



DIVERSE BELIEFS:  
TOURISM OF FAITH  
*Religious tourism gains ground*



Knowledge Partner



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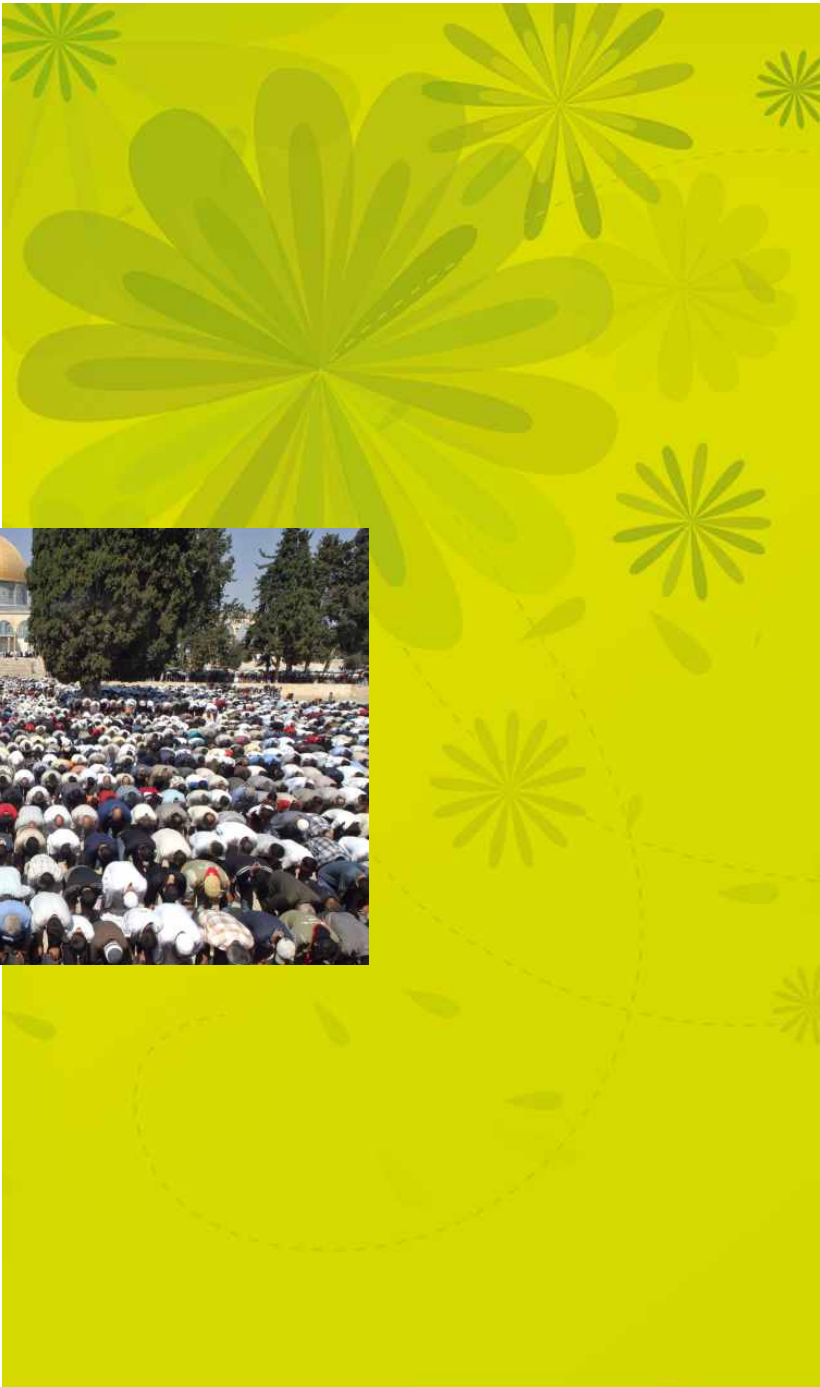


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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## Executive Summary



### Religious Tourism-An Introduction

Religious Tourism can be defined as travel with the core motive of experiencing religious forms, or the products they induce, like art, culture, traditions and architecture.

Being one of the most ancient civilizations of the world, India has been in contact with almost all the major religions of the world, and despite being dominated by Hinduism in the present context, religions like Islam, Buddhism and Christianity have also influenced a sizeable portion of the population, apart from niche religions like Sikhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Judaism that grew as an offshoot to the major religious schools of thought.

### Perspective of Religious Tourism in India

There are two distinct aspects to Religious Tourism in India; one, the faith of the domestic tourist, who has a spiritual attachment to the deity/destination in line with their religious beliefs; the other is the 'foreign' tourist, someone belonging to a different religion, region or country, for whom the destination and the religious practices have the dimension of 'novelty', a spiritual experience different from their own, despite the ethical values being delivered remaining the same.

