



Title:	Role of Religious Tourism beyond development and Growth: Analysis of France, India and Saudi Arabia
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.65919/uimrj.2025.v1i7002
History:	Received: 11 May 2026, Accepted: 08 June 2026, Published: 07 July 2026
Citation:	Kumar, N. (2026). Role of Religious Tourism beyond development and Growth: Analysis of France, India and Saudi Arabia. UnivColl International Multidisciplinary Research Journal, 2(7), 12-19. https://doi.org/10.65919/uimrj.2025.v1i7002
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Conflict of Interest:	The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.
Funding:	This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
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Published By:	UnivColl Publications

Role of Religious Tourism beyond development and Growth: Analysis of France, India and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Religious tourism is commonly assessed through its contribution to income, employment, infrastructure, and regional development. This study examines its wider cultural, social, diplomatic, psychological, and spiritual significance through a comparative analysis of France, India, and Saudi Arabia. Using descriptive and comparative methods, the paper draws on secondary literature, tourism reports, and selected country experiences. The analysis shows that religious tourism supports heritage conservation, cultural exchange, community participation, and interfaith understanding while also strengthening national image and soft power. In India, pilgrimage reflects civilizational diversity, emotional attachment, and the revival of domestic tourism after the COVID-19 disruption. In France, sacred journeys continue to attract visitors despite secularization, demonstrating the enduring search for meaning, identity, and personal fulfilment. In Saudi Arabia, Hajj and Umrah combine spiritual devotion with international engagement, infrastructure development, and economic diversification beyond petroleum dependence. The study further argues that visits to sacred places can enhance life satisfaction, inner peace, belonging, and spiritual reflection, although such outcomes differ according to personal belief and experience. Religious tourism should therefore be understood not merely as an economic activity, but as a multidimensional process linking faith, heritage, diplomacy, social cohesion, and individual well-being across diverse national contexts in the contemporary global order.

Keywords: Religious Tourism; Spirituality; Individual Happiness; Cultural Heritage; Soft Power; Sustainable Development; Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

Religious tourism is the visit to religious sites which are considered holy for the pilgrims who visit there. Religious tourism plays a multifaceted role that extends far beyond economic development, encompassing cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions. At its core, religious tourism involves individuals traveling to sites of religious significance, seeking spiritual experiences, pilgrimage, and cultural enrichment. Economically, religious tourism is a powerful driver of local and national economies. Pilgrims and visitors contribute to the growth of businesses, hospitality services, and transportation infrastructure in the host destinations. The influx of tourists often leads to job creation and stimulates various sectors, fostering economic prosperity in regions hosting religious sites.

This Article explores the multifaceted impact of religious tourism beyond economic development in three diverse contexts: France, India, and Saudi Arabia. Investigating the role of religious tourism in cultural exchange, interfaith understanding, and global unity, the study sheds light on its broader significance in shaping perspectives and fostering connections.

Through a comparative analysis, it examines how religious tourism contributes to historical narratives in France, promotes diversity appreciation in India, and strengthens Islamic diplomacy in Saudi Arabia. It will also delve in areas beyond development and growth of economy and prosperities of the cities and countries. Study will try to find out the relationship between religious tourism and individual happiness, emotional connection between self-satisfaction and religious tourism. Further it will engage to find a relationship with spirituality.

Literature Review:

1.1 Religious tourism

Religious tourism has a rich history that stretches back to ancient times. Pilgrims have been travelling to sacred places since the dawn of civilization. These early pilgrimages were driven by reverence for sacred sites and their guardians worldwide. Over the past 2,000 years, tourism to sacred places has merged with pilgrimage. Today, the importance lies in protecting, conserving, and interpreting these special sites. Many of these places lack sufficient guardians and funding for maintenance and management. Balancing the needs of worshippers and visitors is a challenge faced by religious organisations that own these sites.

