

Promoting Spiritual Tourism in the Land of Buddha

The Indian Tourism industry has contributed significantly to economic growth and development over the years. The sector has been instrumental in providing mass employment opportunities and substantially increasing income levels in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. In addition to the economic benefits, Tourism has promoted cultural interaction between Indian citizens and people of other countries and hence fostered regional cooperation. The sector has also played a pivotal role in enhancing India's soft power over the years.

The sector contributes immensely to foreign exchange reserves in the country and provides significant employment opportunities, both in the formal and informal sector. The sector accounted for 8.8% of the total employment, 5.8% of the total exports and 6.9% of India's GDP¹ in 2019. In addition, the country earned foreign exchange revenues of US\$ 30.05 billion² from tourism in that year.

In the past few years, government has taken a number of initiatives like Swadesh Darshan Scheme, Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD), Dekho Apna Desh, Adopt a Heritage scheme and other initiatives like extension of E-visa facility to 171 countries and rationalization of visa fee to increase tourist footfall in the country. These measures led to an increase in number of Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India from 10.04 million in 2017 to 10.93 million in 2019³.

Despite having a diverse culture and rich architectural heritage, India holds only 1.2% share of the international tourism market (2019) as against Spain (5.7%), USA (5.4%), China (4.5%), UK (2.7%) and Thailand (2.7%)⁴. Countries like the UK and USA have only 34 and 24 World Heritage sites respectively but their foreign exchange earnings from Tourism are much higher than India, which has 40 World Heritage sites.

¹WTTC India Report 2021

²India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2021

³India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2021

⁴India Tourism Statistics at a Glance 2021

COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on the global Travel and Tourism industry. The resultant lockdown in different countries and travel restrictions had a severe impact on economic growth with the global GDP contracting by 3.7% in year 2020⁵. The pandemic is expected to only exacerbate the woes of Indian Tourism industry as no specific stimulus package was announced for the sector. The sector's contribution to GDP declined by 2.2 % to 4.7% in 2020⁶. Also, the contribution to total employment and total exports registered a decline of 1.5% and 3.3% respectively⁷.

Against this backdrop, it is imperative for countries to adopt innovative approaches to boost and promote different segments of tourism such as niche tourism, wellness tourism, adventure tourism and spiritual tourism. Given the fact that India has been recognized as a destination for spiritual tourism since ages for both domestic and international tourists, we must unleash the potential of spiritual tourism. Against this backdrop, the potential of Buddhist tourism may be explored to attract tourists, especially in the post pandemic era. India is known as the 'Land of the Buddha' as Gautam Buddha founded Buddhism about 2,500 years ago in this region.

A number of Buddhist Stupas, Viharas , Chaityas, Pillar and Rock Edicts have been built during the reign of Mauryan kings, Gupta rulers and Satvahana rulers in ancient India. With a global populace of nearly 500 million, Buddhism is the 4th largest religion in the world. Majority of the Buddhists live in China (50%), Thailand (13%), Japan (9%), Myanmar (8%), Sri Lanka (3%), Vietnam (3%), Cambodia (3%), South Korea (2%), India (2%) and Malaysia (1%).

Even though India has a significant number of Buddhist sites in different States , the number of foreign Buddhist pilgrims visiting the country is paltry. A number of efforts have been made to develop and promote Buddhist tourism in the recent past. One of these is the Swadesh Darshan Scheme introduced in year 2014 to develop theme-based tourist circuits

⁵ <https://wttc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

⁶ WTTC India Report 2021

⁷ WTTC India Report 2021

across the country. The Buddhist Circuit program was initiated under this scheme to promote integrated development of holy Buddhist sites across the country.



The following Buddhist circuits have been identified in five Indian states under the Swadesh Darshan scheme:

S No.	State	Name of the Circuit	Name of the Project	Date of Sanction	Amt. Sanctioned	Amt. released	Duration
1.	Madhya Pradesh	Buddhist Circuit	Sanchi-Satna-Rewa-Satdhara-Sonari-Murelhurda-Gyaraspur-Mandsaur-Dhar- Wayside amenities.	18-07-2016	74.02	69.08	24 months

2.	Uttar Pradesh	Buddhist Circuit	Srawasti, Kushinagar, & Kapilvastu.	29-09-2016	99.97	72.56	24 months
3.	Bihar	Buddhist Circuit	Construction of Convention Centre at Bodhgaya	29-03-2017	98.73	78.91	18 months
4.	Gujarat	Buddhist circuit	Junagadh- Gir-Somnath- Bharuch- Kutch- Bhavnagar- Rajkot- Mehsana	28-06-2017	28.67	19.21	24 months
5.	Andhra Pradesh	Buddhist Circuit	Amaravati-Anupu- Bojjanakonda- Shalihundam- Totlakonda and Bavikonda	25-09-2017	52.34	26.17	18 months
6	Uttar Pradesh	Wayside Amenities	Varanasi to gaya, Lucknow to Ayodhya, Ayodhya to Lucknow, Kushinagar to Gaya, Gaya to Kushinagar	02-06-2018	17.93	NA	12 months

(Rs in crores)

As can see from the above Table, most of the projects are way behind their scheduled deadlines. Slow disbursement of funds and poor monitoring of projects have been cited as the major reasons for the slow progress under the Scheme.

