

A Study on Religious Tourism-Potential and Possibilities with reference to Shirdi A place of Religious Tourism

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Abstract

India is a place of many religions. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism are followed in majority. Indians celebrate numerous festivals such as Diwali, Holi, Id, Christmas etc. throughout the year. With immense faith in their hearts people scale all geographical terrains to seek god's blessings reach the places of religious tourism, then be it the high mountains or valleys they reach the places with great faith in their heart only with a wish that they seek blessings of the god. People do not mind standing in long queues to just get a glimpse of the deity residing there. With changing times these religious places have become a site for tourism, rather than a mere pilgrimage. Worshipers want safe and comfortable journey. They want security of food, shelter and health as an important part of their pilgrimage and thus to cater to their needs and demands, business houses, individuals, agencies, and even the government have started playing an important role in providing services to the pilgrims, creating a huge industry for Religious tourism.

Religious tourism industry in India is yet to be explored to its full potential. This sector shall give a sea of opportunities to new business startups and provide a large number of employment in a country. Religious tourism shall not only be a blessing to business concerns, but would help to develop the local market of the area. Religious tourism would lead to revenue generation and rise in standard of living for the locals. It shall also influx development of the infrastructure of the area, such as road and rail connectivity, electricity, drinking water etc. Hence, the primary objective to present the paper is to study the possibilities and potential in Religious tourism.

KEYWORDS: - Tourism, Religious Tourism, Business

Introduction

According to World Tourism Organization, an estimated 300 to 330 million pilgrims visit the world's key sites every year. India being one of most religiously overwhelmed country, religious tourism plays a very important role in its development.

Religious Tourism is travelling to a religions place with not only an intention of seeking blessings from the god but also enjoy the pleasure of travelling, this would include art, culture, traditions and architecture.¹

¹Yes Bank-FICCI "Diverse Beliefs: Tourism of Faith"

Based upon the nature of the product, intensity and region of travel, Religious Tourism is divided into the following major categories:

- Pilgrimages
- Missionary travel
- Leisure vacations
- Faith-based cruising
- Crusades, conventions and rallies
- Retreats
- Monastery visits and guest-stays
- Faith-based camps
- Religious tourist attractions

Shirdi, a town in Maharashtra, India, is one of the famous religious sites for visit from almost 19th century. Lakhs and lakhs of people visit Shirdi every day. The place has become a commercial complex mixed with pilgrimage and business. Shirdi is renowned for Sai Baba Temple, which is one of the richest temples in India. Not only people from Maharashtra visit Shirdi, but devotees from other states and even foreigners visit Shirdi. The temple is run by various trusts working for the temple, Sri Saibaba Sansthan is one of the major trust. These trusts provide free or very low cost accommodation, meals and other services to devotees visiting the temple. The number of devotees visiting Shirdi has given Shirdi a special status as religious tourism. Not only the Government of Maharashtra, but Government of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka Government are playing important role for the growth and development of this temple. In order to create convenience in travelling and visiting the god they are trying their best to improve the local services like lodging, stay, food and other amenities to the devotees. Not only the government agencies but also private agencies are helping for the growth and development of Shirdi as a place of religious tourism

Objectives

The primary objectives of the research paper are:

- To find out Possibilities and Potential of Religious Tourism in Shirdi
- To find out the experience of Pilgrims towards Religious Tourism in Shirdi
- To find the satisfaction level of the visitors visiting Shirdi

Literature Review

Aurthor Stausberg Micheal in his book **Religion and Tourism-Crossroads, destination and encounters** has express about the dynamic interaction between religion and tourism in this modern world? In his book is has sought to answer questions like What is the relationship between tourism and pilgrimage. The author urges that tourism should be a major focus fo research within religions studies.

The Times New Network on October 1, 2006 by Raja Awasthi&RanjeniA Singh in their article **Thank God! Religious tourism grows at 25% per annum** have reported how religious tourism is increasing in India in the past few years the religious tourism has grown by 25% for which the credit goes to god! for whom the devotees visit the religious places.

