

## EXPERIENCE SPIRITUAL TOURISM: A STUDY ON THE LUMINOUS CITY OF VARANASI

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### ABSTRACT:

In modern times, tourism has become one of the major cultural and economic forces in the world. Religion and spirituality are common motives for travel. Spiritual tourism is an emerging research that is gaining worldwide attention by researchers. People who run in a spiritual walk experience a development of spiritual growth and a better quality of life within them. India is quickly emerging as a spiritual tourist destination. From ancient times, India has been known for its spirituality. Varanasi also known as 'Benaras' or 'Kashi' is the city of purity and beauty has been the cultural and spiritual capital of India since ancient times. This fascinating city can be called as mirror of India. A rich cultural heritage, a strong tradition of the pursuit of wisdom, the importance of religion and history - Varanasi has it all. That is why, in Varanasi (located in the Eastern part of state of Uttar Pradesh) many development projects were undertaken to promote tourism, with the aim of liberating Spiritual Tourism Development.

The current study is a step towards exploring the various realities and prospects of a spiritual visit to Varanasi.

Key words- Spiritual, India, Varanasi, Ganges, Pilgrimage

## INTRODUCTION:

People have traveled since time immemorial and travel has been an important part of human life. But at that time reason for travelling were different. Now most of the people travel to escape from their extremely hectic life schedule. Tourism can be described as a leisure time used to travel and seek the relaxation and exciting experiences nowadays and spiritual walking is now considered as one of the offbeat travel trends in India. Earlier, it was mostly explored by the older generation but now, weaving mindfulness and spirituality into the fabric of travel made spiritual visit much sought after among youngsters in the post - pandemic world. Travel for spiritual pursuits refreshes our sense of wonder, it is naturally attached to the idea of self- care and deeper connection to the earth, with others and self.

India is a land of ancient civilization that is thriving, enriched by its culture, traditions, and important spiritual places. It is a world of wisdom where all natural things like trees, mountains, forests, rivers are worshiped and considered sacred. As a result, places where these sacred objects are present, that place is considered sacred and has divine significance. And people who have faith in it, try to visit all these places once in their life. Therefore, a large number of people from all over the world visit these places and try to find the answer to their existence and its purpose in this universe, Varanasi is one of such place. It is a place where you can feel the calmness and spirituality around you. The ghats, lanes, temples, architecture, etc. everything is so unique about this city. It has been an important cultural, literary, educational and artistic hub and is still a prospering center of classical Indian music. That is why tourists from all over the world gather here to experience the spiritual values of Indian culture and religion.

According to the Ixigo tourism market report, there has been a monthly increase in hotel bookings by 48 percent in Varanasi.

## LITERATURE REVIEW:

Tourism has great importance in the development of any country. It not only contributes to economic development but is also very important from a social and cultural point of view. In fact, it is a multidimensional activity. In this research, I have tried to analyze the available and important literature with details below-

**Norman, 2011** defined spiritual tourism as “Tourism characterized by a self-conscious project of spiritual betterment”.

**Barber, 1991** defined pilgrimage as “a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding”.

**According to Cheer et al., 2017** “spiritual tourism has many meanings attached to it and includes many different categories enveloping practices like music festivals, meditation, yoga and such related activities”.

**According to Robledo, 2015** “the first and the prime categorization of spiritual tourism must be based on ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ attributes. In religious tourism, tourists belong to a specific religion and motive of their journey is of a religious nature but, modern form is secular spiritual tourism that has appeared as an outcome of the requirement of sceptics for addressing the innately one’s necessity of spirituality”.

**According to Diana L. Eck, 1983** “Kashi is the permanent home of Lord Shiva. Although Shiva is omnipresent, there are a few places that are especially transparent to his luminous presence. And of these few, the city of light is the most brilliant of all”.

**Melchers, 2006** “Spiritual tourism is not just religious tourism like a pilgrimage, spiritual tourist seeks something that is worth being and can give their lives new richness or even new direction”.

**Eck 1983; Parry 1994, 2004** “Varanasi is believed to be the place for the final transformation of one’s life-namely, death”.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:**

The main objective of this study is to explore the various realities, reasons and prospects of a spiritual visit to Varanasi, India.

> To explore trends and opportunities of Spiritual tourism in India.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

The study requires deep understanding of the psychological feelings of the tourists visiting the spiritual or religious places. This study mainly supports secondary data and is descriptive in nature. It has been derived from several books, journals, newspapers, research articles, ancient manuscripts and various relevant sites which are mentioned in the reference.

