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## Drivers of Spiritual Tourism: A Destination-Specific Approach

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# Drivers of Spiritual Tourism: A Destination-Specific Approach

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With a rising number of visitors worldwide, spiritual tourism is becoming more relevant than ever before. Spiritual tourism is defined as travel to discover the goal and significance of one's life, thus, self-experiences are crucial for the transition of a person's mind, body, and soul. Because of this, both the destination chosen and the inspiration and intention of the tourists involved play central roles. However, existing research on spiritual tourism mainly focuses on classification and motivation and explicitly focuses on the demand side. Given the recent increase of participation in spiritually-focused tourism, it is important to accurately grasp the practical ramifications of the practice as a philosophical discourse on the shift from 'religious' to 'spiritual' tourism experiences must be discussed from the perspective of supply. Arguably, the current conceptualisations and classifications of spirituality and religiousness need a correction from an ontological perspective. This study, therefore, explores the primary drivers for spiritual tourism in India, where the existing theorisations of spiritual, religious, and secular-spiritual tourism have been challenged. To understand the primary drivers of spiritual tourism in India, a netnographic study has been deployed. This paper explores relevant findings, which suggest the need for contextualisation of destination characteristics for determining visitors' key motivations. The context here refers to a nation's background, history, and cultural practices, which determine the boundaries of ideologies, spirituality, and religiosity.

**Key Words:** spirituality, gurus, ashrams, netnography

## **Introduction**

Spirituality can include a set of ideas connected to religious traditions, focus on a philosophy of the self, inner peace, holism, (inter)connectedness, intent, search/quest, experience orientation, nontheistic cosmology, peacefulness/tolerance, and related positive value commitments (Heidari *et al.*, 2018). Many modern tourists are inclined to search for meaningful solutions to the void visible in contemporary lifestyle (Robledo, 2015). Consequently, present-day spirituality has certain tendencies linked to exploration in terms of place and performance. According to Sharpley and Jepson (2011), spirituality, as the postmodern transformation of religion, demands harmony between the individual and their environment, and tourism is an ideal platform for enthusiasts searching for meaning to experience spirituality and religiosity (Kujawa, 2017).

Although spirituality has been included among the primary motivations of tourism for many centuries (Bowers & Cheer, 2017), this new age of tourism increasingly utilises its business praxes (Robledo, 2015). Currently, spiritual tourism potential is increasingly being tapped by tourism destinations across the globe, sometimes overlapping with religious practises in destinations like India (Haq & Medhekar, 2020). The evolution and growth of interest in spiritual tourism destinations is increasingly noticeable, and spiritual potential has been rediscovered in specific global destinations where a sort of 'spiritual magnetism' exists due to the influence of attractions related to historical, geographical, and social aspects, and human values (Buzinde, 2020).

The search for fulfilment and meaning, among other motives, constitutes one of the major categories of drivers in this modern era of leisure travel. These elements can inspire the movement of spiritual pilgrims (Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Rinschede, 1997). The mainstream

of earlier studies on the sphere of spiritual tourism (e.g., Buzinde, 2020; Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Cheer *et al.*, 2017; Fedele, 2014; Kujawa, 2017) focussed on these classifications, categorising religious tourism as distinct from spiritual tourism. In this regard, the conceptual framework model of spiritual tourism by Cheer *et al.*, (2017) is significant for understanding these differentiations. They categorised the drivers of spiritual tourism by providing three golden circles of secular, hybrid, and religious categories. It is beneficial to understand these drivers empirically for those countries offering or wishing to offer a myriad of amalgamated spiritual-religious tourism products. According to Cheer *et al.*, (2017), the current drivers of spiritual tourism oscillate between commodified or institutionalised aspects. Considering the secular motives often involved, it is evident that the fundamental motives of tourism, such as health, adventure, and relaxation, are deliberations based on the self. However, it is essential to clarify the term 'self' in spiritual tourism specifically, as in this context, it is always related to being and becoming, and the various ideologies in which a person may have been brought up. In the case of spirituality, there should be a differentiation between Eastern philosophies and Western materialism. The ontological standpoints (emic/etic understandings and cultural dimensions) of an individual further delineate these classifications.

Moreover, for those countries where religiousness is embedded within spirituality, these classifications may not work as they are infused in one another. Perhaps, a better understanding of the drivers of spiritual tourism could enhance the marketability of these countries' tourism assets. Due to the increased subjectivity of attractions in religious or spiritual tourism settings, case studies can be appropriate for understanding the country-specific dimensions of the subject (Bowers & Cheer, 2017; Cheer *et al.*, 2017). The variables of the commodified and institutionalised drivers which attract tourists are crucial elements of competitiveness and marketability for a destination.

