importance.

Baz Bahadur Palace

Baz Bahadur Palace was the residence of the ruler Baz Bahadur, who was a lover of music and art. The structure includes spaces designed for musical gatherings and cultural activities.

Jama Masjid

The Jama Masjid of Mandu is an excellent example of Afghan architecture. Its construction began during the reign of Hoshang Shah and was completed later. Its grandeur, simplicity, and architectural balance make it a remarkable structure. Monuments such as Jahaz Mahal, Hindola Mahal, and Jama Masjid collectively reflect architectural excellence and historical richness (Archaeological Survey of India, 2020).

Current Status of Tourism

Tourism in Dhar district shows a moderate but fluctuating trend. Madhya Pradesh recorded between 75 and 89 million domestic tourist visits during the pre-pandemic period (Ministry of Tourism, 2021).

Table 1: Tourist Visits in Madhya Pradesh (2018–2022)

Year	Domestic Tourists (in millions)	Foreign Tourists (in millions)
2018	75.2	0.94
2019	89.0	1.09
2020	40.7	0.22
2021	55.1	0.34
2022	70	0.50

Source: Ministry of Tourism (2021); Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (2022)

The data presented in Table 1 indicates a significant recovery phase in domestic tourism following the pandemic-induced slump in 2020. However, the growth of international tourist arrivals remains sluggish, failing to regain pre-2019 levels. Applying Butler's (2011) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, it can be inferred that Dhar district is currently in the 'Development' stage, characterized by rising visitor numbers but hampered by a lack of international exposure and specialized infrastructure. The sharp contrast between domestic and foreign arrivals highlights a critical gap in global marketing strategies for the region.

Mandu receives a significant number of tourists annually, particularly during monsoon and winter seasons (Madhya Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation, 2022).

However, international tourist inflow remains low due to lack of global promotion (Bhatia, 2021).

Infrastructure such as accommodation, transport, and tourist services is still underdeveloped (Kamra, 2019).

This indicates that Dhar district is still in a developing stage of tourism and requires strategic planning for sustainable growth.

The seasonal concentration of tourism indicates the lack of diversified tourism products and highlights the need for year-round tourism planning in the district.

Challenges

Tourism development in Dhar district faces several challenges, including lack of infrastructure, poor conservation of monuments, and limited awareness among local communities (Kamra, 2019).

Inadequate promotion and weak implementation of tourism policies further restrict the growth of tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2023).

These challenges indicate structural and policy-level gaps that require immediate attention for sustainable tourism development.

Table 2: Tourism Potential and Development Scope in Dhar District

Tourism Type	Major Areas	Potential Level	Key Requirements
Heritage Tourism	Mandu, Dhar Fort, Bhojshala	High	Conservation, promotion
Cultural Tourism	Bhagoria Haat, tribal culture	High	Community participation
Eco-Tourism	Vindhya hills, Narmada valley	Moderate	Infrastructure development
Rural Tourism	Tribal villages	High	Awareness, training

Source: Based on secondary data and analysis

Suggestions

Tourism development in Dhar district requires a multi-dimensional approach. Heritage conservation should be strengthened through scientific methods and proper funding (Goodwin, 2022).

Community participation must be encouraged to ensure sustainable tourism development (Moscardo, 2018).

Digital promotion and development of tourism circuits can significantly enhance tourist inflow (Bhatia, 2021).

A coordinated approach involving government agencies, local communities, and private stakeholders is essential for achieving long-term and sustainable tourism growth in Dhar district.

To transition Dhar from a seasonal destination to a year-round tourism hub, the 'Hub and Spoke' model should be implemented, with Mandu serving as the central hub connecting lesser-known sites like Dhar Fort and Bhojshala. Furthermore, investing in 'Digital Storytelling' and virtual tours can bridge the awareness gap for international travelers. Strengthening the local 'Hunar Se Rozgar' initiative will not only provide trained guides but also ensure that the economic benefits of tourism directly empower the tribal communities of the district, aligning with the sustainable goals suggested by Goodwin (2022)."

Conclusion

Dhar district has immense potential for tourism development, but due to various challenges, its capacity remains underutilized. With proper planning, conservation, and participation, it can emerge as a major tourism destination. Thus, Dhar district holds substantial potential for tourism development; however, this potential can only be realized through strategic planning, effective governance, and sustainable practices. Tourism development in the region will not only contribute to economic growth but also ensure cultural preservation and inclusive social development.

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