



A Review of Religious Tourism in India

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Abstract – Religious tourism in India represents one of the oldest and most significant forms of travel, deeply rooted in the country's cultural and spiritual traditions. As the birthplace of major world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and home to Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, India offers a diverse spiritual geography. Ancient scriptures like the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads, and epics describe the sacredness of Indian land, highlighting mountains, rivers, and shrines as divine abodes. The presence of pilgrimage centers such as the Char Dham, Kashi, Bodh Gaya, Golden Temple, Velankanni, and Ajmer Sharif reflects the confluence of faiths. Religious tourism not only strengthens spiritual devotion but also promotes cultural identity, interfaith harmony, and economic growth through pilgrim circuits and festivals. This paper explores the historical roots, major circuits, mythological significance, cultural and economic impacts, modern initiatives, and challenges of religious tourism in India. The analysis highlights India's unique role as a spiritual destination and suggests strategies to enhance the sector sustainably.

Keywords – Bhuloka, Satya Yuga, Pilgrimage, Char Dham, Sacred Rivers, Holy Shrines, Faith, Spirituality.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Hindu Puranas, the three most common lokas (worlds) are Bhuloka (Earth), Swargaloka (Heaven), and Patalaloka (Underworld). Among these, Bhuloka is considered sacred as it is the site where divine incarnations occur and dharma (righteousness) is established. India, described as Tapo Bhumi (the land of austerity), has been revered since the Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga, and Kali Yuga, when gods and goddesses incarnated to protect dharma. From the abode of Lord Shiva at Kailash, to Vaikuntha of Lord Vishnu, and to the countless tirthas (sacred fords), India is dotted with sites where myth and history merge.

Religious tourism in India is therefore not merely travel but a pilgrimage experience that connects devotees with mythological heritage, spiritual practices, and cultural identity. Today, India attracts millions of pilgrims and tourists annually, visiting sites such as the Char Dham, Jyotirlingas, Shakti Peethas, Buddhist stupas, Sikh gurudwaras, Islamic dargahs, and Christian cathedrals. This blend of faith and history makes India a global hub for religious tourism.

II. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN INDIA

Religious tourism has been practiced in India since the Vedic period, where hymns in the Rigveda mention sacred rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati. Pilgrimage was seen as a path to spiritual purification and liberation (moksha). The Mahabharata and Ramayana highlight journeys to sacred lands, while Buddhist texts describe pilgrimages to Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar.

Over time, India developed elaborate pilgrimage circuits: Char Dham Yatra (Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri, Rameswaram). Sapta Puri (Varanasi, Mathura, Ayodhya, Kanchipuram, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Dwarka). Shakti Peethas (51 sites linked to Goddess Shakti). Jyotirlingas (12 shrines of Lord Shiva).

During the medieval period, Sufi saints established dargahs in Ajmer, Delhi, and Gulbarga, which became spiritual centers. Christian missionaries built churches like Velankanni Basilica in Tamil Nadu and St. Francis Church in Kochi, while Sikh gurus founded gurudwaras such as the Golden Temple. Thus, India became a multi-religious pilgrimage landscape, attracting travelers across centuries.

III. MAJOR RELIGIOUS TOURISM CIRCUITS IN INDIA

Hindu Pilgrimage Sites

Hinduism, the oldest religion in India, has thousands of shrines and temples. Key circuits include:

Char Dham Yatra – Symbolizes the spiritual journey across four corners of India.

Kumbh Mela – The world's largest congregation of faith at Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain.

Jyotirlingas – Shrines dedicated to Lord Shiva such as Somnath, Kedarnath, and Varanasi.

Shakti Peethas – Sacred centers of Goddess worship like Kamakhya (Assam) and Vaishno Devi (Jammu).

Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites

Buddhism, born in India, established four major pilgrimage sites:

Lumbini (Nepal) – Birthplace of Buddha.

Bodh Gaya (Bihar) – Site of Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.



Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh) – First sermon of Buddha.

Kushinagar (U.P.) – Mahaparinirvana of Buddha.

India also hosts Buddhist stupas at Sanchi, monasteries in Ladakh, and Tibetan settlements in Dharamshala, making it a hub for international Buddhist pilgrims.

