

Factors Influencing Development of Spiritual Tourism in Puducherry

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Abstract: *Spiritual tourism is defined as an act of travelling to spiritual places such as (1) mosques, churches, and temples and (2) natural environments such as forests, oceans, lake, spiritual gardens, wildlife parks for birds and animals, botanical gardens, caves, and rocks for spiritual reasons to fulfil the need for being grateful to almighty, forgiveness, and inner peace. Spiritual Journey over the centuries in India has been concentrated to visit of religious places. However, the tiny town Puducherry the head-quarters of the Union Territory of Puducherry is unique for its practice of spirituality and resultant tourism. In order to understand the practice of Spiritual Tourism in Puducherry, a small survey was carried out amongst 200 tourists visiting Puducherry. These tourists were interviewed at railway station, beach, at the entrance of Ashram, near Matrimandir and at Visitors' centre at Auroville. The survey included a set of 20 questions concerning the spiritual motivation of tourists to answer the main objective of: conceptualizing Spiritual Tourism in the context of Puducherry and Factors Influencing Spiritual tourism in Puducherry. The survey revealed, though the spiritual visits to Puducherry are limited to a handful attraction sites such as; Ashram, Auroville, and beach. However a survey of visitors' experience of the destination reveals "experience Puducherry" factor more than just visit to any attraction sites. The feel of French, Mixed Culture of French, Tamil, Hindu, Islam & Christianity, location of numerous cathedrals, and friendly people topped the list of factors conceptualizing Spiritual Tourism in Puducherry.*

Keywords: Spiritual Tourism, Infrastructure, Development, Opportunities, Business

1. Introduction

From times immemorial, spiritual reasons have been playing a important role in motivating people to travel which included visiting places that are significant spiritually.

Generally, it is very much seen that, people fulfill their act of faith by visiting their desired spiritual places. For a Christian, it may be a visit to Vatican or Jerusalem, for a Muslim, a pilgrimage to Mecca and so on. Tourists take up Spiritual journeys mainly to gain emotional release of stress due to a fast moving and a pressured life pattern.

In spiritual tourism, tourists visit places of religious importance without any religious compulsion, to experience and also grow spiritually. It means, there exists a deep motivation behind this travel that is „experiencing the godliness from within“. At the same time these tourists may not be necessarily classified as Pilgrim tourists“ as the motive is not only to visit the spiritual cites but also to enjoy the other activities. Moreover, a pilgrim tourist goes with a well-planned itinerary which schedules many more journeys one after the other.

The concept of Spiritual Tourism sounds to be new but the phenomena of spiritual tours are quite ancient. It may be argued that though the phenomena exist right from the historical ages, the outcome of the experience will always be new, nourishing, refreshing and rejuvenating. This research identifies and showcases the spiritual Diaspora of the destination sequencing spiritual tourism, where the tourists can experience and express the “act of faith“. Previous works carried out by various researchers pertain to certain other places. The research theme in this chosen geographical location is yet to be explored, thus makes the research a unique one and adds knowledge to the existing literature.

2. Centres of Spiritual Importance

SRI Aurobindo and the Ashram

Sri Aurobindo was born on 15 August 1872 in Kolkata, India. He rose up to be a great Professor, Poet, National activist and a Yogi. He was deeply inspired by the mystic heritage of India and took up the practice of yoga and on the other hand he began to give a bold new direction to the politics of the time, writing a series of newspaper articles. He was a great poet too. He also inspired secret revolutionary societies at several places across the country. In the year 1910, April, he landed Puducherry where he started exploring the way for mankind's liberation from its bondage to ignorance through spiritual means. He called Pondicherry the “Cave of Tapasya” which means cave of meditation. Sri Aurobindo stayed in Puducherry for the rest of his life—for about forty years, which was very fruitful to the literary and the spiritual world as well. He devoted himself to the practice of yoga- a Vedic exercise which involves body, mind and soul. He emphasised more on Spiritual development of the inner being. His values and fathoming ideals attracted people from all over the world.

Sri Aurobindo presented his values and ideologies through a symbol, which drenched people in the spiritual shower. He emphasized people to first understand the inner being and totally surrender to the nature or the supernatural power along with regular practice of yoga.