However, there are minimal studies thus far which focus on these parameters, especially from a country-specific perspective. Therefore, this study empirically analyses the primary drivers of spiritual tourism for India. Accordingly, the study explores the main drivers motivating travellers to conduct a spiritual tour to India and why? The research is categorised into two specific sub-questions. a) what are the main motivational factors

for visiting India in terms of spiritual tourism b) what are the reasons behind these instincts. These two issues help identify emerging spiritual tourism criteria distinct from religious tourism, including modern and traditional spiritual tourists. This manuscript has been divided into sections, bracketed by this introduction and a conclusion. The following sections provide the literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion of this study.

## Literature Review

### *Spiritual Tourism*

The term spiritual tourism has often been used interchangeably with other forms of tourism, especially religious tourism, Yoga tourism, and wellness tourism. However, there are considerable differences between spiritual and religious tourism regarding tourist profiles, motivations, behaviours, and activities (Robledo, 2015). Arguments exist that spiritual tourism is becoming a trend - as a newer form of pilgrimage tourism (Bone, 2013). According to Demir (2018), spirituality and religion denote two different aspects associated with belief, while the former relates to the spiritual values and behaviours which prompt people to follow good or bad characteristics, the latter symbolises the belief in a God and the related practices like worshipping in a church, mosque, or temple. Depending upon a person's belief, spirituality can be religious and/or non-religious (Gill *et al.*, 2011). Spiritual tourism is distinctive from religious tourism by marking a novel 'discursive shift' among the 'new pilgrims' searching for the 'original spiritual experience' not mediated by the beliefs of traditional religious frameworks (Kujawa, 2017).

Although Yoga tourism and spiritual tourism are usually referred to under the umbrella term 'wellness tourism', Yoga tourism, despite having some crossover, is distinct from wellness and spiritual tourism (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). However, only a few papers exist in tourism studies that focus on spiritual tourism from the pursuit of well-being (Buzinde, 2020). According to Gill *et al.* (2019), Yoga tourism is aligned to retreat tourism. It has religious traditions, and spiritual approaches to well-being, and Bowers and Cheer (2017) highlight it as a process involving the opportunity for achieving physical, psychological and well-being transformations. Yoga tourists are often from developed Western countries. Bowers and Cheer (2017) revealed that Yoga travel is not exactly an escape from everyday life. Instead, Yoga tourists travel to use Yoga for its philosophical values

and as a way to change the circumstances of their lives, particularly in terms of personal well-being and career growth, and are motivated primarily by the opportunity to experience fundamental life changes.

The journey for spiritualism has gained increasing significance, particularly in the last few decades, when neo-liberalism and materialism are becoming more ubiquitous (Cheer *et al.*, 2017). Norman (2011) argued that the rise in spiritual tourism results from the growing materialistic lifestyle prevailing in developed regions and represents a parallel search for spiritual well-being. Besecke (2014) opines that spiritual tourism manifests contemporary spiritual movement, set in the reflexive and critical search for spiritual paths. It is also referred to as a journey of spiritual realisation (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Rodrigo (2019) has a different view about organised spiritual tourism; according to him, spiritual travel is a new kind of tourism that works outside the traditional tourism industry, which is often managed by spiritual seekers, based on their past spiritual experiences. Smith (2003) argued that spiritual tourism could be a form of 'escapism', seeking to get away from the anxieties and demands of materialistic life. According to Robledo (2015:82), spiritual tourism explores meaning for 'both inner and outer connection'. Another viewpoint is that spiritual tourism is characterised by a 'self-conscious project of spiritual betterment' (Norman, 2011:20).

In the realm of tourism, spirituality seeking is, to some extent, being noticed as an attempt to attain 'challenging, visceral, intellectual, transcendental and at times life-changing or life-affirming experiences' (Cheer *et al.*, 2017:187). Pilgrims' spiritual experience can be accomplished through several measures, including spiritual retirement in a sanctuary or by taking part in some religious event (Abbate & Nuovo, 2013). Though religious tourism is different from spiritual tourism, pilgrimage is a type of religious travel, and the pilgrim may prefer to have a spiritual experience using travel as an act of faith reinforcement (Shackley, 2002), which also points to connections between the two concepts. Abbate and Nuovo (2013) have noted that some pilgrimage tourists may travel to maintain an identity, some attempt to satisfy the feelings associated with nostalgia, some prefer to experience the transcendent, and some travel to satisfy the requirements of particular faith-based groups. This can result in a desire for a simple lifestyle, cost-effective movement, and an enriching experience (Lopez *et al.*, 2017).

Halim *et al.*, (2021) point out that spiritual tourism also aims at transformations through the involvement of the traveller in the due process, and activities like Yoga, meditation, reflection, and similar help in purifying the psychological self. Moreover, spiritual tourists can also transcend themselves by increasing their knowledge and wisdom to attain their highest potential and eventually get directed to high consciousness, enabling them to cope with the hindrances they face – resulting in great satisfaction.

