

Identifying and Marketing the Spiritual Tourism Destination: A Case Study on Gokarna, Karnataka

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Abstract

Purpose: India has an elusive history as a spiritual destination. The study investigates if a beach destination exists to be a contested site for ‘pilgrim tourists’ and spiritual tourists or could it be the destination which facilitates co-existence.

Methodology: The research is undertaken at Gokarna, a significant religious destination in the coastal Karnataka. The study privileges quantitative techniques of descriptive statistics and Cluster Analysis to recognize statistically evident and discriminant visitor types backed by qualitative analysis and interpretation.

Findings: The study presents statistically significant clusters of Religious Adherents, Health/Lifestyle seekers, New Age Spiritually Inclined Tourists and Recreational Tourists. The study establishes the elusive connect the new age tourists share with the well-established religious destinations

Implications: The study convincingly recommends that Gokarna could be promoted as a spiritual destination while being acclaimed as beach tourism destination for the new age tourists who seek philosophical and life experiences. Study assists the destination to retain its core offerings and the policy makers to devise well informed development plan to sustainably manage the place and its aura.

Keywords: Spiritual Tourism, Transformational Tourism, Beaches, Destination Marketing, Cluster Analysis.

Introduction

India has an elusive history as a spiritual destination. It is deemed to be the doorway of divinity with diverse offerings for the spiritual seekers. The spiritual heritage and the culture of the ancient land is believed to be wide spread across the length and breadth of India hence indicating the whole of India as a spiritual headquarter. The religious pilgrimage especially in the Hindu belief professes pushing the personal boundaries, inculcate determination, making the connections along the journey and at the destination, adhering to the traditional customs of the place and most importantly indulging oneself in the activities which assist in connecting with the higher power. The evolution and growth of interest in spiritual tourism destinations is increasingly noticeable. The spiritual potential has been rediscovered in specific global destinations where a sort of ‘spiritual magnetism’ exists due to the influence of attractions related to historical, geographical, and social aspects, and human values (Buzinde, 2020).

The most important pilgrimage destinations also happen to be situated with abundant natural resources. Making the journey both physically and mentally challenging. The Studies have evidenced that Spiritual tourism in the nature based destinations have profound transformational impacts on an individual. Every geographical variation offers a unique experience for the visitor with its gusting rivers, expansive seas or Mighty Mountains. The travel induced by the intrinsic motivations of seeking when aided by the authentic and supportive extrinsic offerings culminates the travel to be truly transcendental.

The traditional religious places are now the modern secular destinations attracting spiritual seekers. The popularity of the sacred places in attracting the spiritual seekers is well established with the increasing visitor numbers across the globe at the traditional pilgrimage sites as well as in the new destinations. With the growth of traditional pilgrims, contemporary pilgrim tourists and the spiritual tourists to the same sacred sites, the study investigates if sacred sites have to be the contested sites or could it be the destination which facilitates the co-evolution of pilgrims and spiritual tourists.

Review of Literature:

Spiritual Tourism :

Spiritual tourism is concerned with travelling to places in search of mindfulness while searching for the real purpose of life has been largely termed as spiritual tourism. It can be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature. Spiritual Tourism is the logical outcome of the combined process of secularization, postmodernity and the history of tourism (Norman, 2012 & Rogers, 2007). Spirituality is understood not just as a state of mind but the holistic integration of body, mind and heart while channeling energies to investigate the true meaning of life for oneself. The year 2013 marked the first UNWTO International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development in Ninh Binh of Vietnam, recognizing the importance of the emerging tourism segment and calling for the attention of governments and businesses. The new order of tourism is well indicated with the three 'S' Serenity, Sustainability and Spirituality (Bowler 2013). Interpretations of spirituality vary depending on tourists' cultural contexts and personal backgrounds (Schmidt & Little, 2007). With the growing demand for spiritual tourism, the study on tourism backed by the motives of spirituality and self-fulfillment are drawing increasing academic interest as well (Bandyopadhyay & Nair, 2019; Buzinde, 2020; Cheer, Belhassen, & Kujawa, 2017; Norman, 2012). Yet, there seems to be less focus on positioning and marketing the well established religious destinations as spiritual tourism destinations.

