

Contribution and Practices of Green pilgrimage for sustainable tourism in India

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Abstract

A pilgrimage is a sacred journey, an act of religious devotion undertaken for a spiritual purpose to holy sites. Pilgrims are different from tourists for they travel for spiritual reasons, not just to relax or for fun. Pilgrimage is a search for meaning, purpose, values of life or truth. It has been the tradition for thousands of years in all religions, and hitherto today, we are witnessing global ecological crisis, the nature is suffering in ways we have never experienced before. In India we see this phenomenon significantly. Once where nature was abundant, we now see bare hills, polluted rivers, heaps of untreated waste, the receding of wild forests and the subsequent loss of wildlife. All of these bring trouble for human communities including lack of clean water, air and other natural resources, and unforeseen natural disasters such as floods and landslides. The environment in many holy places and pilgrimage centres is getting adversely affected by large incursion of visitors. In today's world, consumerism have corrupted pilgrimages. In ancient days, a pilgrimage was considered as a holy journey which was full of odds and difficulties. Introduction of comfortable and improved means of transportation has enhanced the accessibility of the tough religious sites which has led to adverse effects such as increased dumping of filth and waste. The religious observances have unknowingly affected the Natural Forests. This calls for an urgent need to bring a shift from the concept of just a simple "pilgrimage" to "green pilgrimage". This paper has made an attempt to highlight the significance of green pilgrimage and its beneficial effects on the environment of the present day. Green pilgrimage is need of an hour. It is essentially the sustainable behaviour of green pilgrimage that will show the means to protect the environment by changing the mindset of the travelling pilgrims.

Keywords: consumerism; accessibility; ecological balance, religious observances; green pilgrimage

Perception of Religious Tourism in India

Travel undertaken with a core motive of experiencing the nature of a religion or the products they induce, like the local art, civilization, customs and architecture is called as Religious Tourism. India is one of the most ancient civilizations of the world, and hence was connected with almost all the major religions of the world, and despite being subjugated by Hinduism religions like Islam, Buddhism and Christianity have also influenced a sizeable portion of the Indian population, apart from religions like Sikhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Judaism that grew as a consequence of the major religious schools of thought.

There are two distinct features to Religious Tourism in India - one, is the faith of the domestic tourist, who has a spiritual connect to the deity/destination and their religious beliefs, the other category is the 'foreign' tourist who, is someone belonging to a different religion or region, and for whom the tourist destination and the religious practices have the element of 'novelty', or a spiritual experience different from their own.

Almost 60 per cent of domestic in-bound tourism in India is driven by religious commitment. And unlike other types of travel and tourism, religious tourism includes all age and income group, thus asserting the largest market segment. A study conducted by Delhi-based Lokniti – Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in 2017 had highlighted that one in four Indians was inclined towards touring religious places. In India, religious places are commonly preferred as a pilgrimage destination as well as a location of choice for leisure vacation. Since Pilgrimage is mostly a family affair, data suggest that the expenditure on religious travel has doubled in recent years.

From the domestic market's perspective, there is a fine line dividing business and belief. Many temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras and other major religious centres, in today's socio-economic structures, are tangible assets in terms of infrastructure and the workforce they employ, thereby implying that the institution has to monetize itself in order to be able to meet its everyday survival in societal environments.

Religious tourism contributes and derives benefit from the hospitality and tourism sector. The rising disposable income amongst the increasing middle class has resulted in setting the travel trend. Also the Indian residents abroad are turning towards the home country for holiday destinations. This reflects in the employment generated by the tourism that constitutes six percent of the country's total workforce and contributed US\$234 billion towards the national GDP in 2017. The India Brand Equity Foundation has released its report stating that by 2028 the contribution would rise to US\$492.2 billion. But alongwith the high economic returns it is also causing harm to our towns, cities, villages and natural places. As tourist endeavour forward on holy pilgrimages and engage in religious celebrations they forget that the natives and the flora and fauna also exist in those places and that we must respect their presence. The tourist is usually not aware of how their actions will harm Mother Earth and all beings around. Therefore It is the responsibility of local government bodies to spread the awareness, and exhort people to take care of the ecosystem in their travel. Our religious sites are being destroyed by the filth and reckless behaviour of tourist that descend in the holy places impact the place by un-conscientious religious observance.

