

RELEVANCE OF SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Modern tourism industries have seen exceptional growth in the development of a new segment called Spiritual Tourism during recent years. Studies focusing on spirituality have grown highly important for research within social fields and health sectors as well as business sectors. Plus, there has been a simultaneous rise in research interest as well as awareness regarding spiritual tourism as a thematic field. The essential aspect of spiritual tourism involves people who pursue tourism activities because of their spiritual beliefs. The tourism activity based around religious beliefs also operates under the name's religious tourism and sacred tourism and faith tourism. The available literature about spiritual tourism receives examination in this paper as part of its subject analysis. This research highlights the relevance of spiritual tourism in contemporary globalization and identifies major Indian factors that drive spiritual tourism and possible directions for future spiritual tourism research.

KEYWORDS: *Spiritual Tourism, Tourism Research, Spiritual Tourism Marketing.*

Introduction

Spirituality has been the source of strength for Indian culture for centuries and has been a part of the religions of the nation, i.e., Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. There are many unique and unparalleled religious destinations and centres of spirituality across the nation that are of immense spiritual tourism importance as well. Spiritual tourism can be explained as domestic or foreign trip activity to the spiritual destinations such as (1) temples, churches, mosques and (2) natural places such as forests, seas, spiritual gardens, bird, and animal wildlife parks etc. It is a catch-all term covering religious travel and pilgrimage and also non-religious spiritual excursions, i.e., nature trips. It includes pilgrimages to sites that offer the possibility of spiritual development and self-discovery. Various spiritual tourism experiences exist which include site pilgrimages for religious significance alongside monastery meditations and participation in spiritual fairs and pilgrimages and visiting sites where prominent spiritual occurrences or figures exist. Satirical tourism centres in India include Bodh Gaya serving as the spot where Gautama Buddha gained enlightenment for Buddhists. The UNESCO world heritage listed Mahabodhi Temple stands as witness to this spiritual illumination. Pilgrims and questers from everywhere come to sit in meditation and worship before the throne of the historical Buddha. Varanasi, one of the world's oldest continuously occupied cities, is also a holy city for Hindus. The ghats of the Ganges River receive millions of pilgrims who visit here to perform offering rites, bathe, and witness the amazing Ganga aarti. Likewise, The Harmandir Sahib, or Golden Temple, is the holiest site in Sikhism. Its. exquisite. golden. façade finds a reflection in the Amrit Sarovar that encircles it. The temple is available to all sections of society, and it supports equality, social service, and adherence to all the principles of Sikh Gurus. Apart from this, there are several Ashrams and Mutts (monasteries or 'institutes') located throughout the country which have been operational for centuries and currently serve as the live centres of spiritual tourism (Indian Panorama, 2018). Similarly, literary cases are: Rishikesh in north India as a model destination for spiritual Yoga tourism (Buzinde, 2020); Shri Paramhans Ashram

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Dharkundi in Madhya Pradesh is another case that is spirituality and pilgrimage-cantered (Singh et al., 2020); Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville were referred to by Sharpley and Sundaram (2005). From this, India has managed to build a destination image and brand based on spirituality (Buzinde, 2020). The country hence presents a wealth of religious locations that have the potential to impact positively on spiritual development, cultural learning, and economic growth. It's worth is in the potential to foster religious cohesion, improve interfaith, and stimulate regional economies while offering tourists a rich and fulfilling experience. Such religious locations not only bear religious significance, but are also famous for their stunning architecture. Religious and spiritual tourism is also projected to contribute more than 60 % of domestic tourism activity in India. Except for the religious category, spiritual tourism is also instrumental in the regional economies by making contributions towards employment generation and local development. Pilgrims' and tourists' movement brings about regional development in infrastructural growth, hospitality industries, and other allied industries, thus creating economic development at the destinations. With more tourists than ever before on the move around the world, spiritual tourism is more relevant than ever.

Objectives of the Study

- To spread awareness regarding Spiritual Tourism in India.
- To analyze motivating factors for spiritual tourism.
- To examine the relevance of spiritual tourism as a tool for socio – economic development.
- To analyse challenges and opportunities in Spiritual Tourism in India.