## **SPIRITUAL TOURISM:**

In the 21st century, spiritual need got more recognition than ever before. People today not just want to believe what is written in the religious books, they want to explore more about life, about their existence, and that is why try to find alternative ways to answer the questions they have. Although religion and spirituality are used synonymously, they are not the same, they are two different ways with the same purpose. In a broader perspective, it can be also observed that the majority of the tourists are attracted and driven by the religious values and belief, on the other side it can also been observed that spiritual tourism only seeks the essence of spiritual tourism without and religious reference.

Spiritual visitation is a journey to find the purpose of life and to explore beyond the self. It contributes to the balance of spirit, mind, and body with or without religious affiliation (**Smith, Macleod and Robertson 2010**). In the tourism industry spiritual tourism is defined as ‘the physical journey in search for truth, in the search for sacred or holy things’ (**Vukonic 1996, 80**). Spiritual tourism is associated with various sacred sites, such as the Vatican for catholics, the Ganges, ashrams and temples for Hindus, Mecca and Islamic shrines for Muslims (**Timothy and Iverson 2006**).

At best, ‘Spiritual Tourism’ can be called as a journey of people, to a place of a great holiness in search of moral, religious or spiritual realization. An unforgettable journey of personal firm faith and, in search of divine awakening and commitment to what one believes. It is a wider form of religious tourism through which tourists experience more than their expectations.

### **The ultimate objective of a spiritual journey could be in search of-**

- > Peace and Liberation (Shanti and Moksha)
- > Divine Happiness (Param - Anand)
- > Fulfillment of a wish (Mannat)
- > Abundant Prosperity (Sukh and Aishwarya)

Often, this journey is equated to ‘Pilgrimage’ or ‘Yatra’ where people are guided by unquestionable faith, unflinching belief and pure bhakti.

## **SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN INDIA:**

Spiritual health has gained attention as a constructive means of dealing with negative aspects of life. India is a land of enlightenment and mysticism, and it has always attracted local and foreign tourists striving to quench their spiritual thirst by visiting various spiritual sites across India. The human mind is always looking for something more, something that can give an explanation of our existence in this world. The more one explores the outside world, the more connected it is to the inner world. That is why it is believed that the way to find the inner person is the way of life. Seeking this answer is a spiritual and divine experience. And this desire is what draws people to this mysterious world. The spiritual journey to India takes one person on a journey to many Spiritual places which are also famous for their religious significance.

Sacred places like- 'Varanasi', 'Vrindavan' (Uttar Pradesh); 'Golden Temple Guru Dwara' (Amritsar); 'Haridwar' and 'Rishikesh', Gangotri (Uttarakhand); 'Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti Dargah' (Ajmer); 'Jagannath Puri' (Orissa); 'Rameshwaram' (Tamil Nadu); and 'Bodh Gaya' in Bihar are some of them.

Some prominent spiritual centres, ashrams, or organisations in India are-

'Auroville' (Puducherry); 'Isha Foundation' (Coimbatore); 'BramhaKumaris' (Mount Abu); 'Ramana Ashram' (Tiruvanmalai); 'The Art of Living centre' (Bengaluru) and many more.

With a focus on spiritual tourism in India, **Medhekar & Haq, 2012** concluded that India has a great potential for marketing spiritual tourism to domestic and foreign travelers. Also, there is a need to market the spiritual tourism circuit as a national asset not as a religious tourism product and it should be a universal product totally based on faith.

According to **Norman, 2011** numerous western tourists visit India for practicing yoga, attending meditation courses, for listening to various spiritual gurus who teach on subjects related to the mind, the body, the spirit and its divine connection with the Almighty.

## **VARANASI: THE SPIRITUAL HERITAGE OF INDIA**

Varanasi or Banaras is a famous hindu spiritual city located on the banks of river Ganges in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. One of the Sapta puri (the 7 most ancient and holy cities), one of 12 Jyotirlinga sites and also a shakti pitha site, Varanasi has been an ultimate pilgrimage spot for Hindus for ages as, it is believed that the

one who is graced to die on the land of this sacred city, would attain salvation and freedom from the cycle of birth and re-birth. The heart of the city pulsates around its ghats, about 80 of which border the river Ganga, which is believed to have the power to wash away the sins of the mortals. Throughout its history, the city is known by several names - 'Kashi' (city of light), 'Anandvana' (forest of pleasure), 'Avimukta', 'Anandakanana', 'Surandhana', 'Bramha Vardha. 'and' Ramya ', ' Banaras', and finally Varanasi (a name derived from the rivers Varuna and assi flowing in the Ganga).

