

HINDU TOURISTS AS PILGRIMS IN QUEST OF SPIRITUAL PEACE

PK PANDIA*

ABSTRACT

Geoffrey Chaucer is considered to be the father of English poetry and the book that popularized him as a poet was A Prologue to Canterbury Tales. The tales narrated in the book are nothing but accounts of pilgrims who visited pilgrimage site of Canterbury. One thing is obvious that regardless of the country and the religion, tourism is very much concerned with pilgrimage. In the modern age tourism for pleasure and tourism for pilgrims in quest of spiritual peace are commonly interrelated for some people. However, the relationship between tourism for pleasure and pilgrimage in quest of spiritual peace has been neglected. One of the key distinguishing factors for tourism for pleasure and pilgrimage in quest of spiritual peace is that the former is purely for pleasure but the latter aims at attaining spiritual peace. However, at the same time pleasure may be derived but not at the cost of main objective. Spiritually, tourism occupies a different position. At its simplest, tourism is viewed as 'sightseeing'. Tourism for pilgrimage in quest of spiritual peace can appear to be explicitly religious, while simple tourism can appear to be explicitly secular. Therefore, tourism for spiritual peace and tourism for pleasure, despite operating on different planes of meaning, can have some important areas with common similarities. There may be tourists having similar experiences to pilgrimages, and pilgrims who really may be indistinguishable from tourists. Spiritual tourists are for the most part regular tourists. However, what distinguishes them is their seeking out of inner spiritual peace. Tourists differ from pilgrims in that they are not necessarily affiliated with one religion at the locations they visit as tourists, and that they are not necessarily there for the same reasons as pilgrims.

KEYWORDS: Spiritualism, Tourism, Peace, Hindu, Pilgrims.

HINDU TRADITION AS PILGRIMS

The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Hsuan-tsang, recorded a visit to Allahabad in 643 CE in the company of King Harsavardhana and described a tradition of Magha Mela. An activity of touring is an outer journey in geographical space mainly for pleasure seeking out of

curiosity or for spiritual quest. Pilgrimage for spiritual peace in the traditional sense is an inner journey manifest in exterior space in which the immanent and the transcendent together form a complex spiritual and travel phenomenon.

* Head, Department of English, BTT College (CTE), IASE Deemed University, GVM, Sardarshahr, Rajasthan.

Correspondence E-mail Id: editor@eurekajournals.com

Generally speaking, human beings need both outward and inward journeys. According to Sanatana Dharma, spiritual peace has got a strong connection with ancient tradition of pilgrimage, known as Tirtha-yatra which formerly connoted pilgrimage involving holy baths in water bodies as a symbolic purification ritual. Faith is pivotal to the desires, vows and acts associated with Hindu pilgrimage, and pilgrimage is a process whereby pilgrims attempt to understand the cosmos around them. In India a number of Hindu sanctuaries is so vast and the practice of pilgrimage so common that the whole of India can be viewed as an immense sacred space organized into a system of pilgrimage centres and their hinterlands. Hinduism, considered by some to be the world's oldest surviving Dharam, dates back to over 5000 BCE while some believe it to be eternal since the dawn of mankind. It is the third largest religion in the world consisting of approximately 13 per cent of the world's population. Hinduism is the majority religion in India, Nepal, Mauritius, and on the island of Bali in Indonesia, as well as a secondary or otherwise major religion in Guyana, Fiji, Suriname, Bhutan, Trinidad and Tobago, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Singapore. Many other countries also have large South Asian-based Hindu populations, including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa.

HINDU PHILOSOPHY

Hinduism is an inclusive religion in that its followers accept that all religions are ways to the same destination. They are therefore highly tolerant of people of other faiths. Hinduism is unique from other world religions in that there is no prophet i.e. the messenger of God and any particular book prescribed for rites and rituals. Instead, according to Hindu tradition, the Creator simultaneously formed both the universe and all knowledge about it.

