

Evaluating the Role of Domestic Tourists in Shaping Domestic Tourism of Varanasi in recent times

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Abstract

Tourism development in Varanasi brings both advantages and disadvantages to the host region, influencing economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. Local residents' support for such development is often guided by social exchange theory which suggests that individuals are inclined to support interactions with tourists if the perceived benefits exceed the associated costs. The actual impacts of tourism and the attitudes of the local community are essential before initiating any tourism-related projects. Domestic tourism in India had shown a tremendous growth and supported by economic development for a local community people in a significant manner. Varanasi of Uttar Pradesh tries to assess the various aspects, dimensions and discussion relating in the context of domestic tourism. The present study associated with domestic tourism growth and examines the trends in domestic tourism in Varanasi and tourist behaviour perspective. This research paper employing a qualitative research design, the present study investigates the experiences of various stakeholders. Interviews and survey were conducted with various stakeholders of domestic tourism in Varanasi region. The findings present the trends, preferences, motivations, and the pattern of domestic growth tourism in India.

Key words: Domestic tourism, Tourism trends and dynamics, Social Exchange

1. Introduction

Domestic tourism in India has suddenly become the preferable choice for the citizens of India and after COVID-19 as it re-open their tourism. It is very crucial to understand how domestic tourism is conceptualized in the light of the 'new normal' and re-defining domestic tourism in the 'new normal'. The visit of the local tourist to known or unknown attractions has enhanced and the government initiative taken for the domestic tourism development also supported the experiences of residents when engaging in domestic tourism activities within destinations. Different studies discussed the revival of tourism and hospitality industry after a span of gap. The revival of the industry is largely due to domestic travel demand, is reported in the extant literature (Christou & Pericleous, 2023). Many scholars have emphasised on the substantial changes in the numbers of domestic tourist in natural areas like mountainous regions (Bhalla et al., 2021), coastal areas (Sohn et al., 2021), and the countryside (Kriaučiūnas et al., 2023). It is to mention that the domestic tourism now becomes very important and expressive. The local tourist prefer short trips with family members or friends which now aided domestic tourism aided the local economy at the time of crisis (Stacey, 2020). The tourism sector in India is growing in very healthy manner and the role of domestic sector plays a vital role in this journey.

This research elaborates the growth, development and recent changes in Varanasi in context of domestic tourism and hospitality sector. However, the study explains about the potential and prospects of domestic tourism and understanding the dynamism of domestic tourism, which supported the economy. The literature researches explain about the places, region, topography, historical sites, pilgrimage, rituals and some aspects of tourism. Furthermore, the present research investigates the evolving trends, new patterns, growth and development of domestic tourism in different locations of Varanasi district. It also tries to find out the change in the tourism industry of this region and will be in a better position

to adapt to such changes in the future. This paper examines the underlying patterns of the growth trends, tourist type, characteristics, tourist behaviour, potentials and prospects of domestic tourism market of Varanasi by analysing the experience of tourist, stakeholders and local community people.

Research objectives:

1. To examine the multifaceted dimensions of tourism in Varanasi.
2. To assess the significance of Varanasi's heritage in the context of domestic tourism development.
3. To analyze the perceptions and sentiments of domestic tourists toward the tourism experience in Varanasi.
4. To investigate the impact of domestic tourism on the livelihoods of local vendors and stakeholders.

Limitations of the Study:

- 1) The study is based on a limited sample size, which may affect the findings regarding domestic tourist sentiments.
- 2) Time constraints restricted the exploration of deeper psychological factors influencing tourist behavior.
- 3) The research primarily focuses on quantitative aspects, with qualitative dimensions not being thoroughly explored.

Global & Local Perspective of Domestic Tourism:

Domestic tourism is an important component of the global travel economy. Many countries rely substantially on local travel spending to boost their economies, especially when foreign travel is restricted or difficult. This reliance is obvious in nations where domestic tourism provides a significant share of tourist earnings. Domestic tourism markets in China, the United States, and Japan are well-established, with residents experiencing diverse places inside their own country and so contributing considerably to local companies and communities. Domestic tourism in India has grown due to increasing disposable income and the popularity of online travel booking platforms. The Indian government has launched initiatives like the Swadesh Darshan Scheme and the Incredible India campaign to promote domestic tourism, which has positively impacted the economy by creating jobs, generating revenue, and promoting local businesses.