Mark Twain once wrote about Benaras-

***“Benaras is older than history, older than tradition  
older than even legend, and looks twice as old as all of the put together”***

Glorified in Hindu mythology and sanctified in religious texts, Varanasi is said to have been created by Supreme Lord shiva himself. According to Hindu mythology, there was a battle between Lord shiva and Lord Brahma, the struggle led to one of the five heads of Brahma torn apart by Shiva. It was the tradition of the time that the victor would take the opponent's head in his hand, leave it hanging from his hand to signify his courage. So Lord Shiva dishonored the head of Brahma and kept it hanging with him all the time. When he arrived in Kashi, today's Varanasi, the hanging head of Brahma fell from the hand of Shiva and disappeared into the ground. Since then, Varanasi is one of the holiest cities for Hindus. There is a common belief that this city is situated on the top of Shiva's trishul or trident, not on the ground.

This divine place is an important destination for Buddhist, Jains and for Sikhs as well. As Lord Buddha delivered his first sermon in Sarnath near Varanasi, four of the Jain Tirthankars were born here and Guru Nanak visited Varanasi two times.

The culture of Varanasi is closely linked to the river Ganges and its religious importance. This city is associated with the promotion of spiritualism, mysticism, Sanskrit yoga and provided the right platform for all cultural activities to flourish. It has rich and original variety of paintings, sculptor styles and equally rich treasures of Indian folk art, music and drama. **Diana L. Eck** (a scholar of religious studies) thinks that, the city illuminates the truth and reveals reality. It does not bring new wonders into the scope of vision but enables one to see what is already there. Where this eternal light intersects the earth, it is known as Kashi.

**Mirza Galib** (a poet) stated that the glory of Benaras was so high that it is impossible to measure or imagine.

## **THE GHATS OF VARANASI:**

Ghats of Banaras are world famous. Here one can see the unblemished, everlasting, pageantry of cycle of life and death on full display. The city's famed Ghats, a series of stepped embankments built along the banks of River Ganga. These Ghats are vital accompaniment to a Hindu's perception of spirituality signified as physical, philosophical, and mystic elements. There are 84 ghats in Varanasi, most of which are used for taking a holy dip by pilgrims, some are designated for puja while some are used exclusively for paying respect to loved ones through cremation.

The most famous and oldest among these ghats are Dashashwamedha Ghat, Manikarnika Ghat, Assi Ghat, and Harishchandra Ghat. Dashashwamedha Ghat is considered holiest as Ganga aarti takes place here every evening. Darbhanga Ghat here is one of the most visually appealing and architecturally impressive. If anyone wants to see some exquisite Rajput architecture then Man Mandir Ghat is there. Some of the Ghats are made by Hindu rulers like Ahilya Bai Holkar of Malwa region, Man Singh of Amber, Peshwa of Gwalior, Sawai Jai Singh of Jaipur etc. Some of the Ghats are named after famous personalities of Banaras like- Tulsi Ghat is named after famous poet Tulsidas, Munshi Ghat is after poet Munshi Premchand.

Most of the Ghats were made at the time of Marathas then Holkars, Bhonsles, Peshwas and Scindias. The boat ride in the morning and aarti at Ghat in the evening in Varanasi is famous all over the world.

## **SUBAH-E- BANARAS (MAGICAL SUNRISE OF VARANASI):**

Varanasi, is a place where the sun is received with as much celebration as nowhere else on the earth. Subah-e-Banaras, an early morning collective effort before dawn (sunrise) is a unique start up by the Government of Uttar Pradesh. It was started in 2014 on Assi Ghat, keeping in mind the freshness and spiritually offered by the divine city of Varanasi, surrounded by the perpetually flowing the Ganges. People come here to start their day with new hopes and inner strength inspired by enchanting Vedic of riches, morning bells dissolved in surroundings, charming Ganga Ghats, vibrant and soothing Indian music in addition to yoga and meditation. Although every place's morning dawns in its own style but Banaras is blessed with two mornings- one which occurs in the sky and the second, which happens in expanse of consciousness. That is why it is said that in Varanasi, not just the sun rises in the sky but also ascends within, of true realization and knowledge. Varanasi is one of its own kind of place in the world where the effect of its morning can be felt on all the three levels of consciousness be it- physical, psychological or spiritual.

Subah-e-Banaras is a holistic platform which provides golden opportunity to purify our mind and soul, to discover our true selves and create a linkage with the divine cosmic feelings.

## **A VISUAL TREAT- EVENING GANGA AARTI OF VARANASI:**

The evening Ganga aarti at the holiest Dashashwamedha Ghat is a shining beacon of devotion and bliss that can make visitors experience the divinity inside and around them. The entire Ghat gets illuminated with a divine light that can be felt strongly. It is an organized activity performed in presence of a large crowd. It begins with lighting up the multi-tiered ceremonial brass lamps and a well synchronized and rhythmic chanting of the holy mantras. While, some of the priests blow the conch shells to sanctify the atmosphere, other priests wave the incense sticks to worship Maa Ganga. All together it makes for a spellbound sight for the visitors who witness the aarti and fills them with spiritual thoughts.

