The Study on Religion and Spirituality in Contemporary Travel: Spiritual Tourism in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Spiritual Tourism is a journey to find the purpose and meaning of your life. It boosts your physical, mental and emotional strength. It develops, maintains, and enhances your body, mind and spirit. This research aims to provide what type of market that help to promote spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka under the objectives, to identify the potentials for spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka, and also to study about public and private sector involvement and the development and the current situation. This is written in the context of a strategic question: “What type of stage that hold the Spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka?” A narrative approach is taken to cover an area of Sri Lankan spiritual tourism potentials and market. However, Sri Lanka had huge potential to develop sustainable tourism through spiritual tourism at present. The researcher used deskwork research methods in collecting data to achieve the research objectives. As the Findings that concluded, Sri Lanka is a huge potential to develop and market spiritual tourism through Buddhism. Apart from that, Sri Lanka as a state which needs marketing and promotion campaigns to attract more tourists while developing the spiritual tourism product at high level.

Keywords: Spiritual Tourism, Market, Potentials, Develop, Promote.

Introduction

The outline of this research study is mainly covered the are of spiritual tourism and its related areas. There is a significant increase in the arrival of up market tourists to Sri Lanka benefiting the country not only in terms of financial returns, but also by the values they represent. Among these types of tourism, the spiritual tourism is the most significant thing.

Tourism and pilgrimage have been said to be closely related because of the leisure activities that expected by tourists. Apart from that, the relationship between tourists and the religions and religious contexts they visit has been neglected.

The question of “Why tourists travel to places of religious” that is significance and how they conceive of their travels are important questions to both the study of tourism and of religion. This research particularly concerned with those tourists who engage in religious practice (Spirituality) or have some form of spiritual experience in a religious context.
Tourism Industry and Spiritual Tourism

Nowadays the business volume of tourism industry equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) points out by comparing the statistics. Tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the modern world. When consider the Modern tourism, as UNWTO highlights, it is closely linked to development and encompasses a growing number of new destinations, and it is a key driver for socio-economic progress. UNWTO says that developing countries in particular stand to benefit from sustainable tourism in the modern world.

According to 2017 UNWTO statistics, international tourist arrivals grew by 7% to 1,323 million and generated US$ 1.6 trillion in foreign exchange earnings from tourism. UNWTO forecasts a growth in international tourist arrivals of between 4% and 5% last year and, by 2030, the arrivals will reach 1.8 billion. How this fast-growing industry could redesign itself to adapt to the rising ageing population across the globe, in terms of spiritual and cultural tourism is interesting to expound. As a nation sustained by four great faiths of the world and replete with a dynamic heritage, Sri Lanka’s potential to capitalize on spiritual and cultural tourism is unlimited. The World Population Prospects: the 2017 research data that the number of older persons 60 years or over is expected to more than double by 2050 and more than triple by 2100, rising from 962 million globally in 2017 to 2.1 billion in 2050 and 3.1 billion in 2100. According to the UN statistics on ageing in year 2017, there were an estimated 962 million people aged 60 or over in the world, comprising 13% of the global population. The population aged 60 or above is growing at the rate of about 3% per year. Currently, Europe has the greatest percentage of population aged 60 or over which is 25%. Globally, the 60 plus age group is growing faster than all younger age groups. Currently, tourism industry is very famous among senior citizens in the world so that group named blooming group of the industry (SLTDA, 2017).

Spiritual tourism is one of the cultural tourism types and that is on the rise, as people are increasingly looking forward to develop their own spiritual life and to discover that (Spirituality) of others. In year 2007, spiritual tourism was studied by the UNWTO as the most rapidly growing tourism type, although it cannot be easily framed out. Especially spiritual tourism is based on a variety of motivations, coming from traditional religious tourism to alternative medicine to forms of deep immersion in nature. However, Spiritual tourism is defined as an act of travelling domestically or international to visit spiritual places, doing spiritual activities and visit natural environments for spiritual reasons to fulfil the need for being grateful to almighty, forgiveness, and inner peace (Attygalle, 2018).

As a developed country, Europe with the largest ageing population appears to be an ideal target market to promote Sri Lanka’s cultural and spiritual tourism at high level. With the West seeking more and more spiritual outlets, our UNECO World Heritage sites and diverse Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Islamic religious sites, provide ‘year-round opportunities for a diverse range of visitor experience and activities
without the need to contrive attractions’ as the Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan (SLTSP) 2017-2020 expects. Promotion of spiritual and cultural tourism is also aligned with the SLTSP’s vision for the country to be recognized as ‘the world’s finest island for memorable, authentic and diverse experiences by 2025’. So, Sri Lanka has many more potentials and markets to blooming tourism industry without any doubt.

