

Role of Social Media in the Promotion of Spiritual Tourism in India

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Abstract

The spiritual tourism has gained significant momentum in India and is increasingly attracting tourists from within the country and as well as from abroad. The influence of social media has transformed perception of tourism landscape shifting the focus from leisure seaside trips to spiritual destinations underscoring the social, economic, political, cultural and technological dimensions. According to media reports, dated December 31 2025, 'millions of people, majority youths visited Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vrindavan and other temples across India, seeking divine blessings and lighting diyas rather than enjoying new year eve parties. This shows a significant change of people's mindset from partying to spiritual discourse. Many research studies have shown that rise in social media, especially YouTube & Instagram, have immensely contributed to the upsurge of sacred trips among the masses. Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (2016-17), reports that "India's religious tourism market is projected to reach 441.9 billion by 2032 with a CAGR of 10.2% making the country a rich heritage site for religious destinations and traditions", aligning with the Viksit Bharath vision. In this context, this paper explores the influence of social media on spiritual tourism. This is a qualitative study using secondary data.

Keywords: Spiritual, Tourism, Social Media, Viksit Bharath, Technology, Youth.

Introduction

"To other countries, I may go as a tourist, but to India, I come as a pilgrim." - Martin Luther King, Jr.

The social media has developed with a rocket speed in our country. It has

revolutionized the lives of people and many share their day-to-day activities in social media platforms shaping narratives, fostering engagement and influencing people. This has greatly contributed to the popularity of spiritual tourism in the post covid period. Press Information Bureau reports that

“India’s tourism industry is on a promising trajectory, with the ambitious target of achieving a USD 3 trillion tourism economy by 2047 as part of the Viksit Bharat@2047”. With an easy accessibility of several digital media tools, the content creation & dissemination is now faster and quicker enhancing citizen journalism to a greater extent.

Digital India Mission started in 2015 aims to transform India into digital empowered society and knowledge economy by providing enhanced internet connectivity and improving online infrastructure. This has benefitted many social media content creators and influencers awakening one’s mind towards any issue or event and helps in shaping peoples’ behavior which was evident during Maha Kumbha Mela held at Prayagraj in 2025.

Several studies have noted that FOMO created through social media attracted a greater number of people to take a holy dip in maha kumbha mela. While “social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram attracted global audience, particularly younger generations and played a crucial role in promoting and managing Maha Kumbh Mela 2025” (Aishwarya K R &Dr. Vinay

M2005), a survey by spiritual storytelling platform OMTV in 2023 noted that “80% of Indians aged 18 to 30 consume spiritual content online via podcasts, short videos, motivational clips and over 50% follow spiritual influencers who explain complex ideas through everyday language”.

A report from Uttarakhand Tourism states that there was a record-breaking 35% increase in tourists under the age of 30, many of whom visited Kedarnath alone in 2024. Majority of them shared their experiences through Instagram & vlogs highlighting that the trip was not only religious but also “introspective, therapeutic and symbolic”.

The increase in the social media usage has led to the digital transformation in every social, economic and political aspects of our lives. According to Data report 2026 “500 million people are having social media user identities, out of which 35.6 percent were female & 64.4 percent were male, equating to the 34.1 percent of total population in October 2025. There were 1.03 billion internet users in India and the internet penetration rate stood at 70.0 percent of the total population at the end of the 2025”.

Problem Statement

India is a land of diversity possessing rich culture & heritage. The social media has impacted people especially younger generations to explore spiritual places rather than travelling towards leisure sea shore destinations. This phenomenal change in tourism landscape can be attributed to several factors like building of Ram temple in Ayodhya, Maha Kumbh Mela held at Prayagraj and tourists capturing their experiences on their social media platforms. Although, platforms like Instagram and YouTube showcase spiritual destinations, there is no significant linkage to understand how social media influence tourism in lesser-known spiritual sites enabling sustainable tourism growth. There is also lack of empirical evidence regarding the impact of user-generated content on tourists visit to spiritual destinations. Hence, this paper attempts to identify the influence of social media in the promotion of spiritual tourism in the post covid period.