Domestic tourism Perspective in Varanasi

Varanasi, also known as Benares or Kashi, is a significant Indian city with immense spiritual significance for Hindus and a major pilgrimage site. The city's historical and cultural richness make it a popular destination for domestic tourists. Key aspects of domestic tourism in Varanasi include religious tourism, which is famous for its ghats where pilgrims take ritual baths in the sacred Ganges River, and historical and cultural significance, such as the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and Sarnath. Traditional arts and crafts, such as silk weaving, Benarasi sarees, and handicrafts, are also popular among domestic tourists. They often shop for souvenirs and experience the process of silk weaving at local workshops. The city offers a variety of traditional dishes, including chaat (Indian street food), lassi (yogurt-based drink), and local sweets. Festivals and events, such as Diwali, Durga Puja, and Kartik Purnima, attract a large number of domestic tourists who want to witness and participate in these celebrations. Yoga and wellness tourism is also popular due to Varanasi's spiritual ambiance, with many ashrams and centers offering yoga retreats and wellness programs.

Literature Review

Halder (2018) - argued that -Banaras is an old historical city famous for its architecture, history, natural beauty, and other features. It is a culturally rich city and has a great capability to attract world tourists. Domestic tourists visit Banaras for different kinds of perspectives, while visitors come in winter for religious purposes and family tours. The number of tourists is increasing every year and the trend is always showing an upward graph. Banaras is a city in Varanasi, India, where a total lockdown phase was declared in April and May due to the pandemic.

Li et al. (2020). - As important as research on the expansion of historic tourism has been, studies on the complex relationships between stakeholders are also crucial. Conflicts of interest occur when the local community takes part in

the development of tourism without being assured of fair participation by the stakeholders. To fully understand the effects of heritage site development initiatives, it is necessary to study these complex scenarios

Rawat (2021)- presented that Ajmer City is a beautiful city located in Rajasthan, with numerous mosques, temples, churches and devotees from around the world. Its religion has led to the development of tourism industry, which has had a direct and indirect impact on the city. This research aims to study the Socio-Economic and Cultural Impacts of Religious Tourism in Ajmer City, as well as the level of satisfaction of domestic tourists arriving.

Singhania, and Saloni (2021) - discussed that Tourism development in rural India is gradually changing the lifestyle of the host population, particularly youth. The core values of Indian culture have not changed much, but there is a transformation in Instrumental values. Tourism has had a positive impact on the economic structure of the Mandawa town, helping to develop infrastructural facilities and cultural aspects. However, there is little impact of tourism on socio-cultural aspects of the town. The ethnic and traditional art and handicrafts are getting recognized at a world level. The local population is trying to make tourism more sustainable to benefit them in the longer terms.

Tiwari (2021) - A development board was established to carry out the strategy. The board purchased and demolished 314 properties to make this enormous space. The properties in the area that were chosen for the project were purchased for a total of Rs. 390 crore. Of this Rs. 390 crore, Rs. 70 crore was allocated for the rehabilitation of the 1,400 residents, the majority of whom were vendors, shopkeepers, and encroachers.

Seth (2022) - The River Front Development Project, for example, expects rivers' banks and ghat areas to experience significant change in the wake of this project. To the opposite of the project includes a four-lane road that crosses the river from the Ghats. Eight kilometers of elevated road will be constructed. The project calls for the construction of three additional bridges. Constructed Upon completion of this project, it is anticipated that the travel industry will grow. A high growth pattern has continued into the present for the number of domestic tourists visiting in India, which has increased significantly in recent years. A review of various literature has taken place to understand the critical research themes associated with domestic tourism and the recent development in India & abroad. It tries to understand the potential, tourism growth and development in recent past in Varanasi district from 2018 to January 2024.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is a way to systematically investigate the research problem. It gives various steps in conducting the research in a systematic and a logical way. It is essential to define the problem, state objectives and hypothesis clearly. The research design provides the details regarding what, where, when, how much and by what means enquiry is initiated. Research is a creative and systematic work undertaken to increase the stock of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2016).

Research Design

The study is basically exploratory in nature. The study shall to analyze the tourists (domestic tourists) responses regarding religions places and any development recommendations about the tourism i.e. pilgrimage tourism in the Context to Varanasi City.

The research design followed in this study employs **exploratory research design**.

The study has utilized both **Primary and secondary data**. **Primary Data Sources**

- Questionnaire filled by tourists' domestic and local vendors.
- Personal visits to pilgrimage places in Varanasi.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources mainly covered government publications, brochures of venue local magazines, local analysis reports by state and central government.

The study utilizes **deductive reasoning** based on primary and secondary available sources. The population of the study is total domestic tourists arrived at Varanasi. The Structured questionnaire was sent to 100 domestic tourists, 40 vendors, and 20 residents. The **convenience sampling technique** has been utilized to collect the data. The data collection method was **structured questionnaire**.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of collected data, observations & interviews during the entire field work we had use various tools and techniques to find out the respective result. In the beginning we had a descriptive analysis of literature review,

observations and interviews on the basis of common thoughts of different subjects involved for the study. Then we had found a hypothesis based on literature review, observations and interviews and after that we had descriptive analysis of data found in the questionnaire by using IBM SPSS software by different frequency tables of percentage and mean, cross tab analysis table.

