



FESTIVAL TOURISM IN INDIA: PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES AND GROWTH STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Given the unique cultural heritage of India and also the large number of world renowned festivals which are being celebrated every year, tourism initiatives focusing on festivals and other cultural activities have got immense growth potential for sustained tourism development in the country. Festival tourism and its variants can attract huge foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) in a country like India and hence promote the rapid economic growth of this developing nation. This paper makes a preliminary review of the prospects and challenges of Festival tourism in India, and offers strategies for its sustained growth.

Key Words: Festival Tourism, Foreign Exchange Earnings, Sustained Economic Growth.

Introduction

It is a widely accepted fact that tourism industry has high potential for creation of employment, attracting more foreign exchange, and hence faster economic development of nations. This trend is particular prominent among the developing nations including India. Hence, nations like India have started promoting tourism aggressively, for bringing about rapid national economic development. From an international perspective, tourism is ranked second largest in terms of income creation, it being second only to the oil industry in this regard. In fact, tourism has become one of the largest as well as the fastest growing industries in the whole world. Heightened levels of leisure time in modern times along with constantly growing levels of purchasing power enable more people to opt for tours. Of late, this industry is getting better attention by Governments worldwide, as it can ensure better foreign exchange earnings (FEE) than any other industry. Government of India is no exception in this regard, and so are the cases of many other developing nations in the world, including India's neighboring nations like China, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Vast linkages effects of tourism sector makes it the driver of so many other related sectors, like, for instance, the amounts spent by tourists on their transport, accommodation, food, recreation etc. have got definite linkages – both forward and backward – with the allied industries. Hence, promotion of tourism industry automatically drives the whole economy through the above sort of linkages, thus resulting in faster economic development.

Festival tourism is one of the major types of tourism wherein tourists get attracted by festivals and other cultural activities. In the Indian context, festivals constitute a part and parcel of the extremely rich cultural heritage of this nation. In India, festival tourism is inseparably intertwined with the nation's culture. Naturally, the tourism ministries of the Governments at the State and Union levels have already recognized festival tourism as a special type of cultural tourism. From a macroeconomic perspective, however, the importance of festivals lies in their capacity to attract thousands of tourists, both domestic and international. This in turn translates into generation of enormous amounts of money because every year millions of tourists attend such festivals and cultural events. Sizeable share of such tourists being



foreigners, festivals attract large amounts as foreign exchange earnings (FEE) also. This capacity of festivals to lure foreign tourists and hence FEE is its vital benefit from a national economic outlook, especially for nations like India with a marvelous cultural heritage. The rich cultural heritage and favorable Government policies provide a fertile land for festival tourism to grow and prosper in India.

Relevance and Significance of the Study

The tremendous potential for tourism for employment creation and economic development is widely acknowledged in the literature. Many nations, especially the developing nations including India, have been promoting tourism aggressively so as to exploit this development potential. For instance, one of the poorest economies in the world viz. Nepal has been trying to lure maximum tourists, “both Indians and non-Indians”. (Ranade, 1998) [24]. Campaign slike “Visit Nepal Year 1998” or “Nepal Tourism Year 2011” all have the basic aim of luring more foreign tourists to Nepal and are primarily targeted at cultural/religious tourists from India. Because of the rich cultural heritage of India, the country has got vast scope for attracting tourists, particularly foreign tourists, and year after year the number of tourists has been on the rise. In fact, as per the estimates of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO), more than 40 percent of the total international tourists belong to “cultural tourists” – that is, those who are attracted by the festivals and such other cultural activities. Hence, festival tourism – a major type of cultural tourism – does always have immense growth prospects in a country like India. In India, the Governmental policies have also been in favour of attracting the tourists, and deliberate measures like tourism promotional activities are being organized by the Union and State Governments of this country over the years. But, the long-term sustainability of tourism needs to be ensured. This in turn calls for adequate and timely strategies towards protecting the heritage cites, attracting the tourists, providing high quality services without compromising the purity and sustainability of the environment etc. In this context, this paper makes a detailed study of the prospects and challenges of festival tourism in India and suggests strategies for its long term sustainability.

