

December 2014

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Recommended Citation

Shinde, Kiran A. and Rizello, Katia (2014) "A Cross-cultural Comparison of Weekend-trips in Religious Tourism: Insights from two cultures, two countries (India and Italy)," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/D7PF0W>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol2/iss2/3>

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A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Weekend-Trips in Religious Tourism: Insights from two cultures, two countries (India and Italy)

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This paper explains the peculiarities, significance, and universality of weekend-trips as a significant form of religious tourism using a comparative analysis of this phenomenon in two pilgrimage sites from two different cultures (and countries), namely, Vrindavan in India and the Shrine of Santimissi Medici in Italy. The findings derived from a case study approach and visitors' survey method confirm that religious tourism falls under the more general category of leisure and that visitors who flock to these places on weekends do not coincide either with general models proposed in the extant literature, nor can they be assimilated into the conventional categories of pilgrims and / or tourists. While highlighting the similarities and differences in the two cases, the paper proposes that weekend visitors are best described as religious tourists: visitors who use tourism as a means to fulfil a predominant religious motive in visiting a destination they consider religious or sacred. The analysis based on the concept of weekend-trips helps to explore nuances of religious tourism which can be used for better planning and management in religious tourism destinations.

Keywords: religious tourism, pilgrimage, weekend-trips, India, Italy

Introduction

Travelling to a sacred site to partake in 'the spirit of the place,' is an idea common to most religions (Collins-Kreiner, 2010a; Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Timothy and Olsen, 2006; Shackley, 2001). Conventionally, travel to such places has been considered as pilgrimage during which pilgrims, with a strong religious or spiritual motivation, undertake long journeys from distant places on foot to arrive at a sacred site. Although the goal of such travel is to *see and be seen* by the deity [and saints] and seek blessings, pilgrims also engage in rituals that are considered necessary by clergymen or priests or religious functionaries for the purpose of travel (Tyraowski, 1994, Morinis, 1992; Shinde, 2011). While this basic structure of religious travel to sacred places has remained unaltered, it has evolved in contemporary societies in ways that are different in its manifestation: motives and needs of travellers become complex and diversified and such travel exhibits a mix of religious and 'tourism-like' characteristics and therefore is referred to as religious tourism (Rinschede, 1997; Santos, 2003; Tomasi, 2002).

In religious tourism, scholars differentiate between two formats of travel: long-term and short-term (Shackley, 2001). The former in contemporary expressions has evolved from the transformation of traditional pilgrimages which were long-term journeys generally performed on foot (Murray and Graham, 1997; Tyraowski, 1994; Shinde, 2008) while the latter is associated with shorter duration of visit and an emphasis on motorised travel benefit from the improved accessibility of sacred places (Shinde, 2007b; Shackley, 2001). The long-term pattern has been examined in great details where scholars have observed: a considerable shift from the notion of journeying to quick and easy trips; some emphasis on commercial organisation that is typical to package tours; increasing consumerism amongst visitors and host communities and; a relatively low priority accorded by visitors to performing religious rituals (Tyraowski, 1994; Shinde, 2008; Gladstone, 2005). Contemporary patterns suggest that the conventional notions of such travel on auspicious occasions is losing ground and more travel is taking place outside the religious calendars. In particular, short-term visits or

excursions are found to be associated with holidays (recognised public holidays) and weekend visits (Rinschede, 1992; Tomasi, 2002). While there is an implicit assumption regarding a strong presence of leisure and recreation related aspects in short term visits, a systematic analysis in this respect is not readily available. Moreover, the extant scholarship on the subject appears to offer limited understanding about the nature of such trips, touristic characteristics and religious engagement of religious tourists at religious tourism destinations in short-term visits.

In this paper, we focus on short-term excursions to religious tourism destinations as they are manifested in 'weekend-trips' in forwarding a nuanced understanding of religious tourism and religious tourists. We illustrate peculiarities, significances, and the universality of this significant form of religious tourism by examining this phenomenon in two different cultures (and countries): Christian religious travel in Italy and Hindu religious travel in India. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), more than 300 million people a year participate in religious tourism which is a market worth over 18 billion dollars; 20 percent of which is generated in Italy alone (approximately 20 million overnight stays and associated business worth over four billion Euros) (Trono, 2009). In Italy, there are about 2,058 pilgrimage sites (Sesana, 2006), twenty of which attract significant numbers of visitors ranging from a few thousand up to a million. In the case of India, the UNWTO estimates around 170 million visits to religious sites (rough estimates suggest this number to be in excess of 2,000 sites); such visits comprise 70-90 percent of domestic tourism flows (UNWTO, 2011; Singh, 2002; NCAER, 2003). Thus, religious tourism represents a dominant form of tourism and a significant market of its own in both India and Italy. The many similarities and differences in their manifestation is the subject of this paper.

This paper is based on findings from observations and the personal experience of two authors while doing independent studies in their individual areas: one is an Indian Hindu who conducted fieldwork in the Hindu pilgrimage site of Vrindavan in northern India in 2005 and 2008; and the other is an Italian Catholic who conducted fieldwork in the Shrine of Santimissi Medici near Oria in southern Italy in 2007. The paper has evolved after the authors shared their findings when one visited the other's institution during a study visit in 2011. Preliminary discussions about the findings from their respective field notes triggered the idea of a comparative analysis of religious tourism in the two cultures and has led to the presentation of this paper.

The paper is organised in five sections. In the first section, we situate religious tourism in the ongoing theoretical debates about pilgrimage, tourism, and leisure to develop a working definition of weekend-trips. The second and third sections discuss pilgrimage and religious tourism in the sites of Vrindavan and Oria respectively and highlight various aspects of weekend-trips as contemporary forms of religious travel. The similarities and differences in weekend trips in both cultures is the subject of the fourth section. In the fifth section, we draw some conclusions about the significance and universality of weekend-trips in religious tourism, the limitations of the present study and we outline directions for future research.