### *Spiritual Tourism Motivations and dimensions*

Some of the primary motives that lead people to visit religious sites include spirituality, instant judgement, family ties with the location, ties with the site and famous people, and interest regarding the site's architecture or historical artworks (Heidari *et al.*, 2017; Shackley, 2002). Tourism for spiritual growth is attributed to an esoteric motivation which deals with the intentional voyage of discovery of people for inner awareness and transformation (Robledo, 2015). A desire to resolve the problems associated with personal choices, questions, and issues is also seen in the parlance of spiritual tourism (Norman, 2011:2009).

Spiritual tourists aim at exploring the elements of life that lie beyond the self and contribute to body-mind-spirit balance (Heidari *et al.*, 2018). The tourist may seek experiences that are physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual; it is a more abstract, multi-faith, and eclectic process through which tourists explore meaning, engagement, and peace. Being away from home and seeking resolutions as part of fixing or improving those aspects for enhancing personal well-being is desired, and spiritual tourism can help in this respect (Norman & Pokorny, 2017). The potential for breaking the routine, finding mental renewal, and taking a trip as anti-stress therapy are some of the possible attractions of spiritual tourism (Lopez &., 2017).

Despite being distinct from religious tourism, one class of spiritual tourism includes religious tourist movements (to accomplish religious obligations), and another category promotes secular aspects (movement of non-religious believers in search of intrinsic spirituality) (Robledo, 2015). A study by Singleton (2017) on spiritual tourism in the historic spiritualist village of Lily Dale, USA, revealed that many of the summer spiritual tourists were on a personal, self-authenticated path of insight

and discovery and spirit communication. Some of the primary motivations of contemporary spiritual tourism, identified by Guzel and Sariyildiz (2019) from various sources in tourism literature include engaging in spiritual experience and spiritual elevation, achieving a feeling of divine search and connection with God, exploring the self, and searching for eventual truth. In spiritual tourism, attending meditation and Yoga retreats has been connected with learning new ideas and techniques of healing and controlling mind and body (Norman, 2011). In secular spiritual tourism, the focus is on building a person's inner life and association with broader realities like human community, nature, and the divine realm (Robledo, 2015).

From a managerial and marketing perspective, spiritual tourism is comprehended with the help of various dimensions. Cheer *et al.*, (2017) identify two distinct drivers of tourism: secular and religious, which consists of varied dimensions in each category. Secular drivers involve wellness and healing, personal development, personal quest, socialisation, journeying, and recreation and leisure. The latter consists of religious observance, ritualised practice, special occasion, socialisation, identity, and cultural practice. According to Heintzman (2013), there are six dimensions associated with spiritual tourism: stimulating environments, community transformation, spiritual transformation, transcendence benefits, spiritual well-being, and eudaimonic experience. Halim *et al.*, (2021) identified seven dimensions of spiritual tourism: a quest for meaning or purpose of life, consciousness, transcendence, spiritual resources, self-determination, reflection – soul purification, and spiritual coping with hindrances.

### *Categorisation of Spiritual Tourism Attractions*

Classifying spiritual tourism attractions is a daunting task, as confining the attractions within a framework may not be accessible when people seek spirituality in a wide variety of natural, cultural, and human-made attractions. Norman (2012), based on an extensive literature review and gathering of data from primary sources, identified five distinct categories of spiritual tourism through which he could reveal five possible attraction types in the realm of spiritual tourism.

- The first one is ‘Spiritual Tourism as Healing’, which involves the aspects associated with physical well-being and links to wellness tourism. The attractions in this may include those which can

provide psychological healing and other types like Yoga retreats and Ashrams.

- ‘Spiritual Tourism as Experiment’ is the next type, in which tourists attempt to seek alternatives when they feel a need for it. The examples cited are spiritual tourists who are backpackers and venture into destinations with attractions such as Yoga, Meditation, and Ashram experiences.
- The third category is the ‘Spiritual Tourism as Quest’, in which an act of searching for knowledge and discovery becomes the prime factor. Searching for learning about religious practices (like Hindu religious rituals as part of the ‘Kumbh Mela’ event in India and original features of different cultures) can be considered as examples of attractions in this category.
- In the category of ‘Spiritual Tourism as Retreat’, the traveller attempts an escape from every day and seeks a religious experience or a ritual renewal. The attractions for these tourists may include meditation retreats, health spas, and eco-tourism attractions.
- The last category is ‘Spiritual Tourism as Collective’, which denotes the travellers’ experience as part of a collective – they want to be there since many others are also taking part. The attractions in this category can be a combination of multiple features which are famous for spirituality.

The above reveals that spiritual tourist attractions can include various sites with varied features, and even the natural and enchanting places can be considered attractions.