Review of Literature

Empirical studies on festival tourism are rare, but many studies on tourism have touched upon the festival tourism or its variants like religious (pilgrimage) tourism, cultural tourism etc. Ranade (1998) [24] has sought to study the relevance of Nepal tourism as a foreign exchange earner for the Nepalese economy. The author has pointed out the social usefulness and economic sense underlying tourism – the world’s largest service industry. The capacity of tourism to earn higher net foreign exchange (exports) to the economy because of its low level of imports has been noted by the author. Given the vast tourism resources of the ‘Himalayan Kingdom’ of Nepal, the aggressive tourism promotion by the Nepalese Government (‘Visit Nepal Year 1998’, for instance), the growing trend in foreign exchange earnings etc. have been discussed.

Kumar, Yathish (2007) [12] in his paper, “Tourism Sector and Sustainable Development” has pointed out that while the basic objects of tourism include enhancing the quality of life of people and providing a good experience to the tourists, it is equally important to ensure that the environmental quality is duly protected because the latter is vital for both the tourists and the local population. The author thus highlights the need for maintaining environmental purity for long-term sustainability of tourism. A study on the sustainability of Indian tourism with special reference to Kerala tourism by Manoj P K (2008) [14], ‘Sustainable Tourism in India: A Study from a Global Perspective with Focus on Tourism Prospects of Kerala’, presented in connection with the Second International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations, has discussed the immense growth prospects of Indian tourism from aglobal



perspective. Kerala tourism and its peculiar features are discussed in better detail. Based on his study, suggestions have been made for the faster growth of tourism in Kerala in a manner that is sustainable in the long run. Another study by the same author, Manoj P K (2009) [15], 'Environment Friendly Tourism for Sustainable Economic Development in India', has highlighted the vast growth potential of Indian tourism for the rapid economic development. The utmost need for ensuring that all tourism initiatives are environment-friendly has been pointed out by the author. Accordingly, environmental purity and ecological balance are to be preserved at any cost, and hence environment-friendly tourism initiatives alone need to be promoted.

A book on ecotourism in India authored by Singh, Sarvjeet (2009) [25] has stated that ecotourism is entirely a new approach in tourism and it provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful displays of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity, conservation and local cultures. It involves travels towards locations wherein flora, fauna, cultural heritage etc. are the main attractions. It encourages the active participation by the local populace in the conservation and education dimensions of tourism development. A paper by Manoj P K (2010)[16], 'Tourism in Kerala: A Study of the Imperatives and Impediments with Focus on Ecotourism', has analyzed in detail Kerala's tourism sector using SWOT methodology. Based on the findings of his study, the author has made suggestions for sustainable development of tourism in Kerala. Nagy & Nagy (2013) [21] have observed in their research paper that Festival tourism has become a 'determining factor' in the economic development of Hungary and will continue to be so in the future. It has been stated that festival tourism needs to be promoted as it plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of rural areas of Hungary.

Sudheer, B (2015) [26] has studied the impacts of Responsible Tourism (RT), both economic and cultural, as part of his UGC-Sponsored Minor Research Project. His case study of RT at Kumarakom in Kerala has revealed the need for alternative and innovative practices like RT for minimizing the adverse effects of tourism on the environment, and hence to make tourism sustainable in the long run. On the RT at Kumarakom, its positive effects (like, employment to the local community), empowerment of women through RT-related activities (like, providing vegetables, fish, meat etc. which are all procured locally), positive linkage effects on the locality (eg. earnings from the purchases made by tourists) are noted. An ecotourism study in Kerala using field-based data by Manoj P. K (2015) (a) [18], 'Prospects of Ecotourism in Kerala: Evidence from Kumarakam in Kottayam District' discusses the prospects of ecotourism, and based on his findings suggestions are made for sustainable development of ecotourism in Kerala. Another empirical study by Manoj P. K (2015) (b) [19], 'Employment Generation from Rural Tourism: A Field Study of the Local Community at Kumbalangi, Kerala' has used the feedback received from the local population about their experiences relating to the potential of rural tourism for creation of employment, the relevant Governmental interventions as expected by them etc. It has been noted that there are high prospects of employment generation. However, the need for betterment of tourism infrastructure, basically through Governmental initiatives has been reported. Another study by the same author, Manoj P K (2016) [20], "Impact of Rural Tourism on the Environment and Society: Evidence from Kumbalangi in Kerala, India" in *International Journal of Advance Research in Computer Science and Management Studies* has noted the obvious positive effects of rural tourism but has warned about the utmost need to preserve the environmental purity by controlling the unchecked inflow of tourists, minimizing the use of non-degradable wastes like plastics, more stress on preserving the environment etc.