Jain Pilgrimage Sites

Jainism emphasizes austerity and non-violence. Important sites include:

Shatrunjaya Hills (Palitana, Gujarat).

Shravanabelagola (Karnataka) with the Gomateshwara statue.

Dilwara Temples (Mount Abu, Rajasthan).

Sikh Pilgrimage Sites

The Golden Temple in Amritsar is the most prominent Sikh shrine, representing equality and devotion. Other sites include Anandpur Sahib, Patna Sahib, and Hazur Sahib in Nanded.

Islamic Pilgrimage Sites

Islamic religious tourism revolves around dargahs of Sufi saints and mosques:

Ajmer Sharif Dargah (Rajasthan).

Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah (Delhi).

Charminar and Mecca Masjid (Hyderabad).

Christian Pilgrimage Sites

Christianity in India is linked with St. Thomas the Apostle.

Key pilgrimage destinations are:

Velankanni Basilica (Tamil Nadu).

St. Francis Church (Kochi).

San Thome Basilica (Chennai).

IV. MYTHOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS OF SACRED PLACES

India's religious tourism is inseparable from mythology:

Varanasi – Believed to be founded by Lord Shiva.

Rameswaram – Associated with Lord Rama's bridge to Lanka.

Mathura and Vrindavan – Linked with Lord Krishna's childhood.

Kedarnath and Badrinath – Mentioned in the Mahabharata.

Ganga and Yamuna Rivers – Described in Vedas as divine mothers.

Such mythological associations deepen the sacredness of pilgrimage sites and sustain religious tourism across centuries.

V. CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE

Religious tourism is both a cultural practice and an economic driver:

Cultural Preservation – Pilgrimage festivals like Kumbh Mela preserve rituals, art forms, and folklore.

Interfaith Harmony – Sites like Ajmer Sharif and Velankanni attract devotees of multiple faiths.

Economic Growth – Millions of pilgrims create demand for hospitality, transport, handicrafts, and local trade.

Employment Generation – Tour guides, priests, transport workers, and artisans benefit directly.

According to government reports, religious tourism contributes significantly to India's domestic tourism, accounting for over 60% of internal travel.

VI. MODERN DEVELOPMENTS IN RELIGIOUS TOURISM

The Government of India has introduced programs like:

PRASHAD Scheme (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive) to develop infrastructure at pilgrimage sites.

Swadesh Darshan Scheme focusing on integrated religious circuits such as Buddhist, Ramayana, and Krishna circuits.

Digital Tourism Platforms for booking darshan tickets (e.g., Tirupati, Vaishno Devi).

Eco-tourism Integration ensuring sustainability in temple towns like Rishikesh and Varanasi.

These initiatives reflect efforts to modernize religious tourism while preserving heritage.

VII. CHALLENGES IN RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Despite its potential, religious tourism faces multiple challenges:

Overcrowding – Festivals like Kumbh Mela strain resources.

Environmental Degradation – Pollution in rivers like Ganga and Yamuna.

Commercialization – Rising costs reduce accessibility for poor pilgrims.

Infrastructure Gaps – Lack of sanitation, transport, and accommodation in many rural pilgrimage sites.

Safety Concerns – Stampedes, accidents, and poor disaster management in crowded temples and yatras.

Recommendations

1. Develop sustainable tourism policies balancing faith with environmental conservation.
2. Enhance digital infrastructure for crowd management and e-darshan.
3. Promote inclusive tourism, ensuring access for marginalized and differently-abled devotees.
4. Encourage community participation in maintaining shrines and pilgrim routes.
5. Strengthen international religious tourism promotion, particularly Buddhist circuits for global visitors.

IX. CONCLUSION

Religious tourism in India is not only a spiritual journey but also a cultural and economic force. From ancient times to the present, it has connected millions of people with faith, mythology, and tradition. The diversity of India's



pilgrimage sites reflects its pluralistic ethos, where temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras, and monasteries coexist as symbols of devotion. While modern initiatives are revitalizing this sector, challenges such as overcrowding, commercialization, and environmental degradation need urgent attention. By adopting sustainable practices, digital innovations, and inclusive policies, India can continue to uphold its legacy as the spiritual heart of the world.

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