The Economic Times Bureau on October 1, 2012 – The article-**Need to re-polish policy to utilize hidden potential of India's religious tourism potential**'In this article the author Debasis Sarkar expresses opinions about how policies need to be re-polished in order to

make religious tourism better and a good experience.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses of the study are as follows:

- H_0 = Shirdi has developed religious tourism in the most effective way possible and visitors are satisfied from the progress made.
- H_1 = Shirdi has not developed religious tourism in the most effective way possible and visitors are not satisfied from the progress made.

H_0 means Null Hypothesis, while H_1 means Alternative Hypothesis. If Shirdi visitors are satisfied for the development made to enhance religious tourism, the Null Hypothesis shall be accepted (H_0) which shall be 50% of positive review, else Null Hypothesis shall be rejected (H_1) and Alternative Hypothesis will be accepted.

Research Methodology

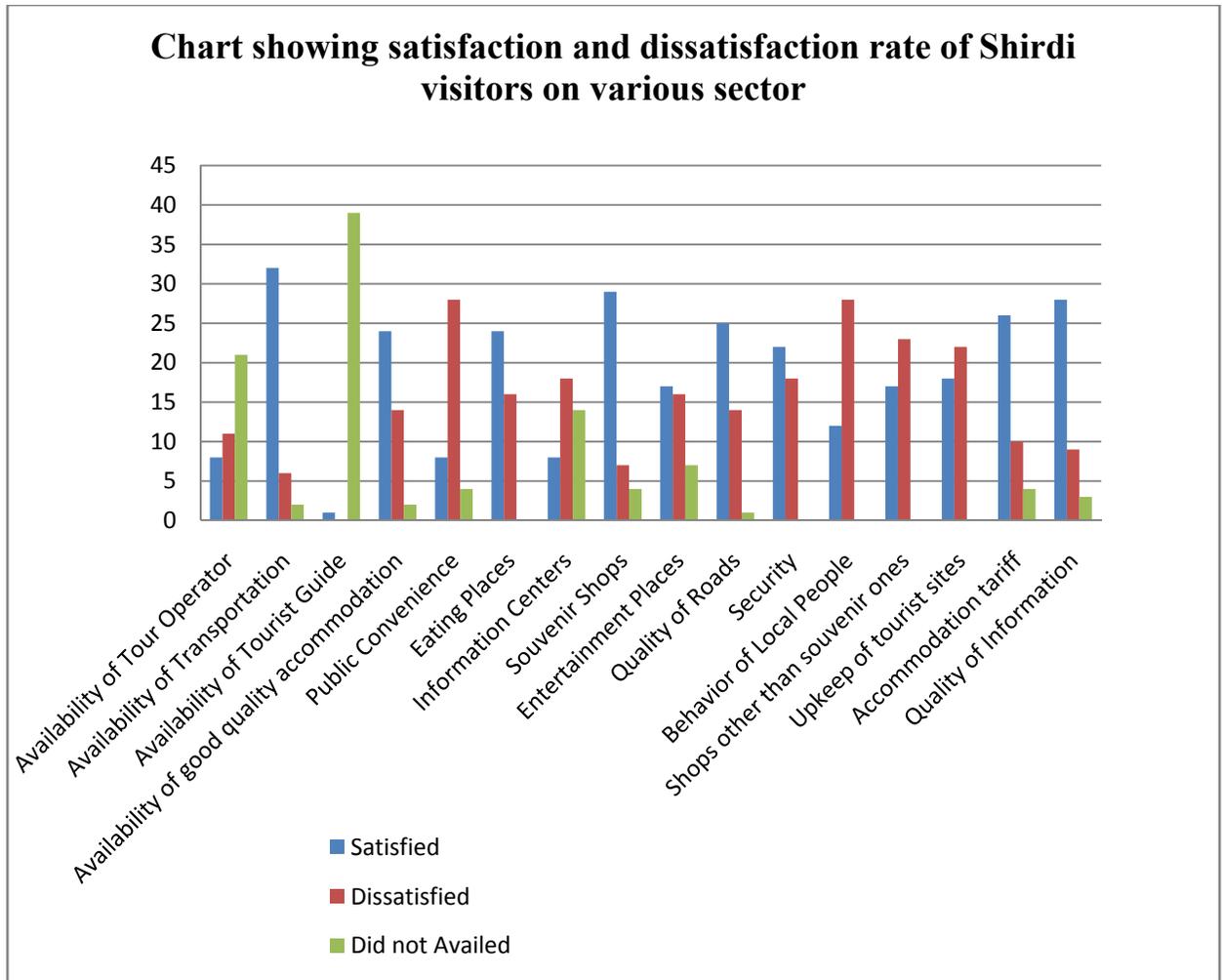
The research has been conducted on Primary data. It consists of 3 methods:

1. **Observation** – Personal observation was conducted on the road from Pune to Shirdi, in and around the Temple, facilities in the city and attitude of local people towards the visitors
2. **Questionnaire**–Questionnaires were distributed to people of various age groups, through simple random sampling.
3. **Interview**– Nine Short interviews were conducted on local people and visitors. Five locals, out of which three were male, and two females, and four visitors, out of which two bachelors (one male and one female), one family man and one retired government employee.

Analysis of Data and Interpretation

I. Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction of Visitors to shirdi

The analysis was done in order to understand the satisfaction and dissatisfaction rate of visitors to Shirdi as religious tourism place. The factors considered for satisfaction and dissatisfaction were availability of tour operators, availability of transportation, availability of tourist guide, availability of good quality accommodation, public convenience, eating places, information centers, souvenir shops, quality of roads, security, behaviour of local people, up keeping of tourist sites and quality of information provided.



Availability of Tour Operator

Although tour operators like makemytrip.com, yatra.com and many other online and brick & mortar are competing in the market, there has not been a huge profit for either of them. 52.5% of the sample did not avail such services; instead travel on their own by either personal vehicles or rented ones. 27.5% Respondents who have used such services are dissatisfied by the service provided by them. Only 20% of the sample respondents are satisfied with their services.

Availability of Transportation

80% of the sample respondents are satisfied by the availability of transportation. There are many buses and trains to Shirdi not only from Maharashtra but also from other states like Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh etc. Maharashtra government has also initiated to build an airport in Shirdi to boost religious tourism.

Availability of Tourist Guide

A guide for Shirdi is a rare sight. Shirdi temple is so well organized that the visitors do not feel the necessity to avail a guide. More than 97% of the sample have not availed a guide for Shirdi.

Availability of good quality accommodation

There are two types of accommodation, one provided by temple authorities and

other provided by private players. Accommodations provided by temple authorities are very cheap, airy and hygienic. Hence 60% of the respondents have been satisfied by the quality of accommodation.

Public Convenience

Public convenience has been rated as dissatisfied by 70% of the sample respondents. Although temple authorities have done a commendable job, the government has been lagging behind to provide such facilities to the visitors across Shirdi.

Eating Places

Eating places has been given a mixed weightage of satisfaction level i.e. 60% satisfied and 40% dissatisfied. The temple authorities provide cheap and good quality of food and on the other hand private players charge a higher rate.

Information Centers

There are various information centers in the temple. 35% of the visitors do not avail information centers on most of the occasions as the directions are clear and one can easily figure out what he has to do. Fellow pilgrims are given more preference than finding an information center. 45% of the visitors are dissatisfied from the service availed from the information centers.

Souvenir Shops

The souvenir shops are well placed all across the city. The visitors can avail various statues of Sai Baba, devotional books and other local souvenir product. 72.5% of the sample respondent is satisfied with the quality of souvenir shops.

Entertainment Places

There are water parks and other parks and play ground. Sample respondents have a mixed review on the satisfaction level of entertainment places i.e. 42.5% satisfied and 40% dissatisfied.

Quality of Roads

The roads have been under construction in recent years. Government has been trying to improve the quality of roads since last 5 years. 62.5% of the sample is satisfied by the quality of road. This shows dedication of the government to improve religious tourism in Shirdi.

Security

The security has been given a mixed review. 55% of the sample population is satisfied with the security of Shirdi, and 45% are not satisfied. There are cases of theft every day. The temple is surrounded with good security.