Spiritual tourism activities usually occur in aesthetically and naturally attractive locations, though the difference can be seen in some instances (Singh, 2014). For instance, Ecovillages are an attraction in which aesthetic geographical features are combined with spiritual practices, as in Govardhan Eco Village (GEV) (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). Mega religious sites like Mecca, the Holy Land, and Rome also attract spiritual tourists (Cheer *et al.*, 2017). Landscapes and attractive surroundings form a significant category of attractions in contemporary spiritual tourism (Lopez *et al.*, 2017). ‘Therapeutic landscapes’ constitute a novel category among the spiritual tourism attractions, and they blend physical and built environments, social conditions, and human perceptions (Gesler, 1996) to generate an encouraging atmosphere for those in search of healing

effects. A section of Ayurveda focussed on health tourism is blended with spirituality-seeking activities (Rodrigo, 2019), thus, some wellness or health tourism attractions are also being included in the arena of spiritual tourism. It is also opined that spiritual tourism is part of wellness tourism (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019).

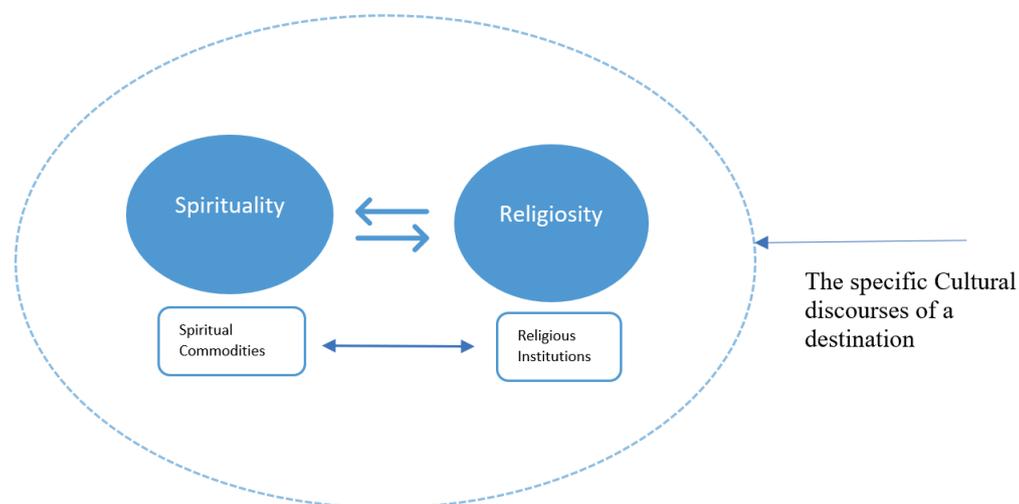
Cheer *et al.* (2017) have also identified a range of other attractions, such as attractions that can provide feelings of accomplishment (e.g., climbing Mt. Everest); religious heritage sites (e.g., Camino de Santiago or The Way of St. James); sites that can offer something to discover (e.g., Machu Picchu); enlightenment locations like the Pyramids of Giza; mega religious sites like Mecca, the Holy Land, and Rome; places where enhanced well-being can be gained (e.g., Rishikesh); attractions that can provide the satisfaction of wonderment (e.g., Stonehenge); and places suitable for experiencing indigenous cosmological systems (e.g., Uluru). Therefore, spiritual tourism contains and describes diverse attractions, including religious sites with rich traditional backgrounds, natural heritage sites with distinguishable features, wellness tourism locations, specific cultural heritage sites, spirituality enhancing infrastructures like Ashrams and retreats, authentic cultural locations and events, and locations with outstanding geographical features. Cheer *et al.* (2017) describe an interaction between various dimensions for religious commodities and spiritual commodities in a destination, which shows the cultural discourse of related attractions (see Figure 1).

### *Spiritual Tourism in India*

Spirituality has been the backbone of India's culture for centuries, and the country's religions – including Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam – have played a significant role in this. There are many religious sites and sacred centres across the country that have immense spiritual tourism significance as well. There are many Ashrams and Mutts (monasteries or 'institutes') throughout the country, furthermore, many of these monasteries have been functional for many centuries and are currently the active destinations for spiritual tourism (Indian Panorama, 2018). Building on this, India has successfully created a destination image and brand linked to spirituality (Buzinde, 2020). Thus, India's rich cultural-philosophical background as the birthplace of religions like Buddhism and Jainism is several centuries old and has paved the way for the emergence of spirituality-seeking from many participants who visit from far and wide.

A multitude of Indian destinations could be employed to create a more developed spirituality-related range of attractions that would act as the strongest of tourist draws (Norman, 2011). Examples from the literature include: Rishikesh in northern India which is an ideal location for spiritual Yoga tourism (Buzinde, 2020); Shri Paramhans Ashram Dharkundi, situated in Madhya Pradesh, is another destination that focuses on pilgrimage and spirituality (Singh *et al.*, 2020); Sharpley and Sundaram (2005) identified Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville,

**Figure 1: Conceptual Drivers of Spiritual Tourism**



Adopted from Cheer *et al.*, 2017:12

situated in Pondicherry (in the southeast); Ecovillages in which spiritual practices are held in some parts of India are also in this category, like the Govardhan Eco Village (GEV), located 108 km north of Mumbai (Bowers & Cheer, 2017). In addition to these examples, almost all of the important religious sites (of which there are many) have spiritual tourism potential of some kind.