Review of Academic Literature

Spiritual tourism, in recent years, has attracted a great deal of interest from researchers across the globe. This interest is not because of its spiritual orientation, but for the potential it promises to become the largest segment in the industry. Spiritual tourism has extended the classical concept – 'the harder the journey, the greater the reward', to a more general concept of a yearning for a transformation, relief from the humdrum day-to-day life and passion and a sacred nature for a common man. Accordingly, research interests in studying different aspects of spiritual tourism as a growing segment have been increasing. This section has surveyed studies on different aspects of spiritual tourism and published in some of the leading journals, including (Annals of Tourism Research, Applied Geography, International Journal of Tourism Research, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management and Journal Management, Spirituality and Management), as well as conference proceedings. Delbecq (2009) discusses the development of spirituality and suggests areas of continuing understanding. The writer also emphasizes the need for development in the future. Spirituality may involve a collection of concepts pertaining to religious traditions, focus on a philosophy of the self, inner peace, holism, (inter)connectedness, intent, search/quest, experience orientation, nontheistic cosmology, peacefulness/tolerance, and associated positive value commitments (Heidari et al., 2018). Although spirituality has been one of the primary drivers of tourism for a number of centuries (Bowers & Cheer, 2017), this new age of tourism is increasingly leveraging its business opportunities (Robledo, 2015). Spiritual tourism opportunities are today being utilized by tourist destinations around the globe, at times overlapping with religious activity in destinations like India (Haq & Medhekar, 2020). The development and expansion of interest in spiritual tourism destinations can be ever more witnessed, and spiritual potential has been revamped especially in certain global destinations where there exists a form of 'spiritual magnetism' founded on the impact of attractions derived from historical, geographical, and social constructions, and human values (Buzinde, 2020). The search for spiritualism has gained heightened significance, particularly in the last decades, when neo-liberalism and materialism are ever more widespread (Cheer et al., 2017). Norman (2011) argued that heightened tourism that is spiritual is the result of the widening materialistic lifestyle prevailing in developed nations and is a concomitant search for spiritual well-being. Besecke (2014) believes that spiritual tourism is an expression of modern spiritual movement, placed within the reflexive and critical quest for spiritual pathways. It is also referred to as a pilgrimage of spiritual awakening. (Singh et al., 2020). Suri & Rao (2014) say that India's spiritual destinations are not merely tourist attractions but they form a part of our heritage. Our civilization is one of the most ancient and that too one of the finest of the civilizations. We have something in our history that is so rich in cultural heritage that we are unparalleled. Shantakumari (2016) suggested that we must understand spiritual tourism, wellness and quality of life dimensions more clearly in order to formulate successful relationship marketing strategies. The increasing focus on spirituality travel, is not so much

due to its spiritual perspective, but rather for the potential it presents to become the largest segment in the global tourism industry. Rodrigo (2019) does not agree with the above understanding of organised spiritual tourism; to him, spiritual tourism is a novel form of tourism that exists outside conventional tourism, which is often organised by spiritual seekers themselves based on their past spiritual experiences. Smith (2003) argued that spiritual tourism could be a form of 'escapism', an attempt to get away from the stresses and pressures of materialistic existence. Spiritual tourism, to Robledo (2015:82), examines meaning for 'both inner and outer connection'. Another view is that spiritual tourism is characterized by a 'self-conscious project of spiritual improvement' (Norman, 2011:20). Spiritual tourism has often been used synonymously with other forms of tourism, most notably religious tourism, Yoga tourism, and wellness tourism. However, there are considerable differences between religious and spiritual tourism with respect to tourist profiles, motivation, behaviour, and activities (Robledo, 2015). Spiritual tourism is distinct from religious tourism as it signifies a new 'discursive shift' amongst the 'new pilgrims' seeking the 'original spiritual experience' without the mediation of the dogma of traditional religious institutions (Kujawa, 2017). Whereas Yoga tourism and spiritual tourism are commonly referred to under the umbrella term 'wellness tourism', Yoga tourism, although having some commonality, is distinct from wellness and spiritual tourism (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). (Shackley, 2002) noted that although religious tourism differs from spiritual tourism, pilgrimage is a category of religious travel, and the pilgrim may wish to explore the spiritual element through the use of travel as an act of reinforcement of faith which also indicates linkages between the two concepts. Halim et al., (2021) stated that spiritual tourism also aims at transformations with the involvement of the traveller in the due process, and activities like Yoga, meditation, reflection, and others help to purify the psychological self. Along with that, spiritual tourists can also self-transcend by developing their knowledge and wisdom to their highest potential and eventually get guided to high consciousness, which enables them to cope with the hindrances they come across resulting in immense satisfaction. Marketing dimensions of spiritual tourism have also received tremendous interest. Haq and Jackson (2009) investigated the function of marketing strategy mindset on Hajj-the yearly Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca-perceptions of Muslims undertaking the visit for such a deep spiritual experience. The authors made additional contributions towards theory development on spiritual tourism and spiritual tourism marketing by using Hajj as, on one hand, an immense spiritual experience and, on the other, a product or service. The study also identified the use of modern marketing principles and tools that were of great help in providing a broader perspective of the expansive business aspects of Hajj.