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. Based upon the nature of the product, intensity and region of travel, Religious Tourism is divided into the following major categories:





- Pilgrimages
- Missionary travel
- Leisure (fellowship) vacations
- Faith-based cruising
- Crusades, conventions and rallies
- Retreats
- Monastery visits and guest-stays
- Faith-based camps
- Religious tourist attractions



### Government Interventions to stimulate the development of Religious Tourism in India

The Government is very much aware of the importance of religious tourism not only as an economic enabler, but also a tool to ensure communal harmony. Some recent notable initiatives are as follows:

- IRCTC has given much needed boost to the Buddhist Circuit, providing a holistic product that addresses transport, sightseeing and accommodation requirements. Apart from this, airports have also been made operational in Bodh Gaya, thereby facilitating direct movement of tourists from South East Asian countries, a major part of the clientele.
- Seven new tourist circuits will be developed across the country to facilitate travel to and stay at religious places. Work has already begun to prepare detailed project reports for Sufi, Buddhist & Jain, Christian, Sikh, Hinduism and Sarva Dharma circuits. The Sufi circuit will include Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Bijapur, Shirdi, Aurangabad, and the Awadh region, besides the dargahs in J&K, Punjab, Haryana and Uttarkahnad. The Christian circuit will have the churches of Goa, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Sarv Dharma Circuit, to promote national integration, will be aligned along Tirupathi-Chennai-Velankanni-Nagoor and Vaishnodevi - Golden Temple-Sacred Heart Church (Delhi)-Nizamuddin. The Ministry of Tourism has already identified 35 destinations for Phase I and will cover another 89 in Phase II. Consultants engaged by the ministry will help identify gaps in infrastructure and amenities, assess investment requirement and



possible source of funds and also evolve business models for investment and operations. The ministry has proposed a required outlay plan of Rs 9,450 crore for the 12th Plan and hopes to draw in private investment close to Rs 28,000 crore for such projects.

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

Tourism acts as a crucial enabler in facilitating development of basic infrastructural facilities, generates income for the local community as well as the government, balances regional development strategies through 'umbrella' effect, and fosters peace and socio-cultural harmony. However, tourism development in any region needs to be regulated to prevent the negative impacts. Major problems include:

- 1) Infringement of Carrying Capacity:** Most religious centres in the country, major or minor, suffer from short but intense seasons that alter the dynamics of the region for the rest of the year. The Char Dham Yatra in Uttarakhand is one such example. Lasting from May till about November, it puts a serious pressure upon the transport infrastructure of the Garhwal region, which coupled with the monsoons and a lot of road construction still under progress imply landslides, meaning frequent road blocks, accidents and loss of life.





- 2) **Waste Management:** In part a derivative of the problem of carrying capacity, the waste management problem has aggravated as science and technology grew to usher us into the 'era of plastic'.
- 3) **Air Pollution:** The sheer volume of travel in this niche makes the figures mind boggling. While trains still manage to absorb a majority of the travel volume, quite a substantial number of major religious tourism sites in India are still only accessible by road or foot, or a combination of the two (take the case of hilly regions).
- 4) **Monetizing Religion:** In the race for developing as many niches as possible, there is often the issue of religion being 'monetized', as the host community gets increasingly driven by the 'profit motive'.
- 5) **Lack of scrutiny of religious trusts:** There is a need to put forward regulations which governs the financial status and regulation of religious trusts as it looks to allay global concerns about money laundering and terrorist financing activities. Such a law will also pave the way to make public names of organizations that claim tax exemption to ensure greater transparency. This is especially crucial in a scenario when some of India's religious trusts are among the richest in the world

The current debate ranges around the fact that the monetary earnings from religious tourism are not enough to offset its socio-environmental impacts. However, it has to be kept in mind that the effects of tourism activity work in multiple planes, from directly affecting the local economy to influencing decisions at the policy framing level.

### **YES BANK-FICCI 10 point roadmap to pave the way for the development of Religious Tourism sector in the country:**

India has abundance of religious centres running across the country. Therefore, it is not necessary to create either core or supporting products. What is needed is to develop/explore is just the ancillary products, however the task is difficult keeping in mind the variety of issues and scenarios that every other destination will require to be dealt with. As Religious tourism in India can provide a unique experience to the keen observer of faith and



culture, it is imperative that the product is developed professionally rather than the haphazard manner in which the sector has been growing.