UN World Tourism Organization (UN-WTO) (2015) [27] has noted the tourism in South Asia has grown by more than 7 percent driven by the commendable growth of over 11 percent in India, over 20 percent in Sri Lanka etc. World Economic Forum (WEF) (2015) [28] in its report on tourism competitiveness made a detailed study of the competitiveness of various countries of the world, in the area of travel and tourism. This report contains the competitiveness of nations at the regional and global levels using a few well-defined parameters; the global competitiveness of Indian tourism is 52 as against 17 of China. At the regional (Asia Pacific region) level too, there is a huge gap in the competitiveness, with in the 12th position whereas China is in the 6th rank.

WTTC (2015) [29] in its comprehensive report relating to the economic impact of tourism and travel industry has made a detailed study of the relative performance of different nations of the world in the tourism front, along with region-wise performance as well as future projections. WTTC has pointed out that South Asian region, spearheaded India and the Middle East, is globally the fastest growing region in terms of the share of Travel and Tourism sector to the GDP value. India is one the large and fast growing markets along with China, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey. It has also been reported that South Asia will be the fastest growing sub-region in its long-run growth to 2025 (7.0 percent) of Travel & Tourism GDP, and that India will outpace China by the year 2025. India Brand Equity Federation (IBEF) (2017) [9] in its very recent industry report on *Tourism and Hospitality* has noted the immense potential of the tourism and hospitality sector for contributing towards the economic development of India.

Though many studies have been done on tourism in the Indian scenario, including a few in the Kerala context too, studies on the festival tourism in India are very scarce. So, this study aims to bridge the above research gap by making a macro level study on festival tourism in India.

Objectives of the Study

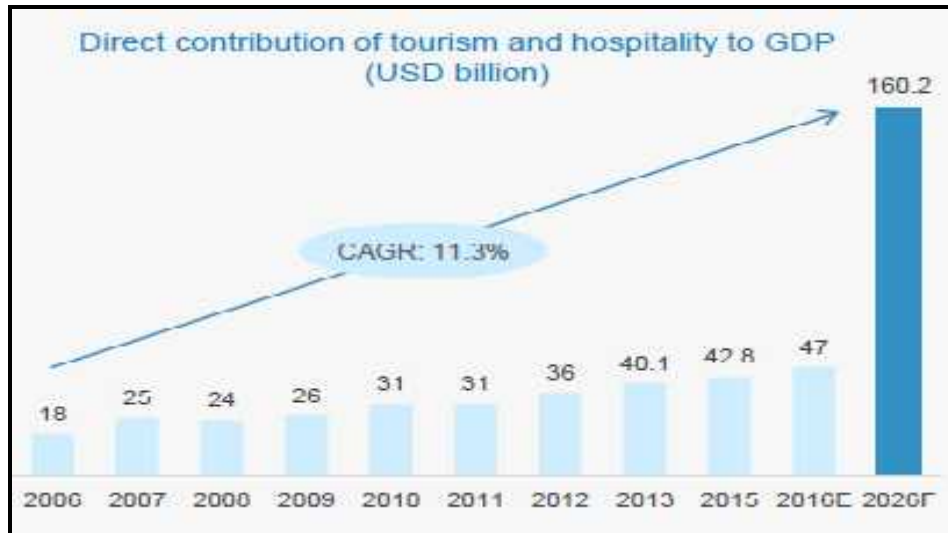
- (i) To make an overall study the scope of promotion of India's tourism sector for the faster economic development of the nation;
- (ii) To make a detailed study of the prospects and challenges of festival tourism in India, with special reference to its long-term sustainability; and
- (iii) To suggest strategies for the sustained growth of festival tourism in India based on the findings of this study.

