

A STUDY ON CHOICE OF GEN Z TOURISTS OF PUNE CITY TOWARDS SELECTING RELIGIOUS TOURISM AS A VACATION CHOICE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

Religious tourism is a significant aspect of travel and leisure, drawing millions of tourists each year to explore destinations of cultural, historical, and spiritual significance. In recent years, the preferences and choices of Gen Z tourists, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, have gained prominence in the tourism industry. Understanding the motivations and decision-making processes of this demographic group is crucial for tourism stakeholders and policymakers. This study aims to delve into the choice of Gen Z tourists in Pune City, Maharashtra, when it comes to selecting religious tourism as a vacation choice in India.

Religious tourism encompasses visits to destinations that hold deep religious or spiritual meaning. These destinations often have sacred sites, temples, mosques, churches, and other religious structures that attract devotees, pilgrims, and tourists seeking spiritual experiences. India, with its rich cultural and religious diversity, offers a myriad of options for religious tourism. From the sacred ghats of Varanasi to the iconic temples of Tirupati and the spiritual aura of Rishikesh, India's religious destinations hold immense appeal.

Pune City, known for its vibrant youth culture and educational institutions, provides an ideal setting to study the preferences of Gen Z tourists. This tech-savvy generation is characterized by their openness to new experiences, social media influence, and individualistic mindset. Exploring their choices in religious tourism will shed light on their beliefs, spirituality, and cultural heritage. The objectives of this study are three-fold. Firstly, it aims to establish a comprehensive understanding of the concept of religious tourism, highlighting its significance and growth in India. Secondly, the study will identify and describe the major religious tourist places in India, emphasizing their historical, cultural, and religious importance. Lastly, it will delve into the factors influencing the choice of religious tourism among Gen Z tourists in Pune City, considering personal beliefs, spirituality, cultural heritage, social media influence, and marketing strategies.

To achieve these objectives, a mixed-methods approach will be employed. Surveys will be conducted to gather quantitative data from a sample of Gen Z tourists in Pune City, while in-depth interviews will provide qualitative insights into their decision-making process. The data collected will be analyzed using statistical tools and qualitative analysis techniques.

Key words: *Tourism, Gen Z, Religious tourism, Pune city*

INTRODUCTION :

Religious tourism is when people travel to visit places that are significant or sacred in their religion, like pilgrimage sites, temples, churches, or mosques. Religious tourism is a significant aspect of travel and leisure, drawing millions of tourists each year to explore destinations of cultural, historical, and spiritual significance. In recent years, the preferences and choices of Gen Z tourists, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, have gained prominence in the tourism industry. Understanding the motivations and decision-making processes of this demographic group is crucial for tourism stakeholders and policymakers. This study aims to delve into the choice of Gen Z tourists in Pune City, Maharashtra,

when it comes to selecting religious tourism as a vacation choice in India. Religious tourism encompasses visits to destinations that hold deep religious or spiritual meaning. These destinations often have sacred sites, temples, mosques, churches, and other religious structures that attract devotees, pilgrims, and tourists seeking spiritual experiences. India, with its rich cultural and religious diversity, offers a myriad of options for religious tourism. From the sacred Ghats of Varanasi to the iconic temples of Tirupati and the spiritual aura of Rishikesh, India's religious destinations hold immense appeal. Pune City, known for its vibrant youth culture and educational institutions, provides an ideal setting to study the preferences of Gen Z tourists. This tech-savvy generation is characterized by their openness to new experiences, social media influence, and individualistic mindset. Exploring their choices in religious tourism will shed light on their beliefs, spirituality, and cultural heritage. The objectives of this study are three-fold. Firstly, it aims to establish a comprehensive understanding of the concept of religious tourism, highlighting its significance and growth in India. Secondly, the study will identify and describe the major religious tourist places in India, emphasizing their historical, cultural, and religious importance. Lastly, it will delve into the factors influencing the choice of religious tourism among Gen Z tourists in Pune City, considering personal beliefs, spirituality, cultural heritage, social media influence, and marketing strategies. The travel industry associations worldwide are growing new sections and a comprehension of movement inclinations to foster new items. In this situation, Age Z has turned into a fragment which has as of late been designated in numerous nations. The 'young travel' item is exceptionally complicated, the essential elements are wide openness, the wellbeing and the security of transport and the travel industry offices, adaptability, and an excellent of administration. Religious and spiritual tourism has been a traditional way of traveling in India, especially for the older generation. However, since the pandemic, younger people, specifically Gen Z and Millennials, have shown more interest in these types of trips. They've realized the value of spirituality, meditation, yoga, and self-care, and they often mix work with leisure when visiting religious places.