Situating Religious Tourism and Weekend Visits

Much early literature in the field aimed at making sense of religious travel by situating it along a spectrum with pilgrimage and tourism as its two poles (Cohen, 1992; Smith, 1992; Santos, 2003). While using various aspects including motivation, behaviour and experience to understand visitors to sacred places, it resulted in their polarisation as pilgrims versus tourists. However, it appears that the dilemma of labelling travellers as pilgrims and tourists were reconciled by the now famous adage, 'A pilgrim is half a tourist and a tourist is half a pilgrim' (Turner and Turner, 1978). Yet this approach does not help in explaining religious tourism as it arises out of the complexities of social, religious, and cultural reasons to travel to sacred sites (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Rinschede's definition of religious tourism as a 'specific type of tourism whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons' (1992, p 52) provides only an entry point to the discussion on this subject.

The origins of the term religious tourism are complicated. In Europe, the idea of religious tourism as different from pilgrimage was connected with the decline in religious practice, the growing popularity of trips by car or bus, and the secularisation of societies (Santos, 2003). Furthermore, Nolan and Nolan (1992) argue that it was the market that self-imposed and popularised the use of this term in exploiting a travel segment that combines both spiritual and secular elements. However, this does not seem to be the case in India where scholars argue that pilgrimage continues to be a kind of religious tourism as it provides social opportunities for travel to sacred places (Kaur, 1985). While this may be true for the long-term format where pilgrimage is considered as a ritual journey, such a notion needs to be examined and scrutinised for short term visits which now constitute a substantial

proportion of trips to sacred places and yet have remained relatively unexplored in the literature.

For examining short-term weekend visits, which is the focus of this paper, we base our study on Turner's (1978) explanation of pilgrimage (or religious travel) as comprising of three key elements:

- Motivation;
- Journey and;
- Destination.

In the past, these three elements have been widely used in varying degrees of combination for distinguishing pilgrimage from tourism (Cohen, 1992; Smith, 1992). The focus in this paper is not to engage in the pilgrim-tourist debate *per se*, but to draw attention to the overlapping characteristics of both these forms as they become apparent in contemporary visits to sacred places. We are also more concerned with understanding the motivation and behaviour of religious tourists and patterns of journeys in the short term visits. For doing so, we explain the three elements in a way that offers a conceptual framework to investigate and understand similarities and differences expressed in religious tourism in India and Italy.

A desire for spiritual or religious fulfilment is the prime motivation for a visitor to be considered as a pilgrim: there is a greater intensity and frequency of behaviours associated with that sphere, including overnight stays in religious structures, participation in religious services, celebrations and rituals. In contrast, travellers who are driven by a combination of religious and non-religious motives tend to participate in activities that are not related to worship or devotion but more to 'spectacle' aspects and practice forms of consumption that are absent in the typical image of a pilgrim (Cohen, 1992). Thus, based on the exclusivity and intensity of the religious motive, a visitor to a holy place can be considered more of a pilgrim than tourist or *vice versa* (Smith, 1992). However, in recent research, there has been a conscious effort to move away from such polarisation of tourists and pilgrims and to consider them as two roles performed simultaneously or at different times by the same visitor to a sacred place.

The individuals' roles as pilgrims or tourists are clearer in the second key characteristic - journey. The journey in religious travel represents the external transposition of a complex interior process that brings a pilgrim closer to the sacred and therefore is a religious rite in itself. According to the Catholic Church:

[T]he proclamation, reading and meditation of the Gospel must accompany the steps of the pilgrim and the visit to the Shrine itself (Pontificio Consiglio Della Pastorale Per I Migranti E Gli Itineranti, 1998).

The journey of a pilgrim is an integral part in the celebration of the sacred and it is in the way it is performed that pilgrimage travel is distinguished from tourism undertaken for pleasure. For instance, the French National Railway Company (SNCF) recognised that pilgrims mark their progress with songs and prayers and to facilitate and collectivise this practice, in the 1950s began installing sound systems on the trains to Lourdes in order to obtain perfect coordination in the synchronous recitation of the rosary and the singing of hymns on the outward and return journeys (Sesana, 2006). Since a journey provides separation from one's daily existence, from 'regulated and organised work' (Urry, 1995) its manifestation as a form of leisure tourism is also considered by many scholars as serving the purpose of rejuvenation and spiritual growth and therefore the return to daily life is accompanied by an overall improvement of self well-being (Graburn, 1977; Urry, 1995; Boyer, 2011). However, this notion of improvement is differently manifested and more explicitly found in those who return from religious pilgrimages as being blessed by the divine - socially they are also accorded special status (for instance, people receive Hajjis with reverence in Islam while in Hinduism those performing the famous char-dham yatra are often welcomed with religious festivities). Thus, it is argued that pilgrimage and tourism are socially similar from the phenomenological point of view and different only in terms of external representation where features of the journey become explicit; pilgrims and tourists use similar infrastructure (Tomasi, 2002, Talec, 1993) but their experience and mental state may change in time and intensity according to their personal characteristics and the way the journey is performed.

The third key element that characterises pilgrimage is the destination: an 'exterior space in which the immanent and transcendent together form a complex spiritual travel phenomenon' (Singh, 2006). This exterior space in Eliade's terms are 'erupts' and are generally manifested as sacred places which often evolve into religious places or a pilgrimage sites but mean different things to different types of visitors. For devout pilgrims, it means the final moment where they reach the objective of 'seeing and being seen by God' using rites and ceremonies (Shinde, 2007a). Traditionally these places of religious experience were considered as 'centres out there' (Turner, 1973; Turner

and Turner, 1978) but these notions are challenged now as pilgrimage sites the world over continue to experience dramatic growth in the numbers of their visitors due to improved accessibility (Shinde, 2007a; Eade, 1992). For example, in India, the population in the pilgrim town of Tirumala-Tirupati has grown at an annual rate of more than five percent to emerge as one of the fastest urbanising centres (Shinde, 2007a). Similar is the case of San Giovanni Rotondo in Italy: in the last 50 years the town has transformed from a rural municipality to a 'tourist' resort where visitor flows reach nine million a year and there exist more than 100 hotels and 79 other types of lodging facilities including Bed and Breakfasts and establishments with rooms to let which account for 40 percent of the available accommodation (Rizzello, 2009). Although the notion of the 'centre out there' continues to draw visitors, in physical reality they may not be as relevant while discussing the influence of a place on the journey. However, the 'religious or sacred value' accorded to a place continues to be the most important reasons for destinations of religious travel. For our paper, we follow the argument of Collins-Kriener:

No place is intrinsically sacred. Rather pilgrimages and their attendant landscapes, like all places, are social constructions (Collins-Kriener, 2010b).

