

## Religious Tourism: A Road Map for Sustainable Development

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### Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries with an annual average growth rate about 5%, and numbers of international travel might nearly double until 2020. Tourism is also a major source of foreign exchange earnings for many developing countries. The tourism industry ranks about 6th in international trade after trade in fossil fuels, telecommunications and computer equipment, automotive products, and agriculture.

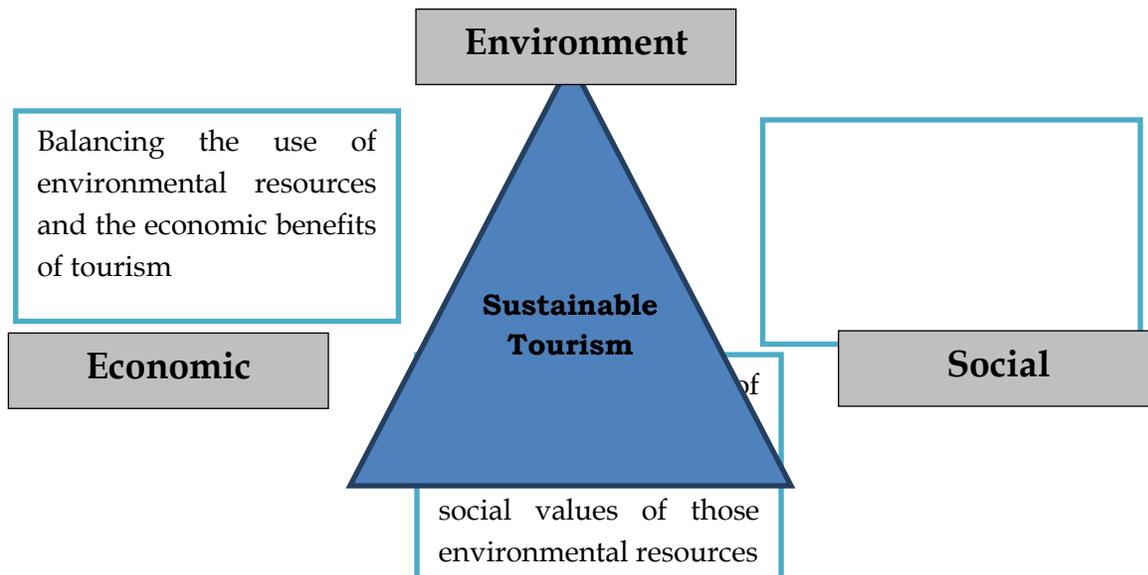
In the tourism business, natural resources are intensively used and consumed, and tourism has major impacts on environment, ecosystems, economy, societies and culture. If it is managed well, tourism can contribute significantly to regional development, if not; it can have devastating effects on nature and society.

Religious tourism is as old as the religion itself and consequently it is the oldest form of tourism in the world (Karar, 2010, p. 99; Rinschede, 1992, p. 53). Smith (1992) and Shackley (2005) noted that most religions require, whatever the aim is, to visit holy places. A good example is the Zoroastrians (Sarahani and Musa, 2012), which motivated pilgrimages in ancient times, which is still going on un-interrupted today. Each year around 300-330 million tourists visit world's key religious sites (UNWTO, 2011a). In addition UNWTO (2011a) has reported that 60% of the world population practices a religion and these believers form demographic base of religious tourism. Many countries include religion in their census. It is estimated that there are approximately six hundred million national and international religious and spiritual voyages in the world, of which 40% take place in Europe and around half of which in Asia and the rest is in other continents of the world (UNWTO, 2011a). The three major religions in the world; Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, with a 33%, 21% and 14% worldwide followers respectively have received highest proportion of religious tourist in their headquarters (Rojo, 2007).

### Principles of sustainable tourism

Due to the dimension of the tourism industry - 900 million arrivals per year around the world – and because tourism is related so essentially to natural areas, it is one of the major threats to biodiversity and natural resources world-wide. Therefore, it is absolutely indispensable to undertake efforts to make tourism more sustainable - regarding all kinds of tourism, at all levels and for all parts of the tourism business from international tour operator to small pension owners.

