

Naimisharanya: A Potential Sojourn For Spiritual Tourism

Dr. Gagan Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics
Govt. Degree College Kuchlai, Sitapur, (U.P.), India
Email: gkb.gdc@gmail.com

Priyanka Bharti

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics
D.D.U. Govt. P.G. College, Sitapur, (U.P.), India
Email: pkb.gdc@gmail.com

Anubhuti Jain*

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
Govt. Degree College Kuchlai, Sitapur, (U.P.), India
*Corresponding author Email: anubhutihain90@gmail.com

Abstract

India is well known for its culture and religion. In reference of Ayodhya, Kashi, Mathura, Prayagraj our state and country is so rich. In this sequence Naimisharanya is one of the most important religious place in Uttar Pradesh. This paper presents a study on Naimisharanya a 'holy place at Sitapur district' which is at the Western part of Lucknow and focuses on the mythology, importance of the place and its culture & tourism. In Naimisharanya sectors such as infrastructure, hospitality, food, transportation and employment have all been significantly impacted by a surge in spiritual tourism. There is a special need to promote tourism for regional development.

Keywords: Naimisharanya, Economic, Spiritual, Gender, Tourism, Infrastructure.

Background

Blessed with vibrant spiritual destinations in form of beautifully carved temples and opulent mosques, to splendid churches and resplendent gurudwaras, India has always been known as the land of spirituality famous for its rich cultural heritage. Rightly known as the land of temples, India holds tremendous potential to grow as a popular destination for spiritual or religious tourism. In the recent years there has been a surge in spiritual tourism which is expected to increase further in the upcoming years. Tourism has undergone continuous development in past decades in particular and the growth has been very diversified so much so that tourism industry has emerged as one of the most significant contributors to economic development in the past few years. In the recent years, one aspect of tourism that has emerged as an attractive proposition is spiritual tourism. The economic implications pertaining to spiritual tourism are now being viewed as a major reckoning force creating opportunities at various levels. Sectors such as infrastructure, hospitality, food, transportation and employment have all been significantly impacted by a surge in spiritual tourism. Nonetheless, there are numerous challenges and issues also that the industry might have to face on its road to progress.

Sacred places have existed since times immemorial across the globe and thousands of devotees belonging to various religions have visited them for various reasons. What draws a person to any pilgrimage site in the world is the feeling of serenity, beauty, calmness and the pious vibes that one receives while embarking on a spiritual journey and also after reaching the desired destination. Certain countries have been able to position themselves as popular spiritual destinations, India being one of them. Each and every state of India has a lot of underutilized potential awaiting proper exploration and utilization. Most of these religious destinations have not received the popularity they deserve. The holy site of 'Naimisharanya' situated in the Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh is one such place that needs to be explored and developed so that it can gain the due recognition it deserves.

A Brief Introduction About 'Naimisharanya'

Located on the banks of river Gomti, *Naimisharanya* is said to be the most sacred of all the pilgrim centres in India for Hindus across the globe. The town finds mention in scriptures like *Shri Ramcharitmanas* and *Shri Bhavad Mahapurana* making it one of the prime holy places to visit in Uttar Pradesh for scholars, devotees and sages. Also known as 'Neemsaar' or 'Naimish,' the place is rich in Hindu folklore and has been blessed with a syncretic culture. Its canvas of faith is much bigger than it seems. 'Naimsharanya' was once a lush forested land with a vast picturesque area ideal for meditation and penance both. With a strong religious and mythological background, *Neemsaar* is blessed with a pure environment favourable for spiritual seekers. Also, as per the innumerable folklores attached to the place, the holy town of *Neemsaar* is believed to be the abode of sages and saints, free from the influence of 'Kali' or 'Kaliyug.' It is the only place in the world mentioned in all the *Vedas* and *Puranas* making it the most ancient spiritual seat of knowledge and learning since *Satyuga*. 'Neemsaar' has been considered to be the first and most holy pilgrimage site on earth so much so that just by visiting this place, one gets the *punya* of visiting all the sacred places, as stated in '*Padmpurana*:'