## Methodology

To understand the spiritual tourism dimensions of a destination like India, we employed qualitative methodology guided by the interpretive paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2001). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not easy to conduct traditional data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups or observation. Therefore, we decided to select Netnography as the research method. In addition, online platforms are the most popular method of sharing knowledge and expression during this time of reduced social contact; the sharing platform of a netnographic approach fits the current study following Kozinets (2010) and Wang *et al.*, (2018).

Netnography, a form of online research method derived from ethnography, aims to comprehend social contact in contemporary digital media contexts. This method helps obtain rich and context-specific data from all sorts of social media, including blogs, vlogs, and SNS

(social networking sites). Netnographic data are also characterised as rich and naturalistic, with the potential to adequately reflect the living dynamics of visitors (Rokka, 2010). It has been used as an effective way to obtain an insider's perspective to study critical research subjects, to enter difficult-to-reach groups (or contexts), to classify unusual but significant users, and to establish creative developments in segments of the market (Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2016; Wu & Pearce, 2013). There are four main stages in this study: 1) Sampling and familiarisation, 2) data collection, 3) analysis, and 4) interpretation (see Findings and Discussion sections)

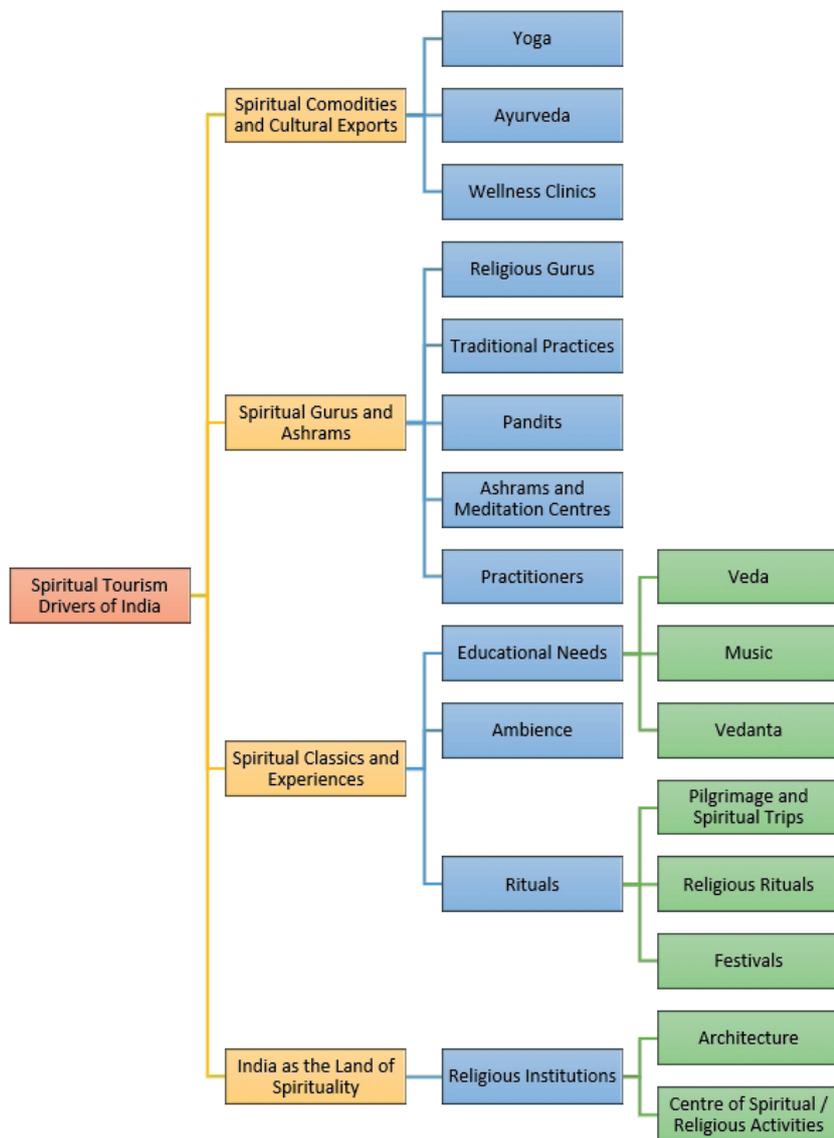
### Stage 1 - Sampling and familiarisation

Purposive sampling techniques are deployed to generate context-specific, information-rich samples (Moaven, 2020). In Netnography, an excessive amount of data resulting from a plethora of online content will jeopardise our capacity to conduct a detailed study. Therefore, purposive sampling is appropriate to identify the actual representative samples through careful filtering. There are four criteria applied for the selection of samples.