Methodology and Data Sources

The study is descriptive-analytical and is primarily based on the analysis of macro level data available from authentic secondary sources, like the publications of the Government and those of the Ministry of Tourism. Common statistical tools are used for data analysis and interpretation.

Tourism Sector in India – An Overview of its Role in National Economic Development

Tourism sector in India plays a cardinal role in the economic development of the nation since its contribution to the GDP of the nation, both direct contribution and total contribution has been on the rise over the years. The direct contribution of this sector to the GDP of the nation, for instance, has been increasing at the rate of 11.30 CAGR over the years (Figure I).



Source: IBEF (2017, Jan.) [9], p.10.

Figure: Direct Contribution of Tourism and Hospitality Sector to the GDP of India.

The direct contribution of the tourism sector to the GDP was USD 18 Billion as of 2006, the same has reached USD 42.8 Billion last year (2015) and the same is projected to reach as high as USD 160.2 Billion by 2026, thus registering a CAGR of 11.30 percent (Figure I).



Source: IBEF (2017, Jan.) [9], p.11.

Figure II: Total Contribution of Tourism and Hospitality Sector to the GDP of India.

The total contribution of the tourism sector to the GDP of India has risen from USD 88 Billion in 2007 to as high as USD 147.7 Billion in 2015 and is further projected to reach the level of USD 280.5 Billion by 2026, thus registering a growth rate of 4.97 percent (CAGR). As of Dec. 2016, the foreign exchange earnings (FEEs) from this vital sector to the GDP of the nation has been as high as USD 2.12 Billion. Regarding Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) to India there has been a growing trend. There has been a growing trend in respect of FTAs and FEEs over the years as is evident from Table I and Figure III.

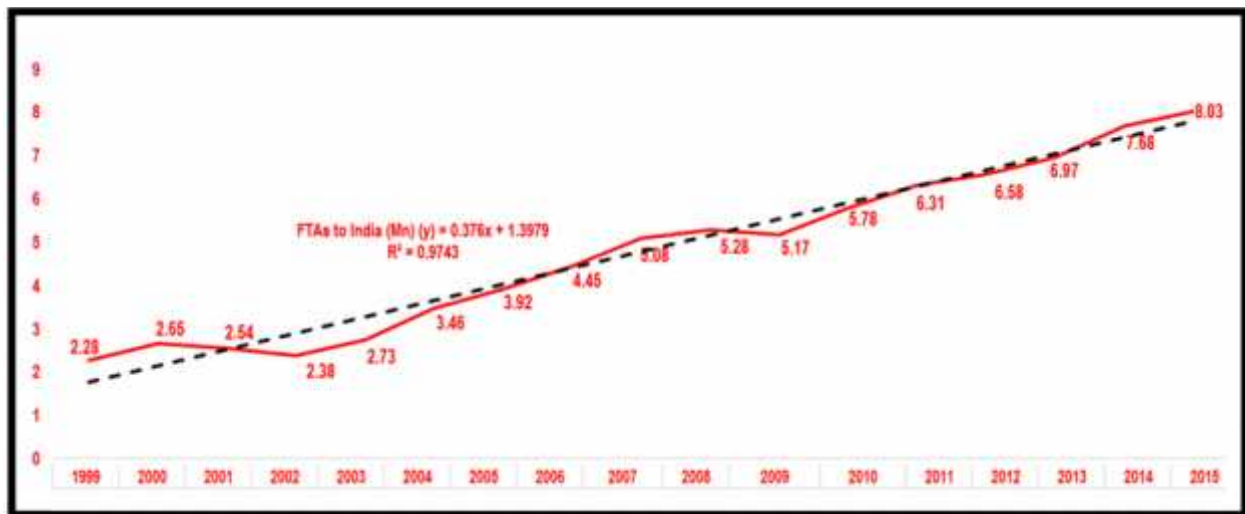


Table I: Trend in FTAs to India FEEs from Foreign Tourists.