Perspective of Tourist visiting Varanasi:

Age Group Distribution of Tourists Visiting Varanasi: (18–24) 14% Young adults, likely students or early-career individuals (25–34) 32% The largest group of visitors; often includes working professionals and young families (35–44) 24% Mature adults, potentially traveling for both leisure and spiritual reasons (45–54) 19% Middle-aged individuals, possibly with a strong interest in cultural or religious tourism (55–64) 7% Fewer tourists in this older working-age category (65+) 4% Senior citizens; smallest group, likely due to mobility or travel constraints

Gender Distribution of Tourists : **Male:** 66% The majority of tourists are male, suggesting a greater travel frequency or independence among men in this context. **Female:** 34% About one-third of tourists are female, indicating a gender gap, which could be influenced by safety concerns, cultural norms, or travel preferences.

Sources of Information for Tourists Visiting Varanasi: **Friends or Family:** 37% The most common source, showing the strong influence of personal recommendations and word-of-mouth. **Social Media:** 27% A major driver of tourism interest, especially among younger travelers; reflects the power of visual storytelling and travel influencers. **Online Travel Websites:** 23% Trusted platforms for planning trips, comparing deals, and reading reviews. **Travel Agencies:** 11% Less commonly used but still relevant, possibly by older or traditional travelers. **Other:** 2% Includes sources like magazines, TV, or newspapers; least impactful

Purpose of Visit to Varanasi: **Spiritual Pilgrimage** 50% Half of all tourists come to Varanasi for religious and spiritual reasons, highlighting the city's significance as one of the holiest places in Hinduism. **Cultural Exploration** 26% Over a quarter are drawn to Varanasi for its rich cultural heritage—rituals, art, music, and traditions. **Historical Interest** 23% Varanasi's ancient history, architecture, and legacy appeal to history enthusiasts **Others** 1% Minimal visits are for reasons outside of the main categories, such as business or academic purposes

Accommodation preference during stay in Varanasi? The data explains travelers stay in Varanasi 67% in hotel, 21% guesthouse, 9% home stay 3% ashram and other. **Tourist prefer exploring Varanasi on using modes of transportation?** The data show that 28% traveler use car/ coach , 34% Bicycle , 31% auto rickshaw and 7% other. **What type of souvenirs or local products do you like to purchase during your trip to Varanasi?** The data show that 21% Handicraft and textile , 18% religious artifacts ,12% local artwork and painting and 48% purchase sharee. **Would you consider visiting Varanasi again in the future?** The data explain that 92% Yes and 8% No

Perspective of Local Vendors providing services:

What is age group vendors providing services in Varanasi? The given Data explain that 17% of travelers are belongs to 18-24 year age group, 27% of travelers are belongs to 24-34 year age group, and 33% of travelers 35-44 age group and 10% travelers 45-54 age group rest and 8% of 55-64 age group and 65 above age group. **Gender of Vendor:** The data explain that out of 40 responded , 78% male and 22% female. **How long have you been involved in providing tourism services in Varanasi?** The data explain that 20% provide tourism services 1-2 year and 27% provide services 3-5 year and 52% provide tourism services in Varanasi more than 5 year. **What are the most popular sites and activities requested by domestic tourists in Varanasi?** The data explain that 67% of kashi vishwanath temples, 13% ganga ghat, 18% sarnath, 2% others. **How have you observed the growth of domestic tourism in Varanasi over the years?** The data explain that domestic tourism growth in Varanasi rapidly increases by 53 %, slowly increases by 17%, alternates by 22%, and is uncertain by 8%. **What kind of accommodation do you offer for**

domestic tourists, and how do you see the demand evolving? The data explain that 21% of budget guesthouses, 14% of mod-range hotels, 4% of luxury resorts, 11% of homestays, 20% of demand is continuous, 29% of demand is increasing, and 1% of demand is decreasing. **Are there any specific festivals or events in Varanasi that tend to attract domestic tourists?** The data explain that more attractive festival or events in Varanasi 42% Dev Diwali, 22% holi, 28% mahashivratri, 8% ganga mahotsav. **How do you tailor your services to meet domestic tourists' preferences and expectations?** The data explain that 48% customised itineraries, 15% multilingual guides, 20% local cuisine experience and 17% cultural workshop. **What role do local cuisines and culinary experiences play in attracting domestic tourists to Varanasi?** The data explain that 33% had no role, 27% had a major role, moderate role 22%, 18% had minor roles. **Have you noticed any changes in the demographic profiles of domestic tourists visiting Varanasi?** The data explain that 33% no significant change, 27% more families with children, 22% more young adults, 18% more senior citizen. **Are there any challenges you encounter catering to the needs of domestic tourists?** The data explain that 53% language barriers, 22% had varied preferences and expectation, 18% lack awareness about local custom, 7% did no. **What initiatives or collaborations have you undertaken to contribute to Varanasi's overall tourism development?** The data shows that 68% participated in local cultural events, 16% collaborating with other vendors for package deals, 9% partnering with local NGO for community projects. **How important is digital marketing and online presence for reaching out to domestic tourists when planning a trip to Varanasi?** The data explain that 47% are some what important, 27% are extremely important, 18% are not very important, 8% are not important at all. **Have you seen any emerging trends or preferences among domestic tourists that influence your offerings?** The data explain that 79% heritage and history tours, 15% wellness and yoga retreats, 3% adventure and outdoor activity, 3% other. **Do you agree that domestic tourists are important to the tourism sector in Varanasi?** The data shows that 90% strongly agree, 7% agree natural, 3% disagree, and null strongly disagree.