Consequently, a physical 'centre out there' may or may not be necessary for accomplishment of religious tourism.

The three elements - motivation, journey, and destination - have also been used to explain secular pilgrimages to places such as memorials and graves, for celebrity worship (i.e. Graceland wall), and even to football matches in the USA where the overlapping of devotion, leisure and other recreational features of tourism are more apparent. Shackley (2001) suggests 11 types of such destinations for pilgrimage:

single nodal feature; archaeological sites; burial sites; detached temples / shrines; whole towns; shrine / temple complexes; 'earth energy' sites; sacred mountains; sacred islands; pilgrimage foci and secular pilgrimage.

However, in this paper the secular dimension will be more relevant in the sense of profane and non-religious activities that support the religious travel to places considered as sacred (Shackley, 2011; Shinde, 2008). Thus, we propose to begin with a working definition of religious tourists as visitors who use tourism as a

means to fulfil a predominant religious motive in visiting a destination that they value for reasons related to religious practice or sanctity of a place. This premise allows us to investigate pragmatically what happens in and to destinations due to burgeoning religious tourism as is manifested in weekend-trips.

Methodology

As mentioned earlier, this paper resulted from a discussion between the two authors who observed the phenomenon of weekend-trips in their respective study areas, namely Vrindavan in India and Oria in Italy, albeit at different times. Given the similarities that were found, they explored the potential of a cross-cultural analysis to explain peculiarities, differences and similarities in weekend-trips as integral forms of religious tourism.

Both scholars had used case study method for their independent studies as this approach relies on a full variety of evidence - documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations and therefore helps to triangulate all the data and provide a fuller understanding of the phenomena being studied (Yin, 2003). Their fieldwork included in-depth interviews, surveys and the observance of public behaviour through participant observation method. Having employed similar approaches, it was convincing to use these findings to present a comparative analysis. However, there were some differences as outlined below.

For the Indian case of Vrindavan, the detailed study was conducted in 2005 with the purpose of understanding the environment of contemporary pilgrimage travel. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, identified through snowball methods, to understand their views on pilgrimage, visitors, rituals, contemporary trends, and environmental change. A total of 92 individuals were interviewed (in person): 30 religious specialists including religious teachers, gurus, priests, and managers of temples and ashrams; 45 local residents including scholars, shopkeepers, tour operators, teachers, community leaders and representatives from traders' associations; ten officials from government agencies; seven representatives from NGOs. In addition, visitor data were captured through a questionnaire survey and interviews. The visitor survey was conducted at three major temples in the town on two weekends. The questions related to purpose of visit, frequency of trip, mode of transport, itinerary, duration of stay, and rituals performed during the visit. The survey was conducted in the non-peak season (during peak seasons it is very difficult to talk to

people due to heavy volumes and the anxiety of devotees to be able to have sight of the deity), and involved approaching visitors at the entrance of these temples after they had completed their tour or rituals at the sites, requesting their cooperation for completing the questionnaire. After filling in questionnaires from 60 visitors, saturation of responses was reached and it was possible to discern a few patterns. Additional longer interviews of about 30 minutes each were conducted with 30 visitors on a random sampling basis to get a deeper understanding about short-term visits. During a later visit to Vrindavan in 2008 and based on regular communication with informants from Vrindavan, the Indian researcher found that these findings continued to be similar to what was observed earlier.

In the Italian case of Oria, 100 visitors were interviewed over two consecutive Sundays in September 2007 using semi-structured questionnaires that took about 15 minutes to complete. These instruments were divided into three macro areas: a) personal information designed to establish the type of visitor; b) structured questions designed to determine the mechanism and duration of the journey and the time spent in the area of the shrine; c) open-response questions designed to gauge the sustainability of the site as perceived by visitors.

These two studies, though conducted at different time-frames and with their individual focus, have potential to draw attention to similarities and differences in patterns of short-term excursions of weekend-trips to sacred sites in two cultural contexts as is discussed in the following sections.

Vrindavan

Vrindavan is located 150 km south of Delhi (the national capital) and about 50 km north-west of Agra (famous for Taj Mahal) and falls within the 'Golden Triangle for tourism' in North India with Jaipur as its third important tourist destination (refer to Map 1). By virtue of its location, Vrindavan renders itself as an attraction within the larger touristic region. However, more than its location, visitors are drawn to it as it is a popular Hindu pilgrimage centre comprising of more than 5,000 temples dedicated to the mythology of Krishna, the human incarnation of Vishnu (Entwistle, 1987). At present Vrindavan is a municipal town having a geographical area of 24kms² and a resident population of 60,000 (2011); and is visited by more than six million visitors every year (Shinde, 2012b).

Map 1: Location of Vrindavan, India.



Map drawn by the author based on Indian Atlas

Pilgrimage tradition in Vrindavan

Vrindavan is the epicentre of a larger region called Braj which was established in the late 15th century by Vaishnava gurus and devotees (followers of Vishnu) who believed that this is where Krishna was born and spent his childhood. This region, spread over an area of 2500 kms², which includes hundreds of sites associated with Krishna mythology was proclaimed as a pilgrimage landscape. Vrindavan gained popularity as a site of Krishna devotion due to the work of its founding gurus, called Goswamis, who built grand temples and charted the ritual framework of Krishna worship. Over time, four important sects emerged and their lineages continue to be the hereditary custodians of most temples. In addition, there are several hundred religious establishments built over the last five centuries and natural elements including Yamuna river, the sacred groves, and hillocks that constitute the pilgrimage landscape of Vrindavan and attract hordes of visitors. A journey through this landscape is the most virtuous form of pilgrimage travel.