Seers, or Rishis and Munis received this knowledge directly from the Creator in the form of the Vedas and subsequently they learnt knowledge from the sacred writ known as the Vedas. Likewise, there is no central religious headquarters or individual authority to make interpretations to religious canons. On the other hand, each individual learns what he or she must do to seek his or her own piety and higher level of being. Pilgrimage for spiritual peace is an important part of Hindu doctrine and millions of followers tour India and abroad each year to participate in enormous festivals, pilgrimage circuits and ritual cleansings. Likewise, thousands of people of other religions also visit India each year to appreciate its ancient and beautiful Hindu architecture and aesthetic historical sites that are associated with the religion.

PILGRIMAGE IN HINDUISM

There are various religious practices associated with Hinduism and pilgrimage is believed to be one of the most important rites. Hindu pilgrimage involves three stages: initiation (from the time one decides to take the journey to the beginning of the journey), liminality (the journey itself and experiences involved), and re-aggregation (the homecoming). The human quest to find peace and experience through the sacred space drives faith-building and the desire to travel.

Feelings associated with positive pilgrimage experiences and faith-building give rise to pilgrims to return to their normal life and share experiences with other members of society. This forms a cyclic frame of travel. This is known as 'pilgrimage mandala'. An example of Hindu perspectives on pilgrimage would explain this issue. Commencing from a believer (person) to the Ultimate (state of reality), there are at least four layers that exist but they are interconnected with each other.

In a way pilgrimage is a system of healing the body and soul by walking and opening the soul to the spirit inherent in Mother Earth. The notion of tirtha is symbolic of at least four connotations in ancient Hindu literature: (a) a route to a place where one can receive power (Rig Veda, Rg V 1.169.6; 1.173.11); (b) the bank of a river where people can dip in the water as a rite of purification (Rg V 8.47.11; 1.46.8); (c) the sacred site itself which possesses the power of manifestation (Rg V 10.31.3); (d) sacrilized places based upon divine happenings and work of the god(s) that took place there (Satapatha Brahmana 18.9). As applicable in various other religions, place and space are an integral part of Hindu pilgrimage. With the revival of traditional Hinduism during the 1950s, pilgrimages became more popular. In India when a tourist undertakes any domestic travel, over one-third is for the purpose of performing pilgrimage. Some estimates even go so far as to suggest the figure is around 95 per cent. The growth and importance of pilgrimage tourism may be related to a growing desire among Hindus to assert their identity in the society.

PROMINENT PILGRIM SITES IN INDIA

Through the ages, some places such as Ayodhya, Kashi, Mathura, Haridwar, Prayag, Chitrakut, Panchavati, Nasik, Kishkindha and Rameshvaram have turned out to be important sites of pilgrimage, and many of them are still known throughout India as indispensable locations to visit. The Mahabharata epic has several allusions to the 'grand pilgrimages'. The 'Book of the Forest' (III. 82) and the 'Book of the Administration' (XIII. 108) are especially important as they provide descriptions of some 330 places and 12 grand pilgrimage routes covering all corners of India-Kashmir (north), Kamarupa (east), Kanyakumari (south) and Saurashtra (west). According to the Mahabharata (XIII.108.16-18): Just as certain limbs of the body are purer than others, so are

certain places on earth more sacred-some on account of their situation, others because of their sparkling waters, and others because of the association or habitation of saintly people. These cantos also make a mention to the rules, the ways and the codes of conduct to be followed during pilgrimage, as well as the hierarchy and degree of sanctity of various places.

