



INDIAN BUDDHIST TOURISM: PROGRESS AND EMERGING ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

The Buddhist tourism industry in India is continuously putting its effort to sustain the image of top Buddhist tourism destination in the world. The industries have to think about new strategies and policies to handle their customers and tourists to optimize their customer loyalty and revenues. A new impetus is given to Buddhist Tourism when Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said; I would prefer calling 'India' as 'Buddhist India' and simultaneously also declared Bodh Gaya as 'Spiritual Capital of India'. Since Bodh Gaya is the epicentre of Buddhist Tourism, it will help to increase number of tourist to Buddhist India. The Buddhist Circuit is a globally important route for over 450 million Buddhists across the world, especially in East and South East Asian regions, making it an important platform for strengthening bilateral and cultural ties. However, despite its cultural and religious significance, Tourism infrastructure along the Buddhist Circuit remains relatively underdeveloped and large volumes of tourists have failed to translate into higher incomes for the local communities. The cornerstone of our National and State policy framework should therefore be to nurture a business environment conducive for the private sector, encourage and invest in local enterprises and domestic industry as well as foreign investment to build quality infrastructure, hotels, and services at these sites.

Buddhist tourism today is highlighted for its immense business opportunities. With its lucrative linkages with transport, hotel industry etc., the potential and performance of India's Buddhist tourism industry needs to be gauged in terms of its socio-economic magnitudes.

Creating a profile of a customer in a systematic manner, delivering consistent development process across all media and integrating multi-channel customer interactions will help in building positive image of Indian Buddhist tourism. This paper is an attempt to envisage the various factors crucial to business development strategy and to find out the issues pertaining to the travelers, tourists and customer's in the Buddhist tourism sector and the attempts being made by various

stake holders. The paper also makes some policy suggestions to address the constraints in promoting Buddhist tourism in India.

METHODOLOGY

Primary data gathered by using structured questionnaires administered to numerous Indians and foreigners/expatriates, interviews of officials in the tourism department and through internet sources. Both open and close-ended questions are used. Secondary data collected through internet sources pertaining to the statistical data. Also the method of SWOT analysis of tourism services through the feedback from various stake holders has been used to decipher the inter-linkage of strategy to the environment factors.

KEY WORDS: Spiritual, cornerstone, immense, envisages SWOT analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

For a country which believes in “Atithi devo bhava”, tourism has emerged as India's fourth biggest foreign exchange earner growing at CAGR of 13 percent. With a contribution of 6.6 percent towards India's GDP and 7.7 percent towards total employment, India's Travel, Tourism and Hospitality industry has the potential to induce sustainable development at the grassroots and become the backbone of our economy, truly adding 'Inclusiveness' to Vibrant India. In his vision of 'Brand India', Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has also underlined the importance of Tourism and Tradition as great enablers.

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The Government has demonstrated a strong focus in the sector through significant budget allocations such as INR 500 crore for developing five tourist circuits and the proposed development of Sarnath-Gaya-Varanasi Buddhist circuit. Additionally, the Ministry of Tourism has launched a comprehensive plan - Integrated Tourism Development of the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar - which will further boost infrastructure development, skill development, increased market access and involvement of communities.

In 2005 India emerged as one among the top 40 tourism earners. Thanks to the vibrant tourism industry, there is now an almost assured channel of financial flow to the country.

Apart from substantial contributions to the forex kitty of the country, India's tourism is also a major source of employment, as a labor-intensive activity in a labor-surplus economy. With its forward and backward linkages with a host of sectors like transport, hospitality, education, health, banking etc, India is all set to reap full potential of this vibrant sector.

Therefore, equipping efforts are made by the government under the five-year plans. But the pressure of lingering problems in the Indian economy – mainly transport bottlenecks – coupled with the emerging commitments and challenges under General Agreements on Trade in Services (GATS) is already being felt. The country needs to solve the problems and address the challenges surely and squarely not only to strengthen the tourism sector per se but also boost the tertiary sector, in general.

