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 fulfill 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 resulant 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: SpiritualTourism, 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 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 sequeling 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 polities 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 desAnges 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, 
Vedapureeswarar 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 tempes, 
templets 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 
method 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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