The Mahatmya literature (the puranas) of the medieval period, dating from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries, provides mythological stories as to how, why, whom to respect, and in what manner pilgrimages should be performed. They extensively describe how pilgrim journeys stand for spiritual progress and how pilgrimage is beneficial in being delivered from sins and worldly affairs. These dos and don'ts refer to several aspects of spiritual transformation and provide a set of principles associated with pilgrimage:

- Travellers should try to encounter areas they have not previously visited or known much about.
- Difficult and painstaking journeys amount to penance.
- Pilgrimage is an opportunity to experience earth powers to improve overall well-being, harmony and happiness.
- Part of religious duty implies being free from other worldly duties.
- One should seek the support of deity to fulfil the journey. By so doing, pilgrims associate more closely with divinities.
- One should seek religious companionship and try to meet other groups of pilgrims while travelling.-There should be a desire to enhance fellowship in the sect they are associated with.
- Pilgrims should seek to understand the sacred symbols and knowledge of auxiliary shrines and divinities.

PILGRIM CENTRES & THEIR ASSOCIATIONS

According to the list of the Kalyana Tirthank published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 35 per cent of all sacred places are known to have their association to the god Shiva, followed by Vishnu (16 per cent), and the goddess (12 per cent). The feminine spirit of nature has received special attention in the books of mythology. 51 special sites are marked on the earth that symbolize the dismembered parts of the goddess's body. Every region has its own tradition of varying forms of goddess. The Tantric tradition symbolized these sites as resting places of pilgrimage by the goddess, resulting in a transformation of energy. These 51 goddess-associated sites later increased to 108. During the medieval period, all these sites were replicated in Varanasi and are still active points of pilgrimage and other rituals. A taxonomical assessment of Hindu pilgrimage places classifying holy places has been an important theme of geographic concern in terms of origin and location, motive, association and manifestation of

According to the Brahma Purana, pilgrimage sites may be categorized as follows: divine sites related to specific deities; demonic sites associated with the mythological demons who performed malevolent works and sacrifices there; sites associated with the lives of important spiritual leaders (sages); and man-perceived sites, which are not believed to be 'chosen' but merely discovered and revered by humans.

With respect to belief systems and practices as prescribed in the Vedas and as experienced by pilgrims, holy places may be categorized into three groups: water-sites, associated primarily with sacred baths on auspicious occasions; shrine sites related to a particular deity and mostly visited by pilgrims who belong to, or are attached to a particular sect; and circuit areas (Kshetra), the navigation of which gives special

merit based on some system of cosmic mandala as in case of Varanasi, Mathura and Ayodhya. In terms of geographic scale, frequency and routine, Stoddard described a typology of 24 categories. He concluded that factors such as minimal aggregate travel distance, proximity to large urban centres, and social characteristics, such as dominance of a particular cohort of the Hindu population, are not influential upon the distribution of holy places in India.

This categorization places less emphasis on the belief systems and phenomenology of religion. It would be more proper to account for the distribution of their sacred places in reference to their development and regional representation, their sacred topography, and perceived and imposed meanings. In general from the perspective of geographical scale and social coverage, Hindu pilgrimage places may be seen as pan-Indian, those attracting people from all parts of India and glorified in the classical Hindu scriptures; supra-regional, referring to the chief places of the main sects and mostly linked to founders of various shrines (e.g. Pandharpur); regional, connoting the site's dominance in a particular culture or language group and perhaps narrated as representative of pan-Indian places; and local spots associated with ordinary sacred geography, attracting people from nearby villages or towns. There is of course overlap and transition among these groups and over time the status of these places may change as well. Moreover, there also exist multi-level places whose identity changes according to sacredness of time and specificity of celebration. The 7 most sacred cities (Saptapuris) are Mathura, Dwarka, Ayodhya, Haridwar, Varanasi, Ujjain and Kanchipuram. Similarly, the 12 most important Shiva (God of Destruction-destruction of evil) abodes

