



Chapter 9

Promoting Trade and Economic Relations via Buddhist Spiritual Tourism Circuit Between India and Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism. The purpose of this chapter is to review the key reasons for lack of promotion of investment and economic relations via tourism services related to Buddhist heritage and spiritual tourism circuit and sites to Southeast Asian countries as well as to domestic tourists. Sarnath, in Varanasi, is the hub of Buddhism in India, opened in 2016. There is road, rail, and air connection from Sarnath to various other Buddhist sites. This circuit can be promoted in counties of Southeast Asia and South Asia to spiritual followers of Buddhism as well as 'New Age' Buddhists. Thailand, Japan, and Korea have invested in spiritual infrastructure in Sarnath for their citizens who visit for Buddhist pilgrimage. This chapter identifies the challenges, opportunities, and provides recommendations for the Indian government to provide a business friendly environment and to encourage foreign direct investment for state-of-the-art infrastructure development from Southeast Asian nations around the Buddhist spiritual tourism circuit.

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INTRODUCTION

Spiritual or religious tourism is a niche segment of tourism in general appreciated in the post-secular era since the events of 9-11 (Cohen, 2006; Olsen, 2019). It is one of the oldest forms of tourism or travel for pilgrimage to religious destinations, places of worships, and events (Cohen, 2006; Rinschede, 1992; Vukonic, 1996; Zhang, 2018). Spiritual tourism is a cultural, spiritual, social, and economic, phenomenon related to spiritual places and people (Haq & Medhekar, 2020). It involves people who travel outside their environment within the country or overseas to spiritual or sacred places as pilgrims or spiritual tourists (Das, 2016; Griffin & Raj, 2017). Tourism is the main driver of economic development of a country for job creation and production of goods and services related to particular niche tourism segments such as spiritual tourism- related to different religious, such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Sikhism (Das, 2016; Brunn, 2016; Haq & Medhekar, 2014, 2018, & 2020; Olsen, 2019; Rumki & Kushagra, 2018). Spiritual tourists classify themselves in many ways as devotees', 'pilgrims', 'travellers', 'seekers', attending religious conferences, events and festival or 'spiritual adventurers'. "Interestingly, many spiritual tourists have been classified by academic researchers as practicing pilgrimage, religious, special interest, cultural or experiential tourists" (Haq & Jackson, 2009, p.142).

The success of any tourism destination, including spiritual tourism sites, monuments liked with spiritual founders/people such as Buddha, and places can be developed and promoted if the motives and needs of the niche segments of spiritual tourists is identified and looked after by the spiritual tourism goods and service providers at the destination (Finney et al., 2009; Haq & Medhekar, 2020; Shinde et al., 2020; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Yasuda et al., 2018). Spiritual or religious tourism is motivated by spiritual reasons and can be a visit to a nearby temple, church, or mosque; or for number of days and weeks within the county or across international borders for spiritual/religious purposes to holy cities/ places and holy sites and monuments (Haq & Medhekar, 2018; Zhang, 2018). There is a huge potential to develop, attract foreign direct investment and promote the existing Buddhist spiritual tourism circuit and include other relevant Buddhist heritage sites and monuments in the various northern eastern states of India (Rumki & Kushagra, 2018). However, the niche spiritual tourism segments development is neglected by the central and the state governments and has developed by private sector in a haphazard manner (Bruntz, Schedneck, & Rowe, 2020). According to Centre Bureau for the Promotion of Imports from developing countries (CBI) religious tourism market covers specialised niche products pilgrimage, visiting sacred sites, temples, church mosques, travel with a purpose of worship and mission. These are visited by believers for religious and worship purpose as well as by non-believers for their aesthetic beauty, heritage value, cultural, and architectural importance (CBI, 2021).

The main objective of this chapter is to review the Buddhist spiritual tourism circuit and the reasons for the lack of promotion of trade and investment in tourism services related to Buddhist Heritage and Spiritual Tourism Circuit and sites to Southeast Asian Countries as well as to domestic tourists since it was opened in India (Buddhist Circuit, 2021; International Finance Corporation World Bank {IFC-WB}, 2018). Sarnath, in Varanasi is the hub of Buddhism in India opened in 2016, and there is road, rail and air connection from Sarnath to various other Buddhist sites connected to the Buddhist spiritual circuit (Buddhist Circuit, 2021; Geary, 2008; Phukan, 2015). Until 2016, Central Government of India invested Rupees 132.17 for developing tourism infrastructure under the 'Swadesh Darshan Scheme'. Whereas Uttar Pradesh Government spent Rupees 99.97 crores for developing Buddhist circuit road and rail covering Kushinagar, Srawasti, and Kapilvastu (The Times of India, 2016). Ministry of Indian Rail-

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