Biblical references highlight the ancient practice of pilgrimage. In the Old Testament, Elkanah travelled to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice (1 Samuel 1:1-28). The New Testament mentions Jews from around the world visiting Jerusalem for Passover (Acts 2:1-12). Some of these sites still exist, while others hold considerable heritage value. Religious sites are often owned by religious organizations. These organisations must balance the needs of worshippers and visitors. For example, mosques serve both as places of worship and community centres, welcoming both Muslims and non-Muslims. The cost of maintenance remains a significant challenge for heritage sites. Religious tourism continues to thrive globally. It contributes to local economies, cultural exchange, and sustainable development. Whether as a tourist attraction or a place of worship, these sites play a vital role in our interconnected world.

1.2 Role of Religious tourism

Religious tourism plays a multifaceted role that extends beyond mere development and growth. It contributes to sustainable development by fostering economic, social and environmental wellbeing. It aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aim to balance progress with the needs of future generations. In countries like India, with rich cultural and religious heritage, promoting religious tourism can lead to sustainable development. (Gambhir, Khalid, Sharma, 2021)

Religious sites catalyse local economies. They create jobs and stimulate ancillary industries such as hospitality, food, transportation, and retail. Such economic activities flourish. Beyond immediate economic gains, religious tourism spurs investment in logistics infrastructure.

It also encourages preservation efforts and enhances recreational offerings in the vicinity of religious sites globally around religious destinations, driving local entrepreneurship and regional development. (Tasleem, 2023)

Beyond immediate economic gains, religious tourism spurs investment in logistics infrastructure. It also encourages preservation efforts and enhances recreational offerings in the vicinity of religious sites globally. (Oxford Business Group, 2023)

Religious tourism fosters cultural exchange and understanding. It adds value to cities, villages, and regions by showcasing their religious heritage. Strategies to assess its social and economic impact are essential for sustainable growth. (Carmen, 2020)

2. Case studies:

2.1 India

According to Statista, religion has always been one of the oldest reasons to travel in India. The total contribution has been 178bn USD by religious tourism between 2013-2021.

Hinduism being the largest religion, it is also the birthplace of several other religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism which are significant in numbers.

In Indian context, Rafia Tasleem explains in her article *India's Religious Tourism: A Spiritual Journey boosting the economy* written in The People's network explains how religious tourism is a catalyst for local economies. Because of growth in religious tourism, it spurs growth in other

industries such as hospitality, food and beverage, transportation as well as retail. (Tasleem, 2023)



Source: Al-Jazeera Figure: Ayodhya Ram Temple inauguration ceremony

During covid period religious tourism was impacted very badly because of the ban on religious gathering and closing of all the religious sites. It has impacted profoundly on hotel booking and room reservation as it declined significantly. (*The Economic Times*,2020)

2.1.1 Post Covid-19

Religious tourism in India has emerged as a significant force, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Revival of Domestic Tourism: Religious sites play a crucial role in revitalising the Indian tourism sector post-COVID-19. Staycations and micro-holidays centred around religious destinations have gained prominence. Existing projects like the Swadesh Darshan and the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) are being reformed to attract travellers.

Collaboration with Other Attractions: Yoga, Wellness, and Ayurveda, which have deep connections with Hinduism, can complement religious tourism. These attractions can serve as vital tools to activate the sector even during crisis situations. Prominent religious sites like the Venkateshwara Temple, Vaishno Devi Temple, Golden Temple, Ajmer Dargah Sharif, and Velankanni Church can lead initiatives to rebuild religious tourism.

Post-COVID, there has been a 62% increase in bookings for spiritual tourism compared to the pre-COVID period. Religious inclination among Indians has grown stronger, projecting a CAGR of over 16% for religious tourism between 2023 and 2030. Religious tourism in India is poised to play a pivotal role in the country's recovery, offering solace, cultural exploration, and spiritual experiences to travellers.

