

# From Pilgrimage to Experience: Analysing the Rise of Hybrid Tourists in Faith-Based Travel and Its Economic Impact on Local Destinations

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## Abstract:

The rise of religious tourism as an experience-based and multi-dimensional phenomenon has given rise to the emergence of hybrid tourists who combine the leisure and cultural exploration and consumption-driven travel with the spiritual motives. This paper will look at how traditional pilgrimage has developed into experience-based faith tourism, and discuss the economic potential of the latter to local destinations. Through a conceptual and analytical method based on experience economy framework, the research combines the secondary data, case evidence (especially in India) and new trends in tourism. The results indicate that hybrid tourism has a profound impact on the economic ecosystems in the localities because it addresses various sources of revenue, job creation, and entrepreneurship, as well as creates issues of sustainability and cultural commodification. The research advances the bodies of tourism knowledge by introducing the idea of hybrid tourist behaviour connection with the local economic change and policy outcomes.

**Keywords:** Hybrid tourists, faith-based tourism, experience economy, pilgrimage tourism, local economy, India.

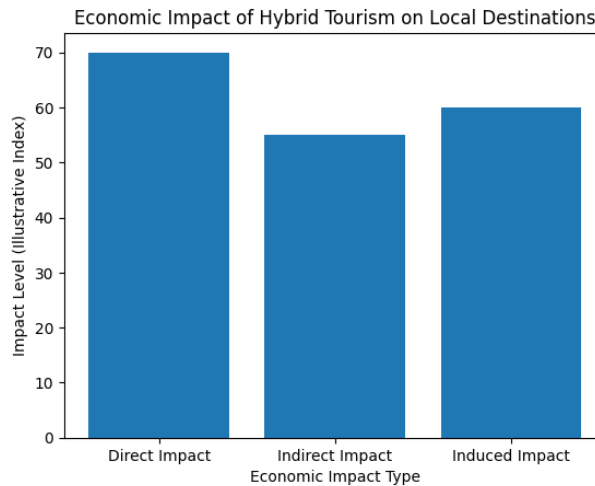
## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is not new to the history of human mobility and is based on spiritual adoration, discipline, and tradition. But in the modern world of global tourism pilgrimage has been transformed out of the religious motives to become a multifaceted experiential phenomenon. There is a growing trend in tourists, who are seeking spiritual satisfaction alongside their leisure and cultural immersion and consumption experiences which has resulted in a new group of tourists being identified as hybrid tourists. This change is in line with the larger paradigm of the experience economy, in which value generation is achieved by creating memorable and immersive experiences, not services. This change has significant economic effects in the countries such as India where pilgrimage sites like Varanasi, Tirupati, and Mathura receive millions of pilgrims. Religious tourism is now playing a significant role in economic development especially in terms of some income, job creation, and growth of a region. At the same time, destinations are evolving into experience-based tourism destinations as opposed to sacred spaces that incorporate spirituality with hospitality, entertainment, and cultural sector.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study conceptual framework is based on the combination of the experience economy theory and tourists behaviour theory, which justifies how the traditional pilgrimage is changed into experience based faith-based tourism. It assumes that the hybrid tourists are formed due to the intersection of the spiritual motives and experiential consumption pattern in which the tourists are interested not only in the spiritual fulfillment of their needs but also in the cultural aspects, leisure and personalized experience. Digitalization, enhanced infrastructure, governmental tourism policies and globalization are some of the

enabling factors behind this change. The framework also defines a cause-effect relationship of hybrid tourist behaviour and local economic change, emphasizing the diversified tourist activities as direct, indirect, and induced economic effects in the hospitality industry, transport industry, retail industry, and cultural industry. Simultaneously, it also considers moderating factors like sustainability practices, governance systems and socio-cultural integrity, which influence the level and quality of economic performances. In such a way, the framework offers a holistic perspective that explains how emerging tourist motivations re-invent the faith-based destinations as active economic systems and strikes a balance between spiritual and commercialization pressure.