An archetypal visit to Vrindavan is motivated by the need to seek *Darshan* [the act of divine sight] of Krishna and to receive blessings from religious gurus and Goswamis (who initiate and counsel their followers in Vrindavan) and often follows a set

pattern: devotees come to seek blessings of Krishna and the Goswamis and in doing so take services from religious specialists, commonly known as *Pandas* in performing pilgrimage rituals. These include:

- staying at a facility provided by a *Panda*: these may include either his own house, an ashram, and / or *Dharamshala* (pilgrim-inns that offer free accommodation),
- preparing food offerings for the deity and the gurus,
- taking ritual bath in Yamuna River,
- visit to different temples for *darshan* of the deity,
- attending prayers at specific times, and
- listening to religious sermons and stories.

The period of stay may range from a day to more than six months. Typically, such trips are organised around a patron-client system where devotees patronise their hereditary *pandas*. Devotees are also encouraged to undertake the 21 kilometers peripheral circumambulation (*parikrama*) of Vrindavan including worship of the river Yamuna. A large proportion of visits to Vrindavan coincide with religiously important occasions or specific calendrical cycles and they possess a high component of rituals. Such a format of visits has been the mainstay of the cultural economy surrounding pilgrimages and pilgrimage sites (Morinis, 1984; van Der Veer, 1988).

Similar to sacred places elsewhere in India, Vrindavan also shows how the traditional patterns of pilgrimage ritual are being abridged in time and over space. The following section discusses these short-term visits, particularly during weekends as they have emerged as a prominent mode of religious travel.

Contemporary expression of religious travel in Vrindavan

The following discussion is based on the findings of the 92 interviews as well as the questionnaire survey of 60 visitors outside the three main temples on two consecutive weekends. Data obtained from the visitor survey revealed that about 80 percent of respondents made regular trips to Vrindavan. Of these, ten percent made monthly trips; about 40 percent came at least twice each year while 20 percent had visited Vrindavan for the very first time. All respondents confirmed that devotional worship and Krishna *darshan* at different temples was the main motive of the visit.

The main mode of transport was by car, self-owned and driven (60 percent), or hired through regional taxi

services (20 percent). Less than 20 percent of the visitors travelled using public transport, i.e., trains or state run regional bus services. The duration of stay ranged between one and three days: close to one third were on a day-trip, half stayed overnight and returned home the following day, and the remaining stayed for two nights before travelling to other places in the region. Only five respondents from the survey chose to board in the *ashrams* belonging to their gurus or in the facilities offered by their community associations.

Regarding traditional rituals, about 20 percent attended the ceremonial prayers performed at temples during different times of the day; 50 percent of those visiting the temple did not wait to attend the customary prayers at specific times (*arati*) nor intended to perform any specific rituals associated with traditional pilgrimage. Less than 10 percent of the respondents had performed the customary *parikrama* or circumambulation of Vrindavan. Only 5 out of the 60 respondents in the survey indicated that they had relied on the services of *Pandas* or local guides during their trip.

It is important to note that this survey of visitors at the entrance of major temples does not reflect the entire range of trips to Vrindavan. Many interviewees also pointed out that many day and weekend trips may involve customary visits to their family *goswamis* or gurus, initiation ceremonies for family members, or sponsoring large ritual feasts (*bhandaras*) to honour pledges made to particular deities or for other important events in the religious calendar.

It was clear from the responses that the weekend visitors considered Krishna to be an important 'wish-fulfilling' god that was easily accessible, physically and devotionally. The connectivity with nearby urban centres including tourism destinations of Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra, provided easy and convenient access for visitors. That Vrindavan was a destination to fulfil both religious needs and leisure related recreation is made clear: a typical itinerary included visits to three temples: *Banke Bihari* temple, whose deity is popularly recognised for fulfilling the wishes of devotees, *Rangji* temple for its grandeur, and *ISKCON* temple for its unique 'western' appeal. In some instances, visitors included *Radharaman* temple in their itinerary because of its architectural heritage. Less than 10 percent of the respondents visited 5 or more temples during their trip. On an average, visitors spent between 45 minutes to an hour in each temple but this was primarily waiting time in queues before reaching the sacro-sanctum and gaining *darshan*. It was also observed that significant numbers of day-visitors visited the Yamuna riverfront and took a boat ride in the colourful boats but refrained

from undertaking the customary circumambulation or worship of the river. The emphasis on non-religious activities is also apparent in the ways visitors appreciate what Vrindavan has to offer. A visitor claimed that,

We don't get this kind of lassi (sweet buttermilk which has a special meaning: it is made from curd, something that is considered as Krishna's favourite food) in Delhi (interviewed on 14/03/2005).

The significance of such an outlook is not lost: in the last five years, more than 100 eating places (and many more informal food sellers) have mushroomed near the most popular temples.

Religious functionaries in Vrindavan emphasise that staying in a pilgrimage centre and partaking of its sanctity for at least one night is necessary for acquiring the benefits of the visit (it is noteworthy to mention a contrary view amongst a few hardliner devotees which prohibits staying in the place of residence of Krishna because by doing so one actually spoils the sanctity of the place). Since the day-trippers do not spend more than a day they are censured by traditional religious actors who argue that such trips are less meaningful, less meritorious in the religious sense, and not helpful for continuity of religious traditions. One of the priests recalls the behaviour of a true pilgrim as

one who used to remove their footwear on entering the boundary of Vrindavan and walk barefoot, sleep in the verandah of a 'dharmshala', cook their own food and defecate outside the sacred territory of Vrindavan [and that] self-regulation and self-discipline were the hallmarks of pilgrim's behaviour (interviewed on 12/03/2005).