The following Table provides information on Foreign Tourist Visits to various sites in the Buddhist Circuit⁸ in India:

Destination	2015	2016	2017	2018
Gaya	0.23	0.28	0.31	0.32
Bodh Gaya	0.23	0.24	0.28	0.27
Rajgir	0.16	0.17	0.16	0.16
Nalanda	0.14	0.14	0.16	0.16
Vaishali	0.09	0.1	0.09	0.09
Sarnath	0.34	0.41	0.43	0.43
Kushinagar	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.08
Kapilvastu (Piprahwa)	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Shravasti	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.15
Kaushambi	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Sankisa	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02
Total	1.49	1.61	1.73	1.75
No. of Foreign Tourist Visits (FTVs) to all States/UTs	23.33	24.71	26.89	28.87
Percent Share of FTVs to Buddhist destinations against no. of all FTVs to all States/UTs	6.39%	6.51%	6.43 %	6.06%

(In millions)

As we can see from the above data, number of Foreign Tourist Visitors to Buddhist destinations in India has marginally declined over the years when compared to other Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and ASEAN. In China, there are 200 million Buddhists but

⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Number-and-percentage-share-of-Foreign-Tourist-Visits-to-destinations-along-the-Buddhist_tbl1_336150311

only 30,000 or 40,000 visit India⁹. Arrivals to India from Buddhist dominated countries comprised a mere 0.005 percent of all Buddhist adherents¹⁰.

A number of factors like inadequate public infrastructure and tourist facilities at Buddhist tourist sites, limited multi-lingual guides, limited visitor interaction with, limited online marketing of Buddhist heritage sites and lack of information about authentic local arts, crafts shops, have led to a decline in Buddhist tourist footfall over the years. Also, museums display relics but offer limited interpretation of the rich heritage behind them. There is a dire need of informed tourist guides in India who can disseminate valuable historical information to travellers. Lack of road and rail connectivity makes travel arduous, time-consuming, and, often, unsafe. Also, poor management of Buddhist Tourist information centers, further, adds to the woes of travellers.

India's neighbouring countries have taken a number of steps to promote Buddhist tourism in the recent past. China has undertaken many projects for development and restoration of Buddhist temples apart from organizing tourism festivals around famous monasteries. In Thailand, Buddhist institutions are granted special benefits by the Government. In Bhutan, the religion has long been supported financially by the Government through annual subsidies to Buddhist monasteries and shrines. In Indonesia, a master plan for restoration of Borobudur was evolved and the temple was declared a UNESCO heritage site in 1991. The Indonesian government has successfully organized Borobudur International festival, an event that is a unique combination of tourism and sports.

It is imperative for India to adopt measures to restore its Buddhist sites and monuments and preserve its rich architectural heritage. Adequate infrastructure in terms of road and rail connectivity across Buddhist circuits must be provided to ensure last mile connectivity and a hassle-free experience to travellers. Roadside visitor amenities at various Buddhist sites should be significantly upgraded. Private investment must be encouraged in order to

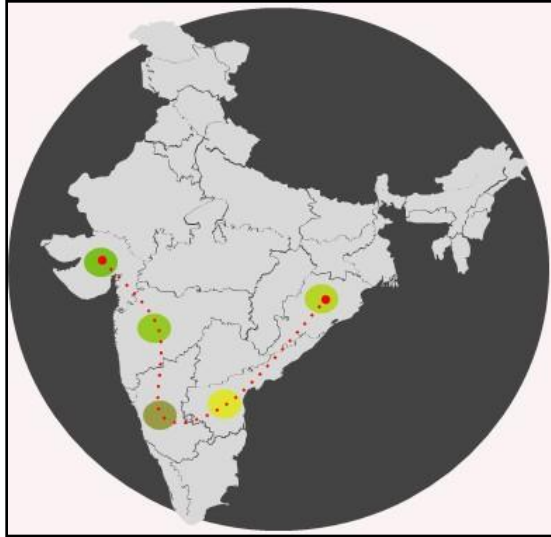
⁹ <https://www.cNBC.com/2018/10/15/india-looks-to-court-a-high-spending-demographic.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/2bdd4697-6d7f-4f78-bca0-269aa100b25a/Buddhist+Circuit+Tourism+Strategy+Final.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=kC1uny1>