Perspective of Local Resident

The Age of the respondents: The data explain that 58% of travelers belong to the 18-24 year age group, 10% belong to the 25-34 year age group, and the rest belong to the 35-44, 45-54 and 16% 55-64 and 65 above age group. **How long have you lived in Varanasi?** The data explain that 0% less than 1 year living in Varanasi, 5% people 1-5 year living in Varanasi, 10% mostly 5-10 year and 85% more than 10 year living in Varanasi. **Have you noticed an increase in the number of domestic tourists visiting Varanasi during your time there?** The data show that 80% yes a significant increase, 15% yes a slight increase, 5% no noticeable change, and not sure. **Which specific areas or attractions in Varanasi do you think attract the most domestic tourists in?** The data explain that 45% temples and religious sites, 30% ghats and ganga river, 15% cultural events and festivals, 10% local markets and shopping area. **How do you think the presence of domestic tourists influences the local economy?** The data above shows that 55% boosted local businesses, 25% improved infrastructure, 15% created job opportunities, 5% had no significant impact. **Are there any challenges you believe Varanasi faces because of the influx of domestic tourists?** The data explain 45% of congestion and traffic issues, 25% cultural clashes, 15% preservation of heritage sites, 10% environmental concerns, and 5% other. **In your opinion, how can the local community benefit from domestic tourism in Varanasi?** The data explain that 40% increased employment opportunities and 25% encouraged local craftsmanship and products, 20% supported community-based tourism initiatives, and 15% preserved and promoted local traditions. **Are there any changes in the behavior or preferences of domestic tourists that you have observed recently?** The data explain that 40% no noticeable changes and 35% more interested in local culture and tradition and 15% increasing participation in community activities and 10% growing demand for sustainable tourism experience. **What do you feel about the efforts made to develop tourism in Varanasi?** The data explain that 43% somewhat positive and 29% neutral and 14% very positive and 9% somewhat positive and 5% very positive. **How important is it for you that domestic tourists respect and understand the local culture and customs?** The data explain that 65% extremely important and 15% quite important and 10% neutral and 5% not important at all and 5% not very important.

Conclusion

In this study, various facets of Indian domestic tourism have been highlighted in the context of Varanasi. It can be concluded that domestic tourists have played a prominent role in boosting the economic well-being of local citizens since ancient times. Varanasi is indeed a great heritage of India and world. Indian tourists have a keen interest in exploring Varanasi and its nearby tourism destinations because of greater access to transportation and facilities by central, state, and local government machinery. This study reveals that traffic Jams and Environmental concerns are key issues in the context of Varanasi tourism. Such issues may be resolved through the holistic development approach of each stakeholder in the domestic tourism sector. Economic disparities have been identified in terms of increased property costs in Varanasi. The present study offers a roadmap to create a strong policy to provide better service delivery by local vendors and government officials in places of prominence. The state government's revenue collection through tourism development in Varanasi can be doubled by providing international facilities and promoting tourism in the Indian market.

Regular tourist arrival in Varanasi has always stimulated the youth to know the tourist's behavior, lifestyle, taste, choice, and motives. These simulations led them to come out with new ideas and thoughts, and at a certain stage, they intended to start their own enterprise. It is a common practice in the modern tourism trend that people working in various capacities, after gaining some experience, very often start their own businesses. Today, the maximum youths working in various formal and informal sectors of tourism are looking for a gap to bridge through their own entrepreneurial skills and want to be leaders, rather than working for a multinational company in a metro city like Delhi. The influence of the organizational system definitely affects the lifestyle of youth, but it is found that most of the youth are satisfied with their work in this industry. Their lifestyles have partially changed; however, they prefer this job and lifestyle for money, environment, position and future benefits, and home sickness. Moreover we can say that Varanasi domestic tourism has a great future to move on as with discussion with various respondents it shows a tremendous change its positioning the domestic circuits.

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