

Socioeconomic Implication of Religious Tourism: *A Women's Prospective*

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Abstract

Religious tourism in India has witnessed significant growth over the years, with an increasing number of women participating in such travel experiences. Despite the patriarchal and male-dominated orientation of Indian society, women have been actively engaging in religious tours, both as part of group travel and independently. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable rise in women travelling in small groups or embarking on solo religious journeys.

This study aims to explore the socioeconomic implications of religious tourism from the perspective of Indian women. By analysing personal experiences, beliefs, encountered challenges, and proposed solutions, the research sheds light on the economic and social aspects of women's religious tourism in the Indian context. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered to female tourists who have independently undertaken religious tours. The study employs an empirical approach to provide insights into the changing dynamics of female participation in religious tourism and offers valuable perspectives for policymakers.

The findings reveal significant structural changes taking place in India, particularly concerning the increased participation of women in religious tourism. The study uncovers key insights into the economic and social implications of religious tourism for women, highlighting the challenges they face and their expectations from policymakers. By addressing the previously neglected issues specific to women travellers in previous research, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and experiences of female tourists.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, Female Tourist, Women Group Tourism, Policy Makers, Women Empowerment.

Introduction:

The desire for travel has become a cherished aspiration among Indians, leading to a significant increase in the number of individuals embarking on journeys to diverse destinations. Notably, the participation of women in tourism has been steadily rising, defying societal norms and reinforcing the continued growth of the tourism industry despite prevailing challenges such as security concerns, political unrest, terrorism, and economic fluctuations (Chiang and Jogaratnam, 2006). Female tourists now outnumber their male counterparts in both leisure and business travel, representing a pivotal demographic that significantly shapes demand and marketing strategies (Zhang and Hitchcock, 2017; Khan et al., 2019).

Women's travel preferences are undergoing a transformative shift, with the rapid rise of women's travel groups and solo adventures in recent times. Indian women, in particular, are embracing leisure breaks, wellness getaways, shopping expeditions, and thrilling adventures, signifying a notable transformation within the realm of women's travel. Today's female travellers exude independence and boldness, actively seeking to explore new and authentic experiences beyond their comfort zones. They exhibit a willingness to venture into uncharted territories, experimenting with diverse destinations, activities, and encounters.

Extensive research has delved into various aspects of travel, including independent travel preferences among women. Motivations for women's solo travel have been linked to a desire for personal growth, autonomy, and self-discovery, along with a yearning to forge new connections and step outside their

comfort zones (Butler, 1995; Jordan and Gibson, 2005; Wilson and Little, 2005). However, studies consistently highlight the additional restrictions and limitations faced by women when seeking access to recreational and tourism activities compared to men (Henderson, 1991; Jackson and Henderson, 1995; Wilson and Little, 2005). Women often encounter heightened concerns regarding safety and the potential for harassment or violence when engaging in activities outside their homes (Deem, 1996; Little, 2002; Virden and Walker, 1999; Wilson and Little, 2005).

While previous research has extensively explored the risks and constraints faced by female tourists, specific attention to the religious tourism experiences of women, particularly in India, remains relatively limited. Religious tourism holds immense significance in India, shaping the social and economic fabric of women's lives. Yet, few studies have explored the travel behaviour and experiences of Indian women in this context.

Therefore, this study aims to delve into the religious tourism experiences of Indian women from their unique perspective. By examining their motivations, beliefs, encountered challenges, and suggested solutions, the research seeks to uncover the socioeconomic implications of women's religious tourism within the Indian context. Drawing on empirical data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to female tourists undertaking religious tours independently, this study provides valuable insights into the changing dynamics of female participation in religious tourism. Furthermore, it sheds light on the economic and social aspects of religious tourism, addressing the challenges faced by women travellers and offering recommendations for policymakers.

By filling the gap in previous research and acknowledging the often-overlooked issues specific to women's religious tourism, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and experiences of female tourists. Ultimately, it is a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers in enhancing women's empowerment and fostering inclusive tourism practices.

I have restructured the introduction to provide a more engaging narrative that emphasizes the transformative shift in women's travel preferences and the need for specific research on women's experiences in religious tourism. The revised version aims to captivate readers' attention and highlight the importance of your study within the larger context of women's travel in India.