- 1) Blogs and other online contents which describes the spiritual tourism experience in India;
- 2) Content clarity and expression – including experience, motivation, satisfaction, and so on
- 3) Language – blogs in English only be considered to avoid any misinterpretation of data

<b>Details of samples collected</b>		<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	USA	23
	Italy	16
	United Kingdom	34
	Germany	6
	Canada	12
	France	7
	others	15
<b>Visited Destinations</b>	Rishikesh	53
	Kashmir	12
	Varanasi	45
	Kerala	38
	Karnataka & Goa	35
	Assam	16
	Kolkata	46
	Unspecified	13
<b>Spirituality Entity experience (one or many attractions)</b>	Temples & other religious institutions	46
	Ashrams	38
	Wellness clinics	35
	Education institutions	10
	Yoga centers	49

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis



(Source: Authors)

4) Rating and authenticity of bloggers or post – the genuinely, reach and ranking of the post was reassured through the comments received channels rating and so on.

**Stage 2- Data collection**

Travel blogs were the primary source of data. Ashrams, Temples, Yoga, wellness, mindfulness, spiritual, and Vedanta were the keywords used to search for blogs. The entries were thoroughly checked and selected for their richness and depth, including their dimensions, the usefulness of the topic, and discursive engagement (Kozinets, 2002). Blog posts linked to the same individual

from various sections of their trip have been analysed as a single collection. In total, 113 were selected (see Table 1).

**Stage 3 - Analysis**

Manual coding and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) were used to analyse the data (see Figure 2). According to Brule:

*Reflexive thematic analysis is an approach to analysing qualitative data to answer broad or narrow research questions about people's experiences, views and perceptions, and representations of a given phenomena (2020:1).*

In this study, a deductive, semantic thematic analysis was incorporated to fit the exploratory nature of the research questions. Table 2 illustrates the main themes that were developed in the research process.

## Findings and Discussion

Amid several other trends, spiritual and religious tourism have been established as the most popular forms of tourism in India for domestic and international visitors (Ministry of Tourism India, 2020). Due to the complexity of existing products, which overlap one another in their fragile boundaries of religious, spiritual, cultural, heritage, and wellness tourism, it is not easy to distinguish the main drivers that attract people to them. Indeed, this trend has been connected with today's busy, fast-paced, stressful life and the associated changes in sociocultural relationships (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019). However, for a destination like India with an ambience of omnipresent religiousness and spirituality, it is crucial to identify what makes the country attractive and enhance marketability. Therefore, this study nentographically analysed travel blogs about India's spiritual and religious tourism to understand the key drivers of spiritual tourism, and the findings are presented based on the main themes generated.

### *India – The Land of Spirituality*

Many visitors expressed their views about the omnipresent embedded spiritual essence of Indian culture. As Singh (2014) states, if travel and tourism are forms which enlighten the spirit, they have been practised in India for decades, where communities have long shared a sense of culture in organised religion. India provides a phantasmagoria of diverse faiths and worship traditions, illustrated by an immense number of holy places, temples, and idols, and everyday life in the nation is remarkably spiritual. Two of the sampled blogs mentioned this fact:

*In any part of the world, you can never find the kind of structured arrangements for preserving and maintaining the sacred centres considered to play an essential role in the lives of people and society. Several Ashrams, Mutts and Monasteries are being run for so many centuries where the religious and educational institutions benefit the community (Blog 26).*

*I have realised that part of what draws me back to India is that it is a country full of – and a place for – seekers. If India is the land of seekers, Rishikesh is the beating heart and soul of India (Blog 54).*

India is a popular destination for spiritual seekers and searchers of souls (Collins, 1998). The self-seekers who come to India experience its many possibilities, and many feel it is the epitome of transition travel. India is considered to be the world's wealthiest nation in terms of culture, tradition, geography, and spirituality, where everything is conceivable. India is one of the world's oldest civilisations, and specific sites have a unique energy. It is the land of gods and goddesses, Yoga's birthplace, Ayurveda, and the home of many various sects and gurus:

*God is ever-present in India. God is celebrated, worshipped and invoked in road-side shrines, massive temple complexes, at tiny altars in many stores and the prayer rooms in most homes; and in the thousands of sacred places – rivers, mountains, trees – and areas associated with sacred events, such as Krishna's birth or the battle of Kurukshetra. All of India is a living, breathing, holy place alive with history, myth and the stories of the epics and the gods (Blog 13).*

Many travellers have shared experiences that showcase the richness of Indian spiritual practises and attractions. In Blog 95, the author noted that spiritual tourism in India emphasises the country's strategic destinations where one can discover the essential nature of spirituality and strive to feel inner peace. Temples, regardless of faith, are so wonderfully constructed that they connote the concept of life's confusion with the need to submit to God or gods to be free of the processes of creation and death. However, there is limited evidence to lead to these specificities as a driver for attracting visitors to the country, although this could be considered as a real motivational factor for enhanced domestic visits all over India, where directly or indirectly more than 60% of tourism is associated with religious and spiritual tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2020).