The studies have been evident that religious and pilgrimage destinations have been one of the major sites for spiritual tourism (Wang, Bilasco et al., 2023; Gill, Packer, & Ballantyne, 2019; Norman, 2012; Willson et al., 2013). The tourism experience has been accorded as ideal setting for the spiritually driven endeavours of the travellers where one feels closer to the faith and place through religious observance, ritualized practice, reaffirmation of identity and cultural performance (Cheer, et al., 2017).

The studies on cultural changes have also seen a rise due to the "new order" where the tourists started indulging in less damaging activities. Many travelers aspired to forsake the "tourist bubble" and get more authentic in experiencing the local culture by meeting and becoming more acquainted with the local people. Spiritual tourism, Out-of-Body travel / experience are one such post modern tourism phenomenon which is scantily researched (Maligi, 2019).

Research reveals that spiritual destinations offer transformational experiences through various offerings as ‘tourism products’. These may be offered through individuals or organizations with a variety of courses, activities and experiences are on offer ranging from; traditional ‘hands on’ or skills based workshops (hedge laying and wood turning); aesthetic development, (art, drama and music); formal scholarly learning, (including courses hosted by visiting New age spiritual and intellectual ‘gurus’); experiential and personalised self-development, (courses on meditation, personal relationships and self knowledge); and finally, courses on alternative approaches to health and welfare including alternative treatments (Sutton and House, 2003).

Nature and Spiritual Tourism:

Nature is seen as a vital context for transcendental experiences. Studies on tourists who experience spirituality in nature indicate that the learning and experience differ from the activities they indulge in. (Curtin, 2009; Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Singleton, 2017). Nature fosters the spiritual dimension of an individual. Different cultures define the concept of nature in diverse ways, permeating views and values that may impact individual attitudes and cognitions toward (in) natural surroundings (Verschuuren et al., 2021). Wang and Blasco (2022) found that the traditional view of nature, called “the unity of heaven and mankind”, can impact Chinese perceptions and, in turn, lead to spiritual enlightenment when visiting natural landscapes.

The studies have also found influence of demographic characteristics, personal characters and the extent of individual experiences on the way natural landscapes are consumed (Schwarz, 2013). It states that high-status and well-educated individuals more commonly act as nature ‘absorbers’ in pursuit of special powers (e.g. treatment, aesthetic, spirituality) from nature. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the category of spirituality ‘recipients’ the destination receives will have a significant influence on the values of a destination (Mu et al., 2019).

Nature could be a crucial context for seeking inner peace and self-fulfilment (Curtin, 2009; Moal-Ulvoas & Taylor, 2014; Snell & Simmonds, 2015). Beaches especially have been regarded as place of Beauty, purity, solitude, tranquillity, mystery, newness, and expansiveness, to name a few. These significant attributes allow the individuals to escape from the daily hustle and bustle, and therefore obtain a sense of self and connectedness with others, nature, and even the cosmos (Maligi, 2019; Andriotis, 2009; De Pater et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Schwarz, 2013). It is well researched that spirituality in nature-based tourism integrates four aspects: 1) nature, 2) visitors, 3) activities and interactions, and 4) tourist experiences and spiritual outcomes (Heintzman, 2009; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Williams & Harvey, 2001).

It is noteworthy that the definition of nature has gradually altered from a dichotomy to a broader pluralist concept, highlighting the significance of cultural and non-material facets. In this regard, socio-cultural aspects are inseparable in certain natural sites that often possess spiritual values. Different cultures define the concept of nature in diverse ways, permeating views and values that may impact individual attitudes and cognitions toward (in) natural surroundings (Verschuuren et al., 2021). In India one can experience the spirituality while keeping the harmony with the natural surroundings and cultural offerings especially at the Hindu Pilgrimage sites.