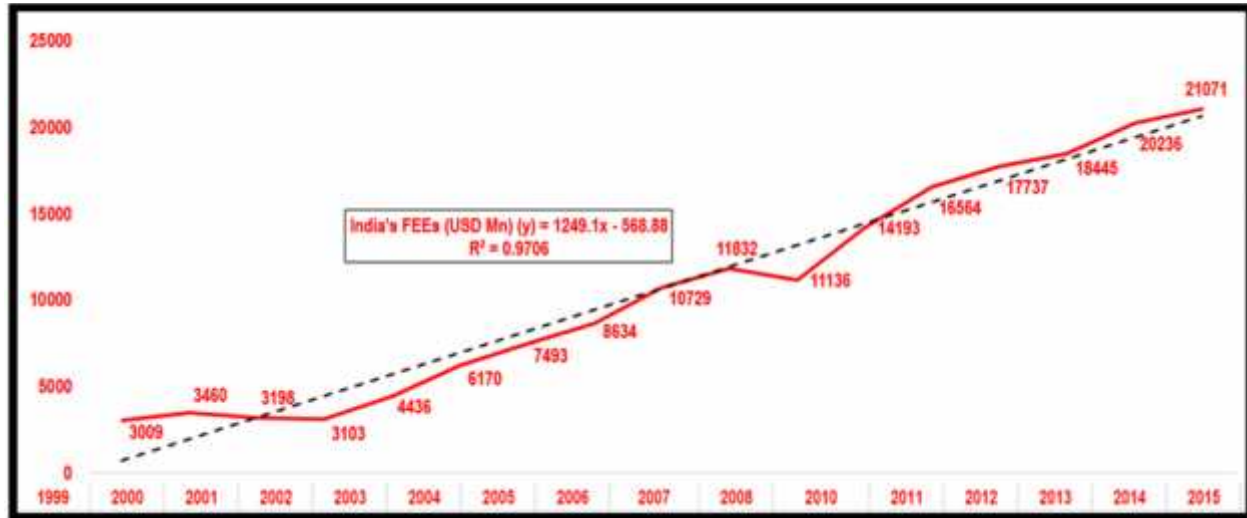
Year	FTAs to India (Mn)	India's FEEs (Tourism) USD Mn
1999	2.28	3009
2000	2.65	3460
2001	2.54	3198
2002	2.38	3103
2003	2.73	4436
2004	3.46	6170
2005	3.92	7493
2006	4.45	8634
2007	5.08	10729
2008	5.28	11832
2009	5.17	11136
2010	5.78	14193
2011	6.31	16564
2012	6.58	17737
2013	6.97	18445
2014	7.68	20236
2015	8.03	21071
2016	4.19 (Jan-Jun)	10865 (Jan-Jun)

Source: Govt. of India (July 2016), *India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2015*, Tourism Ministry.

From Table I, it is noted that there has been a generally rising trend in respect of Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) into India. Figure III captures this trend. The trend equation (with high R² value 97.43%) suggests an yearly addition of 0.376 million foreign tourists every year.



Source: Based on Govt. of India Data (Tourism Ministry) (as in Table I)
 Figure III: Trend in Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) into India (1999 to 2015).



Source: Based on Govt. of India Data (Tourism Ministry) (as in Table I)

Figure IV: Trend in India's Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from Tourism (1999 to 2015).

From Table I, it is also noted that there has been a generally rising trend in respect of India's Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from tourism. Figure IV captures this trend. The trend equation (with high R^2 value 97.06%) suggests an yearly addition of USD 1249.1 million foreign exchange to India every year because of the tourism activities. Regarding the growth prospects of India's tourism sector, the following points deserve special mention.

