

Development of Spiritual Tourism Circuits: The Case of India

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Abstract— Global financial crisis has seen many giant industries crashing to the ground with an exception of tourism. With the economies collapsing around the world, a rise in spirituality and related matters has been observed. A combination of both has created a new product called as spiritual tourism. This product is inclusive unlike religious tourism and pilgrimage. Many countries offering religious tourism and pilgrimage have struggled to reshape their products into multi-faith based tourism. India as a country has the ability to redesign its tourism and present the image of a multi-faith or spiritual tourism destination. A religion based tourism circuit is being introduced by the Indian Government that is assessed as a narrow and exclusive approach in this study. Spiritual tourism circuits are being developed by the Ministry of Tourism India in its 12th five year plan (2013-17), not only for sustainable development and growth of tourism as a whole, but also to promote India as a spiritual tourist destination. Spiritual tourism is a niche special interest tourism segment. This study emphasizes upon the need to capitalize on the many religious traditions being practiced in the country and presenting a comprehensive spiritual tourism package for domestic and foreign travelers. It further recommends public-private partnerships (PPP) between the key stakeholders to explore the full potential which is essential for the competitive advantage and sustainability of the packaged spiritual tourism circuits, but also to promote and practice religious secularism, integration and peace.

Keywords—*Spiritual Tourism, India, Spiritual Circuits, Sustainable development, marketing.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The potential contribution of tourism towards a country's development, specifically in areas of economic growth and employment creation has been reported in ongoing research projects [1]-[3], [5]. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) reported that tourism represented around 35% of the world's service industry exports and more than 70% in the developing countries [2]. WTO [2] also indicated that global spending on daily travel was estimated to be around US\$2 billion. Governments of several countries are keen to analyze and invest in the tourism potential of their country to attract more foreign tourists.

The acceptance of spiritual tourism in mainstream tourism might be slow, but certainly it has been among the oldest forms of travelling for many millennia [25]-[26], [28]. The current literature on spiritual tourism indicates that it has been disguised as pilgrimage or religious tourism whilst the differences are categorical [4]-[5], [8]. Spiritual tourist participants have been classifying themselves in several ways as 'travellers', 'seekers', 'pilgrims', 'devotees', 'conference/events/festival attendants' and 'adventurers', etc. "Interestingly, many spiritual tourists have been classified by academic researchers as practising pilgrimage, religious, special interest, cultural or experiential tourists" [8, p.142].

On one hand, many public and private tourism organizations are aggressively marketing tourism products and services, while many researchers have pointed out a lack of academic research on the marketing of tourism [3]-[7]. This paper aims at providing conceptual material on tourism marketing by focusing on enhancing the quality of the spiritual tourism product and service. Spiritual tourism as a product emerges from the global need of people to be spiritually developed and aware, which seems to be embedded in religion but in fact it goes beyond the spirit of religion. Spiritual tourism is suggested to be a subset of special interest tourism that practically contains religious tourism and pilgrimage. An established definition of a spiritual tourist is: "someone who visits a specific place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature, but within a Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling" [8, p.145].

The marketing and growth of any type of tourism depends upon many factors including the packages and programs offered by the tourism destination [9]-[12]. Other issues regarding marketing spiritual tourism are not only the commercial success but also marketing spiritual tourism "without causing offense for seeming overly commercial" [4, p. 149]. This issue has made marketing spiritual tourism more complicated and a solution suggested in this paper is effective packaging. Special interest tourism such as spiritual tourism

can grow and be marketed successfully by proper designing of packages for the right customers.

In a country with a large and very diverse population many religious traditions survive together. This multi-faith diversity provides a competitive edge to India to be a world leader in the market of spiritual tourism [6], [12], [13]. The first part of our paper introduces the topic. Part two discusses briefly about spiritual tourism in India. Part three introduces the literature related to spiritual tourism and its significance in particular. Part four examines the spiritual tourism circuits of the Indian Ministry of Tourism. Part five provides discussion and critique/limitations of the Indian Ministry of Tourism's spiritual tourism circuits and provides four more circuits in addition to the seven suggested by the Ministry of Tourism and recommends that a public-private partnerships between the key stakeholders is essential not only for the sustainability of the packaged spiritual tourism circuits, but also to promote and practice religious secularism, integration, and peace. Thus the authors suggest that a public-private partnership in spiritual tourism circuit between the key stakeholders (governments at three levels, religious institutions, spiritual sites and places of worships, private and public sector, tourism sector-hospitality, accommodation and transport) is vital for planning, development of spiritual tourism circuit's, product innovation, promotion, packaging and marketing the circuits with the concept of "Oneness of God and Unity in World Religions" for peaceful sustainable development of this niche tourism product as well as taking joint responsibility for financial risks, accountability and implementing and integrating the various spiritual tourism circuits.