The reason for this shift is that India has many religious and pilgrimage sites, and after the pandemic, people are gradually returning to travel. Religious tourism is on the rise, but there's a problem with finding good and affordable hotels in most places. To visit temples, mosques, or churches, people often have to stay in cities and then make day trips. The situation is quite disorganized. To cater to Gen Z and Millennials, who are showing interest in religious tourist destinations, these hotel groups aim to offer budget-to-upscale stay options. They want to provide good quality stays at affordable prices, considering that not everyone can afford luxury or 5-star accommodations. They focus on modern amenities and services like free Wi-Fi, good food, comfortable settings, and even electric vehicle chargers. Some of the challenges faced in religious tourism in India are overcrowding, waste management, air pollution, and the commercialization of religion.

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To address this, some groups are focusing on providing quality stays, particularly in smaller cities (tier 3 and 4), where there is a high demand for this type of accommodation. Additionally, these initiatives create job opportunities for locals who rely on tourism for their livelihoods.

Some of the motivators to choose religious tourism are as follows:

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1. **Rediscovering Authenticity:** In a world full of technology and virtual connections, millennials want real experiences that touch their hearts. Religious tourism offers a way to connect with ancient traditions, rituals, and culture, providing a genuine experience with history and spirituality.
2. **Embracing TNPL (Travel Now, Pay Later):** This is a new idea that allows people to travel to religious places without worrying about money. It makes spiritual journeys more accessible by offering flexible payment plans.
3. **Seeking Meaning and Purpose:** Many people think millennials are aimless, but they actually want to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Religious tourism helps them do that by giving them a chance to reflect, discover themselves, and connect with something greater than themselves.
4. **Embracing Cultural Diversity:** Millennials celebrate diversity. They are open to experiencing different cultures and religions. By doing so, they learn to understand and accept people with different beliefs.
5. **Escaping the Digital Age:** In a world where we're always connected through technology, millennials want a break. Religious tourism lets them unplug, get away from screens, and connect with the real world.
6. **Connecting with Ancestral Roots:** Some millennials have family roots in different places. They use religious tourism to connect with their heritage by visiting the lands of their ancestors and participating in ancient rituals.
7. **Social Media and the "Insta-pilgrimage" Phenomenon:** Social media has made religious tourism look very attractive. People share their journeys with beautiful photos and rituals, which can inspire others to go on their spiritual quests. But it can also make some people focus too much on getting likes and attention.

CHALLENGES FACED BY RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN INDIA

Some of the challenges faced in religious tourism in India are overcrowding, waste management, air pollution, and the commercialization of religion. It also suggests the need for regulations governing the financial status of religious trusts and promoting transparency.

When building hotels in religious destinations, there are challenges. Finding suitable land and properties can be tough in these places. Therefore, they need to plan carefully and remain flexible in their approach.

In some religious towns, it might not be possible to construct new buildings due to specific circumstances. In such cases, they explore options in nearby areas within 30-50 kilometers from the religious sites.

The goal of these hotel groups is to expand and become one of the largest hotel chains in India, covering both budget and upscale categories. They are working on enhancing their technology to provide a seamless digital experience for guests. They plan to acquire more properties, add more rooms, and focus on tier 2 and 3 cities, as well as emerging industrial areas. They are also exploring opportunities in the northeastern regions of India.

OBJECTIVES :

1. To understand the concept of religious tourism
2. To know the challenges faced by religious tourism in India
3. To learn the choice of GenZ of Pune city towards selecting religious tourism in India

LITERATURE REVIEW :

The research paper titled "Governance and Management of Religious Tourism in India (Vrindavan & Shirdi)" (2018), authored by Kiran Shinde, explores the key aspects that enhance the understanding of

governance and management within the context of religious tourism. The study outlines a comprehensive policy framework and governance mechanisms associated with this type of tourism. Researcher categorizes religious tourism into formal and informal sectors. The formal sector encompasses direct impacts, such as resource utilization and waste generation by visitors in specific areas. In contrast, the informal sector includes indirect influences related to the processes of industrialization and urbanization in those locations. The planning of religious tourism is structured through both Action Plans and Master Plans. The Master Plan serves as a strategic roadmap for destination development, while Action Plans facilitate private investments—both domestic and international—that are essential for initial growth. Through an analysis of these factors, the author elaborates on the governance mechanisms and management practices specific to the religious tourism sectors in Vrindavan and Shirdi, illustrating how these frameworks effectively oversee the complexities of religious tourism in India.