Thus the literature review suggests that the studies on nature based tourism with spiritual dimension are quite limited and lack the theoretical reflections on the complex relationship which carries intangible value. (Curtin, 2009; Heintzman, 2009). The studies have identified the gap stating the destinations have been analyzed by the demand side and limited studies are done on the supply side in terms of developing and managing spiritual tourism destinations (Wang, Bilasco et al., 2023). A multitude of Indian destinations could be employed to create a more developed spirituality-related range of attractions that would act as the strongest of tourist draws (Norman, 2011). There has been no study in the Indian context to demarcate the natural and religious destination for pilgrims as well as spiritual seekers without disturbing the core offerings of the place.

The current study thus focuses on identifying the potent of the religious destination at a natural setting as a spiritual tourism destination. More so, it emphasizes the role the beach spaces play in amplifying the experience of spiritual tourism.

Research Methodology

Area under Study :

Gokarna is a religious coastal town located in the Kumta *taluk* of Uttara Kannada District on the west - coast of Karnataka, India between 14.5497' N and 74.3188' E coordinates. Gokarna is spread across 10.9 sq. kms with an elevation of 22m above the sea level. Gokarna is geographically situated between the two rivers Shalmali Ganga or Gangavali on the North and the river Aghanashini to the South. Having Siddheshwara range of hillocks on the East, Gokarna is Open to the mesmerizing Arabian Sea to the West.

Gokarna is a conjuring place with a hoary history and tradition which is traced back to thousands of years and absolutely stunning with its picturesque landscape rich in the mists of epics and legends. Since ages, Gokarna has been revered as the most holy place among Kashi / Varanasi in the north and Rameshwaram in the south. As a new age destination, it welcomes large number of spiritual tourists and lifestyle seekers to the place creating a mosaic of natural, cultural and social offerings.

Sample and Data Collection

The target population for the current research was defined as all the domestic and international beach visitors at Gokarna. To understand the beach user's perception, convenience sampling technique was used as the study demanded heterogeneous population. The study being exploratory in nature, the data collection was ceased at N=400. The majority of the sample was equally distributed between Gokarna main beach, Kudle beach and Om beach. The observations were made at the other two beaches namely Halfmoon and Paradise beach. The best sampling points were considered as the beach stretch was long and the concentration of tourists deferred according to the time. The other influencing factors such as the weather conditions and the time of the day were also considered. The entire data collected covered all geographical seasons, all months of peak season, off season and mid season. The data was collected during the weekdays and the weekends, public holidays along with covering different times of the day. To randomize the sample, the next person method was used partially depending on the nature of the activity the prospective participant was indulged with.

The questionnaire designed was intended to collect demographic information along with 12 questions related to beach usage pattern and 15 questions related to behavioral aspects of the tourists. Out of which, the demographic data and the psychographic data on beach usage is only used for the current analysis. The data on beach usage pattern was collected using 5 point likert scale ranging from 1(Never) to 5 (Mostly). The questionnaire was formulated in English and the translation as and when required, was provided by the researcher while collecting the data from the domestic tourists. The response sheets collected was cross checked for the missing information and the recorded data was cross checked to ensure the quality. The data was further coded to enter into the pre-designed soft format which was carefully handled and treated with PASW-22.0 (SPSS).

Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis of the demographic data was done. The data collected was also subjected to test the normality, skewness and outliers if any. Further, the beach activity attribute was used to segment the tourists. In tourism studies, understanding consumer needs and behaviour is crucial. Segmentation, as a powerful marketing tool, makes it possible to extract tourist identities, focus on them and identify customer preferences (McCleary, 1995). Segmentation was based on psychographic data i.e. the choice of activity performed on the beach. The Hierarchical Clustering with Ward's Method was found to be suitable for the current study. The choice of Variable was decided based on the study objectives and not from the previously established theoretical guidelines. The cluster was thus formed based on the activities on the beaches by the tourists as it carries significant practical implications. Inter object similarity was measured using Squared Euclidian Measure for standardized data. Covariance matrix between variables was measured. The Initial enquiry of agglomeration schedule suggested that the ideal number of clusters would be 04 upon seeking the demarcation points accounting for the theoretical validity. As the number of observation was very high, use of Dendrogram was preferred. The line plot was used to further understand the health of cluster formed. The descriptive statistics were applied to further understand the profile of each cluster formed with respect to the choice of activity performed on the beach. To validate the results of the cluster analysis and to determine the variables which significantly discriminate the clusters, discriminant analysis was applied. The analysis indicated that three variables out of the 12 variables provide maximum separation between the clusters.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the beach users :