Spiritual Tourism in India

Given the 'Incredible India' combined with the campaign of 'Atithi Devo Bhavah', literally means 'Guest is God', India has recognised the importance of spiritual tourism and enhancing travel facilities for the same by planning to develop tourist circuits for every religion. This will also increase the domestic as well as international spiritual tourism activity along with the 5000 years old history, culture and alternative medicine which attracts the tourists from all over the world [6]. Tourism is the third largest foreign exchange earner. Economic, social and cultural impact of spiritual tourism on the economy of Uttarakhand state in India is studied by [5]. According to the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, 58.2% of the international tourists visited the state for holiday, 21.9% for health/yoga, and 19.4% for pilgrimage/religious tourism. On the other hand, 44.2% of the domestic tourist mainly visited Uttarakhand for pilgrimage/religious while that of 43.6% was holiday/sightseeing, having a significant economic, social and cultural impact [5]. Studies have also explored the lack of awareness amongst the Indian and foreign tourists about the Buddhist spiritual sites [14], as well as how the government can promote various religious sites such as

Buddhist, Golden Temple, Tirupati Temple, Vaishno Devi Temple, ISKON Temple and Baha'i Lotus Temple [15]-[16].

India is a secular country and is made up of people following many different religions, customs and cultural practices. The intention of the Indian Government to develop and promote this niche spiritual tourism circuit product is evident from the recent statement of the Tourism Minister Subodh Kant Sahai in the Economic Times [17], after releasing the 'Incredible India' promotional calendar- 2012 that "Our aim is to have more than 11 million foreign tourists in the next five years and for this we are finalizing plan to launch an aggressive campaign abroad. We will be opening representative offices in about 12 countries soon," [17]. The economic impact of tourism can be measured by number of tourist arrivals and foreign exchange revenue earned. According to Government of India, Ministry of Tourism report, Foreign Tourist Arrivals during 2010 were 5.58 million with a growth rate of 9.3% as compared to the 5.11 million and growth rate of (-)3.3% during 2009. The number of domestic tourist visits increased from 650.00 million in 2009 as compared to 562.98 million in 2008 showing a growth of 15.5%. The Foreign Exchange Earnings from tourism during 2010 was US \$14193 million as compared to US \$11394 million and US \$11747 million in the years 2009 and 2008 [18].

India is a birthplace of many religions such as: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. From historical times, Jews and Zoroastrians have landed in India due to religious persecution in their own country and adopted India as their home land. Further, Christians (Dutch, French, Portuguese and British) and Muslims (Afghans and Mughal's from central Asia) invaded or travelled to India as missionaries and considered India as their country. The local Indians also appreciated and adopted many of the foreign religious traditions, significantly Islam, Ismaili, Bohri, Baha'i and Christianity. The foreign settlers also built monumental structures linked to their religious and spiritual beliefs hence presenting India with some of the best religious centers, Mosques and Temples in the world [6], [12], [18].

Ministry of Tourism, following a consensus in 2007 with South Asian Association Of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit, promoted the Buddhist destinations circuit involving countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh along with India [19], [20]. According to the Minister for Tourism, Subodh Kant Sahai "Under the 12th five year plan (2007-2012), the ministry will focus on skill development, infrastructure development, promotion of tourism, hygiene and sanitation, sustainable tourism, safe and honorable tourism, niche tourism, taxation, incentives and convergence" [21]. He further added that, "tax levied on tourism industry should be unified, rationalized and made globally competitive along with the foreign exchange earned by hotels and inbound tour operators may be considered as "deemed exports" and full service tax exemption be provided to them on a par with other exporters," [21].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Spiritual Tourism*

Thinkers from different backgrounds have analyzed spirituality for centuries, though it seems to have entered the business and trade lexicon more recently [8], [22]. The interest in spirituality has influenced several industries around the world [22], including the tourism industry [10], [23]. The definition of tourism, delivered by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), provides the corner stone for understanding various types of emerging and growing tourism. The WTO conference in 1991, provided the most precise, most widely accepted definition of tourism as people travelling at least 80 kilometers away from their usual environment, for the purposes of recreation, medical treatment, religious observances, family matters, sporting events, conferences, study or transit to another country [24].