**Spiritual Tourism in Sri Lanka**

Spiritual tourism involves people who are wish to seeking inner peace during their leisure time and gaining spiritual development within. In Sri Lanka, Meditation, yoga and pilgrimage tours can use for spiritual tourism. There are about 20 meditation centers identified by Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and also promote them by Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB), situated outside Colombo which can provide many more opportunities for the travelers who are on an expedition to see the reality of life and the spirituality. As a multi ethnic nation Sri Lanka had huge potentials such as Buddhism and Hinduism too. And also, with culture to promote spiritual tourism as well.

In year 2017, 0.01% tourist arrivals for religious and the other category ranked 0.02%. By the way this spiritual tourism market’s people travel out of their country every year seeking spiritual development, inner peace, happiness or tranquility. They go to various locations across the world and engage themselves in yoga, meditation and participate in discourses (SLTDA, 2017).

When explore the elaborate interpretations and industrial information from tourism Leaders, they define their valuable discretions and give them to industry in practically.

“Be it wellness, mindfulness, meditation Asia has it all and particularly, Sri Lanka as a one-stop shop for diverse cultural and spiritual tourism products. The popularity of cultural tourism has increased faster than most other tourism products, given the breakdown of values and human relationships in the west. In this setting, more and more western tourists, particularly the mature ones are seeking spiritual pleasures of Asia,” that said by Former Managing Director of Sri Lankan Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) Mr. Sutheash Balasubramaniam in year 2018 at a conference. He said that ‘despite the accumulated wealth and fame in the case of western celebrities, the spiritual vacuum in which most of them live propel them to seek the ‘Healing properties of Asia’. “With age, comes more maturity and the western tourists with ample leisure and wealth are looking for tourist attractions which are cultural and wellness bound unlike the younger segment which is looking out for adventure tourism,” he also added. Moreover, he said that “We need a more solidified effort to conserve our popular cultural and religious sites and, at the same time, to promote lesser known religious and cultural sites.” According to him, Sri Lanka is rich with resources to uplift tourism industry with spiritual tourism and also, we had source markets to promote spiritual tourism (2018).

The potential to develop spiritual and cultural tourism which comes within the purview of ‘Supplementary Sources of Tourism’ is enormous for the country, that said by the Ven. (Prof) Wijithapura Wimalaratana Thera, Head of the Department of Economics at the University.
of Colombo. “Although more attention has been given to ‘mainstream’ tourism products, including entertainment and leisure, little attention is still paid by our industry to focus on cultural and spiritual tourism, which is now sought by more than 300 million people across the globe, largely the more mature population.” With no professional or personal commitments in their retirement and with sufficient savings, the western tourists are seeking leisure outlets of a different nature, predominantly, spiritual and cultural centric ones, observed the Ven. Prof. Wimalaratana Thera, who attributes this trend to the free flow of information that spurs curiosity and the need for mental solace. In the modern world, People give high values to the spirituality so that is the way to refresh the tourism by giving high priority to develop spiritual tourism with the host community.

Buddhism has always promoted peaceful co-existence, democracy, religious freedom and harmony among all communities and this has a great appeal to the educated and open-minded non-Buddhists across the world to explore the Buddhist culture here at home. The Buddhist culture, which is closely interconnect with our indigenous medicine tradition too. It can be exploited to attract the elderly tourists. It is better way to motivate senior citizens to overseas the rial life. Rehabilitating the abandoned and rural estates of the country to establish meditation retreats with amenities and encouraging community tourism which can generate not only employment opportunities but also foster long lasting bonds and cross-cultural dialogue are mooted by the Thera as the way forward. That also proofed, Sri Lanka is one of the grate destination to do spiritual tours absolutely (Lin, 2019).

“The industry needs to be prepared for this social reality of the growing ageing population and cater to fill the gap of English language proficiency and other skills required, specially by the youth pursuing unconventional careers such as tour guiding,” he also added. With the West seeking more and more spiritual outlets, our UNECO World Heritage sites and diverse Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Islamic religious sites, provide ‘year-round opportunities for a diverse range of visitor experience.