In regards to short term visitors, another interviewee observed that

there is no control over behaviour of visitors and as a result the self-discipline of religious place is gone (interviewed on 20/03/2005).

Concerns are also voiced by many local residents who find that contemporary visitors bring with them their urban lifestyle of consumerism and seem to be less sensitive to the sacredness of the place. In common parlance, therefore, most day-trippers and weekend-visitors are referred to as 'yatri' (just plain traveller) rather than 'tirth-yatris' (pilgrims). The following remarks from an elderly guru highlight the difference:

tirthayatri used to come with 'bhav' (devotion) but many 'yatris' now come for tourism and entertainment. They come as if they are on a morning walk and go as if they just finished their evening walk. They do not come with the vision ('drishti') of 'tirth-yatra' . . . where do they have time for thinking about what they are seeing or even understanding the form of Vrindavan – they are just tourists of two hours, unlike the 'tirth-yatri' who was never in a hurry. Slow movement of pilgrims is over now, everybody is in a rush and on 'eat and drink party' (interviewed on 18/03/2005).

On similar lines, preference for accommodation in traditional religious establishments such as ashrams and *dharamshalas* and their patronage is dwindling and more modern type of accommodation facilities such as guesthouses and purpose-built apartments and townships are becoming central to such travel. Also emerging are car driver enterprises and tour operators specialising in tours to nearby sacred places and tourism attractions; more than 50 agencies have sprung in the last five years. During interviews, visitors complained of tour drivers being money-minded, less sensitive and having little regard for the devotional or religious emotions of pilgrims.

Like any other Hindu God, Krishna in Vrindavan, is worshipped for material benefits and general welfare, but was not considered as a 'wish fulfilling' God (as some of the deities are believed to be, for instance, Balaji at Tirupati) whose worship needed to be accomplished with certain rituals. However, the findings suggest that a good proportion of day-visitors come to Vrindavan seeking Krishna's help in solving problems related to their mundane existence. A common discourse among local residents is that

People come for the god and not for Vrindavan, and therefore it is not the place that is important now, it is the God who helps them who is important, that too in a particular temple (priest interviewed on 30/03/2005).

However, a parallel discourse is also present which emphasizes that most people come to visit Vrindavan rather than the god because it provides them with an easily accessible destination to spend their leisure time. The opinions about visitors as 'religious tourists' and not as 'pilgrims' is commonplace amongst local community in Vrindavan: Such visitors do not engage in elaborate rituals, spend relatively much less time in temples, but wander around and shop for religious trinkets and souvenirs. Owing to time constraints,

visitors aspire to seek *darshan* [seeing] in a few temples rather than participate in elaborate rituals such as the circumambulation of the sacred territory, worship of the river, performing arati, and attending religious ceremonies.

In summary, visitors to Vrindavan are driven by various religious needs including the ritual of visits to temples and customary counsel with religious gurus, their weekend visits are characterised more as cultural practice where they combine aspects of a 'get-away on a weekend', enjoy some leisure, experience grandeur or Hindu temples, and return back home feeling elated about having seen Krishna in Vrindavan. The context of Vrindavan is also equally significant: it is an easily accessible destination within about 3 hours reach of major urban centres such as Delhi, Jaipur, and even less from places like Agra, etc; besides being a sacred place of Hindus it appeals as a cultural tourism destination where visitors can enjoy and participate in regular and frequent cultural performances and festivals; comprises hundreds of charitable institutions and religious establishments which not only provide basic lodging and boarding facilities but also continue to reinforce the religious character of the place. One way or the other, the final outcome is that weekend trips constitute a major proportion of religious tourism in Vrindavan and contribute to the impacts it has on the socio-economic and cultural environment of the place.

Santissimi Medici Shrine in Oria

The Shrine of the Santissimi Medici Cosmas and Damian belongs to the diocese of Oria, in Puglia in southern Italy. The Diocese covers an area of 910 square kilometres with 42 parishes served by 63 priests and six permanent deacons with a combined congregation of close to 90,000 people. While the present shrine serves the population of Brindisi province, the town and the shrine has ancient origins and a rich cultural heritage dating back mostly to the Middle Ages.^[1] The present church was commissioned by Monsignor Francia, bishop of Oria from 1697 to 1719 and was built over the ruins of a small church built by Basilian monks and dedicated to the Santissimi Medici in the 8th century AD - it was already a site of pilgrimage even then.

The shrine has been the object of religious visits because it houses relics of the two saints - Cosmas and Damian. The constant and significant pilgrimage flows have resulted in structural transformations in the area of the church that have transformed the small Basilian shrine into a monumental complex that today is composed of various elements. The shrine today is the

most important amongst numerous pilgrimage sites in the diocese in terms of visitor flows. The resident population of the nearest town of Oria (five kilometres away) is little more than 15,000. Since the shrine is situated in an uncontaminated wilderness from which the epithet '*alla macchia*' (in the scrubland) derives, it may loosely be referred to as corresponding to Turner's 'out there' category of pilgrimage site. In recent years, however, the Shrine has undergone structural transformations as contemporary visits have shown strong recreational elements as discussed in the following sections.

Pilgrimage tradition in Santissimi Medici

The Shrine is the object of two types of visit. The first corresponds to the short-to-medium range pilgrimage that takes place in the first twenty days in the month of May in the run-up to the *Perdonanze* (Forgiveness) and the feast of the Santissimi Medici. The other is harder to define as it involves year round visits, particularly on Sunday, when the Mass is celebrated hourly throughout the day. This second type of visit to the Shrine usually has the character of an excursion and is the subject of this section.