- ❖ In terms of the total contribution of travel and tourism sector to the GDP of the country, India ranks third among 184 countries of the world. This is a commendable performance.
- ❖ As part of embracing ICT advances in the tourism sector, Govt. of India has recently started promoting electronic tourist authorization, also termed as E-Tourist Visa. This has led to rapid growth in the number of tourist visas issued in India in the recent years. For instance, as high as 10,79,696 tourists could visit India in the year 2016.
- ❖ The contribution of the tourism sector to the GDP of the country for the period 2016-2026 is estimated to be at the rate of 7.9 percent per annum.
- ❖ As of 2016, the travel and tourism sector has contributed 9 percent to the total employment generated in the country. It has given employment to 38.4 Million people in India in 2016.
- ❖ The estimated growth in the contribution of this sector to the capital invested in India is as high as 6.3 percent per annum (2016-2026)– higher than the global average of 4.5 percent.
- ❖ The contribution of visitors' exports to the total exports from India has been estimated to grow at 7.5 percent per annum (2016-2026) as against the global average of 4.3 percent.

From the foregoing discussions, it may be noted that there are bright growth prospects for the tourism sector in India and that it can contribute effectively for the faster and sustained economic development and employment generation in the country, if properly nurtured.

Festival Tourism and Economic Development in India – Prospects and Challenges

Of late, the case of promotion of festivals and cultural events as a special kind of tourism, known as Festival tourism, and sometimes termed as Cultural tourism or Heritage tourism, etc. also, has assumed importance as an emerging and prolific area of tourism studies and research. As a major industry segment, Festival tourism has high growth prospects in India. Festivals and such other cultural events



have been flourishing in the country in recent decades, and more and more tourists, especially from other parts of the world (foreign tourists) have started showing keen interest in visiting and understanding such festivities and cultural activities. Naturally, in the Indian scenario, because of the rich cultural heritage of the nation Heritage Tourism (and its variants like Festival tourism) as one major type of tourism, just like Ecotourism, Medical tourism etc. It may be noted that Pilgrimage Tourism is an allied kind of tourism. (Figure V).