Objectives

To analyses the usage of social media

To study young minds interest in spiritual tourism

To assess the influence of digital tools in promoting spiritual tourism

Research Gap

Social media has emerged as a transformative force in promoting spiritual tourism across India, with platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Facebook enabling pilgrimage destinations to reach global audiences through user-generated content, influencer-led narratives, reels, and live-streamed rituals. The visual and viral nature of content has amplified iconic sites, repositioning them not merely as centres of religious devotion but as aspirational travel destinations for a digitally connected demographic. Despite this growing phenomenon, the academic literature examining the intersection of social media and spiritual tourism in India remains geographically narrow since several empirical studies have explored the role of social media in shaping tourist perception towards select spiritual destinations such as Ayodhya, Prayagraj, Tirupati, Varanasi etc. narrowing down the scope of inquiry to a limited number of destinations, leaving a vast landscape of India's diverse spiritual geography. Further, the survey sample sizes employed are notably small, raising questions about the generalizability of

findings across the broader pilgrim and spiritual tourist population. These gaps collectively point to the need for more expansive, methodologically robust research that captures the full breadth of social media's influence on spiritual tourism behavior in India. The empirical validation of this paper is limited by the use of secondary data. However, an attempt has been made to identify gaps in the existing literature and draw broad inferences about the role of social media in promoting spiritual tourism across India

Review of Literature

Several studies have noted that India's young generation like Gen Z and Millennials, uses social media extensively, making India the most happening country in the world for social media companies and driving growth in digital advertisement (Muralidhar Reddy2021). India is an important mobile centric market with “72% of Indian population accessing news through smartphones and 35% via computers”. News aggregator platforms and apps are valued for convenience and provide news quickly (Anjana Krishnan 2022). Social media platforms such as YouTube (53%) and WhatsApp (51%) are used for accessing the

news which shows that social media has become a powerful platform for news consumption among Indians (Digital News Report 2022).

K M Shrivastava (2013) emphasizes that social media is an extension of word of mouth in cyberspace and has expanded new dimensions to ‘engagement’ where consumers/citizens are expressing themselves giving rise to C2C model & ‘SOLOMO’ (Social, Local & Mobile). Author observes that the combination of SOLOMO engages consumers/ citizens to act upon simplifying their user experience to ensure that messages capture the right person at the right time and in the right place.

Saiganesh Venkatesh M S Priyanka and Rohan Hunnaragi (2024) observed that Instagram and YouTube are the preferred social media platforms for engagement of tourist visiting Ayodhya and its historical significance in shaping decisions. Authors notes that Indian Government has adopted various schemes and initiatives to create awareness and promote spiritual tourism.

Aishwarya K R & Dr. Vinay M (2005) notes that, “social media has played a crucial role in promoting and managing Maha Kumbh Mela 2025through live streaming, influencer

collaborations and interactive content enabling real-time information sharing for better crowd management”. It has contributed in preserving the cultural and spiritual essence of the event, fostering a virtual community of devotees, ‘engaging global audience particularly younger generation’.

Dinesh Dhankhar, Gaurav Singh and Yogesh Dahiya (2026) examined and observed that the “destination image of digital platforms act as an important mediator between social media use and travel intention” with evidences from Haridwar as a spiritual tourism destination.

Norman (2012) has identified five types in spiritual tourism. They are-

“Spiritual Tourism as Healing’ (visiting ashrams, Yoga etc.), Spiritual Tourism as Experiment (backpackers who ventures out to spiritual places whenever they feel like), Spiritual Tourism as Quest (self-discovery, knowledge gaining), Spiritual Tourism as Retreat (seeking renewal to escape from every day busy life, health spas, eco-tourism) and Spiritual Tourism as Collective (visiting religious places because others have done it)”.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in the systematic analysis of secondary data. Secondary data has been sourced from a range of published academic journals, peer-reviewed articles, government tourism reports, industry publications, podcasts, videos and credible online databases pertaining to social media and spiritual tourism in India. The use of secondary data is particularly well-suited to the objectives of this study to identify the trends, and thematic consistencies across a wide body of literature that would be difficult to replicate through primary data collection alone.

Benefits and Limitations of Secondary Data

This study is based on secondary data and uses a qualitative approach to understand the topic better. Using secondary data is a suitable choice for this study for several reasons. First, it helps in bringing together knowledge from a large number of existing studies, making it easier to identify common patterns and findings that would be hard to gather through a fresh survey or fieldwork. Second, secondary data often covers longer time periods and larger groups of people, which adds more depth and context to the

analysis than a single survey can provide.

Third, since this study aims to understand the broader role of social media in promoting spiritual tourism across India, secondary sources are better suited as they cover a wide variety of destinations & types of tourists, which a primary study, limited by time, location, and the number of respondents, may not be able to achieve. All the data gathered has been carefully reviewed, organized, and analyzed to draw conclusions about how social media platforms influence tourist interest, destination awareness and visitor numbers at major spiritual sites in India.