Behavior of Local People

70% of the sample respondent tourists of Shirdi have been dissatisfied by the behavior of local people. A bias treatment favoring Marathi speaking people could be clearly seen.

Shops other than souvenir ones

The shops other than souvenir ones have been reviewed dissatisfactory by 57.5% of the sample population.

Upkeep of tourist sites

There has been again a mixed review in this factor i.e. 45% of the sample population is satisfied whereas 55% of the sample population is unsatisfied. Through personal observation it could be said that there has been only a moderate level of up keeping of the tourist site.

Accommodation tariff

The accommodation tariffs of temple authorities are very low, which has been the major reason for higher satisfaction in this sector. On the other hand, tariff of private hospitality sector charges high due to the objective of profit maximization. 65% of the sample population have rated satisfactory while 25% of the population has reviewed dissatisfactory.

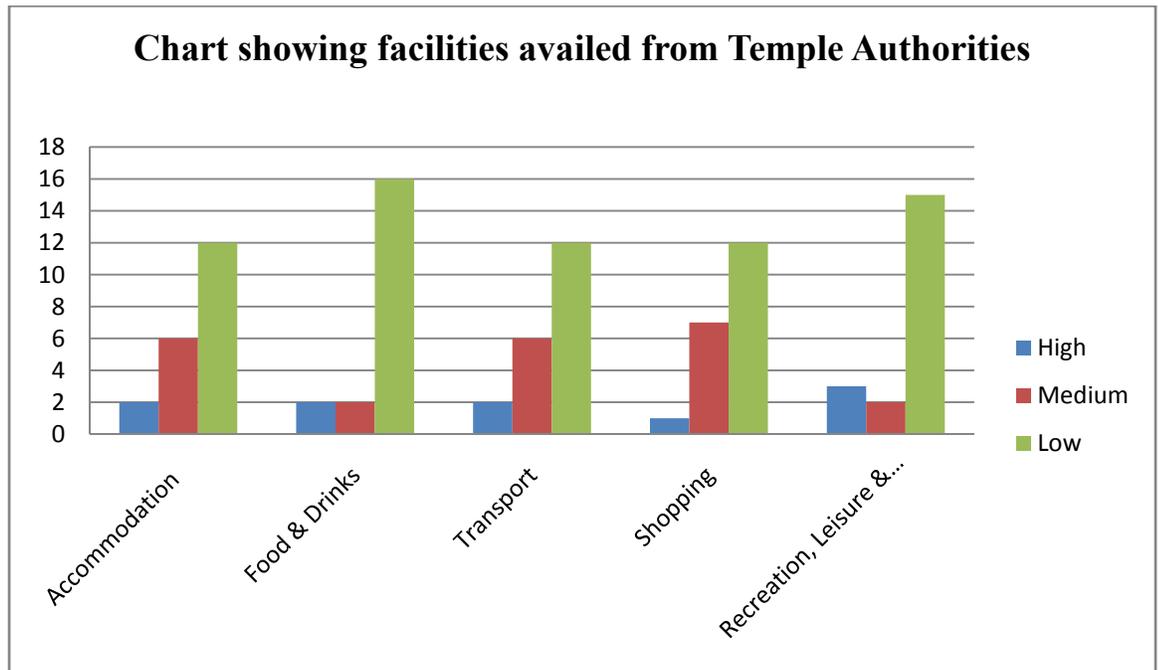
Quality of Information

70% of the sample respondents have given a review that they are satisfied the quality of information provided by the temple authorities, internet and other sources.

II. Prices Charged by Temple Authorities and Private Parties in Shirdi:

The study made an attempt to know the price charged by temple authorities and private parties of the religious tourism i.e Shirdi as high, medium and low and the factor considered for the price level were accommodation, food and drinks, transports, shopping and Recreation, leisure and cultural activities.

A. Prices Charged by Temple Authorities:



Accommodation

60% of the sample respondents have rated accommodation at a low price slab, while 30% have rated it at medium price slab. The accommodation availed by the visitors from Temple authorities, majority being various trusts of Sai Baba Temple are rated as cheaper. Through interviews it has come to light that Temple Trusts provide accommodation facilities from INR 100/- per day/person (dormitories) to higher rates for AC Rooms which are lot cheaper than the tariffs in the private hotels and motels.