Literature review

In the 21st century, the trend of women travelling alone, particularly abroad, has been on the rise (Matthews-Sawyer, McCullough, and Myers, 2002). Numerous studies have explored the motivations behind women's independent travel, which often stem from a desire to challenge themselves, assert autonomy, and seek new experiences by stepping outside their comfort zones (Butler, 1995; Jordan and Gibson, 2005; Wilson and Little, 2005). However, research consistently indicates that women face greater restrictions and limitations than men when seeking access to recreational and tourism activities (Henderson, 1991; Jackson and Henderson, 1995; Wilson and Little, 2005). Moreover, women often perceive increased risks and constraints when engaging in activities outside their homes due to concerns about harassment or male violence (Deem, 1996; Little, 2002; Virden and Walker, 1999; Wilson and Little, 2005).

Scholars have examined the specific risks and limitations faced by female tourists, highlighting their vulnerability and susceptibility to various hazards (McNamara and Prideaux, 2010; Kimm, 2012; Yang et al., 2018; Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, and Disegna, 2019). Studies have shown that female tourists are more likely to alter their travel plans if their perception of risk increases (Kozak, Crotts, and Law, 2007). Additionally, women tend to perceive higher levels of risk than men when considering specific destinations (Lepp and Gibson, 2003). Risk perception among female tourists can vary depending on their travel motivations. For example, elated female tourists may be more concerned about personal safety at their accommodations (Khoo-Lattimore, Prayag, and Disegna, 2019). Sexual risks have also been identified as a significant concern for female tourists, particularly in Asian and European destinations, with Asian women being particularly vulnerable (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia, 2018). Media reports of sexual assaults and violence against female travellers

further reinforce awareness of these risks. However, despite the awareness, some women undertake solo adventures in search of empowerment, autonomy, and freedom (Jordan and Gibson, 2005; Wilson and Harris, 2006).

Travel motivations play a crucial role in determining destination choices for tourists (Baloglu and Uysal, 1996). The push and pull theory of motivation, widely accepted in the literature, suggests that individuals travel based on different push and pull factors, selecting destinations accordingly (Ibis and Batman, 2018). However, researchers acknowledge the complexity of human behaviour, making it challenging to pinpoint precise reasons for travel preferences (Khan et al., 2019). Nevertheless, an increasing focus has been placed on understanding the motivations, benefits, and challenges faced by female tourists in the 21st century, whether they travel in groups or alone (Brown and Osman, 2017).

Studies have highlighted the distinctiveness of women's travel motivations compared to those of men (Jennings, 2005; Chiang and Jogaratnam, 2006; Heimtun, 2012; McNamara and Prideaux, 2010; Khoo-Lattimore and Prayag, 2018). For example, Malaysian women have identified the pursuit of fun and new experiences as important motivations for travelling with their female friends (Khoo-Lattimore and Gibson, 2015). The literature suggests that women travel together to avoid the male gaze, foster bonds and socialize, and experience a sense of security and empowerment (Jennings, 2005). Additionally, women's travel motivations are intertwined with their roles as caretakers, seeking opportunities to bond with family members and create lasting memories (Brown and Osman, 2017).

While studies on women's travel motivations have gained significant attention, limited research has focused on the experiences and motivations of Indian women, particularly in the context of religious tourism. India, being a diverse and culturally rich nation, is home to various religious sites that attract a significant number of domestic and international tourists (Dhiman and Gupta, 2019). Religious tourism holds immense significance in the lives of Indian women, influencing their social and economic dynamics. However, the experiences of Indian women undertaking religious tourism remain relatively unexplored in the literature.

Thus, this study seeks to address this research gap by investigating the religious tourism experiences of Indian women from their unique perspective. By examining their motivations, encountered challenges, beliefs, and suggested solutions, this research aims to shed light on the socioeconomic implications of women's religious tourism in India. Empirical data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to female tourists undertaking religious tours independently will provide valuable insights into the changing dynamics of female participation in religious tourism. Additionally, this study will contribute to enhancing women's empowerment and fostering inclusive tourism practices by addressing the challenges faced by women travellers and offering recommendations for policymakers.