*Figure 1: Illustrates the comparative contribution of direct, indirect, and induced economic impacts generated by hybrid tourism. The findings indicate that direct impacts, including tourist expenditure on accommodation, food, and transport, constitute the highest contribution, followed by induced and indirect effects, reflecting multiplier-driven economic expansion in local economies*

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Faith based tourism has since then changed drastically in terms of its traditional perception as a strictly religious or pilgrimage based tourism to the more conceptualized view of an experience and economical perspective. The initial academic work, most notably by Collins-Kreiner (2020), put pilgrimage on a spectrum between devout pilgrims and secular tourists to define the basis of mixed-motivation travel behaviour analysis. Continuing on this, new research has brought up the notion of the so-called hybrid tourists, i.e. those who combine spiritual goals with leisure, cultural sightseeing and experiences that are consumption-oriented (Choe, 2025; Budovich, 2023). It is strictly connected with the construct of the experience economy, where the value-generation process in tourism is more focused on the immersive, individual, and memorable experience than on the simple attendance of the religious ceremony (Pine and Gilmore, 2019).

Modern literature (2021225) mentions a number of structural and behavioural forces that contribute to this change, such as globalization, accelerated digitalization, improved connectivity and active tourism policies of the state. The policy reports and studies in the Indian context point to faith-based destinations where a strategy of rebranding as integrated tourism ecosystems with a blend of spirituality, heritage, wellness, and entertainment is implemented (IBEF, 2024; Ministry of Tourism, 2023). This transformation has largely impacted tourist behaviour as hybrid tourists are more involved and have more spending habits than the traditional pilgrims (Shinde, 2021; Singh and Rana, 2022). This transformation has only been increased by the incorporation of the digital platform and social media that shapes the expectations of the tourists and encourages experiential consumption.

Economically, the literature has indicated over and over again the importance of the faith based tourism in terms of local and regional development. Factual research proves that religious tourism has a significant

impact on the generation of income, creation of jobs, development of infrastructures, and the expansion of related sectors through direct, indirect, and spillover impacts on the economy (Budovich, 2023; Choe, 2025; UNWTO, 2022). This sector is especially crucial in the outcome of the micro-enterprises, handicrafts, and informal service industries instilling the livelihood of the locals and economic stability in emerging economies such as India (IBEF, 2024; Singh and Rana, 2022). Nevertheless, researchers also emphasize the possible dangers of the commercialization of holy locations, such as the commercialization of cultures, deterioration of nature, and the destruction of spiritual purity (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Shinde, 2021).

Recent studies have led to the further development of the dialogue by adding social-cultural and governance aspects with the focus on sustainable and inclusive tourism development. Matters of unequal sharing of economic gains, marginalization of the locals and absence of regulation systems have been addressed with critical scrutiny (UNWTO, 2022; Ministry of Tourism, 2023). As a result, community-based tourism models, policy integration, and capacity-building works are becoming increasingly accepted as a solution to ensure that economic benefits would not be achieved at the expense of cultural and environmental sustainability. Although there is increasing literature on the topic, it can be seen that a significant research gap still exists in the need to merge hybrid tourist behaviour with measurable economic performance in one conceptual framework. Most of the available literature is prone to the analysis of either behaviour change or economic changes separately. Thus, the given research will add to the existing research by suggesting a more detailed system, which will allow connecting the changing tourist reasons with the process of economic change in the faith-driven destinations, especially in the setting of the new economies like India.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design in this study is qualitative and analytical research design to explore how faith-based tourism has changed to become experience-based phenomenon and the economic impact of the emergence of hybrid tourists on the local destinations. Since this is a conceptual and exploratory research, the research methodology is based on the primary data-supported approach with the supplement of thematic and comparative analysis.

##### Research Design

The study is mainly descriptive and exploratory in nature, as it seeks to make conceptualizations about the formation of hybrid tourists and form some form of connection between tourist behaviour and local economic performance. The paper combines both theoretical understanding of experience economy framework and tourist behaviour theory in developing an analytical framework.

##### Data Sources

The study relies extensively on secondary data, collected from credible and authoritative sources, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles (Scopus-indexed, 2021–2025)
- Government reports (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India)
- International organization reports (UNWTO, World Bank)
- Industry reports (IBEF, tourism development reports)
- Books and policy documents related to religious tourism and economic development

This ensures both academic rigor and policy relevance.

##### Data Collection Method

Information has been gathered systematically using:

- Search of databases (Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science).

- Key words strategy: faith-based tourism, hybrid tourists, experience economy, religious tourism economic impact and pilgrimage transformation.