Cohen [26] is recognized as the first tourism scholar to study various dimensions of religious tourism. His research appreciated religion, spirituality and pilgrimage as significant phenomena in tourism and presented religious tourism as polarized into the popular and the formal [26]. The formal pilgrimage indicated the tourist's motives to fulfill religious commitments, while the popular pilgrimage identified the non-religious but personal development and wellbeing oriented goals [26].

Pilgrimage and religious tourism promote religious motivation, though people also travel to religious destinations for other motives, such as education, knowledge and awareness [4], [25], [23]. Some research categorized such tourists or recreational travelers as religious tourists [25], [12], [26]. However, tourists travelling for non religious motives cannot be identified as pilgrims, religious tourists or spiritual tourists. By contrast, religious tourism and formal pilgrimage, with their emphasis on religious activities, are appreciated by the multi-layered conception of spirituality so they can be regarded as aspects of spiritual tourism.

The knowledge base provided by the discussion in this section of the chapter provides a firm foundation for the conceptualization of spiritual tourism. Adapting the definition of cultural tourists to tourists who are motivated to travel for spiritual reasons, a spiritual tourist could be described as someone who visits a place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual growth (in relation to God or the Divine), regardless of the main reason for travelling [27]. The definition of spirituality given earlier in this chapter indicates that the pilgrims and religious tourists who are in a quest for God or a Supreme Being could be called spiritual tourists. Adopting the perspective of [27], spiritual tourism could be viewed as a broad concept that involves tangible and intangible products and services. The tangible items will include churches, mosques, temples, shrines and other centers

with a spiritual focus. The intangible products and services will include organized spiritual events, seminars, festivals and gatherings with spiritual motives.

Cohen's research classified religious tourists and pilgrims and their motivation for traveling, but he did not focus on presenting a model to establish a religious/spiritual tourism destination or site. Rinschede [28] also offered ground breaking research studies on various forms of religious tourism associated with different religions and spiritual traditions and ignored any approaches to design a specific destination. Similarly, other known scholars of religious tourism did not offer a framework for designing a distinctive destination or a travel route [4], [12], [23], [25]. Therefore this paper attempts to address this gap in the literature by studying and suggesting a design for a destination and a travel route for spiritual tourism in India.

B. *Significance of Spiritual Tourism*

Pilgrimage is intertwined with tourism while tourism entertains the possibility of pilgrimage experiences but pilgrimage and tourism are not identical [12], [25], [28]. Although the tourism industry is intertwined with commercial capitalism, pilgrimage is described as a basic shift from the profane periphery towards the holy mind of the religious system [26]. Pilgrims and tourists are generally connected to each other in a collective place and from the tourism industry point of view there was no real difference between the two [4], [23], [28]. The requirements for pilgrimage, such as infrastructure, food and transport, are similar for tourists and pilgrims [10], [23], [29], [30].

Packaging has become an established element of the marketing mix for services [7], [9], [29]. Packaging combines all types of relevant services presented as a single-price offering for the tourist, it presents the design and delivery of special activities, events, or programs to motivate customers to spend more and provide more value in a package [10], [12], [31]. Packaging needs to be designed and implemented separately for each identified segment of spiritual tourists visiting India. Based on this study of packaging the spiritual tourism circuit is proposed in this paper. A pro-poor, eco-friendly and sustainable spiritual tourism integrated circuit for the state of West Bengal has been suggested by [18] called Gar Mandaran-Kamarpukur Joyrambati, that is 'living in harmony with nature' is a home to Sri Ramkrishna Parmahansa, who believed in the Unity of World Religions. A general tourism circuit for the state of West Bengal has been suggested by [18]. This paper suggests that rather than geographical limitation there is a strategic need to apply a type-tourist limitation and open up the geographical boundaries. Therefore, a spiritual tourism circuit established throughout India, based on various religions, will be more fruitful in order to optimize inbound tourism to India.

III. SPIRITUAL TOURISM CIRCUITS IN INDIA

For many centuries India has enjoyed the position of a spiritual hub for many religions and spiritual tourists. A large number of tourists associated with various monotheistic and polytheistic faiths have been visiting India seeking the product and service to fulfil their spiritual needs and desires [13], [34], [39]. Spiritual tourism has been recognized as part of the tourism industry associated with India. A quick search would show that several oral, archaeological and written records document peoples' involvement with spiritual experiences and their adventures to various areas of India to engage in various spiritual activities [12], [28], [40]. [13] recommended suggested from his research that spiritual tourism is a massive industry and still growing in India, regardless of the uncertainty related to the economic, social and political issues. [40] approve the fact that spiritual tourism is growing in all geographic regions specifically in India, and the main reason is its acceptance by the global tourists and that India's negative externalities are supposed to be quite minimal. Several Indian ashrams that accommodate thousands of local and foreign spiritual tourists travelling for a spiritual and religious retreat are significant examples [12], [40].