Important Hindu places of pilgrimages in India are located all over India and are known as Jyotir lingas tirthas. The 4 prominent abodes of Vishnu in the 4 corners of India comprise

another group of popular pilgrimage centres and are representative of pan-Indian pilgrimage places. Scenarios at 'Three Bridges to Heaven' According to one of the most authoritative Sanskrit texts on pilgrimage and sacred places, the Tristhalisetu (TS-'Holy Bridge of Three Sacred Cities to Heaven'), dating from the late sixteenth century, the three pillars of the 'bridge to the realm of soul' are Prayaga (Allahabad), Kashi (Varanasi) and Gaya. The first two are located on the Ganga River, while Gaya lies on a tributary of the Ganga. Kumbha Mela, Allahabad: the world's largest pilgrimage gathering Sacred site festivals in India (melas) are a vital part of Hindu pilgrimage traditions. Celebrating a mythological event in the life of a deity or an auspicious astrological period, melas attract enormous numbers of pilgrims from all over the country.

KUMBHA MELAS

The grandest of all these melas, the Kumbha Mela, is organized 4 times in a span of 12 years, rotating between Allahabad located at the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, Nasik on the Godavari River, Ujjain on the Shipra River, and Haridwar on the Ganga . Taking a dip in these rivers during the Kumbha Mela is regarded an attempt of great merit, cleansing both body and spirit. The Prayaga and Haridwar festivals are normally attended by millions of pilgrims (13 million visited Allahabad in 1977, some 18 million in 1989, and over 28 million in 2001 and over 30 million in 2013), making the Kumbha Mela the largest religious congregation in the world. It may also be the oldest. There are two traditions that determine the origin/location and timing of the festival. The origins of the location of Kumbha Mela are referred to in the Puranas, ancient texts that tell about a battle between gods and demons in which four drops of nectar-drink of the gods that provides them immortality were supposed to have fallen to

earth on these mela sites. The second tradition establishes the timeframe and is connected to astrological phenomena.

Kumbha Mela sites in India have evolved in its present shape under the guidance of the great philosopher Shankaracharya, who had set up four monasteries in the north, south, east and west of India, and called upon the Hindu ascetics, monks and sages to meet at these sites for an exchange of philosophical views. Some scholars hold that between the ninth and twelfth centuries other monks and religious reformers perpetuated and reinforced this periodic assemblage of saints and laypeople at sacred places on the banks of the holy rivers to create an environment of mutual understanding among different religious sects. Moreover, the festival enabled laypeople an opportunity to derive benefit from their association with the normally reclusive sages and forest yogis. What was originally a regional festival at Prayag in a way became the pre-eminent pan-Indian pilgrimage gathering. Panchakroshi Yatra, Varanasi: experiencing the cosmic circuit The most sacred city for Hindus, Varanasi (Kashi), has a unique personality possessing all the important pan-India Hindu holy places in concise form and spatially transposed in its landscape-hence, the city's title of 'cultural capital' of India. The sacred territory (kshetra) of Kashi is delimited by a pilgrimage circuit, known as Panchakroshi. In an abbreviated form, the Panchakroshi pilgrimage route of Varanasi symbolizes the cosmic circuit, the centre of which is the temple of Madhyameshvara and radial point at the shrine of Dehli Vinayaka, covering a distance of 88.5km. There are 108 shrines and sacred spots along this route, archetypically indicating the integrity of the division of time (e.g. 12 zodiacs) and cardinality of space (9 planets in Hindu mythology, referring to 8 directions and the centre). Among the 108 shrines, 56 are related to Shiva (linga). The antiquity of this pilgrimage

goes back to the mid-sixteenth century as described in the mythological puranas.