### *Spiritual Gurus and Ashrams*

Spiritual gurus and their institutions were found to be the most popular reason to visit India. The phrase 'ashram'

has its origins in the Sanskrit word for ‘drama’, indicating religious practice. However, it is now generically employed to characterise a spiritual retreat or college, typically founded by a Hindu sage or ‘guru’ (teacher or holy man). There are countless ashrams in India (and elsewhere), ranging from practitioners’ dwellings to massive, purpose-built institutions (Sharpley & Sundaram 2005). The widespread Indian diaspora is also catalysing this tendency. Many guru organisations today have a global presence, with franchises and hubs not just in the towns and cities of India but also in the prosperous Western world, such as those in areas with a significant number of Indian migrants. These ashrams also work as the practice centres of India’s cultural (or spiritual exports), such as Yoga and Ayurveda. The crafted spiritual ambience and inclusive packages were found to be prevalent drawing factors of these places. These findings are in line with the observations of Cheer *et al.*, (2017).

The diversity of these ashrams and Gurus is remarkable. Therefore it is vital to check that secular–spiritual tourism has influenced how visitors make their destination choices. It is important to understand how people select their preferences and interests from the overwhelming number of gurus that are accessible for one’s spiritual accomplishment i.e., how people navigate the complexities of Indian spirituality? This includes all levels of spirituality, from Darshan to Sayujya (to see and attain eternity). Many travellers expressed their interest visit the place and see the gurus; for example:

[Tourists from Germany]...*come to the ashram to see Amma, the Guru that it is all about. I was amazed to see people treating her like some deity and touching her feet – even in photographs. For a Western girl like me, that was something new. If you are coming to see this hugging lady, it is undoubtedly wise to check her travel schedule on the ashram’s website before planning your trip and avoid any disappointment* (Blog 98).

The ambience of ashrams creates a serene setting, which becomes a preference for those souls seeking spiritual tourism. The atmosphere, activities, and meditations all influence revisitation intention. Daily practices at these sites include a predictable blend of meditation, Yoga, Satsang, kirtan, and mealtimes. Additionally, there is private time for fitness, exploration, writing, relaxation (Ayurvedic therapies and treatment are generally

available) – anything people choose to do. Vegetarian food is provided in the shared dining room, and afterwards, people must wash the eateries themselves.

*The ashram had a distinctly relaxed vibe when I attended, but the energy of the place was profound, deep and transformational. I usually find it challenging (at best) to meditate for more than a few minutes; in the ashram’s meditation hall, I fell into a trance, not once but several times. Once I came out of mediation so deep to find that everyone else had left the hall without me so much as noticing. Furthermore, no, I was not asleep* (Blog 27)

*When you visit these sacred places, you will feel the site’s energy and relationships ... The spiritual air in the country humbly carries the fragrance of Karma, Dharma and most importantly, Forgiveness. Trudge through the mighty mountains, and you shall experience divine presence, or traverse through the meandering alleys, where spirituality combined with history waits to greet your spiritually thirsty souls* (Blog 33).

In one blog, it was mentioned that travel to India was a ‘spiritual quest’, and the presence of the Guru is essential to guide a visitor towards the path of spiritual immersion. This suggests that a significant number of travellers are purposefully visiting ashrams or Gurus to fulfil their spiritual dreams. However, the terminologies used in various blogs ranged from devotion to spiritual motivation. Moreover, many expressions showed that the authors conducted prior research before they joined a particular setting. These findings further underline the interconnectivity of religiousness and spirituality in India. At some point, both of these concepts are mingled; therefore, the actual intention or pull factor for visits cannot be easily defined (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). This study confirms the views of Sharpley and Jepson that

*spirituality is the postmodern culmination of religion, which calls for harmony with the individual and the surrounding world of which s/he is a part* (2011:54).

In this manner, this study argues for the clear bifurcation of spiritual and religious tourism by suggesting a contextual reconsideration.