Issues being faced in the development of Religious Tourism in the Country:

Tourism acts as a crucial enabler in creating wealth for facilitating development of infrastructural facilities at the destination, helps generate sustainable income for the local community as well as the government, supports the strategies for regional development through 'umbrella' effect, and promote peace and socio-cultural harmony. However, tourism development in any region needs to be regulated to control and prevent the negative impacts. Some of the major problems include:

1. **Violation of Carrying Capacity** - Most of religious destinations in the country, suffer the short but extreme variations in seasons that alter the dynamics of that place for the rest of the year. The Char Dham pilgrimage in Uttarakhand is one such example. The period of visit by tourist begins from May and lasts until November every year, it puts immense pressure upon the transport infrastructure of the Garhwal region, coupled with the monsoons and road construction. Besides these the local bodies have to confront landslides, leading to frequent road blocks, accidents and loss of life.
2. **Waste Management** - With higher numbers of pilgrims visiting our religious destinations, mammoth levels of waste are being generated. Plastics make up a large portion of this waste in the form of bags and bottles. It is often an overwhelming task to deal with large amounts of plastics. Lack of adequate sanitation also leads to dangerous levels of waste. Left untreated, such waste can be a serious health hazard. Flowers and other items used in our temples can

also contribute to waste. We often see flower garlands, containers for prasad, and temple leaflets discarded and left on roadsides or in rivers.

3. **Energy** - Pilgrimage cities and towns can create more energy efficiency. In a proposal to reduce the use of conventional fuel and make conservation a elevated point in the government's energy security agenda, the ministry of non-conventional energy sources has proposed to all state governments the alternative of solar cooking for pilgrimage/spiritual sites and other large institutions, including industries.
4. **Air Pollution:** The complete volume of travel in this sector gives mind boggling figures. While the railways manage to absorb a majority of the travel volume, substantial number of religious tourism sites in India are only accessible by road or foot, or a combination of both the modes of travel. It is observed that transport generates around three quarters of the 5% of the global CO₂ emissions. Transportation has a high carbon footprint and deserves attention and vigilant consideration to how pilgrims will arrive and travel round the pilgrim destination.
5. **Monetizing Religion:** In the quest for creating attractions in the pilgrimage offerings, there is often a feeling of uneasiness that religion is being 'monetized', as the congregation of local community gets increasingly driven by the 'profit motive'.
6. **Absence of Surveillance on religious trusts :** There is a need to introduce regulations for governing the financial status of the religious trusts as it seems to drive out global concerns about money laundering and terrorist financing activities. A good legal and governance system will ensure greater transparency and pave the path to make public the names of organizations that donate to the trusts and claim tax exemption. This is especially critical in India's where some of the religious trusts are among the richest in the world. The current argument with all stake holders centres around the truth that the monetary earnings from pilgrimages are not enough to compensate its socio-environmental impacts. However, it needs to be kept in mind that the effects of tourism activity work in multiple levels and directly affects the local economy and also influences decisions at the policy framing level.

Challenges for sustaining the environment

The Amarnath shrine is one of most revered sites amongst Hindus. But the debris left behind by end of the two months season includes plastic bottles and bags, human waste and all other rubbish. The mountain trails that pass through the sensitive Himalayan environment disturbs the ecosystem. Most of the times the waste falls into the melted glaciers that flow downstream and are a source of drinking water which becomes a threat to their lives.

Indian rivers are among the most polluted centers of pilgrimage. The coliform bacteria pollution is among the highest in the rivers due to the dumping of untreated sewage. Also the organic and bacterial contamination is severe due to the discharge of untreated domestic waste water. All the rivers have high levels of Bio Chemical Oxygen Demand (BOD). Some of the rivers that are attractions of pilgrims like Yamuna, Ganga, Gomti, Ghaghra and Champal are among the most coliform polluted water bodies in India with concentration levels of about 500 mpn/100 ml.

Numerous tanneries, chemical plants, textile mills, distilleries, slaughterhouses and hospitals also dump their untreated waste into the river. While Industrial effluents contribute to much of the pollution and are a cause for major concern because they are toxic and non-biodegradable.

Almost 400 million people live along the river Ganga and an estimated 2 million devotees bathe daily in the river. Some of India's oldest colonized cities like Varanasi and Patna (Pataliputra), are situated along its banks. It flows through more than 70 cities and towns and supplies water to a population of about 500 million people, which is 40% of the country's population across 11 states. With fecal coliform counts up to 100,000,000 MPN (most probable number) per 100 ml, the river Ganga is considered to be one of the most polluted rivers. After the cremation of the deceased at Varanasi's ghats, the bones and ashes are thrown into the Ganges. Large number of uncremated bodies are thrown into the Ganges during epidemics which spread the disease. Even today, many bodies are seen floating free to decompose in the waters. In addition, those who cannot afford the large amount of wood to incinerate the dead body, leave behind the half-burned body parts which adds to the woes of cleaning the surroundings and creating health hazards.