But for this to fructify, the seeds will have to be sown and the saplings will have to be nurtured. The sector has immense potential for development due to the availability of religious tourism sites all over the country. The identification of core deficiencies, requirement of facilitating products and subsequently overcoming the issues are essential for paving the way for development of this niche sector of India in a way so that it can become a major attraction for inbound tourists.

The following ten point roadmap can pave the way for initiation of a progressive phase in the development of religious tourism in the country:

**1) Developing Religious Tourism Circuits through a Hub and Spoke Model:**

One of the first steps in this aspect is to create nodes near religious centers, where there is already a basic infrastructure present and plan day trips from there. For example, Chennai in South India can be a node for excursions to Madurai, Thanjavur, Trichnapalli and Pondicherry. Madurai is the home of the exquisite Meenakshi Temple, which is regarded as the holiest temple in India by many people. As the influx of crowd is already sizeable in famous spots, a hub and spoke model will ensure tourist spread to all the nearby attractions.

**2) Providing the tourists with a holistic tourism experience:** Attracting the tourist segments that are not attracted to religious sites, needs a holistic package around the religious spots. Tourists may not find it worthwhile to come all the way just for a pilgrimage. An innovative mechanism to streamline this development can be to market a religious tourism destination as an alternative tourism destination. For example, Rishikesh is marketed as both a religious and an adventure tourism destination.

**3) Marketing religious tourism destinations needs special training as quite a major part of the visitors are attracted to these destinations due to reasons like studying old culture, evolution of practices and research.** Only blind faith may not be the attraction of these sites. These are also





an enabler towards attracting the non religious strata of the population. The innovation in this case can be blending the ritualistic part of the religious tours with informative, cultural and philosophical inputs. Traditional dances, music and theatre related to the religious shrine will have to be built into the itinerary. Discourses on the essence of the religious beliefs, workshops on yoga and ayurvedic practices can add immense value to religious tourism.

**4) Developing integrated infrastructure for religious tourism development:**

Infrastructure development requires that religious tourism circuits be identified and State Government is required to streamline the development of the entire religious tourism circuit existing in a given region/area.

**5) Enhanced emphasis of minimizing the impact on the environment and maintaining the ecological balance:**

Appropriate checks and balances need to be put in place to ensure that the negative impact of tourism on environment is minimized. These checks and balances can be in the form of fines. Religious Tourism is endemic to a given geography and in this scenario training of the local population deriving its source of livelihood from tourism in the field of environment management can be the model approach.





- 6) Scrutiny of religious trusts:** There needs to be a practice for reviewing the financial status and regulation of religious trusts as it will allay global concerns about money laundering and terrorist financing activities. Such a law will also pave the way to make public names of organizations that claim tax exemption to ensure greater transparency. This is especially crucial in a scenario when some of India's religious trusts are among the richest in the world.
- 7) Developing appropriate Institutional Framework to stimulate the growth of Religious Tourism:** The Department of Tourism of the respective state governments should institute a separate board to prepare and implement plans to provide necessary facilities to the devotees and also ensure conservation of cultural atmosphere consistent with sentiments of visiting devotees. The religious aspect of tourism is a crucial enabler in economic development of the local region. The nature of economic development relies heavily on the institutional mechanisms of any region and the infrastructural development undertaken to stimulate the development of that particular region. Hence in the above scenario, it is extremely crucial that appropriate institutional mechanisms be put suitably in place to streamline the spill off effects occurring as a result of religious tourism.
- 8) Pricing of religious tourism products:** The pricing of religious tourism products needs to be in tandem with the different sectors of people visiting the sites. In India, the prices paid are only for the tertiary services provided and not for the actual services of the religious flavors one intends to experience. Hence, attempts need to be taken to ensure that the pricing of the tourism product is such that it compensates for educational and cultural services provided to those interested. But extreme caution must be exerted while attempting the pricing of these products. As we know that majority of pilgrims are either from middle or budget classes, therefore, pricing of products needs to be done to suit their budgets.
- 9) Limiting the impact of globalization on places with an endemic flavor of being a distinct religious tourism attraction:** Since religious tourism is based on the values, customs, practices, traditions and beliefs of a



particular region, the same need to be maintained. It is only by preserving these local values and customs that one can provide a genuine and original religious tourism product.

**10) Improving connectivity to specific religious tourism circuits to promote them:** Attracting tourists to remote religious areas will require improving the connectivity to these regions to develop these into commercially viable tourism sites. The Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India has developed specialized infrastructure for the development of Buddhist Tourism Circuit by developing an international airport near Gaya and provided a strong impetus to the development of Buddhist Tourism Circuit. The airport operates flights directly from key SAARC countries such as China, Japan, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, etc