The multi-faith spirituality in India is penetrating into the religious mind and movements such as the Ramakrishna Movement, following the trend of unity of all religions is being appreciated by the public and media [18], [32]. The Tourism Ministry of the Government of India, along with the State government and industry stake holders and religious leaders is planning to develop a tourist circuit across the length and breadth of the country, for every religion, which integrates the country.

The government is planning to employ the services of expert consultants to do this job [20]. This will not only promote packaged tours for travel to the religious places, but also help in the development of hospitality industry for accommodating and other infrastructure facilities required by the tourists. Detailed spiritual tourism circuits for the following religions are proposed by the Tourism Ministry at the Central Government level as given below such as Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Sufi, Sikh, and Sarva Dharma Circuit [21], [33].

(1) The Sufi Circuit includes: (a) Islamic places in Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur-Sikri (b) Bijapur, Shridi, Gulbarga, Aurangabad in Maharashtra, (c) Awadh- Lucknow region and the (d) Sufi Saints' dargahs (shrines) in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Haryana and Uttarkhand and Uttar Pradesh. The Sufi shrines also attract visitors for the qawwali, which is a spiritual music based on the poetry of the Sufi himself or his devotees [34]. Some of these qawwali songs are so popular that they are even adopted in Bollywood, the Indian world of cinema.

(2) The Christian Circuit includes the Churches from (a) Maharashtra and Goa, (b) Tamilnadu such as Velankanni,

Saint Thomas, and Saint George Cathedral and (c) in Kerala-Malayatoor, Santacruz Basilica, and Church of Saint Francis.

(3) The Sarva Dharma Circuit to promote national integration includes the temples (a) Tirupathi, Madras-Chennai, Velankanni-Nagoor and (b) Vaishnodevi in Jammu and Kashmir, Golden Temple, and Sacred Heart Church in Delhi-Nizamuddin.

(4) Hinduism Circuit includes the temples from (a) Haridwar-Kedarnath, Joshimath, Veisho-Devi and Badrinath, (b) Barsana, Gokul, Nandgoan, Mathura, Vrindavan, Govardhan and (c) Tirupathi, Chennai and Mahabalipuram.

(5) Buddhist Circuit includes (a) Bodhgaya (UNESCO-World Heritage Site), Nalanda and Rajgir, (b) Varanasi, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Piparwah and Lumbini, (c) Nagarjunakonda, Amravati and Aurangabad (Ajanta Ellora caves). In 2007, SAARC meeting, concluded to develop the Buddhist spiritual circuit with the cooperation of the SAARC countries mainly Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Srilanka. The Ministry of Tourism launched a major marketing campaign 'Come To India - Walk With The Buddha' to attract Buddhist from all over the world and India for spiritual tourism [35]. Japan, has agreed to provide nearly 700 crore of rupees for restoring the famous Buddhist Ajanta Ellora and other 25 caves in Maharashtra such as Karla, Bhaja, Bedsa, Junnar and Penderveni besides other Buddhist religious sites such as Sarnath, Kapilavastu, Kushinagar, Sravasti and Sankisa in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. According to [10], "India is not taking sufficient advantage of its treasures of holy sites relating to the life and times of Lord Buddha" (p.116) compared to other countries such as China, Tibet, Thailand, Sri-Lanka and Japan.

(6) Jain Circuit includes (a) Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Nagaur, (b) Bhavnagar, Mehsana, Patan, Udaipur, Sirohi, Pali and Jaisalmer, (c) Bengaluru, Mandya, Hassan, dashing Kannada, and Udupi, (d) Bhojpur, Vidisha, Damoh and Chattarpur.

(7) Sikh Circuit includes (a) Golden Temple and other Gurudhwaras (Sikh Temples) in Punjab, (b) Amritsar, Delhi and Patna, (c) Amritsar, Delhi, Patna and Nanded (d) Gurudhwaras in east and North-eastern states of India (Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh).

The Ministry of Tourism in India has already begun talks with Industry stakeholders (public and private) as well as Sufi exponents [21]. According to the Minister for Tourism, Sobodh Kant Sahai "India is home to a number of religions and there is a huge scope in terms of boosting tourism to religious places. Our aim is to facilitate a packaged tour like experience to tourists complete with stay and entertainment options. We have already engaged consultants to work on these circuits, and hope to engage state government in the project...." [20].