**5. TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES USED FOR DATA ANALYSIS**

Tool / Technique	Purpose	Application in the Study	Expected Outcome
Thematic Analysis	To identify patterns and themes in literature	Categorization of studies into themes such as hybrid tourists, experience economy, and economic impact	Structured understanding of key research domains
Content Analysis	To systematically interpret textual data	Analysis of policy documents, reports, and academic articles	Extraction of relevant concepts and policy insights
Comparative Analysis	To compare different tourism models	Comparison between traditional pilgrims and hybrid tourists	Identification of behavioural and economic differences
Conceptual Modelling	To develop theoretical framework	Designing a model linking drivers, hybrid tourists, and economic outcomes	Visual and theoretical representation of relationships
Literature Synthesis	To integrate findings from multiple studies	Combining insights from Scopus-indexed journals (2021–2025)	Development of a comprehensive research narrative
Trend Analysis	To examine changes over time	Analysis of evolving tourism patterns and government initiatives	Understanding growth and transformation of faith tourism
Secondary Data Analysis	To analyse existing datasets and reports	Use of data from IBEF, UNWTO, Ministry of Tourism	Evidence-based support for economic impact discussion

**6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

**Key Findings**

**1. Development of Hybrid Tourist Behaviour.**

The paper concludes that faith based tourism has been experiencing a major behavioural shift whereby there has arisen a new breed of tourists known as hybrid tourists who are synthetic tourists with religious motives coupled with experience and recreational oriented preferences. These tourists do not travel in the traditional pilgrim way but rather they pursue culturally immersive, comfortable, and tailored travel experiences. This trend is a sign of greater transformation in the consumer behaviour due to globalization, digital media and the increase in disposable income, and thus changing the definition of what religious tourism is and what it is not.

**2. Experience Economy in Faith-Based Tourism.**

The other important observation is the growing incorporation of the experience economy into the religious tourism with destinations ceasing to be ritualistic but being converted into experience based ecosystems. Heritage walks, festivals, online interactions, and wellness tourism are some of the aspects that have taken center stage in making tourists satisfied. This has made the faith-based destinations gain economic and cultural worth, which also makes such places competitive within a global tourism industry.

### 3. Important Economic Additions to local Destinations.

The paper emphasizes the fact that hybrid tourism creates high economic impacts in the local destinations by direct, indirect, and indirect impacts. Higher tourist expenditure in accommodation, food, transport and local products helps in revenue collection and generation of employment. The multiplier effect also helps sustain local business, handcrafts and informal sectors and thus, makes the region economically resilient especially in developing economies such as India.

### 4. Commercialization and Sustainability Problems.

Although the benefits are economical, the results indicate that there are serious issues relating to commercialization of sacred spaces and sustainability of tourism activities. The threat of over-commercialization is spiritual authenticity, whereas the more tourists there are, the higher the chances of environmental degradation and infrastructural strain. These issues are further aggravated by the lack of integrated policy frameworks and fair distribution of benefits, which makes the tourism planning sustainable and inclusive.

## CONCLUSION

### 1. Change to Experience-Oriented Tourism.

The paper has concluded that faith-based tourism is no longer a traditional and ritual-focused form of tourism, but is a dynamic and experience-based industry that is being influenced by the shifting expectations of tourists. This change has marked a paradigm shift in which spiritual journeys are gradually being inter-linked with leisure, exploration and consumption of cultures and hence redefining the identity/purpose of pilgrimage destinations.

### 2. The Hybrid Tourists as Economic Growth Accelerators.

The hybrid tourists are emerging as the major economic change agents in the faith-based destinations. They also add value to local economies because of their greater expenditure patterns, increase in length of stay as well as diversified consumption patterns. This has made religious tourism to cease being a peripheral activity but a major part of the regional economic planning and growth campaigns.

### 3. Demand of Long-term and Equitable Policy Frameworks.

The paper points out that even though hybrid tourism has a great deal of economical potential, its success in the long-term is relying on the adoption of environmentally sustainable and inclusive policies. The governments and stakeholders need to concentrate on how to strike the right balance between commercialization and cultural conservation, how to practice environmental friendliness and to ensure that the economic benefits are distributed fairly among the local communities.

### 4. Future Research and Policy Innovation.

Last but not least, the research comes to the conclusion that future research is highly warranted to empirically test the conceptual interrelations revealed in this research especially using quantitative models and primary data. Researchers and policymakers ought to work together in coming up with new frameworks that can incorporate the use of technology, sustainability and community involvement whereby faith based tourism can keep on transforming as an economic activity as well as an enriching cultural experience.

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