Food & Drinks

80% of the sample respondents have rated food and drinks at a low price slab, while 10% each have rated it at medium and low price slab. Per meal cost/person for Shirdi visitors are made available at INR 25/- to INR 30/-, which is an unbeatable price

for private restaurants and other eating places. The price so low is probably due to economies of scale, as 27000 visitors are served per day.

Transport

60% of the sample respondents have rated transport at a low price slab, while 30% have rated it at medium price slab. There are mostly two reasons behind the transport being rated as low cost, firstly, Shirdi Saibaba Sansthan had been running a free bus service from Gate no. 1 to Bhakta Niwas and secondly, availability of State run buses also being at a low cost.

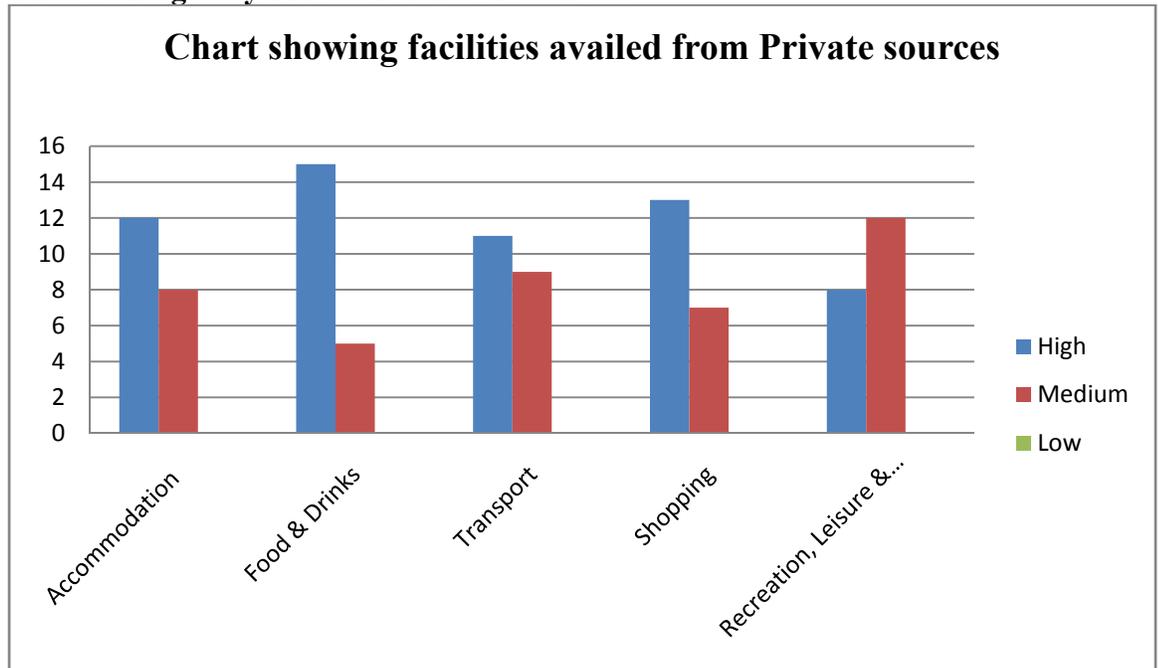
Shopping

60% of the sample respondents have rated shopping at a low price slab, while 35% have rated it at medium price slab. Shopping from the shops under the temple authorities had been cheaper, as the temple authorities keeps the prices under control by keeping a check on it. Souvenir shops are mostly to be found around the temple. This shop mostly sells religious books and deity statues to the pilgrims.

Recreation, Leisure & Cultural Activities

75% of the sample respondents have rated Recreation, Leisure & Cultural Activities at a low price slab, while 15% have rated it at medium price slab. The visitors are mostly pilgrims who have come here for devotion and inner peace, prayer sessions are conducted by the temple authorities which are free of charge. There are many parks around Shirdi which are also free of any entry fees.