By considering the existing literature on women's travel motivations, experiences, and risks, and examining the specific context of religious tourism in India, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and experiences of female tourists. The findings will not only benefit scholars but also inform policymakers in developing strategies that promote women's empowerment and create a more inclusive tourism environment.

Objectives of the study:

The objective of this research is to investigate the motivations, challenges, and potential solutions related to Indian women's engagement in religious tourism. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Explore the motivations driving Indian women to undertake religious tourism, including factors such as personal growth, spiritual fulfilment, family bonding, and empowerment. By understanding these motivations, the research aims to shed light on the underlying reasons that inspire women to embark on religious tours.

2. Identify the challenges faced by Indian women during their participation in religious tourism, encompassing issues such as safety concerns, cultural barriers, societal expectations, and limitations imposed by religious institutions. By recognizing and examining these challenges, the study aims to gain insights into the specific obstacles that Indian women encounter in their religious travel experiences.
3. Propose potential solutions and recommendations to enhance the experiences of Indian women engaging in religious tourism, with a focus on promoting their empowerment, safety, and inclusivity. By offering practical suggestions and strategies, the research aims to contribute to the development of policies and initiatives that address the unique needs and perspectives of Indian women travellers, ensuring their well-being and fostering a more inclusive tourism environment.

Methodology:

This study employed a quantitative research approach to gather data from a sample of 76 female participants out of which 66 were found suitable for analysis. The data collection was conducted using a self-administered online questionnaire distributed via a Google Form. The questionnaire consisted of 19 structured questions designed to explore the motivations, challenges, and experiences of Indian women engaging in religious tourism.

The questionnaire covered various aspects, including demographic information (such as name, age, education, and marital status), travel preferences (such as travelling alone or in a group), perceptions of discrimination, feelings of safety during travel, encountered difficulties, reasons for travelling alone, leisure activities during tours, preferred destinations for group religious tours, factors influencing future trip plans, reasons for the increasing trend of women travelling in groups, attitudes of fellow female travellers, personal changes after returning from religious tours, booking and reservation preferences, and the reactions of other travellers upon learning about the respondents' trips.

The online questionnaire was shared with potential participants through personal contacts, social media platforms, and relevant online communities. Participants were required to provide their consent before completing the questionnaire, ensuring their voluntary participation in the study. The data collection period lasted for two weeks, during which responses were collected and recorded.

The collected data were then analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages. The quantitative analysis allowed for the exploration of patterns and trends in the participants' responses, providing insights into the motivations, challenges, and experiences of Indian women undertaking religious tourism.

It is important to note that this study had certain limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 66 female participants. Therefore, the findings may not be representative of the entire population of Indian women engaging in religious tourism. Additionally, the data collected relied on self-reported responses, which are subject to individual biases and potential recall errors. Despite these limitations, the study aimed to provide valuable insights into the motivations, challenges, and experiences of Indian women involved in religious tourism.

The study strictly adhered to ethical considerations, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality. The research design and data collection process received approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee.

The findings obtained from this study will be presented and discussed in the subsequent sections of this research paper, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, challenges, and experiences of Indian women in religious tourism.

Data Analysis:

The collected data from the questionnaire responses were analysed using descriptive statistics. The analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the motivations, challenges, and experiences of Indian women engaging in religious tourism.

Any incomplete or inconsistent responses were either excluded or appropriately handled to ensure data accuracy. The findings were presented using appropriate data visualization techniques, such as bar charts, pie charts, and tables. Visual representations aided in the clear communication of the results and facilitated the interpretation of the data.

Results

Based on the responses of the 66 female participants, the following results were obtained:

Demographic Profile:

Age: The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 78, with an average age of 36.5 years.

Education: The participants had diverse educational backgrounds, including postgraduate degrees, in engineering, dentistry, and Ph.D.

Marital Status: The participants were both married and unmarried.

Travel Patterns:

Travelling Alone: A majority of the participants (45 out of 66) indicated that they have travelled alone at some point.

Feeling Discriminated: 30 participants reported feeling discriminated against as female tourists, while 36 participants did not feel discriminated against.