The demographic profile of the tourists were analysed through descriptive statistics. The results of the analysis (Table 1) indicate that the male respondents summed to 59% comprising Domestic Tourists (112) and International tourists (124). The 41% Female respondents comprised of domestic tourists (90) and international tourists (74). The study captures the data from 202 Domestic tourists (50.5%) and 198 International tourists (49.5%) which included overnight visitors and the same day visitors / excursionists along with the International travelers with extended length of stay. Though the domestic tourists make up for the highest percentage of visits, equal sampling of the international tourists was purposely done so as to understand the group characteristics. The Domestic tourists are mostly from the state of Karnataka and rest visited from the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. It is interesting to note that majority of the visitors originate from the coastal states which accentuates the nature of beach in Gokarna than that of the other beaches in their home states. The

international visitors were mainly from the traditional regions namely Russia (12.5%), Germany (6%), France (5.8%), U.K. (4.3%). Tourists from USA accounted only for about 1% while the emerging markets were from Europe and Israel.

The beaches of Gokarna were dominant by the presence of 60.5% of the tourists who are between 25 years to 44 years of age. The next dominant age group was between 45-64 years (29.5%) followed by 7.5% who were below 24 years of age and the other 2.55% who were above 65 years of age. The destination has attracted the Gen Z and the Post modern tourists signifying the attributes of new age destination. The study indicated 43.5% of the respondents were working professionals, 11.8% were the home-makers, 7% retired, 4.3% students, 2.3% agriculturists and rest were either part time workers

Table 1 : Demographic Profile of the respondents (N=400)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	41%
	Male	59%
Tourist Category	International	49.5%
	Domestic	50.5%
Age	Under 24Yrs	7.5%
	25-44Yrs	60.5%
	45-64Yrs	29.5%
	65+ Yrs	2.5%
Occupation	Working Professionals	74.90%
	Others	25.10%

Taking the cue from the demographic profile, the study was furthered to understand the beach usage pattern of the visitors with a focus on the activities undertaken by the visitors on the beach. As the destination is being studied from the supply side, the beach attributes which has facilitated the users to indulge in their choice of activity has been taken into consideration for the segmenting. The studies have suggested that while motivation-based clustering usually aims to identify tourists' interests, behaviour and expectations, leading towards innovative touristic products and services development and providing integrated, wide-ranging, fulfilling and memorable experiences (Ramires et al., 2018). By contrast, clustering based on the importance of attributes focuses on resource allocation and quality of services that visitors value the most (Vaske et al.,1996).

Visitor Segmentation Using Psychographic Data:

To determine the statistically significant groups from the homogenous sample, it accentuates the need of clustering based on the activities undertaken on the beach. The discrete variables like tourist category or the gender is not used in the clustering rather the beach activity attribute is used to segment the tourists, which is a part of post-hoc segmentation. The beach activity forms the underlying factor to identify the unknown groups which are statistically significant and could also assist in better profiling of the tourists and to devise well informed development plan for the destination.

The Hierarchical Clustering with Ward’s Method was found to be suitable for the current study. The same sample was used for obtaining the clusters from the observations and to decipher its underlying structure. Inter object similarity was measured using Squared Euclidian Measure for standardized data. Covariance matrix between variables was measured. Wards’s method was privileged to have the significant clusters based on objective of the study. The Initial enquiry of agglomeration schedule suggested that the ideal number of clusters would be 04 upon seeking the demarcation points accounting for the theoretical validity. As the number of observation was very high instead of Dendogram, the means were compared and the same was plotted with the help of line graph.