Green initiatives in some prominent temples and ashrams in India

Temple/Ashram	Green Measures
Golden Temple of Sripuram Vellore in Tamil Nadu	Solid waste management, wastewater management, rainwater harvesting, biogas generation, organic farming, herbal gardens, hill and campus a forestation, harnessing of solar energy
Tirumala temple, Tirupathi, Andhra Pradesh	Community kitchen using solar energy, a forestation, wind energy
Shirdi Sai Baba Temple, Shirdi town, Maharashtra	Solar power to cook meals for devotees and light up the premises
Ambaji Temple, Gujarat	Waste management, tree plantation, solar steam cooking system
Golden Temple, Amritsar	No plastic waste, solar panels for the lighting and solar water heaters
Jagannath Temple, Puri, Odisha	Solar energy
Lotus Temple of Bahai, New Delhi	Use of solar systems for lighting and cooling
Art of Living Ashram, Bangalore	Organic farming, solar lighting, rainwater harvesting
Sivananda Ashram, Rishikesh, Uttarakhand	Solid waste management, solar heaters
Muni Seva Ashram, Gujarat	Solar, wind and biogas energy
Brahma Kumari Spiritual Trust, Mount Abu, Rajasthan	Solar systems for cooking prasadam food offerings for devotees
Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh	Environment-themed aarti and teachings

Source Green Temple Guide

Illustration of contribution from society

- a. The nine-day Durga Puja festival in Kolkata and Howrah attracts around 30 million visitors each year. The local authorities have initiated green themed pujas on issues highlighting climate change, water conservation and conservation of Bengal tigers. Almost 30,000 idols were painted with lead free colours ; LED lamps were replaced with other less energy-efficient lights. The organisers aspire to use the pujas as a medium to inspire the local communities to engage in green practices not only during Pujas celebration but also throughout the year.
- b. In February 2014 Hindus in the UK and India held the first ever Hindu Environment Week. It was initiated by the Bhumi Project and brought together Hindus from across the world, from different traditions, in a common cause in unprecedented numbers, with about 4,000 people participating.
- c. The Jagannath temple in Puri observe seven days of action, including planting of trees and cleaning the temple premises of litter. Students at Benares Hindu University hold events each day including a cycle rally (to raise awareness) and cleaning the famous Kashi Viswanath temple and bathing spots.
- d. The Parmarth Niketan ashram in Rishikesh in partnership with the DRDO have installed almost 5,000 zero-waste toilets along the river Ganges.
- e. Sri Sailam is one of the largest tiger reserve of India and houses two famous temples. Pilgrims have to travel a road that cuts through the reserve. Conservationist at the reserve have put up signs along the road using images and scripts in various languages encouraging pilgrims not to drop litter.
- f. Vrindavan known as the land of Krishna and his cows, in the recent years has seen an increase in death and sickness of cows who have eaten plastic bags. The local bodies have passed a law to discontinue shopkeepers from using plastic bags for the purchases made by the pilgrimages. Only cloth bags are used and if similar law is followed across the country would reduce the burden of waste management.
- g. The Sikh gurdwaras around the world all have free kitchens. A few are now running their stoves on bio fuel, made from their kitchen compost. The Golden Temple in Amritsar recently approved a proposal to shift the cooking of 'langar' (community kitchen) to solar energy.
- h. In 2008 the Church of South India's Christian Women's Fellowship in Kottayam, Kerala, set up a snack centre run on biogas. At Rs 40,000 the set up costs were relatively high but within a year they had saved what they spend from reduced fuel bills.
- i. Some of the largest solar cooking systems in the country are installed in Shirdi and the Tirupati temple complex, where food is served to lakhs of devotees every month. In Tirupati this system helps reduces carbon dioxide emissions by almost 1.5 tonnes per day and has the added benefit of saving more than Rs. 20 lakhs a year.
- j. Amritsar has made the vicinity in front of the Golden Temple accessible by foot and cycle only. The City has also introduced locally-made eco-rickshaws, which are lighter than other cycle rickshaws. They are linked to a call centre by radio (so more convenient to use), with financial structuring so that for the first time it is effortless for rickshaw pullers to buy these vehicles, with repayments covered by advertising banners on the back of the vehicles.

Conclusion

Since religion is a sensitive issue, the Government refrains from interfering in the religious affairs. As a result, pilgrimage tourism continues to affect the natural environment unfavourably. But these problems cannot be left unaddressed, steps should be taken to resolve them in consultation with the religious heads so that it does not create anxiety between various communities. Green pilgrimage will encourage pilgrims to travel more responsibly, rediscover the connect with nature, sustain the local population, and apply ecological morality in their activities every day.

Recommendations

- **Media and engagement:** Communicating the message - One of the key solution for a Green Pilgrimage site is by informing people about it and its importance as a part of a religious practice. This is not just about launching awareness programmes, but about sustaining them in longer period of time, so that pilgrimage town or city becomes a living model to others and sets a trend for responding to the environmental crisis. Media – can help build the best engagement with local and national tourists. It can design a repeat programmes that would constantly remind the society of the role and responsibility towards green pilgrimage
- Use environmentally/eco friendly paints when painting statues of deities
- Centre religious celebrations around environmental themes
- Make sure waste is disposed of effectively at the festivals
- Be mindful of ways that noise, lights and traffic can be limited during celebrations in and around environmentally sensitive areas

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