Spiritual Tourism is an important part of Sri Lanka’s tourism industry and Sri Lanka is a country with many places of worship and religious monuments. Buddhist meditation and techniques are the most important parts of spiritual tourism. By spiritual tourism can get acquainted with Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka. Mr. Vipula Wanigasekera who was the former CEO of Sri Lanka Convention Bureau researched about spiritual tourism moreover. According to him, what has attracted the visitors to take part in the meditative session is simply the following message: In life, one way or another, everyone goes through spells of suffering. However, suffering is one aspect in life that ignites a self-inquiry to go into a search for freedom. The realization of the freedom is not knowledge. The intellect cannot grasp this. This discourse will show you that freedom is within you. You only need to discover that which you had simply overlooked throughout your life. ‘Truth is simple’. ‘And it is too simple, that most people fail to see the obvious’.

He was spearheading the promotion of spiritual tourism not only by publishing the book ‘Pointers to Enlightenment’ and making it available to tourists visiting Sri Lanka, but also conducting meditation
programs for tourist groups by practically. He has been into spiritual studies for many years and the book was the result of his long years of research work. Through that book, he brings out the Pointers to those who seek 'freedom from suffering'.

When he says suffering, it encompasses worry, anxiety, pain, anger, hatred, depression and stress. It is a practical guide. There are no aspects in this book to make readers believe in anything in particular. What is written is a different but pragmatic way of looking at life. The number of visitors travelling out of their home country seeking some kind of spiritual achievement is over 40 million a year. In fact, UNWTO had two conferences in the past four years on spiritual tourism to ascertain the real strength of spiritual tourism which revealed that the number was growing every year. The modern world is heaping people with so much suffering despite technological and other sophisticated advancement. These people become mentally stressed and are compelled to go to places that offer various retreats. Sri Lanka is an ideal location and we are yet to obtain the full benefits of this sector (Fernandopulle, 2015).

The book of 'Pointers to Enlightenment' that was enabled to offer this philosophy which our country has preserved for over 2,500 years. There was no looking back since then and he personally believe that this will eventually become the biggest attraction for tourists. He did this single handed and constrained by time. Many tour operators want to include meditation in their programs. He didn’t want to elaborate much on this as this is not a business for him. To put it modestly, over 1,300 tourists that have taken part in meditation sessions for the first 11 months of the year 2018 in batches in various locations.

There has been an unprecedented growth since he launched this and he will hand it over to a few who can conduct this in a particular fashion that suits tourists. That is the key. For instance, it cannot be presented in the way it is done for local Buddhists. First it is a discourse followed by guided meditation and then ending with questions and answers. One hour is the optimum time for the audience to grasp the message he conveys with an exercise that could be continued in their own home country after they return. All we need is a quiet place and some cushions to sit and some chairs for elders. There are two parts of his programs. Initially it is the Tranquility part which helps the audience to settle down. This is known as Samatha. Then move on to Insights with some practical guidance through guided meditation (Vidharshana) that enables a kind of a shift within the participants provided they are sincere in their search for freedom. The Q and A session also helps to clarify matters at the end of the session. It is heartening to see their responses; some reach him after they return to their countries. Actually, he does that program in a correct way to promote spiritual tourism in Sr Lanka at high level (Sri Lanka Miracle, 2015).

Mr. M.S.M. Aslam said that the concept of spiritual tourism is flourishing rapidly in Sri Lanka as there is a huge demand for this concept in the world who is a Senior Lecturer of the Department of Tourism Management of Sabaragamuwa University. And also, he said that away from routine tourism based on sun, sand and sea, spiritual tourism is also coming up in Sri Lanka. There is a growing trend among foreigners specially from the Middle Eastern countries to visit Sri Lanka seeking inner peace during their vacation and to gain spiritual
development specially through meditation and pilgrimage tours. “A considerable number of Muslim tourists visit Sri Lanka to learn Buddhism as they believe that Sri Lanka is the only place where they can learn pure Buddhism,” Mr. Aslam also said. He also said that a large number of meditations centers have already been set up in Sri Lanka to meet this growing demand for spiritual tourism. The government is also developing infrastructure facilities for the improvement of the tourism industry.

Mr. Kishu Gomes, the former Chairman of Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau who expressed his thoughts on the visit of Marking one month since the Easter Terror Attacks, ‘‘Being a Buddhist country with Buddhism embedded into predominant culture, a large delegation of Thai devotees led by chief prelate Ven. Phra Bhawana khemakum maha thero, led by several other Buddhist monks in the delegation, the visit is very timely, to send positive messages to the rest of the world, with regard to the prevailing security situation in the country. Buddhist Tourism, for us, is a new segment that has grown over the past few years. Not just within the region, but across the entire world with a significant number of tourists from the western world visiting the country, to study Buddhist Philosophy and Meditation, etc.’’ The group took part in an auspicious ceremony to donate a Buddhist statue to the Thai Viharaya in Mabima in Kelaniya. That can give a massage of the Buddhism and Spirituality to the world. So, Sri Lanka is an ideal landmark for Spiritual tourism.