Categorisation of Spiritual Tourism Attractions

Classification of spiritual tourist destinations is the difficult part because placing the sites in a template might be elusive when people seek spirituality in an extensive range of natural, cultural, and artificial locations. Norman (2012), employing a comprehensive literature review and gathering of data from primary sources, found five various forms of spiritual tourism through which he was able to determine five possible attraction types in spiritual tourism.

- The first among these is 'Spiritual Tourism as Healing', which involves the aspects related to physical well-being and pertains to wellness tourism. The experiences in this can be that which can provide psychological healing and other experiences like Yoga retreats and Ashrams.
- 'Spiritual Tourism as Experiment' is the second category, where tourists seek alternatives when needed. The examples given are spiritual tourists who are backpackers and visit places with experiences like Yoga, Meditation, and Ashram experience.
- The third category is the 'Spiritual Tourism as Quest', where an action of seeking knowledge and discovery turns out to be the major determinant. Seeking learning regarding religious ceremonies (like Hindu religious ceremonies in the 'Kumbh Mela' festival in India and distinctive aspects of different cultures) can be listed as instances of attractions in this category.
- Within the genre of 'Spiritual Tourism as Retreat', the traveller attempts to escape mundane existence and attempts to achieve a religious experience or ritualistic rebirth. Spiritual retreats, health spas, and nature-related places may be the attractions for such travellers.
- The last category is 'Spiritual Tourism as Collective', which is the experience of the travellers as a group – they want to be there because others are also doing it. The destinations in this category can be a combination of a number of features which are famous for spirituality.

The above refers to the fact that spiritual tourist attractions may be numerous sites with varied attributes, and even natural and magical sites may be attractions. Spiritual tourist activities are usually conducted in naturally and aesthetically attractive areas, though the difference is evident in other instances (Singh, 2014). For instance, Ecovillages are a place where spiritual practice is intertwined with beautiful geographical shapes, e.g., Govardhan Eco Village (GEV) (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). Mega religious places like Mecca, the Holy Land, and Rome are also attractions for spiritual tourists (Cheer et al., 2017). Scenic landscapes and attractive environments are a dominant form of attraction in contemporary spiritual tourism (Lopez et al., 2017). 'Therapeutic landscapes' constitute a new category among the spiritual tourism facilities and integrate physical and built environment, social context, and individuals' perceptions (Gesler, 1996) to produce a cheerful atmosphere for individuals in pursuit of healing