The clusters were further analysed using K-means clustering to validate the number of cases in each prominent cluster. The solutions ranged from 3 to 5 clusters. The Solution with 04 clusters was chosen to highlight the significant characteristics upon excluding the outliers. A series of Pearson Chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests were run, revealing significant differences between the four clusters. The test was conducted to understand that the attributes chosen were significantly different from each cluster. The Table 2 indicates the significance of the activities undertaken at the beach by the visitors and it’s spread across the clusters formed. The table also confirms that significance difference exists between the clusters. The table below indicates the ‘p’ value of the attributes at 95% confidence level. Hence it could be concluded that the respondents fall into distinct clusters based on the activity undertaken on the beach.

Table 2: One way ANOVA results of activities undertaken at the beach

	Clusters				One-Way ANOVA 'p' Value
	1	2	3	4	
Activities Undertaken at the Beach	N=89	N=179	N=95	N=24	Significance
Leisure Time	4.67	4.73	4.78	4.87	.000
Walking/Run/Jog	4.32	4.80	4.55	4.53	.012
Religious rituals	4.69	1.73	1.31	1.38	.000
Rea/Hobbies	1.12	1.41	2.14	2.39	.000
Water sports	1.00	3.16	1.00	1.04	.000
Yoga / Meditation	1.00	1.00	4.71	1.06	.000
Picnic	1.02	3.08	1.26	1.00	.000
Cycling / Biking	1.00	1.06	1.29	1.06	.007
Shop / Dine	1.23	1.39	2.14	1.83	.000

Note - The F tests should be used only for descriptive purposes because the clusters have been chosen to maximize the differences among cases in different clusters. The observed significance levels are not corrected for this and thus cannot be interpreted as tests of the hypothesis that the cluster means are equal.

The line of any cluster means plotted is quite healthy and not flat or almost flat which indicates that the variables are well spread and are all above average. The most common activity which is enjoyed by all across the categories of tourists is spending the “time in leisure, walking, sunbathing and swimming”. Apart from the mentioned common activities, the other activities are analyzed to draw meaningful conclusions. Table 3 indicates the cluster characteristics based on the significant activities which differentiates the clusters along with the demographic information.

Table 3 : Cluster Characteristics based on beach activity and demographic profile

Characteristics	Cluster1 N=89 "New Age Spiritually Inclined Tourists"	Cluster 2 N= 179 "Recreation & Adventure Enthusiasts"	Cluster 3 N=95 " Religious Adherants"	Cluster 4 N=24 "Health/ Lifestyle Seekers"	Total
Significant Factors					
Leisure Time	4.78	4.73	4.67	4.87	4.76
Walking/Run/Jog	4.55	4.80	4.32	4.53	4.55
Religious Rituals	1.31	1.73	4.69	1.38	2.28
Read_Hobbies	2.14	1.41	1.12	2.39	1.77
Watersports	1.00	3.16	1.00	1.04	1.55
Yoga/Meditation	4.71	1.00	1.00	1.06	1.94
Picnic	1.26	3.08	1.02	1.00	1.59
Cycling_Biking	1.29	1.06	1.00	1.06	4.10
Shop_Dine	2.14	1.39	1.23	1.83	1.65
Gender					
Male	66% (59)	60% (108)	45% (43)	71% (17)	51% (227)
Female	34% (30)	40% (71)	55% (52)	29% (7)	41% (160)
Tourists					
Domestic	20% (18)	49% (87)	96% (91)	0	51% (196)
International	80% (71)	51% (92)	4% (4)	100% (24)	49% (191)
Age					
Under 24Yrs	6	20	4	0	8% (30)
25-44Yrs	61	110	40	20	60% (231)
45-64Yrs	22	49	41	4	30% (116)
65+ Yrs	0	0	10	0	3% (10)

Cluster 1 – “The New Age Spiritually Inclined Tourists” represents 23% of the total sample. It signifies a substantial percentage of International tourists (80%) who look up to the destination for their spiritual needs. The group involves fair share of Male (66%) and Female (34%) tourists. It is significant to note that majority of the population (69%) belong to 25-44 yrs of age making up for the millennial tourists followed by the 25% of the tourists belonging to 45-64 yrs of age. Though leanly represented, 7% of the

tourists belong to 18 -24 yrs and are inclined towards participating in Yoga, meditation most of the times followed by reading philosophical texts or to indulge in any of the hobbies of their choice on the beach. The cluster also represents the majority of the tourists who prefer to dine on the beaches. The spiritually inclined tourists did not give significant importance to religious rituals or for the water sports activities on the beach. Spending time picnicking or cycling was not considered by the cluster making it least preferred activities.

