


Chapter 12

Atithi Devo Bhava: An Indian Culture of Hospitality for Sustainable Tourism

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ABSTRACT

From the Vedic period, India followed a unique principle of hospitality called Atithi Devo Bhava. It argues that the guest should be honored like God. The Upanishads and other religious texts considered it a religious duty and spiritual exercise. Other religions also echoed the same attitude in hospitality. All these constituted India's cultural capital, which affirmed the importance of following this principle as a way of life. For centuries, Indians sincerely followed it. However, today, the hospitality and tourism sector is occupied by profit-making people and multinational corporations who prefer profit over people. This results in the undermining of the relevance of the Vedic principle. Although the Ministry of Tourism has taken it as a tagline for promoting tourism, its real spirit is lost. From this perspective, this chapter examines the possibilities of reviving this principle and promoting it as a model of the global tourism and hospitality sector.

INTRODUCTION

Atithi Devo Bhava is a Sanskrit phrase, and its equivalent usage in English could be 'the guest is equivalent to God.' This concept of treating the guest as God is unique to Indian culture, but its various versions could also be seen in other ancient cultures (Rahaman & Chattopadhyay, 2025). It puts forward a reverential procedure to be followed in guest-host relationships. The importance of this usage in Indian

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culture and tradition is again highlighted when it was taken as the tagline of the Indian Tourism Ministry to promote tourism in India. *Atithi Devo Bhava* has its root in the *Taittiriya* Upanishad, *Shikashavalli* 1.11.2, where it says that *matrudevo bhava, pitrudevo bhava, acharyadevo bhava, atithidevo bhava*. It instructs that an individual should behave to ‘be one for whom the mother is God, be one for whom the father is God, be one for whom the teacher is God, and be one for whom the guest is God.’ This was part of the behavioral guidelines for the graduating students from a *gurukul* (a traditional schooling method). Astonishingly, this mantra in *Shikashavalli* 1.11.2 ends with the golden rule, ‘Let your actions be uncensorable, none else. Those acts you consider good when done to you, do those to others, none else.’

The Indian cultural capital always upheld the importance of *Atithi Devo Bhava*. It consistently reminded us that hospitality should be the *modus operandi* of the Indian culture towards other people. It insists on treating every guest with respect and care (Rahaman & Chattopadhyay, 2025). It was very much visible even during the periods of colonization. The respect towards guests, considering them gods, is not a weakness but the richness of Indian tradition. The tourism sector always flourishes with the best treatment for guests (Kumar et al., 2023). Many places lose their guests and guests due to bad treatment methods. Presently, there are many incidents where ethical considerations and values are sacrificed for the profit-oriented activities of the locals. The logic of values should outweigh the interests of business. That is what this ethical principle of *Atithi Devo Bhava* suggests to the tourism sector.

Globalization has created an interconnected world and increased economic growth through technological advancements and collaborative efforts in many fields, including tourism (Demir, Canakci, & Egri, 2021). Tourism is a vital concern as the hosting society should provide hospitality to make the tourists feel at home; otherwise, it will affect the industry (Skandrani & Kamoun, 2017). The tourism sector flourishes when people display good hospitality attitudes. However, in the present context, the age-old ethical principal *Atithi Devo Bhava* remains only in books, theories, and taglines. The business motives of the multinational and transnational actors and other players in the tourism sector prioritize profits over reverential treatment towards guests. The tourism industry also faces various challenges, such as overtourism, threats to cultural and biological diversity, security issues in the present context of geopolitical complexities, climate change and its environmental effects, increased cost of living, the wider use of AI, robots, chatbots, and other virtual realities, labor challenges, growing intolerance among people, and xenophobic attitudes (Dimanche & Andrades, 2024). The increasing flow of tourists globally and the growing number of immigrants from developing to developed countries cause confusion and complexity in the tourism sector. It might benefit economic growth, but it is viewed with suspicion, visible in the growing protests against immigration in European countries and the US (Freitas-Monteiro & Prömel, 2024). These challenges create

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