The empirical validation is limited in the proposed study since methodology used is secondary data. However, an attempt has been made to identify gaps in the existing literature and draw broad inferences about the role of social media in promoting spiritual tourism across India.

Findings and Discussions

PART A

Social Media Sphere

- Around 5.22 billion people worldwide use internet out of which 94.57% are active on at least one social network platform in 2025

- 971.50 million people in India use the internet and 62.07% actively engage with social media platforms. Social media usage in India has increased by 5.23% from 2024 to early 2025.
- “500 million people in India are having social media user identities, out of which 35.6 percent were female & 64.4 percent were male, equating to the 34.1 percent of total population in October 2025, which shows that male access social media more than females!
- There were 1.03 billion internet users in India and the internet penetration rate stood at 70.0 percent of the total population at the end of the 2025”. (Source-Data report 2026)
- Average social media user in our country visits approximately 6.7 different platforms each month and spends about 2 hours and 20 minutes on them daily (source-GWI Report 2025).
- **Social Media Users in India- Age Wise:**
 - 18-24 years- 24.4% male and 10.7% female

- 25-34 years -26.1% males and 10.6% female
- 35-44 years-12% male and 4.4% female
- 45-54 years- 4.8% male and 2% female
- 55-64 years- 2.1% male and 1% female
- 65+ 1.4% male and 0.6% female

This shows that majority of the social media users in our country are in the age of 25-34 years and interestingly the percentage of social media users decreases as the age increases!

(Source-

<https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-statistics-india/>)

PART B

Tourism in India: Key Statistics

India's tourism sector has surpassed pre-pandemic levels in the year 2024-2025

- International Tourists: 20.57 million visited in 2024, a 14.82% increase over 2019.
- Major Hub for Foreign tourist: Maharashtra State (3.71 million).
- Peak Season: December month for international arrivals.
- Arrival of NRI's: 10.62 million tourists visited India in 2024 with an 13.22% increase over 2023

- Domestic Tourists: 2,948.19 million visits in 2024, growing by 17.51% from 2023.
- Top Domestic Destinations (2024): Uttar Pradesh topped (646.8 million) followed by Tamil Nadu (306.8 million) and Karnataka (304.6 million).
- Purpose of Visit: Leisure, holiday and recreation are primary drivers, with a 4.1% share of arrivals for medical purposes as of early 2025
- Economic Impact: Contributed ₹15.73 lakh crore (5.22%) to India's GDP in 2023-24.
- Employment: Generated 36.90 million direct jobs and 47.72 million indirect jobs

[Source-India Tourism Data Compendium 2025, Ministry of Tourism]

PART C

Spiritual Tourism in India

Spiritual tourism in India has evolved as major drivers in the economic growth, generating employment, infrastructure facilities, tourism related various schemes, increase in domestic travels to holy places, travel agencies offering attractive packages and improvement in accommodations. Spiritual tourism constitutes 60% of tourism

in India. The historical significance of the place attracts tourists from all over the country and from world.

Spiritual tourism offers two purpose— ‘Pilgrimage and Education’. Tourists visit holy places as pilgrims to seek the divine blessings. Tourists visit various spiritual destinations to attend religious discourses, learn religious traditions, experience divine presence through yoga & meditation and participate in workshops, seminars related to spirituality and religion. (Source- IBEF- Spiritual Tourism in India)

Post consecration of Ayodhya Ram temple, an average of 1.5 lakh to 2 lakh tourists visits Ayodhya daily. Around 660 million visited Maha Kumbh Mela in 2025 which lasted for 45 days and majority of tourists also visited Ayodhya & Varanasi during Kumbh mela. Many travel agencies are offering suitable package tours to religious places. In 2022, 1,433 million Indian tourists travelled to pilgrimage places as compared to 1.05 million in the year 2021 and USD 16,380 million was earned in 2022 as compared to USD 8,600 million earned from religious tourism in 2021 (Ministry of Tourism).

The Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD), launched

by Ministry of Tourism which focuses on the “integrated development of identified pilgrimage and heritage sites across India and will continue to play a crucial role in enhancing infrastructure at major pilgrimage sites and heritage cities, ensuring world-class amenities and accessibility for visitors. By strengthening spiritual tourism, the government aims to position India as a global cultural hub while driving economic growth and employment generation” [Source – PIB dated 04/02/2025].