2.2 France

Religious tourism in France plays a significant role, intertwining ancient traditions with contemporary seekers' quest for meaning. Millions of people embark on sacred journeys to Europe's pilgrimage sites each year. These sites serve as meeting grounds where ancient traditions meet modern seekers. Despite prevailing secularisation and declining religious observance, pilgrimage experiences continue to resonate with individuals seeking spiritual fulfilment. (*EARS*,2024)



(Source: Peters way tours)

(People participate in the candlelight procession and recitation of the rosary to honor the mother of God.)

The Camino de Santiago, one of Europe's most significant pilgrimage routes, spans across France, Spain, and Portugal. Originating in the 9th century, it leads to the revered destination of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. Over time, the Camino pilgrimage has witnessed remarkable growth, attracting nearly 350,000 pilgrims annually. (EARS, 2024)

Another notable pilgrimage path is the Via Francigena, stretching 1,800 km from Canterbury to Rome. This route mirrors the journey undertaken by Archbishop Sigeric in 990 A.D. to meet Pope John XV and receive the pallium investiture.

Pilgrimage routes were traditionally born from deep religious callings, involving visits to sacred destinations or acts of penance. However, motivations have evolved.

Alongside traditional religious pilgrimages, we now observe the emergence of secular and spiritual pilgrimages. These journeys transcend religious roots and emphasise personal spirituality .

Professor Noga Collins-Kreiner suggests that pilgrimage is entering a phase of "rejuvenation." Pilgrims today seek meaning beyond religious observance, connecting with nature, culture, and their inner selves .

Regardless of their motivation—faith, cultural exploration, or a desire for connection—all modern-day pilgrims share a profound quest for significance. This fundamental search sets pilgrimage apart from conventional tourism . (EARS,2024)

Religious heritage sites serve as key tourism destinations, driving economic growth and international tourism. They also foster tolerance, respect, and mutual understanding between different cultures .(PR 14083, 2014)

Therefore, religious tourism in France bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, inviting travellers to explore sacred spaces and seek deeper meaning.

2.3 Saudi Arabia

Religious tourism plays a very significant role in Saudi Arabia by contributing to its economy as well as cultural heritage. The most famous cities for religious tourism in Saudi Arabia are Makkah and Madina. Muslim pilgrims from all over the world gather to perform **Hajj** and **Umrah** which together add a substantial \$12 billion annually in the country's GDP. (Mahmood, 2020)



Source: Entrepreneur MIDDLE EAST

Although Saudi Arabia has only 7 percent addition to GDP through religious tourism, 91 percent of export earnings are done through petroleum products. So, they are looking for non-oil sources of income to diversify its economy. (Triki, 2019)

Saudi Arabia, steeped in moral and religious values, serves as a spiritual epicentre for millions worldwide. Its rich resources extend beyond faith, significantly impacting the economy. The nation strategically emphasises pilgrimage tourism, recognizing its economic potential. Policies and procedures are meticulously crafted to enhance the experience for both national and international visitors. As the pilgrimage industry flourishes, Saudi Arabia concurrently invests in infrastructure, hospitality, and cultural preservation. These strategic plans ensure that tourists receive a satisfying and enriching journey. Thus, the country's commitment to religious tourism harmoniously blends economic prosperity with spiritual fulfilment. (Ali, Arun, Arif, 2021)

3. Argument and Criticism:

Tourism significantly impacts India's economic development and employment generation. Attracting more tourists is crucial for sustainable growth in specific regions. Religious tourism, rooted in individual beliefs, aims to leverage environmental, cultural, and religious heritage. Understanding tourist satisfaction and behaviour is essential for religious tourism development. Satisfied pilgrims contribute to positive word-of-mouth, attracting more religious tourists. (Pandey, 2023)

Religious tourism not only helps in growth and development but also helps to increase the soft power of the nation. Countries like India which has the largest population and holds one of the largest diaspora all around the world, the promotion of religious tourism connects people with their roots.