Contemporary expression of religious travel in Oria

As mentioned earlier, the study of Oria and the shrine of Santissimi Medici employs a mixed methodological approach that includes participant – observation, examining archival documents and structured interviews, as well as empirical observation concerning the material landscape and the observed practices. The discussion here is based on findings of a visitor survey

1 According to Herodotus and Strabo, in about 1200 BC a group of Cretans from Minos were driven ashore in a storm off the Ionian coast of Salento and founded the city of Hyria in the hinterland. The cult of Saints Cosmas and Damian was introduced into Italy by Greek monks driven from the Byzantine Empire during periods of iconoclasm and became popular mainly in southern Italy. Saints Cosmas and Damian, twin brothers, were both doctors, called *Aváγγυροι* because they tended to the sick without asking for payment. Born in Arabia, they operated in Aegea and Cilicia. On the 27th of September 303, during the persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian, Cosmas and Damian were arrested, tried and condemned to death in Syria, together with their younger brothers Anthimus, Leontius and Euprepus. Despite being tortured, Cosmas and Damian stayed true to their Christian faith. They were buried together, but subsequently their remains were taken to Rome by Pope Felix IV (526-530), who dedicated a basilica to them in the area of the so-called Temple of Romulus.

that was conducted to understand the profile of visitors and the nature of their visits.

The visitor survey data revealed that the respondents came from the surrounding area, mainly from the same province (48 percent from the municipalities of San Michele, Erchie and Ostuni in the province of Brindisi, 32 percent from the province of Lecce and 20 percent from the province of Taranto). Given the geographical proximity, the trip took only a few hours and was mainly organised informally, with 52 percent of respondents having organised the trip with their families and 44 percent with their friends. In all cases the journey was undertaken in the visitors' own cars and the stay in the area of the Shrine lasted no longer than a few hours.

The visitor profile emerging from the study describes persons who are observant of religious practice and frequently attend places of worship: 64 percent of the interviewees stated that they had been to important religious centres in the past (the places most visited previously were: San Giovanni Rotondo - 44 percent, Pompeii - 12 percent, and Assisi - 10 percent; in addition, Rome, Loreto, Padova and Pietrelcina were mentioned). Most respondents confirmed that the main motive of their journey was religious in nature and none expressed an interest in combining the visit to the Shrine with a visit to other places of interests including the monuments in the town of Oria. They had organised their trips so as to spend as much time as possible at the shrine. Many set off to see the Shrine after lunch or took a packed lunch like a picnic (12 percent), while only two percent said they patronised a local establishment.

It is apparent that it is the Oria shrine 'out there' that gains from such short-term visits as those travelling to the Shrine neither stay overnight nor contribute in any significant manner to economic activities in the town. It could be argued that the Shrine, isolated from the town and situated amidst a rural environment of wild vegetation, is primarily a religious attraction with the remains of the two martyred saints and therefore may not be attractive for other types of visitor. However, there seems an underlying contradiction here: a closer examination of visitors' responses reveals that they perceive this place as providing entertainment with fun and relaxation alongside the dominant – but not exclusive – religious motive. Accordingly, it is evident that a weekend trip to the Shrine falls under the more general category of leisure.

The leisure dimension has become more pronounced in recent years as demonstrated by the physical

Map 2: Location of Santissimi Medici, Oria, Italy.



Map sourced from <http://www.studylanguages.org/>

transformations that are now visible in the area surrounding the Shrine. The most significant have been the creation of a zoo and a market for goods of various kinds besides other amenities including a small garden for the children, a bar with a terrace, a shop selling religious souvenirs and a diocesan museum. The site thus offers a place where it is possible to transform a religiously motivated trip into a pleasant day out, which explains both the conspicuous presence of families and the frequency of return visits: 92 percent said that they visit the Shrine many times during the year.

It appears that a typical visitor thus, is no longer a pilgrim with an exclusively religious motive, as he or she finds the Shrine attractive in that it satisfies both religious needs and a demand for low-cost leisure activities on the part of families. It is no surprise therefore that only two percent of the respondents commented on the presence of the above-mentioned recreational and commercial facilities as detractors from the atmosphere of religious worship. Visitors also

welcomed the changes that were made to the Shrine and surroundings in the Jubilee year of 2000, for a better experience of the place. These improvements included the reorganisation of the area in front of the church, enlarging and improving the car park, smartening up the public green areas and installing sunshades over the outdoor church.

In summary, the characteristics of the visitors who flock to the Shrine of Santissimi Medici near Oria every Sunday do not coincide either with the general models proposed in the literature examined earlier, nor can they be assimilated to the 'devotional tourists' as described by Trono (2009) where

the social and celebratory motive overlays – and at times overwhelms – the religious motive.

In Trono's observation, this happens during special festivities that are structurally conceived in order to provide services that closely bind the sacred to the secular, the occasional and periodic nature of the events justifying and motivating the propensity for consumption and enjoyment. The Sunday visits to the Oria shrine fall under the more general category of leisure, i.e. the

mass of occupations to which individuals can spontaneously dedicate themselves, in order to rest, have fun or improve themselves, after freeing themselves from their professional, familial and social commitments' (Boyer, 1972: 33, our translation).

Some of the other contextual factors that might have played an important role in weekend religious tourism to Santissimi Medici are:

- the shrine itself provides a welcome-break from highly urbanised areas in southern Italy;
- the conventional religious practice of attending a church on a Sunday,;
- the overall commitment to religious practice as a part of the social system in southern Italy.

Thus, while religion continues to drive the journeys, the hedonistic tendencies of getaway are intertwined in case of weekend visitors.

Discussion: A Tale of Similarities and Differences

While the two sites, Vrindavan and the Shrine of Santissimi Medici in Oria, representing two different cultures have certain unique traits of weekend trips, they also illustrate several similarities in the manifestation of religious tourism. This is not to say that religious tourism in these cultures is uniform: it is highly contextualised and influenced by the tradition of pilgrimage which is rooted in a religious-cultural sphere. However, with global factors such as improved accessibility of most sites and transport infrastructure and tourism facilities in both contexts, some features do emerge that are commonly seen in religious tourism. In this section, we highlight the similarities and differences found in the two cases presented here and examine what makes weekend trips such a significant form of religious tourism.