Cluster 2 – “Recreation & Adventure Enthusiasts, represent 46% of the total sample, making it the largest cluster. The cluster is fairly distributed among the different age criterions. The maximum representation is by the tourists aged between 45 – 64 yrs (61%). Spending time in leaisure, walking, running, jogging, indulging in water sport activities have been the significant factors contributing to the cluster characteristics. The cluster is dominated by the male tourists (60%) compared to the female tourists (40%). Domestic(49%) and International tourists (51%) both contribute to the cluster formation equally. Yet, the study states that almost 4.63% of the tourists visit the beaches of Gokarna with the main purpose of Surfing where there are dedicated schools that pull the interested international tourists to Gokarna for their surfing instincts.

The cluster indicates least significance for the other activities namely indulging in hobbies, meditation, cycling or dining on the beach. Adventure activities and spending time in pickining has been rated highly by the cluster members making it more mass visitors’ group.

Cluster 3 - " Religious Adherants" represent the most unique attributes of the beach. One fourth of the sample contributes to the cluster and they are dominated by the domestic tourists (96%) followed by a lean but very significant representation of 4% of the International tourists. The religious aspect of the beaches of Gokarna, places the cluster at a rather typical factor. Majority of the cluster members could be conveniently called as the pilgrimage tourists who account for 45% of the male and 55% of the female visitors. The religious rituals which relate to the post mortal rituals are mainly undertaken on the beaches. The emphasis is placed on offering the prayers to the sea as well as to the sand lingam. Though not all 4% of the international tourists categorise them as religious, the rituals of making the sand lingam or worshipping the sea was considered a significant aspect. They opined to be more spiritual. Spending time in leisure is the only activity which is preferred by the visitors and no other activity is significant to the cluster members. Hence the pilgrims form the core of the cluster characteristics.

Cluster 4 - "Health/Lifestyle Seekers" form the smallest yet significant cluster representing 6% of the total sample. The cluster is significant as they don’t share typical interests of the other three clusters. The cluster is largely represented by 25-44 yrs tourists (83%) and is all international tourists unlike the other clusters who had a mixture of both domestic and international tourists. Dominated by the male tourists (71%), the cluster characteristics are defined by the choice of activities where upkeep of their health or having an alternative lifestyle was the major intent. The cluster members indulge in activities of walking, running, jogging, cycling and biking significantly. While they also indulge in reading, rituals at the beach making them inclined towards bettering their understanding of life. The key features calls for a indepth understanding of the place significance to be projected as an alternative destination than that as a mass beach destination.

Discriminant Analysis:

To validate the 04 cluster solution by the cluster analysis, discriminant analysis was performed. The analysis was conducted to understand which activity undertaken by the beach users discriminate between the clusters. The enquiry was done to understand statistically significant, discriminating attribute among the 09 activities opted by the beach users.

The same sample was used for validating the results. The total number of respondents considered was 387 out of 400 responses. 13 were excluded as outliers. The initial discriminative statistics indicated that the major variables responsible were religious rituals, reading and hobbies, Yoga and meditation and picnicking. Table 4 indicates that the Box’s M test result is significant ($p < 0.05$) and indicates a significant difference between the groups.