B. Prices Charged by Private Parties or Sources:



Accommodation

60% of the sample respondents have rated accommodation at a high price slab, while 40% have rated it at medium price slab. The hotels and motels entities had been facing immense competition from both private players and temple trusts. This has led to slow growth of the private hospitality sector in Shirdi.

Food & Drinks

75% of the sample respondents have rated Food and Drinks at a high price slab, while 25% have rated it at medium price slab. Although many hotels provide food and drinks in their room services, the local eating places have been the more dominant choice for most of the visitors. Even the big restaurants have put to knees by the local eating places. This is mainly because of three reasons, first, rates charged by the hotel room services and restaurants are very high. Secondly, the temple authorities provide meal at a very low cost, with economies of scale, it make them the lowest cost leaders in Shirdi. Thirdly, a high competition environment with local eating places.

Transport

55% of the sample respondents have rated transport at a high price slab, while 45% have rated it at medium price slab. Private transport is on a higher price level. Auto-rickshaw's meters are a mere show, as tariffs are not charged according to the meters but by whims and wishes of the driver. Same can be said about the taxis. But the six-seater charge a nominal rate.

Shopping

65% of the sample respondents have rated shopping at a high price slab, while 35% have rated it at medium price slab. Shirdi is mainly a pilgrimages town. There are no shopping malls, but small local shops are the dominant players. The price range is bit on a higher side for the tourist.

Recreation, Leisure & Cultural Activities

40% of the sample respondents have rated Recreation, Leisure & Cultural Activities at a high price slab, while 60% have rated it at medium price slab. Recreation, Leisure & Cultural Activities are to be found at low frequency as devotional activities are more to be seen in Shirdi. The respondents have in majority rated as medium price level as compared to other cities.

Observations

Following are the observations and finding of the research paper:-

1. Possibilities and Potential of Religious Tourism in Shirdi

The possibilities and potential of religious tourism in Shirdi are as follows to:-

a) Private Sector

- Opportunity for the private player to play a bigger role.
- Opportunity for new entrepreneur to compete in the market.
- Availability of guides can be encouraged.
- Transportation industry has a very good market.
- Hospitality and eating places has an opportunity to flourish.

b) Government

- Opportunity to increase employment for local people.
- Opportunity to earn tax revenue from transportation, accommodation and other services.
- Opportunity to increase standard of living of people in Shirdi.
- Religious tourism in Shirdi shall lead to revenue generation through various sources for local people, which shall lead to increase in per capita income.
- Shall help the government to bring unity in people where in a country like India has a diversified culture.

2. The experience of Pilgrims towards Religious Tourism in Shirdi

Although there has been a tremendous push from the government and temple authorities to build a site for religious tourism in Shirdi, the experiences of pilgrims are not satisfactory. An overall 46.718% of the sample respondents have given positive reviews and 37.5% of the sample respondents have given a negative review. Thus, the government, temple authorities and also the private players should play a bigger role to provide satisfaction to the visitors. 15.781% of the sample respondents have not availed the services, which needs to reduce further, as visitors should be able to enjoy the available services.

3. The satisfaction level of the visitors visiting Shirdi

From the above data interpretation and analysis following observation can be made:

a) Satisfied Sectors

The visitors to Shirdi are satisfied with the services such as availability of transportation, good quality of accommodation, eating places, souvenir shops, quality of roads, security, accommodation tariffs and quality of information which are mostly provide by the temple authorities or the government.

b) Dissatisfied Sectors

The visitors to Shirdi are dissatisfied with the services such as public convenience, information centers, behavior of local people, shops other than souvenir shops and upkeep tourist site. Hence, the government should work on providing more information centers, take due care of the tourist site, and build more public conveniences to aid the tourist.

Conclusions

In the end, the alternative hypothesis is accepted as there are only 47.718% positive reviews from the respondents. Shirdi can still be developed as religious tourism and can create a better potential for development as religious tourism. In spite of all facilities available yet there is a scope to develop and grow. Better efforts have to be made by the government in a righter perspective so that Shirdi can grow as one of the best place of religious tourism.

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