In the background of this situation, the objectives of the present paper are (i) to examine the progress and problems of Indian Buddhist tourism as it has entered the new millennium; (ii) to analyze the emerging challenges; and (iii) to devise alternative strategies for Buddhist tourism promotion in order to bridge the gulf between potential and performance.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi plans to market the Buddha card to the countries in the region as India is the place of origin of Dhamma and Sangha. He indicated such a change in emphasis by his first official visit abroad to a neighbouring Buddhist country Asia, Bhutan, and then to Nepal, where Buddha was born. His first official visit outside South Asia was to another Buddhist country, Japan.

With a vast population of Buddhists in east and south-east Asia plans are afoot to make India a pilgrimage for world Buddhists. The work on phase-I Buddhist Tourist Circuit is gathering pace. This includes Lumbini in Nepal where the Buddha was born, Bodhgaya where he attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh where he delivered his first sermon, Rajgir in Bihar where he lived and taught, Nalanda which became the centre of Buddhist learning and teaching, Kushinagar in UP where he departed from the world, Kapilavastu on the India-Nepal border where Buddha spent his early years before embarking on the long journey to enlightenment, Vaishali in Bihar where he delivered his last sermon, Sravasti in UP where he spent 24 rainy seasons at Jetavan monastery and Kausambi where he preached.

Buddhism has emerged as one of the potent instrument in India's foreign policy directed towards the Asia. This renewed vigour towards Buddhism and its use as a foreign policy tool has multiple reasons which are:

a) India is the birth place of Buddhism therefore the entire Buddhist community in Asia has a spiritual affinity towards India, providing avenue for soft power diplomacy.

b) All major Asian nations have sizeable Buddhist population, paving way for people to people contact.

c) Buddhism itself offers a middle path to rein worldly desire, to exist peacefully and in environmentally sustainable manner. All these are latest diplomatic themes and India's thus see an opportunity to be a torch bearer in this arena.

d) Religious based conflict has escalated at global level and global diplomacy is assimilating religion to arrive at meaningful solutions. India can't be oblivious to the emerging trend.

But the religion based diplomacy has to be treading cautiously to reap positives while checking negatives.

POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

a) Spiritual Leadership: India can emerge as the spiritual leader for not only Asia but for the entire world community, thus adding a feather to its soft power.

b) A peaceful Asia that may emerge if integral for the rise of India.

c) Asian community is deeply religious thus spiritual integration will take our foreign relation to an altogether new level.

CHECK LIST

a) It should not derive India to religion based association thus losing focus on interest based diplomacy.

b) India's neighbour especially Sri Lanka, Myanmar have Buddhist community at axe with other religious group. Our inclination towards Buddhism may send wrong signals to these minorities in homeland and may provide opportunity to disgruntled element to affect internal security.

The path of Buddhist diplomacy needs a calculated move, one that secures the principle of "Sarv Dharma Sambava" and simultaneously bolsters our Soft power to present us as a rightful contender for global superpower.

PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

The tourism industry of India is based on certain core nationalistic ideals and standards which are: Swaagat or welcome, Sahyog or cooperation, Soochanaa or information, Sanrachanaa or infrastructure, Suvidha or facilitation, Safaai or cleanliness and Surakshaa or security.

All said and done, the tourism industry in India is not without its problems like –

- Low share in the world – only 0.38 per cent
- Inadequate capacity – e.g. 85,481 hotel rooms as against 8,97,206 in China
- Costly travel – soaring fuel surcharges, poor flight management etc

- Poor organization – fragmented market, poor advertising, stringent rules for service providers etc
- Lack of supportive infrastructure – bad roads, improper health and hygiene, Communication gaps, etc
- Gap between demand and supply of manpower
- Lapses in security and safety – incidents of tout and harassment of tourists in Some places.

These constraints have led to poor visitor experience, and slow growth of revenue visà-Vis countries like China, Singapore etc.