The research paper titled DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM (2008) by Madalina Lavinia Tala, Ana Mihaela padurean the research focused on The research states that, Religious tourism, also known as spiritual tourism, involves traveling to ancient holy places with the purpose of expressing and strengthening one's faith. It is the oldest form of tourism, dating back thousands of years. People embark on religious journeys to connect with their beliefs, experience sacred sites, participate in religious rituals and ceremonies. The motivation behind religious tourism is rooted in deep faith and the desire for spiritual growth. It allows individuals to explore different religions, cultures, and historical contexts fostering a greater understanding and appreciation for diverse religious traditions. Religious tourism has become increasingly popular worldwide, offering opportunities for personal growth, cultural exchange, and a deeper understanding of various religions. It concludes that the growth of religious tourism in Romania is promising, but proper management is crucial. By providing adequate facilities, harnessing community potential and creating positive experiences, we can attract more tourists. The elements effectively, and Sharing successful models, we can create a vibrant and thriving religious tourism industry. It's all about bringing together these different of all different religion to form an enriching experience for visitors. By involving all stakeholders and sharing successful model at international Conferences and events, we can inspire other communities. It a journey which discovers spiritual essence of a place and connect religious heritage.

The Research titled Strategic Role of Religious tourism in Recuperating the Indian tourism sector Post - Covid 19 (2020 November) by Parikshat singe manhas&Bipithlal Balakrishnan nair The research focused to the religious new tourism to give the strength the Indian tourism sector in post covid-19 with the focused on domestic. Tourism The discover the religious sites could play an important role the Indian tourism sector by away from the work devoted to rest in the less holidays also need to identifies the major obstruction overcome such as the physical distance crowding and more offers practical sensitivity Indian keys. religious sites such as Vaishnavi Devi temple golden temple Ajmer Darga Sharf & velenkanni church to create initiatives to rebuild the religious tourism sector covid-19 has challenged nations across the world unrivalled travel restrictions & stays at home and lockdown orders world's greatest distribution since the world war. With this raised tourist behavior changes, rebuilding safety & security important outcome is about hygienic issues this pandemic has transferred the entire world & created on new normal world. the Study highlight the significant the post-crisis marketing research. India is still at the crisis. -Stage of the process, and it is impossible to predict any outcome reliably.

NEED OF THE STUDY:

The research studies on choice of GenZ tourist of Pune city towards selecting religious tourism as vacation choice in India” this research aims to understand the concept of religious tourism, and choice of GenZ of pune city towards selecting the religious tourism in India.

Overall, this research endeavours to contribute to comprehensive understanding the concept, and activities on the religious places what challenges faced by religious tourism India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

Source of Data - Primary as well as secondary data were used for this study 'purposive random sampling' has been adopted by researchers for this study. The questionnaire was circulated and the sample size for this study was 136. The researcher has adopted a combination of descriptive and analytical research design for the present study.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS:

- Data reveals that out of 136, 57.4% respondents are male and 42.6% respondents are female.
- Age group of the respondents said - 16-20age is 62.5%, followed by Category 21-24 age group is 33.1%and the least category is 9-15 age group i.e., 4.4%.
- When asked about education, researcher found out 45.6% were under graduate, followed by Category of graduate 23.5% secondary education 11.8%, and others 11.8%, the least is the Category of higher secondary i.e. 7.4% respondents.
- Data shown in the category of the percentage of the respondent's income out of which most of dependent (student) is 55.1% and followed by the Category of 15k-20k are 21.3%, and category of 20k-25k are 9.6%, 8.1% respondents are 30k and above and least are 25k-30k which is 5.9%
- Respondents response for the visit to religious places showed that 97.1% respondents responded YES, they have visited or wish to take religious place as a tourism choice. And 2.9% of respondents responded NO for visit or wish to take religious place as a tourism choice.
- As per the data the most of respondents often travel for religious tourism in once a year are 43.4%. followed by it, Category of twice a year is 23.5% followed by category of thrice a year are 12.5%, category of more than four year are 11.8% and the least are 8.8% respondents responded for four times in year.
- most of respondents responded that they preferred to travel for religious tourism with 'family' are 55.9% and followed by Category of 'friends' are 27.9% followed by category of 'solo' are 10.3%. and the least are 5.9% respondents responded for the 'travel group'
- As per the data important reasons to choose religious destination as a tourism choice amongst gen z, category 'finding peace and relaxation' were Always are 95%, And category of 'family tradition' Always are 56%,and 'spiritual wellbeing' Always are 41%, and category of social media influence Always are 27%, and category of 'At start of a new beginning' Always are 40% peoples thinks the most important reason to choose the religious destination.
- From the data it has been observed that the most of respondent responded for preferred mode of transport for gen Z while choosing religious tourism was private transport (bike/car) followed by Category of rail and followed by category of bus (private/public) and the least respondent responded airplane
- Data analysis highlights key factors influencing Gen Z's choices in religious tourism. The 'Past experience' category shows 80% consistency, while 'Social media influence' is at 29%. 'Destination activities (fairs/festivals)' are considered important by 45%, and 'Spiritual journey' by 48%. The 'History and architecture of the destination' ranks at 65%, while 'Budget' influences 35%. The 'Part of family/group tour' category sees 65%, with 'Experiencing religious atmosphere' at 51%, and 'Connect with religion and culture' at 66%. Lastly, 'Peer pressure' influences 34% of decisions.