Online ticket booking, virtual pooja & darshan, online bookings for special pujas, online accommodation and transport bookings have contributed immensely. The CBRE report has identified Amritsar, Ajmer, Varanasi, Ayodhya and Puri as key cities which are witnessing spiritual tourism boom. The average occupancy of the hotels in Puri has increased to 90% (post covid period) from 70% in the pre-pandemic period (Al Jazeera Report)

Spiritual Tourism Projections

It is estimated that more than one hundred million people will be employed driven by India’s Spiritual Tourism alone in both permanent& temporary jobs which is anticipated to be worth around US\$ 59 billion

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by 2028. (Source- IBEF-Spiritual Tourism in India)

“India’s religious tourism market is projected to reach 441.9 billion by 2032 with a CAGR of 10.2%making the country a rich heritage site for religious destinations and traditions”, aligning with the Viksit Bharath vision. [Source-Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (2016-17)].

For financial year 2025-2026 the Ministry of Finance allocated ₹2,541 Crore for tourism (including Swadesh Darshan 2.0 at ₹793 Crore) [Source – PIB dated 04/02/2025].

PART D

Spiritual Tourism, Youth and social media:

India's Gen Z is reshaping spirituality in fascinating ways, blending ancient traditions with digital tools. They are “Reinventing, Reimagining and Reclaiming faith”. Smartphones in hand, headphones pulsing with ancient chants remixed into lo-fi beats the nation's youngest adults are forging a spirituality that's deeply personal, intuitively guided, tech-savvy and emotionally alive. (source-spiritual app Dharmik vibes) “53% of Gen Z Indians believe religion is important and use apps, music, and social media for their spiritual engagement” (YouGov-Mint Survey 2023).

According to media reports, ‘millions of people, majority youths visited Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vrindavan and other religious places across India, seeking divine blessings, lighting diyas& documenting their visit on social media rather than enjoying new year eve parties on December 31st 2025.

An increased number of youth tourists & many solo were seen during Maha Kumbh Mela in 2025. These young tourists documented their holy dip experiences in social media which created FOMO attracting thousands of people to visit Kumbh mela.

Several studies have found out that tourists visit social media pages to check for pre visit details such as accommodation, food, transport, temple timings and darshan experiences. Social media influencers connect with people through their personal narratives and foster engagement influencing people to visit the holy place at least once in their lifetime. The search for destinations with or around religious places in tier-2 and tier-3 cities has increased to 97% in the last two years. Searches for Ayodhya grew by 585 percent, Ujjain by 359 percent and Badrinath by 343 percent in 2023 as compared to 2022. (Source: MakeMyTrip Annual travel Trends report 2023-2024)

Varanasi (India) is ranked second with the score of 78 in the top destination places in the world with Kyoto (Japan, score 100) as first and Vatican City ranks third (Score 70). Varanasi dominates with the highest online search volume with nearly 2.8 million searches. (India TV, April 03 2025)

Conclusion

Spiritual Tourism is booming now in our country and social media platforms are engaging and influencing tourists towards spiritual destination. Several studies have shown that digital tools are connecting ‘Sacred into Spotlight’ impacting people through compelling story telling and captivating visuals and thereby creating FOMO. The stakeholders are promoting Spiritual tourism and the relationship between cultural heritage, holy places & religious festivals are deeply inter- connected contributing to the social, economic and political aspects of the nation. Today, the youngsters are not only exploring spiritual places but also documenting them in their social media fostering narratives rooted with emotions. This paper concludes that social media is widely used in the promotion of spiritual tourism in India.

Recommendations& Future Scope of

Study: While this study has provided useful insights into the role of social media in promoting spiritual tourism in India, it has certain limitations that open the door for further research. The following recommendations and future scope are suggested:

Since this study has relied entirely on secondary data, future studies can consider collecting primary data from tourists, pilgrims and other stakeholders through surveys and interviews. This will help in obtaining firsthand evidence and stronger empirical support for the findings.

Future research can focus on specific spiritual destinations involving larger number of respondents for the study, which will make the findings more accurate and present the actual ground situation.

There is also considerable scope for research on the economic impact of spiritual tourism. Future studies can explore how the growth of spiritual tourism contributes to the economy of states, increases revenue for travel agencies and creates income opportunities for social media influencers who actively promote such destinations.

Dedicated research can also be undertaken to study the specific roles played by travel agencies and social media influencers in shaping and promoting spiritual tourism in India, as both these groups have emerged as key drivers of tourist interest and destination awareness in recent years.

As Jeanne W. Ross says, - “Clearly, the thing that’s transforming is not the technology, it’s the technology that is transforming you.”

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