TOURIST ARRIVALS ON BUDDHIST CIRCUIT

Tourist Arrivals 2014

10-Year CAGR

Sl No.	Circuit	Domestic	International	Total	Domestic	International	Total	Nearest Airport (Distance in KM)	Travel Time (Hours)	Travel along the circuit(% of Bodhgaya)
1	Bodhgaya	16,47,701	2,25,668	18,73,369	21.0%	22.3%	21.1%	10	0.5	100%
2	Patna	18,17,439	9,097	18,26,536	2.2%	19.3%	2.3%	0	0	98%
3	Rajgir	15,25,107	1,64,314	16,89,421	18.8%	45.9%	20.0%	67	1.5	90%
4	Sarnath	8,38,566	3,62,113	12,00,679	4.9%	7.6%	5.6%	10	0.5	64%
5	Lumbini	7,23,781	1,33,308	8,57,089		14.4%		10	0.5	46%
6	Kushinagar	7,50,171	62,292	8,12,463	15.5%	21.3%	15.9%	223	4.5	43%
7	Vaishali	2,02,509	60,108	2,35,761	-1.6%	47.9%	0.0%	40	1.0	13%
8	Sarvasti	1,09,876	98,642	2,08,518	6.7%	16.7%	10.4%	177	5.1	11%
9	Kapilvastu	1,61,434	30,219	1,91,653	40.7%	5.4%	24.6%	10	0.5	10%

Source: Government of UP, Government of Bihar

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present work is based on both primary and secondary data. The methodology adopted for carrying out the present construct is largely based on primary data collected through well designed questionnaire served on a selected group of respondents to elicit the required

information. Questionnaire was prepared on Likert's five point scale and respondents have been asked to tick the relevant satisfaction/dissatisfaction agreement.

Secondary data is also used for referring the conceptual aspect and literature review collected from various sources like Books, Journals, Magazines, Research Reports, and Previous work done related to subject and Tourism Industry Websites.

Customer satisfaction: The hypothesis tests indicate that customer satisfaction with the performance of organizations in Buddhist tourism industry is important factor in determining whether the customer will repurchase and/or recommend.

Tourism industry image and customer satisfaction: This finding indicates that tourism industry image and customer satisfaction are important factor in determining a customer's intention to exhibit loyalty.

Location	Connectivity		
	Rail	Road	Air
Aurangabad	Aurangabad has railway station of its own and is connected by railway network with the rest of the country.	Connected by road with rest of the country via National highways.	Domestic Airport at Aurangabad.
Bodhgaya	The nearest rail head is Gaya (16 Km.).	Bodhgaya is connected by road to Gaya. 16 km to the Delhi-Calcutta Highway junction (on Grand Trunk Road) Dobhi-22 km and Patna 105 km. (via Jahanabad) or 181 km via Raigir.	No direct air connectivity, nearest airport at Patna (112 Km).
Kesaria	No direct air connectivity, nearest airport at Patna (112 Km).	Accessible by road from Patna and Charia.	No direct air connectivity, nearest airport at Patna.
Lauria	No direct rail connectivity, the nearest Railhead is Bettiah (26 Kms).	Accessible by road from Bettiah, Motihari and Muzzafarpur.	No air connectivity, nearest airport at Patna.
Nalanda	The nearest railhead to Nalanda is Bakhtiyarpur, only 38 Km away from Nalanda. It falls on the DelhiHowrah (Kolkata) main line. Several important trains connect this railway station to several major places in India.	Accessible by road from Patna.	No direct air connectivity, nearest airport at Patna (90 Km).

Rajgir	Rajgir has a railway station of its own, which is linked to Gaya. Several important trains from all parts of the country in turn service Gaya.	Road network connects Rajgir to Patna (102 Km), Nalanda (12 Km) and Gaya (34 Km).	No direct air connectivity, nearest airport at Gaya.
Vaishali	Hajipur (35 Km) on the North Eastern Railway is the nearest railway station for Vaishali.	Vaishali is connected by road to Patna (55 Km), Muzaffarpur (36 km) and Hajipur (35 Km).	No direct air connectivity, the nearest airport is Patna 56 Km.
Vikramshila	No direct rail connectivity, nearest railhead at Kahalgaon (BhagalpurSahebganj loopline).	Accessible by road from Kahalgaon (10 Km).	No direct air connectivity, nearest airport at Patna (239 Km).

SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths: The tourism sector's contribution to the national development priorities and strategies has so far been relatively limited. A review of the Buddhist tourism sector's competitive strengths and weakness, opportunities and threats indicates that it has considerable growth potential. The main results of analysis are:

Buddhism, and everything that came from it to become the widespread faith it is today, is deeply rooted in India. In the words of the Dalai Lama, the relationship that Buddhism shares with India is that of student and master. From the birth of the very first Buddha, Buddha Shakyamuni, also known as Gautama Buddha, India and its vast landscape have played a vital role in the evolution of Buddhism from humble beginnings into a full-fledged internationally spread faith.

Almost all of the Buddha's life was spent in this part of the subcontinent, and this has resulted in there being a marked elevation in the spirituality of the places which saw him work his cause in the flesh as opposed to the later structures and institutes that came to be. To put it another way, all the monumental events with respect to the faith during the Buddha's lifetime occurred here.

Buddhism is a religion, which arose in and around ancient Magadha, India (Bihar), and is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (born in Lumbini, Nepal), who is known as the Buddha (literally the Enlightened One or Awakened One).

India has always been a delight for tourists, especially those interested in history, culture and religion. For Buddhist tourists, India is the land of Buddha, for it was here, in a small town of Bodh Gaya, that the great prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment and became Buddha. Years later, it

was again in India that an ambitious king Asoka renounced everything and took refuge in the preachings of Buddha. He sent his emissaries to different parts of the world so as to spread the message of peace and harmony and the religion of Buddhism.

Weakness: The main competitive constraints facing the tourism sector are the low priority that the sector has been given by the government. In past it was unable to effectively link its role in relation to national development priorities, undue focus was laid on the international market at the expense of domestic tourism, the poor quality of environments surrounding many of India's main Buddhist sites, the security scenario in the region that affects the perception of India as a safe and secure destination, the quality of facilities and services at Buddhist sites, the quantity and quality of transportation service and related infrastructure, facilitation of entry to India by international tourists, the multiplicity and high level of taxation, limited availability of tourist information in – source markets and at destination, limited scope, accuracy and reliability of market data for planning and management, insufficient marketing of Buddhist tourism in domestic and international market, limited and poor facilities and services outside the major cities, especially in rural areas and the lack of community participation leading to in some cases hostility to Buddhist tourism.

Opportunities: Notwithstanding the constraints, the key competitive opportunities are:

- (1) Leverage the huge potential of its domestic and international Buddhist tourism.
- (2) Leverage its strengths as one of the world's famous destination for Buddhist tourism.
- (3) Leverage India's strength as one of the world's largest economies for Buddhist tourism.

Threat: The main internal threats to the development of Buddhist tourism sector are failing to effectively resolve the constraints identified above. These are security, safety and health situation; failing to involve communities in the decision- making process for Buddhist tourism development; and failure to adopt and implement sustainable development and management principles and practices at Buddhist tourism sites.

CONCLUSION

In the overall development of Buddhist tourism, the constraints related to infrastructure remain a bottleneck. Road infrastructure needs to be strengthened and augmented ensuring better connections within the Buddhist circuits. The availability of recreation and entertainment facilities has to be improved, because such facilities would directly enhance the satisfaction levels of tourists. In particular, some evening entertainment facilities are an important element in the tourism industry and these can take the form of outdoor restaurants and cultural shows. This could be done in accordance with the overall nature of each site. Of course, nothing should be done to disturb the ambiance or the social environment and religious atmosphere of areas used for prayer or meditation. In the long run, consideration could be given to providing indoor sports facilities, yoga centres, meditation halls, and so forth.

An analysis of the environmental effects of tourism needs to be carried out. This should include the overall environmental quality of the cities and the region with a focus on air and water pollution, traffic congestion, waste disposal, parks and landscaping, design of buildings, public health and safety. After the study and analysis, coordinated efforts should be taken to improve these environmental aspects.

An evaluation needs to be made of the socio-cultural considerations related to Buddhist tourism development in the region with the aim to identify positive socio-cultural impacts of Buddhist tourism at present and in the future needs. Measures may be needed as well as action to be taken in order to reinforce the positive impact. The existing marketing strategy and programme for Buddhist tourism promotion should be strengthened at the regional level. The aim should be the preparation of a specific strategy and programme related to Buddhist tourism for the region.

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