As one way of analysing the differences, we turn to the basic structure of motivation-journey-destination as conceptualised by Turner. Although the three elements together contribute in making weekend visits a unique form of religious tourism, it is also possible that certain contextual factors may influence one element more than others in the manifestation and nature of weekend trips. For instance, Vrindavan presents itself as an accessible destination nestled within a larger region of urban centres from where thousands of Hindu followers continue to arrive, its sacred character has been maintained and reinforced through a framework of religious and cultural practices in which visitors participate. It then appears that visitors may be religiously motivated and they have choices of places to go to but Vrindavan renders itself as a first choice for its easy accessibility and versatility of being able to provide many things including religious and cultural resources for visitors. The destination also seems to be more of an influencing factor in case of Oria in Italy, where it is seen as 'out there' but that is primarily as a recreational get-away. That Sunday also happens to be the day of particular significance to visit churches is incidental in bringing visitors to the church in Santissimi Medici.

The findings from both the sites suggest that at the level of motivation, contemporary weekend trips serve to fulfil both religious and recreational goals simultaneously. The multi-layered motivations of visitors also emerge from more diversified demands for leisure activities that are to be addressed in given time frames, particularly holidays, which are governed by work cultures prevalent in a modern society. In religious tourism, the explicit religious or spiritual

motive central to traditional pilgrimage travel gets expanded to include other motivations where the idea is to take some 'time out' for non-religious activities and leisure while visiting a sacred place. For instance, in Vrindavan, motivation for short-term travel seems to be the worldly reason of material well being typical of urban visitors who seek refuge before the supreme power in the wake of a growing sense of uncertainty and insecurity of the modern world (Singh, 1995, Guha and Gandhi, 1995). Thus, although motivations are rooted in religious-social contexts, once they are overlaid with recreational motives, the nature of the trip changes. Moreover, the religious commitment and intensity of motivation (thanksgiving, vows, spiritual asceticism, etc) specific to pilgrimage and religious practice (Santos, 2003) appears to be diluted in weekend trips. Consequently it can be argued that a conceptual separation of religious tourism from pilgrimage exists in short-term weekend visits.

Explaining weekend visits as religious tourism is simplified when one focuses on the *journey* aspect. Both cases presented here attest to wider trends where the traditional and conventionally known puritan form of 'pilgrimage on foot' is replaced by motorised transport and improvement in accessibility of sites (Singh, 2006; Murray and Graham, 1997; Reader, 2007). The 'private car', at least in the Indian case is emerging as a social marker and both a norm and a status symbol for the middle and upper middle classes (Varma, 1998). The change in 'journey' as evident in short-term weekend visits has multiple and far-reaching consequences: the meaning of the pilgrimage is related to the experience of travelling itself and a pilgrim (in relation to the bodily experience) can connect with sacred places and experience their numinous powers with the right emotion, motivation, self-restraint and sensitive behaviour. The contemporary travel in weekend visits, however, does not permit the direct and time-intense contact of physical body with landscape and this is likely to pose a threat in terms of a loss of the deeper meaning of journey (Shinde, 2012a). These observations about limited engagement in religious rituals and emphasis on wanderlust and shopping reinforce our argument that several aspects of journey lose significance in short-term visits where visitors focus on making the best use of their available time.

A reimagining of the destination as 'getaway' emerges as a prevalent notion in both the cultures but its manifestations differ. In Oria, it means getting away from urban areas to the countryside and the 'scrubland' landscape which is a 'centre out there' (in the sense of Turner's usage); a place that is distant not

geographically but symbolically, a place to seek the sacred. Simultaneously, it is a place in a pleasant and tranquil environment long way from the cares of everyday life and somewhere to go with friends and family, which means an alternative venue for leisure. For visitors to Vrindavan, 'getting away' to a religious place is perceived as a change from the mundane urban life and its banal challenges. Many visitors to Vrindavan confirm the notion that that such trips

offer them an elevated feeling of spending a holiday in a religious place with their family and a satisfying experience of fulfilling a religious need (interviewed on 2/4/2005).

This supports Cohen's (1992) observation that tourism gives mere pleasure and enjoyment, derived from the novelty and change provided by the destination and pilgrimage provokes religious 'rupture' or 'exaltation'. These kinds of emotions suggested by Cohen were found in case of visitors in both the sites.

To sum up, we claim that the weekend visitors to sacred places correspond closely to the idea of a 'religious day-tripper' for whom religion represents a moment of escape from everyday life in the same way as other types of leisure activity (Rizzello, 2009). The prosaic and commercial elements incorporated into sacred journeys and sacred places do not provoke condemnation on the part of the visitor and are not perceived as elements in conflict with the atmosphere of the place, but on the contrary are an integral part of it. Thus, weekend visitors are fundamentally religious tourists: 'visitors who exhibit both religious and touristic behaviours as necessitated by their trip but yearn to fulfill a predominant religious motive in visiting a religious or sacred destination'. In some ways this is different from but complimentary to Graburn's positing of the notion of tourism as a religion (in the sense of a ritual) (1977, Graburn, 2001). We extend this argument to weekend religious tourism as a ritual where religion and tourism are simultaneously both the goal and the means. Our claim is that the weekend visits in religious tourism are not the transformation or evolution of pilgrimage as has been suggested earlier by many scholars. We further argue that the weekend visits should be considered as an analytical category which requires a distinct conceptual approach for its study.