Tour Group Characteristics:

Group Size: The tour group sizes varied, with participants mentioning groups ranging from 2 to 20 people.

Future Travel Plans: All participants expressed a willingness to travel alone or in a female tourist group in the future.

Safety Perception: 48 participants felt safe as female tourists during their travels, while 18 participants did not feel safe.

Difficulties Faced: 27 participants reported facing difficulties during their tours, while 39 participants did not face any difficulties.

Reasons for Solo Travel:

Pleasure and Enjoyment: Most participants identified pleasure and enjoyment, along with the freedom from responsibilities, as the primary reasons for travelling alone.

Leisure Time Activities:

Shopping: Shopping was the most preferred leisure activity during solo or group travel, as mentioned by 48 participants.

Reading/Watching TV and Social Media: Other common leisure activities included reading/watching TV and using social media.

Preferred Destination for Religious Tours:

Varied Preferences: Participants mentioned a wide range of destinations, including nature, mountains, specific temples, and holy places like Haridwar, Kedarnath, Rameshwaram, and Varanasi.

Factors Influencing Future Trip Plans:

Tour Group and Destination: The majority of participants considered tour group characteristics and destination features as essential factors in their future trip plans.

Increasing Women's Group Travel:

Reasons: Women's empowerment, education, financial freedom, and relief from household chores were identified as the key factors contributing to the increasing trend of women travelling in groups.

The Attitude of Female Travellers:

Friendly and Caring: The general attitude of other female members during the tour was described as friendly and caring by most participants.

Behavioural Changes after the Tour:

Increased Confidence and Relaxation: Participants reported feeling more confident and relaxed after returning from their religious tours.

Booking and Reservation Practices:

Advance Bookings: The majority of participants preferred to book all their tickets and hotels in advance before the tour begins.

Difficulties Faced Due to Reservation Cancellations:

Limited Difficulties: Only a few participants reported facing difficulties due to prior reservation cancellations, such as searching for new hotels or dealing with transportation issues.

Reactions of Other Travelers:

Encouragement and Delight: Most participants reported positive reactions from other travellers, who encouraged and offered help upon learning about their trips.

These results provide insights into the motivations, experiences, and preferences of Indian women engaging in religious tourism.

Findings and Conclusion:

Based on the analysis of the responses from the 66 female participants, several key findings emerged, shedding light on the motivations, experiences, and challenges faced by Indian women engaging in religious tourism. The conclusion of this research is as follows:

Motivations for Religious Tourism: The study revealed that Indian women engage in religious tourism primarily for personal growth, spiritual fulfilment, and enjoyment of their own time away from responsibilities. The most common reasons cited for traveling alone were pleasure and the lack of interest from other family members. This indicates a desire for individual experiences and a need for self-care.

Experiences and Challenges: Overall, the majority of respondents felt safe during their travels and had positive interactions with other female travellers. However, a significant number reported facing difficulties, such as reservation cancellations and limited facilities. Discrimination based on gender was also acknowledged by some participants, highlighting the need for gender equality and empowerment in the context of religious tourism.

Empowerment and Future Preferences: The research revealed a growing trend of women's empowerment and education contributing to the increase in female group travel. Financial freedom, relief from household chores, and busy schedules were identified as factors influencing women's decisions to travel in groups. The study also indicated that the travel experiences led to positive changes in participants, such as increased confidence and relaxation.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that policymakers and stakeholders in the tourism industry take into account the unique needs and perspectives of Indian women travellers. To enhance their experiences, it is crucial to address safety concerns, promote inclusivity, and provide adequate facilities and services. Initiatives focused on women's empowerment, education, and gender equality should also be encouraged.

The findings reveal significant structural changes taking place in India, particularly concerning the increased participation of women in religious tourism. The study uncovers key insights into the economic and social implications of religious tourism for women, highlighting the challenges they face and their expectations from policymakers.

Overall, this research highlights the importance of recognizing and catering to the specific requirements of Indian women engaged in religious tourism. By understanding their motivations, challenges, and aspirations, steps can be taken to create a more empowering and inclusive environment for female travellers, fostering personal growth, spiritual fulfilment, and overall well-being.

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