The challenge of sustainable tourism development is to make use of tourism's positive impacts, enhancing and channelling the benefits into the right directions, and to avoid or mitigate the negative impacts as far as possible. A common definition of sustainable tourism is the one of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): "Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support system." [WTO 1998: 19]



In other words, sustainable tourism development is ecologically sustainable, economically viable as well as ethically and socially equitable. It respects the fragile environmental balance that characterizes many tourism destinations, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas; and it is based on a long term perspective.

**Sustainable tourism is characterized by: (UNESCO Report 2005)**

- Enhancing the well-being of communities  
Sustainable tourism development supports and ensures the economic, social and cultural well-being of the communities in which tourism takes place.
- Supporting the protection of the natural and cultural environment  
Sustainable tourism allows the use of natural and cultural resources for gaining economic profit while at the same time guaranteeing that these resources are not deteriorated or destroyed.

Additionally, tourism is expected to be a driving force with regard to the establishment or the enhancement of nature protection and the maintenance of cultural values.

- Recognizing product quality and tourist satisfaction  
The quality of tourism products offered by a region is a key factor for the economic success of tourism. It is not only characterized by material criteria like the quality of transport, accommodation and food, but also by non-material criteria like hospitality or the quality of experiences.
- Applying adaptive management and monitoring  
To ensure that tourism is developed in a way which is ecological, economic and socially sustainable, adequate management and monitoring must be established, following the basic principles of sustainable use of resources.

It is important to note that different stakeholders involved in the tourism business are responsible for the implementation of different parts of the principles. Governments, tourism businesses, local communities, NGOs and the tourists can all contribute to make tourism more

sustainable. In order to achieve the goals of sustainable tourism, the different actors should cooperate and stimulate each other to put the principles into practice.

## 1. Religious Tourism

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

## 2. Issues being faced in the sustainable development of Religious Tourism in India:

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:

- **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.
- **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'.
- **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).
- **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'.
- **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

### 3. Road Map for future

India is in a very fortunate position in terms of tourism. While tourism resources are being destroyed elsewhere, India's assets in the form of its natural environment and culture are well preserved.

This can further increase the profile of India as a prime tourist destination. The tourism industry can create a wide range of opportunities for people in our country who have begun to grasp economic opportunities offered by the industry. Tourism also can develop a self-financing mechanism for promoting the country's environment and facilitating an awareness and understanding of the uniqueness of this country.

Tourism has resulted in some adverse impacts but the government should recognise the need to address them.

Religious Tourism can also promote Indian culture by creating employment opportunities for traditional musicians and dancers and encouraged the resurgence of local festivals in different parts of the country.

The private sector is being more involved in not only monitoring itself but also can help in developing future tourism policies. Tourism bodies and Tour Operators should establish partnership between relevant sectors involved in the industry and within the industry itself. Both

the organisations are still in their formative stages but have crucial roles to play in determining the future sustainability of tourism in India.

### **Conclusion**

Religious tourism offers a way of achieving the benefits of tourism in a way that is consistent with the country's development philosophy. The tourism industry also has a fundamental role in maintaining the sustainability of religious tourism in India. Individual firms can take the lead role by showing how self-regulation can work in practice, by taking voluntary action to reduce pollution, by initiating and abiding by the Codes of Best Practices, and by educating clients. The tourism industry association must continue to develop and adopt such codes of conduct and good practice, and provide members with the information to implement them. The industry association must also develop mechanisms for effective self-regulation and introduce sound environmental practices. Lastly, local involvement and input are essential for the long-term economic and environmental sustainability of tourism in India. If local communities are involved and have a stake in tourism activities, it will be in their interests to ensure that tourism is sustainable. Furthermore, partnership between the government, the private sector, and the local people can open up a wide range of opportunities that make good economic sense and benefit all the partners.

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