Motivating Factors Influencing Spiritual Tourism and its Impact on Destinations

There are various motivations of spiritual tourism: one will be seeking individual growth and spirituality, whereas the other will be seeking knowledge regarding various religions' traditions or nature's harmony with holy sites. (Heidari et al., 2017); Shackley, 2002) noted that some of the major motivational forces that push people to religious places are spirituality, instant judgement, family tie with the place, site-celebrity tie, and interest in the architecture or historic paintings of the site. Spiritual Gurus, spiritual destinations such as ashrams/temples, and ceremonies are major motivational forces for spiritual tourism in India. Spiritual tourism studies have the potential to unlock the experience of encounter among various religious groups, their shared values, and capacity for peaceful coexistence and respect for each other. Spiritual growth tourism is attributed with a mystical driving force that is cantered on the voluntary path of exploration of individuals seeking interior consciousness and self-transcendence (Robledo, 2015). A desire to address the problems associated with personal decisions, questions, and issues is also seen in the vocabulary of spiritual tourism (Norman, 2011:2009). The traveller can seek experiences that are physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual; it is a more intangible, multi-faith, and eclectic mechanism whereby travellers seek meaning, engagement, and peace. Away from home and solution-finding as part of fixing or improving those aspects for personal well-being augmentation is desired, and spiritual tourism can help with this (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). According to Heintzman (2013), there are six motivating factors associated with spiritual tourism: evocative environments, transformation of community, spiritual transformation, benefits of transcendence, spiritual well-being, and eudaimonic experience. Moushumi Banerjee (2013) reported that most foreign pilgrims visiting religious destinations in India like Rishikesh feel that religious destinations give them a peace of mind and they are spiritually satisfied. For this reason, they prefer to organize their pilgrimages to religious destinations rather than adventurous, historical, or exotic places. Moreover, almost half of the tourists believe in Indian religion and customs and admire the rituals followed in Indian tradition. They are interested to learn about religious importance of Holy Ganges, ashrams and Haridwar. Some portions of foreign travellers are even eager to visit Satpuris such as Ayodhya, Kanchi, Dwarka, Ujjain, Mathura, and Kashi. They believe that they are not looking for comfort but their hard work to fulfil the divine mission to make life easy and more fruitful and satisfactory.

Resurgence of Spiritual Tourism in India

Spiritual tourism suffered critically from COVID-19 because international travel bans together with lockdowns and health fears produced sharp income decreases during 2020 and 2021. Revenue from spiritual tourism rose after emergency health measures and travel limitations terminated. The Indian spiritual tourism sector rose markedly during recent history after Ram Mandir at Ayodhya conducted its ceremonial opening. This momentous occasion will be a game changer for the nation's spiritual tourism by bringing in integrated development of numerous other destinations along with creating opportunities for job and growth in GDP. As per the recent studies, one of the Indian hospitality firms under the Tata group, Indian Hotels Company Ltd (IHCL) is trying to make its flagship stronger in religious tourism, considering that spirituality will have a larger space in the world in the years to come. In this context, the firm is planning to acquire properties at spiritual destinations in India. IHCL currently operates or is developing 66 hotels in spiritual destinations, including the new hotspot Ayodhya, and will continue to expand its portfolio. IHCL's spiritual destination portfolio includes Vivanta and Ginger-branded hotels in Katra, Vaishno Devi (North India), and Taj at Tirupati, with another property in development. The initiatives are aimed at Indian cities with the company's total dedication. According to a recent research, pilgrim centres like Ayodhya, Ujjain, Badrinath, and Amarnath have recorded steep 102 per cent increase

in searches in May 2024. To address the phenomenal increase in religious tourism activities in the country during the recent past, the hospitality sector is doing everything it can to combat the pressure through innovation and resilience. By mixing tradition with the use of technology, hospitality businesses throughout the nation are trying to offer reinventing experience to serve the changing needs and expectations of pilgrims and tourists as well. According to Ministry of Tourism data, spiritual tourism attracted 1439 million tourists in the year 2022 whereas the number was 677 million in the year 2021. The sector also witnessed a revenue generation of ₹1.34 lakh crore in the year 2022. The tourism industry is anticipated to generate a total revenue of 59 billion by 2028 as it creates 140 million temporary and permanent jobs before 2030. The states of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra along with Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Punjab and Uttarakhand will lead the job creation expansion according to estimation. The promising statistics about national tourism and hospitality indicate that the sector demands proactive measures from the state government and all related entities.