There are two types of tourists, domestic and international. In the case of India, footfall of domestic tourists is based upon rich cultural heritage, emotional bond with the daitey, and for individual happiness and satisfaction. Important religious places which are glorified in mythology, promoted through movies, stories. International tourists are attracted by its rich civilization, culture, and soft power. Globalisation has played a very significant role in the spread of rich cultural heritage and knowledge sharing about Indian culture, religious sites.

3.1 Religious tourism and individual happiness

According to Authentic Happiness Theory (AHT), life satisfaction is a long lasting concept (Martin Saligman, 2004). Apart from the development and growth in the regional Economy, the experience of oneself which the religious tourists experience at sacred places is lifelong. Moreover religion has a significant impact on life satisfaction and happiness (Headly, 2010).

3.2 Religious tourism as spirituality and soft power

According to Joseph Nye, Soft Power is "the ability to obtain a preferred outcome through attraction rather than coercion".

Currently, India ranks 29th in the soft power index (brand finance, 2024). India being a multi religious, multicultural society, it has the potential to improve its ranking. Rise of iskcon devotees all around the world, acceptance and exchange of values through conferences and mutual trust and respect can contribute to the rise of religious tourism.



Source: www.iccr.gov.in

(The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) partnered with 'United Consciousness Global' to organise a remarkable conference on 'India's Spirituality as Soft Power' in New Delhi. From May 31st to June 1st, 2023)

Religious tourism in France has been surviving because of confluence between traditional ethics and modern values. France has become a more secular society. Catholic Christian which comprise the highest population percentage in France, are on decline. The major reason for religious tourism is individual happiness, self-satisfaction apart from economic gain to the States.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (2014), out of 87 million tourists which come every year, 20 million come for spiritual and religious reasons.

Religious tourism can significantly impact individual happiness and satisfaction by providing unique spiritual experiences and fostering a sense of connection to one's faith. When individuals embark on religious pilgrimages or visits to sacred sites, they often find solace, inspiration, and a deepened sense of purpose.

Religious tourism offers a platform for believers to engage in rituals and practices that are integral to their faith. Participating in religious ceremonies, pilgrimages, or visiting holy places allow individuals to strengthen their spiritual connection, reinforcing a sense of belonging and fulfilment. The shared experiences with fellow believers also contribute to a communal bond, enhancing the overall satisfaction derived from the journey.

Moreover, religious tourism often involves immersion in cultural and historical aspects of the faith, providing educational and enlightening experiences. Exploring the origins of religious traditions and understanding the historical context behind sacred sites can deepen one's appreciation for their faith. This enriched understanding contributes to a heightened sense of meaning and satisfaction, positively impacting individual happiness.

Additionally, the sense of awe and wonder experienced at religious sites can have a profound impact on an individual's well-being. The architectural grandeur, sacred landscapes, and the atmosphere of devotion creates a unique ambiance that fosters spiritual reflection and personal introspection. These moments of contemplation often lead to a greater sense of inner peace and satisfaction.

However, it is essential to recognize that the impact of religious tourism on happiness and satisfaction can vary among individuals based on their personal beliefs and experiences. While some may find profound joy and fulfillment in these spiritual journeys, others may not share the same sentiment. Therefore, the effectiveness of religious tourism in enhancing individual happiness is subjective and influenced by one's spiritual disposition and the significance attributed to such experiences in their personal worldview.

Conclusion

In summary, the role of religious tourism extends beyond its economic impact. It intertwines with cultural preservation, social cohesion, and spiritual fulfilment, contributing to a more interconnected and understanding world. As individuals embark on journeys to sacred sites, they not only enrich themselves but also contribute to the broader tapestry of global unity and cultural diversity. Religious tourism boosts the economy and development of the region, by adding a valuable contribution to the GDP of the nation, but it is also driven by individuals' self-satisfaction, their belief and faith in culture, religion. Religious tourism not only adds to the happiness of the pilgrims but also adds to the soft power and continuation of acceptance of richness in cultural heritage.

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