## **PLACES TO VISIT IN VARANASI:**

Some of the most renowned places to visit in Varanasi are-

- > Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple
- > River Ganges
- > Bharat Mata Mandir
- > Banaras Hindu University
- > Dashashwamedha Ghat
- > Assi Ghat
- > Sarnath
- > Ramnagar Fort
- > Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum
- > The Banaras Silk Emporium





### **ROLE OF VARANASI AND SPIRITUALITY IN INDIAN TOURISM:**

India is an ideal destination for a spiritual soul with a wanderlust. As it is known for its spiritualism, religious tolerance, yoga and secularism and for that reason it is called as- “Moksha Bhoomi”, door to the cosmic paradise. From extremities of Kanyakumari to the point where the earth touches the skies in the Himalayan regions, it is abundantly speckled with spiritually magnetic places, people and practices. This land is origin of Yoga- the true source of knowledge. People from all over the world now come to India for practicing Yoga and Meditation in Varanasi, which has been practiced here for centuries. The city is internationally renowned for its ancient spiritual practices and cosmic healing treatments. Indians have followed Vedic spiritual systems and its own healing practices like Ayurveda, Meditation, yoga and Pranic healing from ancient times. No wonder that people from every corner of the globe travel to Indian continent, a spiritual hub surrounded by natural beauty and powerful vibrations to receive orientation towards spirituality for their spiritual rejuvenation.

### **REASONS BEHIND THE FOREIGN TOURISTS VISIT AT VARANASI:**

- > The majority of foreign tourists visit Varanasi in search of peace of mind, sense of calmness and spiritual comfort. The city has numerous ashrams and maths that bids a perfect peaceful surrounding for those who wish to spend some spiritual days.
- > Varanasi offers the kind of freedom, both artistic and religious which no other Indian city offers. Tourists visit here to learn more about vibrant Indian culture, heritage and customs.
- > There is no better place to learn Indian classical music than Varanasi. Many foreigners visit here to learn Sanskrit language, Indian classical music and dance.

> To know more about holy river Ganges and its religious significance and to explore the enchanting ghats of Varanasi.

> Varanasi is famous for its festivals and fairs held here. Foreigners come here to enjoy festivals like Maha Shivratri, Dev Dipawali, Ganga Dussehra, and some important fairs like- Kumbh mela, Sarnath fair etc.

Owing to its rich traditional fabric and beautiful ghats, Varanasi attracts around 60 lakhs domestic and more than 30 lakhs international tourists every year. (Uttar Pradesh Govt., Tourism Stats). The peak season is regarded as October to march with tourist inflow being 60% of the total domestic tourists coming in a year while, for a foreign tourist it is 71%. The average stay is 2-3 days for both domestic and foreign tourists (ICRA Report, 2016).

According to Uttar Pradesh Department of tourism, over 3 million foreign and 5 million domestic tourists visited Varanasi in 2018.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPEMENT AT VARANASI:**

> Advertise more about the benefits of Indian spiritual arts like yoga, meditation, Ayurveda etc. In foreign countries.

> Provide additional improvements to existing spiritual products to improve their value among potential customers. For example- merging it with other types of cultural tourism or any other type of tourism at Varanasi.

> Maximize connectivity across Varanasi.

> Promote Kumbh Mela globally to attract more foreign tourist. Development of strategies and policies to overcome the seasonal problems and overcrowding.

> Ease in VISA process for the tourists visiting India for pilgrimage or holy places like Varanasi.

> India is known for not being a clean country. The clean India initiative needs to be publicized abroad.

- > Checking and eradicating the practice of highly inflated charges for foreigner tourists.
- > Appoint learned people as guides who can highlight the importance of the places.
- > The role of social media is very important to promote any destination and it should be explored to its full potential to attract many tourists.

## CONCLUSION:

Religion and spirituality are the critical motivators for many people to visit sacred places and the best part about spiritual tourism is that we get real time to know ourselves while enjoying holidays. It is like an opportunity to devote a period of time entirely to yourself. People believe that Varanasi is the best place to end your travel journey, but I would say that Varanasi is the perfect place to start your travel journey. This Vibrant city of Lord Shiva speaks to the soul. The evening Ganga aarti at Dashawamedha Ghat symbolizes that, Varanasi is not only about liberation and cremation, it is also about spiritual awakening and celebrating the colorful journey of life. It is a city where divinity can be felt everywhere. A rich cultural heritage, strong tradition of intellectual pursuit, colorful fair and festivals, historical and spiritual importance Varanasi has it all, may be that is why this lively city is aptly called ‘the spiritual capital of India’. So on the basis of above report we can conclude that, the spiritual tourism at Varanasi has great potential to develop the tourism industry in all dimensions.

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