- The data analysis depicted highlights the challenges faced by Gen Z when choosing religious tourism. The most significant challenge is digital dependency, accounting for 20.6%. This is followed by poor infrastructure at destinations and safety and security concerns, both at 16.2%. High expectations and budget constraints are also noted, each representing 5.9%. Additionally, 35.3% of respondents identified all of the aforementioned challenges as relevant factors.

FINDINGS:

The data analysis reveals insightful findings regarding the demographic characteristics, preferences, and motivations of respondents, particularly focusing on Generation Z's engagement with religious tourism. Out of 136 respondents, 57.4% identified as male and 42.6% as female. The age distribution shows that 62.5% of respondents are in the 16-20 years category, while 33.1% fall within the 21-24 years category, and only 4.4% belong to the 9-15 years age group. In terms of education, 45.6% are undergraduates, 23.5% are graduates, while 11.8% have secondary education, 11.8% fall into the "others" category, and 7.4% have received higher secondary education. Regarding income levels, 55.1% of respondents are dependents (students), 21.3% earn between 15,000-20,000, and there are lesser percentages in the categories of 20,000-25,000 (9.6%), 30,000 and above (8.1%), and 25,000-30,000 (5.9%). Notably, 97.1% of respondents reported having visited or expressed interest in visiting religious places as part of their tourism experiences, demonstrating a strong inclination towards this form of travel, while only 2.9% indicated disinterest. When it comes to frequency, 43.4% travel for religious tourism once a year, followed by 23.5% who travel twice a year, 12.5% who travel thrice a year, and 11.8% who travel more than four times a year, with the least frequent travelers (8.8%) making four trips annually. In terms of companions, 55.9% prefer to travel with family, 27.9% with friends, 10.3% solo, and 5.9% as part of a group. Respondents identified several key motivations for choosing religious destinations, with 95% citing the desire for peace and relaxation as a consistent reason. Other motivators include family tradition (56%), spiritual wellbeing (41%), social media influence (27%), and the importance of starting anew (40%). Regarding travel preferences, private transport (bike/car) emerged as the most favored mode of travel for Gen Z, followed by rail and public transportation (bus), with air travel being the least preferred option. Furthermore, various factors influence the choices of Generation Z when it comes to religious tourism. These include past experiences (80% consistency), social media influence (29%), interesting destination activities (45%), the significance of a spiritual journey (48%), historical and architectural importance (65%), budget considerations (35%), participation in family or group tours (65%), the religious atmosphere (51%), and connecting with culture and religion (66%). Peer pressure also plays a role in influencing decisions, with 34% acknowledging its impact. Finally, the data highlights several challenges that Gen Z faces in the realm of religious tourism. The most significant challenge is digital dependency, affecting 20.6% of respondents. Other notable challenges include poor infrastructure and safety concerns at destinations, each at 16.2%, along with budget constraints and high expectations (both at 5.9%). Additionally, 35.3% identified all these challenges as relevant factors in their decision-making process. This comprehensive analysis delineates the demographic profile, motivations, travel preferences, and challenges encountered by Generation Z in the context of religious tourism.

HYPOTHESIS 1:

H₀: There is no significant difference in the motivations for religious tourism between personal motivations (e.g., "finding peace and relaxation") and social motivations (e.g., "family tradition") among Generation Z respondents.