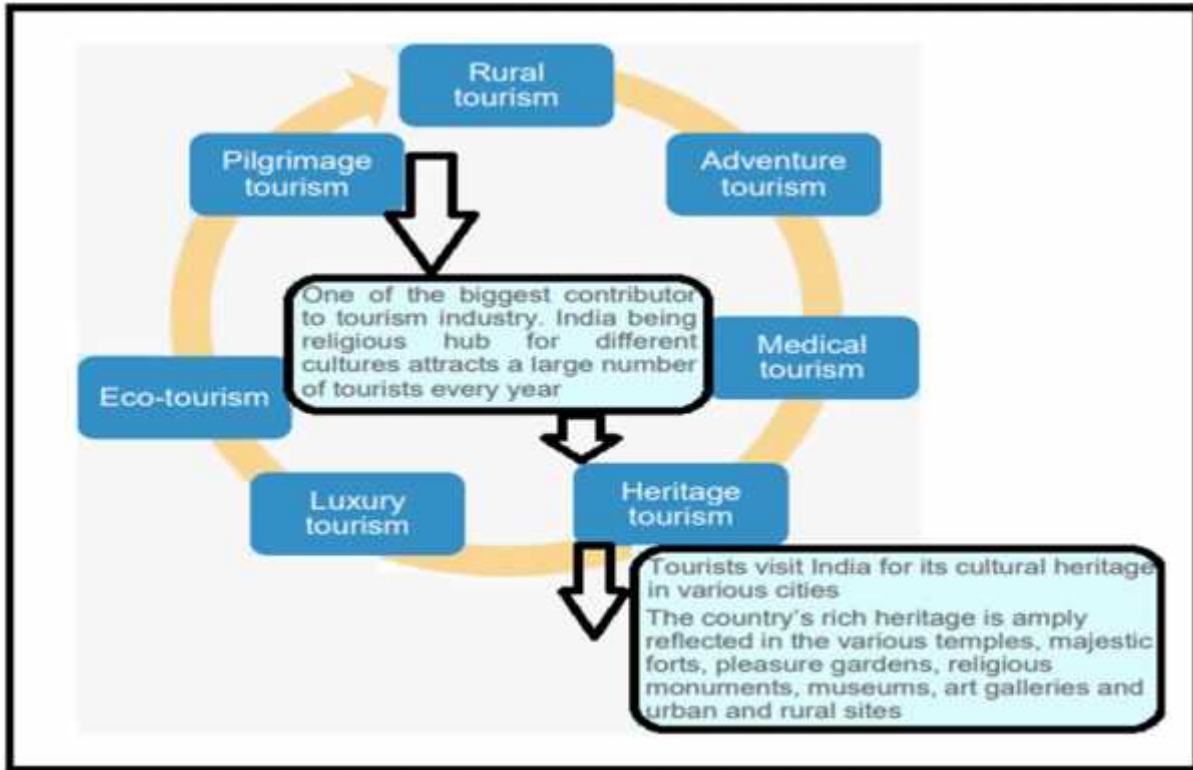


Figure V: Festival-based(Heritage/Pilgrimage) Tourism among Various Kinds of Tourism

It is noted that over the years the festivals themselves have undergone changes. Unlike in the past when festivals used to be associated with key calendar moments and specifically aligned with some peculiar seasons and heritage sites, today these are being celebrated in other seasons too, and almost throughout the year. During the past one decade many festivals and other cultural events are organized in a broader and diverse manner, all over India and that too round the year.

Spiritual, Religious and Cultural Underpinnings of Festival Tourism in India

Spirituality is, in fact, inbuilt into the rich cultural heritage that India can boast of. Naturally, India becomes the ultimate destination for those who travel in search of spiritual growth and enlightenment. For instance, traditional wellness treatments like the Transcendental Meditation are favorite choices for many a foreign tourist. Many foreign tourists visit Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s ashram at Rishikesh to learn about meditation. Spiritual tourism has already become a growing industry in India, and so also have many of its variants like Festival tourism and Cultural tourism. Here, we need to distinguish between spirituality and religion, since these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, though they are essentially different. Spiritual tourism relates to travels undertaken by people who seek the ultimate meaning of life, to attain inner peace by means of self-realization and transformation of self. Such



people who seek meaning in life may or may not be concerned with some religion. Those visiting spiritual places like Rishikesh, Varkala, Tiruvannamalai, Auroville, Shirdi, Bhodhgaya etc. are some examples in the Indian context. Religious tourism (sometimes called Pilgrimage tourism), on the other hand, involves devotees travelling either individually or collectively (in groups) with a view to visit some religious location for the purpose of worship and also completing certain specific rituals, customs, ceremonies, practices etc. Such religious places include, Ajmer, Amritsar, Goa, Fort Kochi, Rameswaram, Srirangam, Thanjavoor, Tirupati,Puri, Varanasi, Velankanni, etc.

India is endowed with a large number of religious as well as spiritual destinations and these have been luring large number of tourists to India over the years, and the number of tourists is on the rise year after year. Rishikesh in India is renowned for the International Yoga Festival which is being held every year where nearly 2000 participants from over 100 countries assemble. Also, Pushkar Fair in Rajasthan State of India too attracts pilgrims in the range 2 to 4 lakhs every year, over a period of two weeks. “KumbhMela” held in Allahabad attracts over 1.2 Crore pilgrims every year, over 2-months’ period—the largest conglomeration of religious festivals in the world.

Besides the world renowned festivals like ‘KumbhMela’ that are held in India every year, there are large number of less known festivals and events – often overshadowed by the former, the much more popular ones. Since the latter ones are not adequately promoted and also because of the insufficient infrastructure facilities associated with them, these festivals go unnoticed by the world. Hence they remain as unexplored but highly resourceful festivals or events. Though belatedly, the successive Governments at the Centre have been according better emphasis on systematic planning and meticulous implementation of various schemes for tourism promotion. Highly specialized type ‘Tourist Circuits’ are, of late, being promoted by the Government. The destinations of a particular type are hand-picked and are properly connected in such a way that conveyance facilities through rail or road or otherwise are easily available. Proper support and co-operation of Indian Railways—the Government owned enterprise that provides rail services, ensures that such tailor-made tourism packages connecting religious and/or spiritual places in specific regions of the country. Facilities for special ‘Circular Journey’ connecting various prominent tourism destinations in specific regions of the country and that too at heavily discounted prices are available at present, the special packages offered by the Indian Railways play a vital role in popularizing such tours.