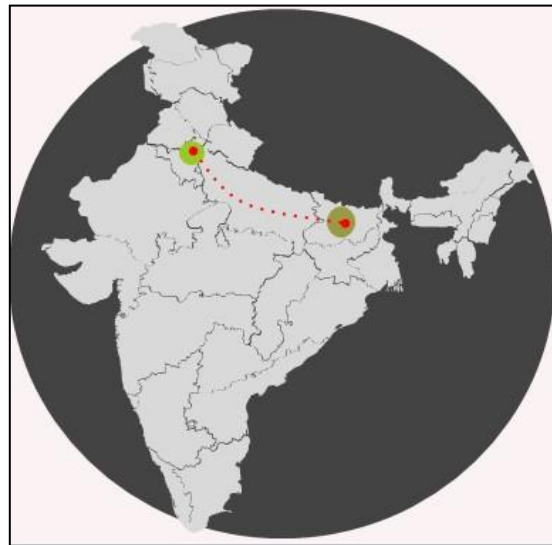
provide quality infrastructure and world class services to tourists. Lack of skilled human resources is another major issue with India's hospitality sector. Academic institutions in the field of Tourism and Hospitality need to upscale their interface with both students and the industry, encourage participation from the locals and impart skill training to them so that they can leverage Buddhist Tourism for enhancing their livelihood opportunities.

Awareness about Buddhist circuits must be spread through extensive advertising and e-marketing. State governments must partner with trade and religious bodies to organize exhibitions and conferences to promote Buddhist tourism. Government may also think of establishing and promoting a spiritual tourism brand on Buddhist circuit. Many popular monuments across the country (the Qutub Minar, for instance) are being upgraded with virtual audio-visual guides that offer information about the monuments. The same can be replicated at various Buddhist sites across the country. Interactive travel apps specific to Buddhist Tourism can be developed to provide real time information to travellers. There can also be a central database/website wherein all information pertaining to Buddhist Tourism like availability of guides, accommodation, souvenir shops could be made available.

Similar to the Buddhist circuit, the government may develop an integrated circuit for Ashokan rock and pillar edicts. The famous rock edicts are at Girnar(Gujarat), Sopara(Maharashtra), Sannati(Karnataka), Yerragudi(Andhra Pradesh) & Dhauli, Jaugada(Orissa). Famous Ashokan pillar edicts can be found in Delhi, Meerut, Topra, Vaishali, Rampurva and Lauriya-Nandangarh in Bihar.



Rock Edicts



Pillar Edicts

Only one Buddhist site (Mahabodhi Temple) has been identified under Iconic Tourist Sites Development Project and there is no single Buddhist tourist site under the PRASHAD scheme. Buddhist sites should be accorded importance under various schemes for their holistic development.

The growing influence of the tourism sector as an economic powerhouse and its potential as a tool for development are irrefutable. Not only does the tourism sector spearhead growth, it also improves the quality of people's lives with its capacity to create large scale employment. As per industry bodies, the Indian Tourism sector is predicted to grow at an annual rate of 6.9% to \$460 bn by year 2028, which is 9.9% of GDP¹¹. Augmenting tourism infrastructure, assurance of quality standards in services of tourism service providers, projection of the country as a 365 days' tourist destination through aggressive marketing, promotion of sustainable tourism etc. are some of the policy areas which need to be constantly worked upon to increase and facilitate tourism in India.

Suggestions

1. *Most of the pilgrimage traffic happens via Charter Flights. Indian Charter rules are quite rigid and need a relook (WTTCII has been working on a comprehensive suggestion). For instance (A Buddhist tourist Charter Aircraft carrying passengers to Agra -for visiting Taj Mahal, or any other destination must be allowed.*
2. *Direct Airline connectivity between India and key cities in Buddhist Source Markets, assistance by Government of India & States with viability gap funding, easier bilateral support, supportive code share arrangements providing advantage to Indian Carriers.*

3. *Connect the primary Buddhist destinations by luxury/premium trains. Hotel on wheels concepts - for example a group landing in Varanasi has the option of moving around the entire Circuit while taking night halts in Trains/marked Stop Stations.*
4. *Wayside amenities with adequate health and hygiene a must for vehicular travel by groups.*
5. *Linking destinations and creating subsidiary destinations to hold tourists post pilgrimage activities. For instance linking Bodhgaya to Santiniketan & Kolkata (Chinese heritage).*
6. *Signages at important monuments, edicts and places of worship (in the Buddhist Circuit) must be in Mandarin & Cantonese, Japanese, Thai languages to start with.*
7. *Marketing & Promotions :Audio visual promotional material in languages (Mandarin & Cantonese, Japanese, Thai must be circulated/geo targeted within Buddhist activity centres/cities/regions in Countries.*
8. *Tie ups with Chinese, Japanese & Thai banks & financial institutions for in destination ATMs/Cash Dispensation facilities.*