Conclusion: from Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism

Using cases from two different cultures, in this paper, we explained how weekend-trips to sacred places fall within broader framework of religious tourism but do not necessarily follow the structure of, and patterns evident, in traditional pilgrimage. Unfolding the meanings, motivations and actual working of weekend-trips suggests clear association of religious tourism with leisure and holidaymaking. Such travel that includes both recreation and religion, is culturally acceptable because it is concerned with personal well being, self-realization and the quality of life (Shackley, 2001). The findings from the two cases confirm to Santos's observation that 'most urban visitors are seeking the supernatural in accordance with a way of thinking and acting that is common in contemporary societies' (Santos, 2003). While to some extent we agree with the famous proclamation of *a pilgrim being half-tourist and the tourist being half-pilgrim*, we argue that it is better to use the terms 'religious tourist' and 'religious tourism' in contemporary contexts where one can simultaneously find qualitative characteristics of 'site-seeing' and 'getaways' to sacred and religious places that are undertaken on holidays, particularly weekends. The emphasis on leisure as a motivating factor in religious tourism is a significant contribution of this paper.

Religious tourism, particularly as expressed through weekend trips, represents contemporary forms of engagement with sacred places. The analytical category of weekend trips suggests that religious tourism does have more neutral connotations and 'fewer theological and traditional implications than the word pilgrimage' (Nolan and Nolan, 1989). While such neutrality is significant from an experiential and explanatory perspective, it becomes more relevant as it renders an opportunity for better integrating this form of religious travel into tourism policy.

To suggest the universality of weekend-trips in religious tourism we have examined and juxtaposed two cultural contexts but in doing so we are fully aware that religious travel in the two cultures is not uniform: rather they exhibit several context specific characteristics. In putting forward a simplified understanding of weekend-trips we have glossed over issues which in themselves can lead to several research questions. Most notably, factors such as geographical location (isolation or part of urban network), scale and frequency of visitor influx, socio-economic and demographic profile of visitors, that is likely to influence the intensity of impacts of visitor flows in

transforming a site and its tourism. All of these need to be analysed for a fuller understanding of weekend-trips as a form of religious tourism. Religious functionaries and tour operators are significant players in mediating visitor experience at sacred places and therefore, their role in weekend-trips need further investigation. One may be tempted to claim that weekend-trips represent a more personalised and self-driven form of travel, in which agency of an individual is more important than that of institutions but this aspect of deviation from collective religious practice needs more research. Extending this enquiry further, it may be necessary to explore if the short-term excursionists themselves distinguish themselves undertaking two roles of pilgrim and tourist or consider themselves as seamlessly blending these distinctions.

In spite of its limitations, the paper has provided empirical evidence on interaction between leisure and religious practice as dominant features of weekend trips in religious tourism. If leisure is not available the journey takes a different form and probably involves a different destination, and if the 'religious' is taken out, from the visit to Vrindavan or Orisa, it can be only hypothesised if anybody would be interested in going to these places.

Note on Contribution

This paper is the result of the concerted efforts of both authors. The Vrindavan case study is by Shinde K.A, the Santissimi Medici case study is by Rizzello K.. And the introduction (including situation and methodology), discussion and conclusion were written by both authors

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Appendix A : Images of Vrindavan



Photos of Vrindavan by Author
Above - Island Stage / Below - Yamuna River



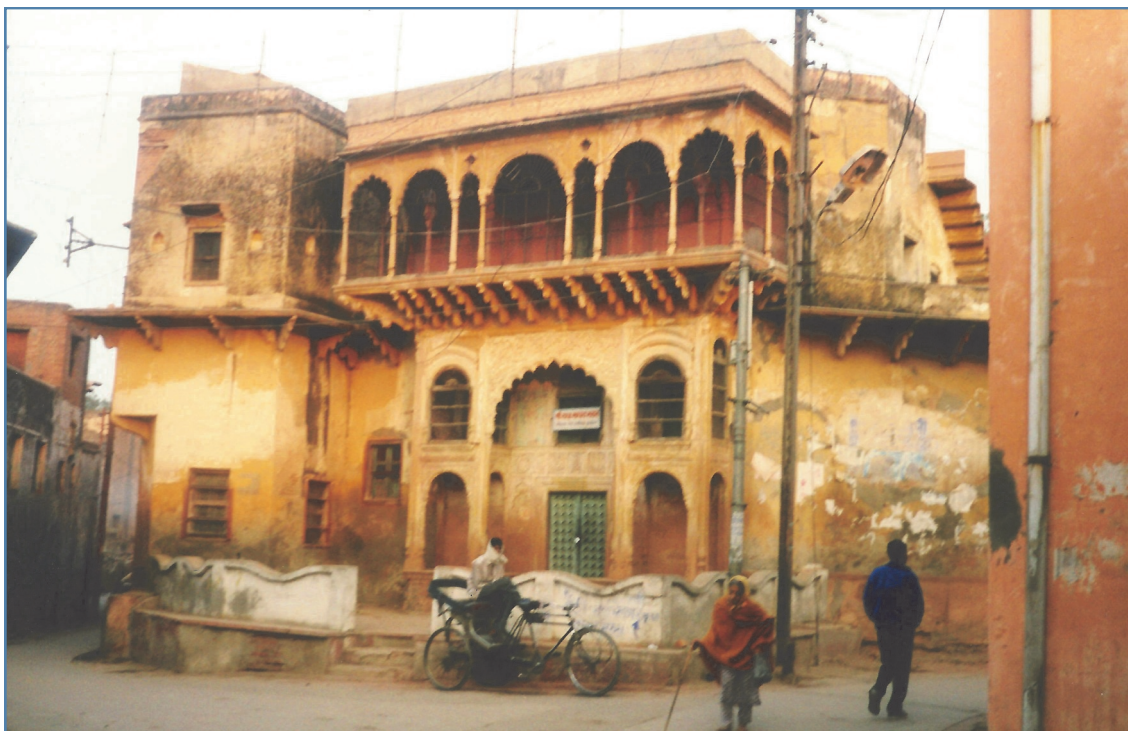


Photos of Vrindavan by Author
Above - Madan Mohan Temple / Below - Italian Temple





Photos of Vrindavan by Author
Above - _Rangji Temple / Below - Old Haveli



Appendix B : Images of the Shrine of Santissimi Medici



Photos by Author