Key Initiatives of the Ministry of Tourism Development for Sustainable Spiritual Tourism

The Government of India has taken favourable policy steps in recent years which have enabled the increasing popularity of religious tourism throughout the nation. Ministry of Tourism within the Government of India launched "Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual and Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD Scheme)" in 2014-15 with an initial funding of INR 100 crores during that year. The scheme works toward developing pilgrimage destinations across India to create better religious tourism while promoting sustainable spiritual tourism in India. The initiative integrates religious points of interest through a strategic and sustainable planning process to present genuine religious tourism opportunities. The comprehensive area development approach under this strategy works to boost both local artistic content and cultural practices and local foods which in turn enables livelihood generation in specified tourism destinations. The number of PRASHAD Scheme projects sanctioned has reached 37 by February 2022 along with completion of 17 of these projects. The government allocated INR 235 crores within this year for the scheme.

The mission operates independently but it does not function autonomously. The PRASHAD scheme integrates the functional elements from multiple Union Government programs that support tourism development in India. This list contains some of the key missions which serve as flagships.

- To drive a national mission for revival and spiritual development of major religious places.
- To establish tourism as a prime driver of economic growth and job creation.
- To provide complete tourism experience by enhancing tourist attraction of the religious places in a sustainable manner.
- To promote sustainable pilgrimage tourism in the country.
- To finalize the mechanism for filling infrastructural gaps in the identified pilgrimage centres and establishing a monitoring system for the timely completion of projects in consultation with States/UTs and other stakeholders.
- To finalize steps for pilgrims' safety and security and to enhance quality tourism services.
- To create employment by active participation of local people with pro poor strategy in an inclusive and sustainable manner through initiation of a 'Responsible Tourism' Initiative.
- To embrace an area development strategy in its totality for the provision of all the amenities required by the tourists in the destination areas.

The Swadesh Darshan scheme launched during 2014-15 focuses on theme-based tourist circuit development across the nation to promote the growth of spiritual tourism in India. The national development campaigns executed under PM Gato Shakti and equivalent schemes have established a system through which people can travel efficiently between Indian regions therefore making a vital contribution to spiritual tourism expansion. The tourism sector saw a very positive outcome due to all efforts which can be demonstrated through 70 million individuals visiting the renovated Kashi Viswanath Dham Varanasi following 2022 compared to 8 million visitors a year before.

Challenges to Spiritual Tourism

The type of destinations for spiritual tourism differs from traditional holiday/leisure tourism because they focus on attracting visitors with a travel mindset and budget. Spiritual tourism development requires local community members to play an active role at the destination point. The visitor's interaction

process at religious sites and their desire for new encounters also need equal consideration to modern facility provision. India has enormous potential to develop its spiritual tourism industry. The industry continues to deal with multiple difficulties while experiencing strong growth potential. Multiple roadblocks need to be solved to achieve proper spiritual tourism development

- Insufficient basic infrastructure consists of poor transportation networks together with inadequate communication technology and limited access to public transportation and poor last mile connectivity. Adequate infrastructure development has become the leading cause of international tourists avoiding visits to the nation.
- Every religious centre throughout the country faces damaged carrying capacity from busy periods that create lasting changes to region-wide patterns. The pilgrimages to all four holy sites of Uttarakhand serve as an example of the Char Dham Yatra. The annual event runs between May and November while putting significant strain on Garhwal district's transportation system thus creating dangerous conditions caused by landslides resulting in multiple road obstruction accidents and loss of lives.
- Increased plastic usage brought on through scientific progress resulted in more severe solid waste management challenges that stem from the carrying capacity problem.
- Security issues involved foremost in visitor concerns since most tourists felt unsafe both when traveling in buses and walking on the streets due to petty theft and robbery. Security functions poorly in India due to regular community disturbances and sporadic terrorist attacks in the nation. The country presents numerous threats to female visitors while maintaining weak discipline standards and unstable political conditions exist.