Table 4 : Box’s M test result

Box's M		251.367
F	Approx.	24.659
	df1	10
	df2	149049.512
	Sig.	.000

Table 5 : Discriminant Analysis Summary

Function	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Canonical Correlation	Wilks' Lambda	Chi-square	df	Sig.
1 Two Clusters	38.453 ^a	86.1	.987	.002	2415.387	12	.000
2 Three Clusters	4.795 ^a	10.7	.910	.071	1011.490	6	.000
3 Four Clusters	1.437 ^a	3.2	.768	.410	340.343	2	.000

Note : 97.9% of original grouped cases correctly classified.

The Discriminant analysis summary is presented in table 5. Three canonical discriminant functions were estimated and found to be statistically significant. The canonical co-relation is 0.768 and the squared value of the same indicates 59% variance between the groups which is above 50% and hence acceptable. The factors chosen are not mutually exclusive hence the co-relation exists between the factors. The Wilk’s Lambda value is 0.410 which signifies the existence of difference in the group means also significant ($p < 0.05$). The analysis also calculated the degree to which respondents were correctly classified. The hit ratio is 97.9% which indicated a very high accuracy rate and suggested that the solution with four clusters was correctly identified. Hence the discriminant analysis proves that the clusters formed are discriminating.

Discussion and Implications of the Study

While religious destinations form the major sites to attract spiritual tourists, the spiritual tourists may not have any inclination towards the pilgrim obligations of the sacred place. While the cluster 1 identified as “The New Age Spiritually Inclined Tourists” explicitly states the presence of the spiritual tourists, the other clusters also have indicated the presence of new age tourists looking for transformational needs.

Further investigation on how the respondents perceive Gokarna as a beach destination revealed that 11.42% of domestic tourists perceive it as a spiritual destination while 13.95% of International tourists convey the same. While Gokarna is predominantly a religious destination, these fair share of respondents classify the destination to be spiritual. The post modern tourists no more confine their travel to mere travel and gaze. They deliberate themselves to feel the destination by involving into the activities to create experiences. The Psychoanalytic approach of Word Association Test (WAT) also indicates that respondents connected the beaches of Gokarna with the words sacred (N=80), peace (N=25), phenomenal, stress free, magical, endless, other world, relaxing, positivity, inspiration and relief which describes the spiritual nature of the beaches.

While the religious destinations have always been a contested place for pilgrims, pilgrim tourists and tourists, the case study presents co-evolution of pilgrims and spiritual tourists without hampering the core offerings of the destination. Development of the destination focuses on positioning and marketing the well established religious destinations embedded in nature as spiritual tourism destinations rather than leisure destinations. While there exists strong pull factors like pristine nature and few philosophical learning centres, it requires a dedicated mention in the promotional literature to draw the focused group of visitors. The amount of negative impacts mass tourism has brought to the beaches in general is well known. Spirituality could be the seed for sustainability. The commodified products of spiritualism in the form of retreat centers or yoga camps however exist, but there could be a dedicated attempt to keep the natural environment undisturbed and allow the nature to heal the self from within. The study convincingly recommends that Gokarna could be promoted as a spiritual destination rather than that as a mere beach tourism destination for the new age tourists who seek philosophical and life experiences.

The study endorses scientific profiling of the tourists and to appreciate the destination history which assists in identifying the core and emerging destination attributes. The results drawn assists the policy makers and the destination managers to devise well informed development plan to sustainably manage the place and its aura. As the power of positioning and marketing of destination is well accounted, the current study endorses to use Ethical Alternative Marketing. While the pleasure dimension demeans the nature, the spiritual dimension could be the tool for Sustainability in safeguarding the pristine resources as well as keeping up the decorum of the place.

Conclusion

While India is known for its cultural and spiritual offerings, the same unique preposition could be amalgamated into creating a contemporary alternative experience product. Spiritual tourism precedes the new age Transformational Tourism. Spiritual tourism is well acknowledged as it encourages respecting other religions, cultural exchange, maintaining communal harmony and conversation. It further stands like the building blocks of mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect (Christalan & Susila, 2023). A

differentiating product with cultural and environmental ethos would ideally accentuate the destination competitiveness. Further, A dedicated study on profiling of spiritual tourists at the religious destinations would disseminate crucial insights on facilitating spiritual tourism destinations in India.

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