H₁: There is a significant difference in the motivations for religious tourism between personal motivations (e.g., “finding peace and relaxation”) and social motivations (e.g., “family tradition”) among Generation Z respondents.

DATA FOR TESTING HYPOTHESIS:

To test H₁, researcher used a Chi-square test of independence to determine if there is a significant relationship between the type of motivation (personal vs. social) and the frequency of occurrence.

Categorical Data Representation:

Personal Motivation: Finding peace and relaxation (95%)

Social Motivation: Family tradition (56%)

This data can be condensed into a contingency table:

Motivation Type	Always%	Not Always%
Personal	95	5
Social	56	44

Conducting the Chi-Square Test:

Null Hypothesis (H₀): There is no significant difference in motivations for religious tourism.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁): There is a significant difference in motivations for religious tourism.

CALCULATION:

Using the data from the above table, the Chi-square statistic can be calculated. The critical value can be determined from Chi-square distribution tables at a significance level of 0.05 with 1 degree of freedom ($df = (2-1)(2-1) = 1$).

Since $\chi^2 < 0.05$, we reject the null hypothesis. Thus, we conclude that there is a significant difference in motivations among Generation Z respondents, supporting H₁.

Suggestions for Engaging Generation Z in Religious Tourism:

1. Digital Outreach: Leverage social media platforms, websites, and mobile applications to share information about religious sites, rituals, and festivals. Engage Generation Z with digital content, virtual tours, and live streams of religious events.
2. Interactive Experiences: Develop interactive and immersive experiences at religious sites by integrating modern technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) to captivate younger visitors.
3. Educational Programs: Create educational programs or workshops at religious sites that highlight the significance and history of these locations. Focus on making the exploration of religion and culture an enjoyable and engaging experience.
4. Eco-Friendly Initiatives: Advocate for eco-friendly and sustainable practices at religious sites, as Generation Z is increasingly environmentally aware. Implementing sustainable tourism initiatives can effectively attract them.
5. Adventure and Wellness Tourism: Merge religious tourism with adventure activities (such as trekking and rafting) and wellness retreats (including yoga and meditation) to cater to the varied interests of Generation Z.
6. Cultural Exchange Programs: Organize cultural exchange initiatives with local communities. Generation Z appreciates cultural diversity and authentic experiences, making this approach appealing.
7. Youth-Focused Events: Host events tailored to younger audiences at religious sites, such as music festivals, art exhibitions, and spiritual retreats, to draw in a younger demographic.

8. Safety and Accessibility: Ensure that religious sites are safe and accessible, maintaining well-constructed infrastructure, clear signage, and appropriate security measures.
9. Collaboration with Travel Influencers: Partner with travel influencers and content creators to promote the spiritual aspects of these destinations to a broader audience.
10. Promote Volunteer Opportunities: Encourage Generation Z to engage in community service and volunteer programs linked to religious tourism, which can enhance their sense of purpose.
11. Discounts and Special Packages: Provide discounts and special offers for students and young travelers, making it affordable for Generation Z to explore these destinations.
12. Feedback Mechanism: Implement a feedback system to gather suggestions and insights from Generation Z visitors, using their input to continuously enhance the religious tourism experience.
13. Youth-Friendly Accommodations: Provide affordable and youth-friendly lodging options near religious sites, such as hostels, homestays, and budget hotels.
14. Promote Cultural Exchange: Highlight the cultural diversity and pluralism inherent in India's religious heritage, encouraging tolerance and understanding among Generation Z.

CONCLUSION :

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in interest among Generation Z in religious tourism, particularly in visiting sacred sites and pilgrimage destinations. This shift marks a significant evolution in how these journeys are perceived, moving beyond traditional notions of tourism to encompass a deeper quest for meaning and connection.

Research indicates that Generation Z is increasingly seeking authentic experiences that foster spiritual growth and offer a respite from the digital landscape. This emerging trend is having a considerable impact on the tourism industry, prompting organizations to enhance their offerings and create more affordable accommodations in religious destinations to meet this new demand.

However, one of the primary challenges faced is the identification of suitable locations for developing hotels or lodges within these religious communities. In response to Gen Z's keen interest in religious tourism, hotel groups are inspired to prioritize the provision of budget-friendly and comfortable lodging options tailored to the needs of younger travelers.

The overarching aim is to facilitate accessible and enjoyable spiritual journeys for Generation Z, all while supporting local economies and generating job opportunities within these communities. This exciting development not only enriches the landscape of religious tourism but also contributes positively to the socio-economic fabric of the areas involved.

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