### *Spiritual Commodities*

While considering the significant drivers of Indian spiritual tourism, this study leads to vital evidence of the clear distinction between Eastern spirituality and Western materialism. If not the majority, many blogs provided hints for considering ‘the spiritual commodities’ such as Yoga and Ayurveda as spiritual products (Gill *et al.*, 2019). They often describe Yoga as a product for attaining spiritual dimensions in life (Cheer *et al.*, 2017). For instance, the phrase ‘Yoga is my spiritual path’ in Blog 34, was further elucidated:

*Everyone’s path is different, and for me, India is my spiritual home. The ‘advances’ I made in my spiritual way while travelling and studying Yoga in India for 11 months may have taken me a lifetime (Blog 34).*

It is not uncommon to frame Yoga as the spiritual development tool – or rather, it has been primarily promoted and marketed that way. Bowers and Cheer (2017) observed that in Western contexts, Yoga has been a well-established practice for many years, not only as a discipline of fitness and well-being but also as a motivating force for spirituality and mindfulness and meditation. It was also visible in the blogs that people seek a spiritual transformation through Yoga, since

*ultimately, yoga tourism and spiritual travel have an innate connection linked with inquiry and self-discovery, be it spiritual or otherwise (Bowers & Cheer, 2017:5).*

In India, Yoga is a part of the culture founded on Hinduism, whereas in many other parts of the world, it has been projected merely as a secular practice. When incorporating it into spirituality, Yoga principles should be linked to their original religious framework. Therefore, many famous sacred sites have become Yoga centres as well. As per Blog 39:

*Yoga, performed in various ways throughout the world, is still a mystery for other countries. In recent times, yoga schools have become common parlance that has been respected for the therapeutic potential of body, mind and soul. Yoga has been a lifestyle choice for many decades, and Rishikesh is renowned as the capital of Yoga globally, experiencing millions of travellers fascinated in studying and practising Yoga.*

India is undoubtedly the cradle of meditation, and its fame as the global epicentre of holistic healing is focused on its ability to deliver unique fitness and wellness encounters

### *Spiritual Classics and Experiences*

Spiritual classics of India such as Veda and Vedanta are also considerable drivers for visiting the country. Their importance is to be found in practices which link educational and spiritual tourism, including travelling to learn Sanskrit and explore the sacred literature of India. Similarly, the spiritual experience of chanting Pooja and other rituals attract many visitors. However, there is more evidence of these being motivational factors for revisiting tourists. In their initial trip, visitors are spiritually motivated and these practices become more important for regular visitors. Ganga Arti (a ritual of offering prayer to the Ganges river in Rishikesh, Banaras, and other locations) is the most popular one of these practices.

As per Blog 43, the spiritual tourism sector in India emphasises the country’s strategic destinations, where one can discover the nature of spirituality and pursue peace and happiness. Rituals and experiences are embedded with divinity and can help visitors to attain this. Regardless of faith, temples are marvellously designed to exemplify the concept of life’s instability with the need to yield to God, to be relieved from the processes of creation and death, which is the founding principle of Indian classics. Many are interested in learning these philosophies and select appropriate places to come and stay. As per Blog 92:

*Unique & religious experience of Ganga Aarti in the evening! I enjoyed it more as Hotel Ganga Lehri had organised with local Guruji & we were sitting very near to the central aarti place! The diyas in all the Aartis & its shadows in the river created a magnificent view. Fantastic to hear Aarti & people’s participation in it! One gets the feeling of heaven on earth!*

The serenity, rituals, and architectural ambiances in religious institutions are frequently mentioned aspects of interest for international tourists. However, reactions such as this are mainly found among frequent travellers to India.

## Conclusion

Considering the growing body of literature about spiritual tourism and its distinct boundaries, this paper presents relevant findings that suggest the need for contextualisation of the destination. Within this, context refers to the background, history, and cultural practices of a destination. For instance, as the evidence points out, spiritual elements are embedded within society's religiousness and daily practice for nations like India. Consequently, it is not easy to clearly bring together spirituality and religiousness.

This study produced many vital findings. Firstly, spiritual products or cultural exports – primarily the commodified versions of spirituality – were the most popular drivers for people travelling to India. This may also be catalysed by the recent trends in wellness and mindfulness and is visible in Ayurveda's case. Secondly, religious gurus and their institutions have become more internationally famous in modern times. They have become, in essence, the spiritual ambassadors of India. The expanding diaspora and mushrooming religious clinics all over the world act as a catalyst for the same. However, the selection of gurus and ashrams is subjective. Associated with these observations, it is imperative to state that a considerable number of visitors come to see this spiritualisation instead of an actual quest for spirituality. Thirdly, the spiritual classics and experiences inspire revisits to the place. This phenomenon is more visible among revisiting tourists. In conclusion, the fame of India as a spiritual land, cultural exports, spiritual Gurus, spiritual entities such as ashrams/temples, and rituals are primary motivating factors for spiritual tourism in India. The choices are underlined by the tourist's personal preference, understandings, and internal inspirations, which are the main things that provide a significant push to visit India.

This study primarily relies upon secondary data sources, which mainly explore the post-tourism experience. Therefore, future research should include real-time data collection by including interviews, participant observation, and focus group interviews to enrich the present understanding. Regarding these findings, the current study proposes future research which would consider religious institutions and spiritual gurus as part of spiritual tourism motivations.

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