Prospects of Festival Tourism in India

Given the diverse range of spiritual and religious destination across the country, many of which can be effectively connected each other specially because of the vast network of Indian Railways and also by way of road lines, there are bright prospects for Festival tourism to prosper in India. The favorable policy initiatives of the Governments at the Centre and at States is an added advantage, and so also the vast rail and road networks in the country. Governmental policies in respect of ICT adoption would further enhance the prospects of festival tourism (eg. E-Visas issued to foreign tourists), by way of minimizing the hassles of tourists, enabling online reservations, better marketing of tourism products and services etc.

Challenges and Issues of Festival Tourism in India

Promotion of Festival tourism (and its variants like Cultural tourism, Pilgrimage tourism etc.) might dilute the unique features of various cultures, their peculiar customs and practices etc. because of their



close interaction with people from alien cultures. Unbridled expansion of any kind of tourism would result in environmental degradation and the purity of the environment.

Strategies for Promotion of Festival Tourism for Sustained Economic Development

- Efforts for popularizing the less known tourism destinations (like, less popular festivals, religious events etc.) so that ‘Over crowding’ in more popular destinations can be avoided. This is vitally significant in view of the fact that limiting the tourist footprints to a level that is matching with the carrying capacity of the respective destination is essential for ensuring the long term sustainability of the destinations, i.e. festival sites, cultural sites etc.
- The inflow of tourists has to be limited to a level that can ensure that the environmental purity is maintained. This precaution is necessary for any kind of tourism initiative, since the long term sustainability of tourism initiatives is vitally significant.
- Further thrust on adoption of ICT is required. The present initiatives like the provision of E-Visas for foreign tourists. Additional measures for online reservations, online marketing of products and services etc. need to be initiated. The supporting ICT infrastructure like the broad-band connectivity, uninterrupted internet facility etc. also needs to be ensured.
- Better infrastructure facilities, both physical as well as human, technological (ICT), etc. need to be arranged in a phased manner. Excellent connectivity between various destinations should be ensured in an environment-friendly and sustainable manner.
- Effective promotion of various Festival tourism destinations is essential for scaling up this emerging segment of tourism. Use of ICT-based tools for the above purpose is preferred because of the growing affinity of new generation customers to such kinds of marketing.
- Precautions to preserve the unique cultural identities as well as peculiar characteristics associated with of various festivals and such other religious events (like, their customs, practices, religious functions and ceremonies etc.) are essential for the long-term sustainability of Festival tourism.
- Trained manpower in the field of tourism should be ensured for effective marketing of the products, providing quality services, effective ICT use, preserving the natural environment.
- Any initiative for promotion of Festival tourism (or other kinds of tourism) should essentially be environment-friendly. Strict control over the use of plastics and such other non-degradable materials in various tourism destinations is vital for the long-term sustainability of tourism initiatives. Control over the number of inflow of tourists within sustainable limits, ensuring the ‘green cover’ of destinations, and maintaining the purity of the environment through the use eco-friendly materials are vitally important in this context.

Concluding Remarks

In view of the foregoing discussions it can very well be concluded that prospects of Festival tourism and its variants like Pilgrimage tourism, Heritage tourism and Cultural tourism are bright in India owing to the unique cultural heritage of this nation, very diverse customs and practices, and above all the world renowned historical places, places of worship, monuments etc. However, the success of utilizing these rich tourism endowments for sustained economic development of the nation lies in effectively marketing such tourism products and services, ensuring adequate infrastructure facilities, particularly the ICT infrastructure and allied services. Wide use of ICT at all levels, right from marketing of products and facilitating online reservations to after-sales services and follow-ups needs to be encouraged. Equally important is the need to developed skilled and techno-savvy human resources who can leverage ICT well for tourism promotion. Above all, the entire gamut of tourism



policies and practices must be built-up on the principles of preserving the environment and ecology so as to ensure long-term sustainability of such projects.

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