The Mother and Auroville

Lady Mirah Alfassastyled as The Mother, a true follower and a disciple of Sri Aurobindo founded the International township of Auroville in the year 1968. The Mother's spiritual values revolve around understanding and surrendering oneself to the Divine Consciousness. Auroville aims at bringing in people with different walks of life and to promote actual Human Unity that can never be destroyed by

any external forces. To represent this feature, a centre called “Matrimandir” was constructed, which was styled as “No-man’s land”.

Matrimandir“ showcases The Mother’s symbol and has chambers representing each petal found in the symbol. Here, the central circle represents the Divine Consciousness and the four petals surrounding represents North, South, East and West which are respectively termed as Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati. The petal facing of south (Maheshwari) represents The Mother’s inexhaustible compassion, sovereign majesty and all-ruling greatness.

Church of Our Lady of Angels

This church is also known as White chapel. The Eglise de Notre Dame desAngees or the Church of our Lady of Angels was built in the year 1855 and was commissioned by “Napoleon III”. The church has Greco Roman architecture and is based on the Notre Dame chapel in Paris. The two towers on either side of the main chapel house the church bells and the clock, which have been preserved since they were first installed. In the early days, the church was completely white inside and outside – giving it the name “White Chapel”. Not only have these interesting facts attract the tourists but also the presence of God and the Divine atmosphere

Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

This church built by the French Missionaries in the 18th Century, is situated just at the vicinity of the Railway station and embraces the Gothic architecture. It displays precious and rare stained-glass panels depicting events from the life of Christ.

Sri Manakulavinayagar Temple

Even before the French could come and occupy Puducherry, this temple was in existence i.e. before 1666. Forty different forms of Ganesha are portrayed on the walls. This temple has a small shrine dedicated to Lord Murugan who is the younger brother of Ganesha. Hundreds of Tourists visit this temple. Historical records reveal that this temple was constructed by The Cholas in 12th Century B.C. Few other temples to mention are Kamakshi Amman Temple, Navagraha Temple, VaradarajaPerumal Temple, Vedapureswarar Temple etc.,

3. Inferences and Observations

The study clearly exhibits that this Destination is rich in Religious as well as Spiritual centres and because of which the place is popular and attracts more tourists, which agrees with the research statement made by Russel (1999). A tourist who is looking for a holistic therapy is sure to go rewarded with rich spiritual fullness. In one hand the temples, churches and mosques serve to fulfil the religious „act of faith“ and attract tourists. On the other hand Ashram and Auroville act as a common platform for the rejuvenation of body, mind, soul and self-actualization, thus making the Destination very unique from others. Mrs. Simmy, a 70 year old resident, was inspired by the values and ideologies of the Ashram and made herself a permanent Ashramite 45 year ago itself. For Eliza, 25 years old Tourist from Australia, the

most heartening experience was at the Auroville. And the story goes on...

4. Conclusion

This destination though potential in attracting spiritual tourists, has to improve on certain aspects as given below based on the research:

a) Spiritual Tour Packages

The Department of Tourism and the Travel agents may design a special tour keeping in mind the Spiritual aspects of the destination. This package may cover all the religious and spiritual Centre’s. Instead of promoting this year-round, a separate season could be identified thereby reducing the impacts of mass tourism on the spiritual sites.

b) Spiritual Tour Guides

Lack of trained guides has come to light. Many tourists have expressed that due to lack of guides they were mis-guided several times. Here, a spiritual guide should be well trained in such a way that he/she would be able to explain the importance of the religious centres, a sound knowledge of the architectural features and its relevance and so on.

c) Information/Display Boards

Ample information should be given on the boards so that Tourists would help themselves in understanding the significance.

d) Spiritual Counseling Centres

Tourists seek to visit religious centres or carry out a pilgrimage to a place in order to relieve themselves from stress. Hence, if counseling centres would be established in the premises of Ashram or Auroville or other sacred centres, the tourists would be free to share the issue with the counsellor. The counsellor may then suggest an appropriate rejuvenation programme for betterment.

e) Participation by the Local Community

The host community may be encouraged to actively contribute their skills and make possible livelihood by selling hand-made candles, incense, or anything that would motivate the tourists to buy. The stalls may be placed near the entrance of the centres so that the tourists can have a glance of what is being sold. The local seller should be given ample training to communicate with the tourists, which would enhance the image of the destination.

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