HINDU PILGRIMS & THEIR OUTLOOK

Hindu pilgrims view sacred journeys as an earthly adventure from one place to another that includes the cumulative effects of a spiritual quest and physical hardship-by moving, suffering or avoiding temptation. Believers often speak of the special power of pilgrimage to uplift them (based upon particular qualities of places) and of the compelling effects of various rituals and rites performed by priests at sacred places. Gaya: the sacred city of ghostscape Known as the most holy place for ancestral rituals, the city of Gaya and its surrounding area claims continuity of tradition at least since the eighth century CE as recounted in the Vayu Purana. The ancient writ mentions 324 holy sites related to ancestral rites, of which 84 are presently identifiable and are concentrated in the vicinity of 9 sacred centres. At present pilgrims most typically visit only 45 of these sites, although three-quarters of the pilgrims perform their ancestral rites at only three places: Phalgu River, Vishnupad, and its other associated sacred centres. The cosmogonic hierarchy is marked by three territorial layers: Gaya Mandala, Gaya Kshetra and Gaya Puri, within which there is a complex interweaving of themes of birth, fertility, sun and death. In the symbolic realm of the cosmic triad, Vishnu's footprints in the Vishnupad temple serve as the axis mundi, and the cardinal and celestial points are marked by hills and other sites of the mandala. The first clear evidence of Gaya as a holy place is metaphorically highlighted in the Rig Veda (1.22.17). The treatise Nirukta, around the eighth century BCE, elaborates the three most sacred places in Gaya. The glory of Gaya had already been established in the period of the Mahabharata, especially for ancestral rites. Based on inscriptional sources, the antiquity of

the site and tradition of ancestral rites in and around the Vishnupad temple goes back to the period of Samudragupta (fifth century CE). The Chinese traveller Hsuan-tsang (seventh century) also mentioned Gaya as a sacred place for bathing, which has the power to wash away sins. The name Gaya is derived from a demon-king, Gayasura. He, by his arduous austerity, pleased the gods. Consequently he was blessed that the spirit of all divinities would reside in his body. By the power he gained through deep meditation, the divine spirit met the earth spirit, resulting in the formation of a very powerful matrix. It was this fame that brought the Buddha here to perform meditation here.

SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Among the ancient epics, the Mahabharata is considered to be the first to encourage Hindu pilgrimages (tirthayatra). The mythologies of the medieval period (puranas) likewise appreciated holy places. Many works followed later.

They encourage pilgrimages as well. According to these prominent scriptures, the pilgrimage symbolizes spiritual progress and is encouraged as a way of breaking free of sins and worldly affairs. Pilgrimage journey is prescribed as a duty to earn spiritual peace and symbolizes different contexts such as routes, riverbanks, shrines and venerated sites associated with wise and respected sages.

According to ancient mythology and the Hindu mindset there are many types of hallowed places throughout India, but the most important sacred place is Kashi/Varanasi (Banaras), extolled as one of the three ladders to heaven in company with Allahabad and Gaya. With the spread of global tourism and a widespread interest in seeing culture in the mirror of history and tradition, religious heritage resource management becomes an important issue in two primary ways:

protection and maintenance of sacred sites and the survival and continuity of pilgrimage ceremonies that preserve centuries-old human interactions with the earth and its mystic powers.

CONCLUSION

By and large almost in all the religions there is a provision for the pilgrimages. The adherents attach high significance to visit the pilgrim sites. Naturally this type of tourists comprises a high number of tourists. In the context of India the tourists as pilgrims who want to have spiritual peace are very high. In the recent time, the means of transportation, communication, medical team, expertise, money and such other factors have facilitated tourists to visit the pilgrimage centres in quest of spiritual peace.

Mansarovar and Amarnath also belong to such category. Pilgrimage is a way of fostering a rediscovery of forgotten or endangered cultural heritage and practices at sacred places. They focus on reverence to, and harmony with, the Earth as source and sustainer of life. There are many examples of grand Hindu pilgrimages at the regional level, such as Sabarimalai in Kerala (South India) and Vaishno Devi (North India), in which a large number of pilgrims participates. Such places are the nexus of cultural integrity.

This fact also deserves a mention whether such people who couple tourism with pilgrimage want to seek religious 'truths', or whether spiritual tourism is something quite different. This brings out the notion that holidays are becoming 'holy-days' in an ironic twist of the influences of secularisation and post modernity. Perhaps it is the case that undertaking spiritual journeys is, for some, playing the dual role of religion and relaxation. Such a thing may help us to figure out about the shifting trends in popular religiosity, as well

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