The tourism sector faces various challenges such as hygiene and cleanliness problems alongside begging events and heritage trafficking as well as restricted community involvement and cultural corruption and government inattention to tourism administration processes etc. Every person needs drinking water which stands as an essential requirement. Most religious sites currently offer water that is unfit for human consumption. The visitors needed to purchase a daily mineral water bottle. Spiritual tourism in India requires the discovery of fundamental problems alongside product and service delivery systems to solve essential matters that drive development and growth of spiritual tourism. Spiritual tourism stakeholders need to develop facilities that match different visitor choices through better transportation systems while offering extended stay options with maintained top-tier facilities and service quality. Governmental heritage protection mandates oversight of factory and mill licensing near sites because the release of harmful smoke and gases attacks sculptures and architectural structures. The state governments should do aggressive promotion while implementing theme-based tourism plans to draw specific types of tourists. Our country boasts uniqueness through its discovery of yoga and meditation despite their association with spirituality today. The government needs to present this concept at different international events that will establish connections between people.

The Way Forward

Spiritual tourism has been recognized as one of the largest industries in India contributing to the state's revenue. More than one hundred million people will be gainfully employed through permanent and temporary job opportunities driven by India's Spiritual Tourism alone by 2030, which is likely to be worth around US\$ 59 billion by 2028. These encouraging figures indicate the pinkish future of the Indian tourism industry as well as its potential. Nonetheless, systematic research work in the field is not yet visible. Thus, even though there had been a good trend in recent years, proper Indian tourism has undergone a metamorphosis path in the Amrit Kal and it wishes to be a \$3 trillion economic giant by 2047. This is based on welcoming 100 million international visitors, creating domestic travel by way of smart infrastructure and divers circuitry circuits, and building high-value experiences through heterogenous niche tourism products. Spiritual tourism will prove to be a force to be reckoned with in this journey and the country needs an abundance of structural reforms on war footing basis to attain this mission. It emphasizes using multiple measures from the government end as well as other stakeholders because it is an important asset with promising prospects, but it needs more attention to enable further fast-track growth process. Also, improved road, rail and aviation connectivity to religious tourism sites with economic accommodation options, improved infrastructure, creation of more religious tourism circuits and nodes and integrated hubs and travel packages tailored to one's needs etc are some initiatives our country should undertake forthwith to improve popularity of spiritual locations and meet

rising demand of visitors in this regard. The long-awaited appeal of the hospitality sector to provide infrastructure status to hotel projects worth more than 10 crores would be a revolutionary move by the Government now. Property services firm Colliers believes that real estate growth will result from hospitality development in 7 upcoming holy cities including Amritsar in Punjab along with Ayodhya and Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and Dwarka in Gujarat and Puri in Odisha and Shirdi in Maharashtra and Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh. The combination of traditional wisdom with modern progress allows us to restructure visitor management while elevating quality expectations and establish India as the global authority in faith-based tourism. Together we will welcome every visitor through our door by displaying kindness and openness so they can experience comfort and inspiration among the feeling of being at home.

Conclusion

A specific set of characteristics defines Spiritual Tourism according to this research. The essential characteristics involve foreign visitors seeking religious trips instead of luxurious experiences while benefiting from technological conveniences to simplify their journeys. The main conclusions from this research project become evident through the following points:

- The overall tourist industry receives its largest contribution from Spiritual Tourism and at the same time stands as India's foremost employment-generating sector. The number of spiritual tourists has skyrocketed during recent years because people have transformed their spiritual perspectives. This transformation in academic research registered secondary effects across all sections. The number of scholarly investigations devoted to spiritual/pilgrimage tourism has grown substantially throughout the current decade. Research about spiritual tourism has progressively increased as has investigation into the different types of touristic activity (adventure tourism, eco-tourism, medical tourism etc. and wedding tourism). Major components of Spiritual tourism including destination analysis and demographic segmentation of tourists require further exploration even though a spiritual heritage exists within tourism as a core aspect of tourist experiences. The government needs to establish multiple policies which will promote international tourism influx. Indian tourism needs to harness internet capabilities to spread information about spiritual tourism throughout the population. The increase of tourism products including fairs and festivals and handicrafts alongside quality transportation and accommodation services has failed to reach their full potential in Indian spiritual sites. The government should establish spiritual tourism as a fundamental part that integrates with all tourism activities. The government needs to faithfully develop and maintain the spiritual tourism destinations.

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