The Tourism Ministry will bear the cost of the consultancy; project report by the state government, and the cost of setting up project monitoring units for undertaking all activities related to a particular circuit with a proposed expenditure outlay of Rupees 9,450 crore for the 12th five year plan (2012-2017) along with attracting private investment of rupees 28,000 crore for the spiritual tourism circuit projects.

The Ministry of Tourism has taken a holistic approach for the development of these circuits segment, “by facilitating the availability of basic infrastructure, State Information centers and accommodation in and around the country” [37]. The Tourism Ministry has identified 35 destinations within India for Phase-I and will cover another 89 destinations in Phase-II [38]. The private consultants who have been employed will perform a SWOT analysis and also identify bottlenecks in tourism infrastructure facilities, assess investment requirements and possible sources of funds (State, private or foreign direct investment) and develop business models for infrastructure investment, supply chain and operations management [17], [21]- [33].

IV. DISCUSSION

It is noticeable that four popular and important faiths such as the Zoroastrian, Baha'i, Jewish and Islamic circuit are not mentioned in the plan. Zoroastrian, Baha'i, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON-Vedic), and Jewish circuit can be part of Sarva dharma circuit or developed separately as people from these religions have played a significant contribution to the Indian economy and society. Given over 500 years of Islamic history in India along with the Mughal periods it is important to develop these circuits independently to attract the spiritual tourists from within the country and overseas. Muslims represent the second biggest religion in India and the second highest Muslim population in the world. The impact of Islam by the influx of Muslim scholars and Sufis on the Indian society has been remarkable and hence many of their shrines and Mosques are still revered by Indians from all religions [5], [12], [32].

This paper proposes that spiritual tourism in India should offer packages based on a circuit targeting tourists interested in a combination of religions or one specific religion. Therefore, this paper concludes that a public-private partnership approach [39] is needed to package circuit based spiritual tourism in India that would represent all major faiths and religions to promote unity in diversity inclusive of all worldly faith. According to [39] “Partnerships are essential for planning and implementing federal, state and local government tourism related infrastructure initiatives necessary for supporting sustainable tourism development” [39, p. 28]. The choice

rests with the tourists but the packages offered should be comprehensive with all travel services offered for their delight. We suggest that the following four religious circuits for India which can be added to the seven circuits already mentioned in the plan by the Tourism Ministry:

(1) Islamic Circuit to include famous Palaces, Mosques, Museums and Gardens established by the various Islamic rulers such as Nawabs of Hyderabad, Tipu Sultan's Dynasty, Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal period. This should cover important destinations in the states of (a) Jammu and Kashmir, Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh, (b) New Delhi, Agra and Rajasthan, (c) Bengal and Bihar, (d) Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, (e) Maharashtra, Aurangabad and Gujarat.

(2) Zoroastrian Circuit to include Fire Temples of historical significance all over India (a) Navsari in Gujarat, (b) Mumbai, and Pune in Maharashtra (c) Calcutta in Bengal.

(3) Jewish Circuit to include Synagogues of historical significance all over India (a) David Sassoon Synagogues in Pune, Mumbai in Maharashtra, Cochin, Malabar, Calcutta in Bengal and Manipur in east India.

(4) Baha'i Circuit to include Baha'i, temples such as the beautiful Lotus Baha'i Temple in New Delhi and other Baha'i temples in India, including the key other religious places of worship from the list above as Baha'i religion is inclusive of teachings of key major religious faiths.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper concludes that India as a tourism destination has great potential to market spiritual tourism for domestic and foreign travelers. The Indian Government's packaging strategy to offer a spiritual tourism circuit seems effective, but not comprehensive. If India wants to be a global market leader in spiritual tourism based on the availability of multi-faith events, places and people, then all major religions should be addressed in organizing the circuit. The spiritual tourism circuit shall be designed as an inclusive tourism market that will not deny the importance of pilgrimage, cultural, heritage and regional tourism, but offer a branding umbrella for all these types of tourism in India. The spiritual tourism circuit needs to be marketed as a national asset not as a religious travel product but a universal faith based product.

The conclusions of this theoretical paper can be tested by adopting a quantitative method and providing surveys to domestic and foreign visitors to the sacred places and events in various Indian cities. The tourist consumer behavior and their tastes and preferences could be identified from such a study. Moreover, a qualitative method could be adapted to interview private tourism operators and government officers working on the marketing campaigns to promote tourism in

India based on various religions by attracting the spiritual followers and as well as foreigners and non-resident Indians from abroad who the major customers of spiritual tourism product [40], [41] to India.

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