Spiritual tourism is an important component of a Sri Lankan tourism industry as Sri Lanka is a land of spirituality end owned with many places of worships, pilgrim centres and religious monuments etc. Buddhist meditation system and techniques are more vital parts of the spiritual tourism with the help of well skilled and knowledge of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. Meditation is a means of channeling one’s inner-self. Buddhist mediation practices are systems that energize and create focus, clearness, enthusiastic energy, and a quiet observing of the genuine idea of things. By engaging with a particular meditation practice people learn the patterns and habits of their mind, and the practice offers a means to cultivate new, more positive ways of being (Samaratunga, 2015).

Public and Private sector involvement

Public Sector

The government is developing infrastructure facilities for the improvement of the tourism industry. Under the Tourist Strategic Plan 2017-2020, they provide facilities for the development of Spiritual tourism. They highlighted multi nations, Cultures and especially religious sites to promote spiritual tourism worldwide. There are about 20 meditation centres identified by Sri Lanka Tourism, situated outside Colombo, which can provide opportunity for the travelers who are on an expedition to see the reality of life. Such as Ridee Vihara, Rockhill Hermitage, Kanduboda Meditation Center, Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Centre, Paramita International Meditation Center, Sri Subodharama international Meditation Center, Dhamma Kuta, Sambudu Maga Hanthana International Centre, Amawathura Meditation Center, Arankele Forest Monastery, Dekanduwala Meditation Centre, Sanatha Suwaya, Dewanam-piyathissa International Samatha-vipassana
Meditation Center (DISVMC), Pagoda Meditation Center, Lanka Vipasanna International Meditation Center and Nisala International Meditation Center too (SLTPB, 2019).


Private Sector

Travel Agents who Engaged in Buddhist Tour Trail do the grate service in Sri Lanka. The agents identified by Sri Lanka Tourism and give an approval to make their business with Standard brand and security. Such as Aitken spence Travels, Jagath Tours and Travels, Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy, Jetwing Travels, Let’s see Asia (Wonder of Miracles), Royal Holidays, Sunbird Lanka Tours and Unique Paradise Travels too. So private sector also involved with spiritual tourism at present (SLTPB, 2019).

How to develop spiritual tourism

Tourism development is considered an important tool in promoting economic growth, alleviating poverty, and advancing spirituality development. Mr. Vipula Wanigasekera, former Sri Lankan diplomat and former CEO of Sri Lanka Convention Bureau who has done an extensive research in this area prior to the launch of his book ‘Pointers to Enlightenment’ and since then he has conducted over 60 meditative sessions for tourist groups. He would share his experience with the industry members as to the international scenario in Spiritual Tourism and suggest ways and means of offering this to tourist groups from Sri Lanka as an option in tour itineraries with a view to developing this to spiritual tour packages in the future (Sri Lanka miracle, 2015).

Million people travel out of their country every year seeking spiritual development, inner peace, happiness or tranquility. They go to various locations across the world and engage themselves in yoga, meditation and participate in discourses in Sri Lanka. According to him, what has attracted the
visitors to take part in the meditative session is simply the following message: In life, one way or another, everyone goes through spells of suffering. However, suffering is one aspect in life that ignites a self-inquiry to go into a search for freedom. The realization of the freedom is not knowledge. The intellect cannot grasp this. This discourse will show you that freedom is within you. You only need to discover that which you had simply overlooked throughout your life. ‘Truth is simple’. ‘And it is too simple, that most people fail to see the obvious’. Those ways can develop spiritual tourism always. Sri Lanka had potentials to uplift spiritual market. Now have to do promotion and develop the infrastructures to attract tourist. For that, Sri Lanka should have the government support, long term plans and political stability. As a result of that, we can embrace Sri Lanka as a brand of spiritual tourism all around the world (Chinthaka & Senarathna, 2012).

Conclusion

This research study reviews the relationship between tourism and spirituality and explain how tourism development could contribute to spirituality development goals. And also, this provide an analysis of the relationship between tourism and spirituality development. It explores definitions and constructs of spirituality and reviews experiences and practices in relation to spiritual resources. However, by looking at a brief identification of spiritual tourism in Sri Lanka, can learned that there is a high agreement today upon the spirituality definition. In order to reach a sustainable development within tourism, have to consider about the importance of tourism and spirituality. As components of life success, we can promote spiritual tourism regarding the development of spirituality through tourism activities. Finally, can suggests that there is an ability to develop spiritual tourism effectively in Sri Lanka which can strongly and positively influence spiritual principles and practices.

References