*"Teerthantu Naimisham Naam Sarvateertham Phal Pradam
Tadaitannaimisharanyam Sarva Teertha Nishevitam."*

Padmpuran Srishtikhande (11.6)

For the spiritual wanderer, looking for meaning and hope, Naimisharanya can serve as a tranquil refuge with several highly revered temples like Hanuman Garhi, Maa Lalita Devi Mandir and Vyas Gaddi. The status of 'Naimisharanya' as a tourist destination is quite low and this holy shrine remains a hidden treasure waiting to be unveiled. Adequate development of infrastructure along with proper marketing and promotional campaigns with the likes of 'Incredible India!' will prove to have fruitful economic impact on the region bringing to light this spiritual gem of Uttar Pradesh. This study is an attempt to shed light on some of the areas that need upliftment in order to develop this pilgrim site.

Research Methodology

The present study has been conducted using the survey method. The sample consisted of both tourists and locals present in and around the area of Maa Lalita Devi Temple at Naimisharanya in March, 2022. Primary data was collected through quantitative techniques by surveying the visitors and locals by asking them questions related to parameters of economic development and tourism. Apart from this, face to face interviews were also

conducted with officials and local authorities to gain deeper understanding of the present scenario. The sample consisted of 40 tourists and 40 locals [N=80]. Tourists above the age of 18 years were surveyed for the purpose of this study.

Sample characteristics

The major characteristics of the sample of the present study viz. age, gender and domicile are as under:

1. Age: The age wise distribution of tourists and locals surveyed is as follows:

Age	Tourists		Locals	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
18-30 years	12	30%	10	25%
30-60 years	16	40%	24	60%
60 years and above	12	30%	6	15%
Total	40	100.0%	40	100%

2. Gender: The gender wise distribution of the tourists and locals surveyed:

Gender	Tourists		Locals	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Male	28	70%	30	75%
Female	12	30%	10	25%
Total	40	100.0%	40	100%

3. Domicile: The domicile wise distribution of the tourists and locals surveyed:

Domicile	Tourists		Locals	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
UP	35	87.5%	40	100%
Others	5	12.5%	00	00%
Total	40	100.0%	40	100%

Results

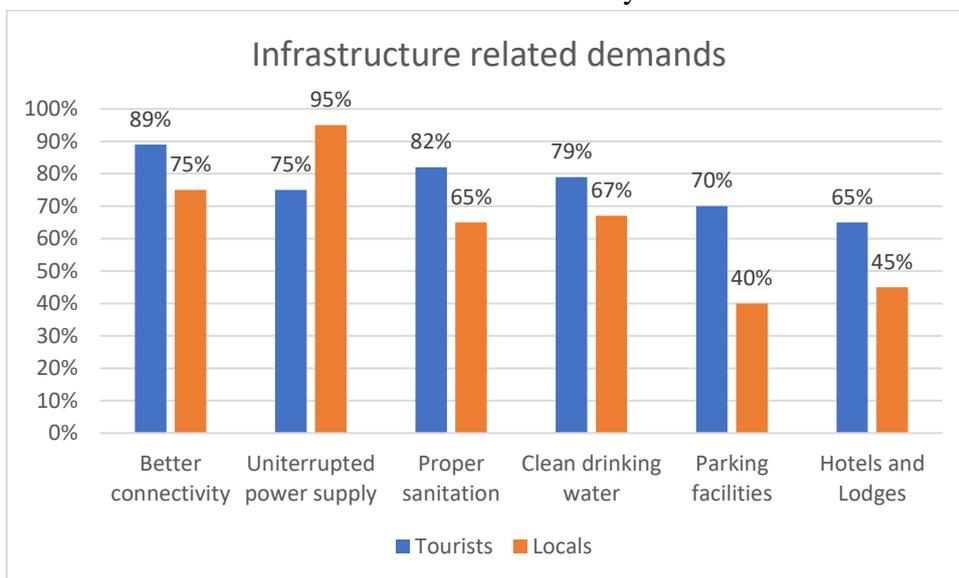
The survey was done under three major headings, viz, infrastructure, product demand by tourists and transportation facilities. The data has been represented in terms of percentages under various headings on the basis of responses obtained from the tourists and locals. The results have been discussed as under:

A. Infrastructure

In terms of infrastructure, the tourists and locals placed emphasis on the need of better connectivity through road and rail network. Most of the people were of the opinion that proper roads are present in the area, but there is lack of easy connectivity which results in longer travel time and hampers easy movement. Next comes the demand for uninterrupted electricity supply, proper toilet and bathroom facilities especially

demanding by female travellers and locals. They were of the view that the area near ‘Chakrateertha’ must especially have clean and hygienic bathrooms and toilets because that is the area where both men and women take a dip in the holy waters and therefore clean and hygienic sanitation facilities must necessarily be present in that area. Also, installation of water coolers with purification systems at several points throughout the town is highly demanded so as to ensure clean and hygienic drinking water to both tourists and locals. Apart from this, construction of good hotels and lodges is also among one of the most demanded infrastructures because the region lacks good quality accommodation. Apart from this, proper parking facilities are also needed so as to ensure hassle free movement of traffic and safe parking of vehicles, especially for the tourists.

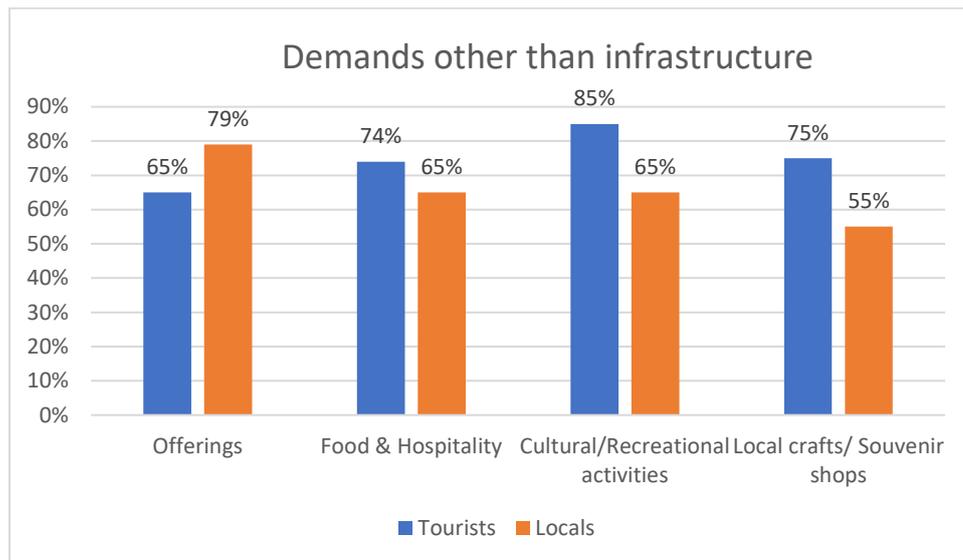
The above responses have been depicted through a bar graph showing a comparative picture of various forms of infrastructure demanded by tourists and locals both.



B. Product Demand by Tourists and Locals

With reference to demands other than infrastructure, one of the biggest demands is of food and hospitality. The tourists suggested that there is a lack of proper food joints/ eateries in and around the area and food being a basic need, there is requirement of setting up good quality hygienic food joints. Other than food, the people demand products related to offerings while worshipping and visiting the various temples. Further, the tourists demand that there must be avenues for shopping since the tourists mostly have purchasing potential but due to lack of availability of options, they are not able to spend. Hence some stalls or government run shops can be set up which sell local handicrafts and souvenirs related to the holy shrine which the visitors can take back with themselves as mementoes.

The graph below depicts the demand made by tourists and locals apart from infrastructure.



Suggestions and Conclusion

Naimisharanya has huge potential to be developed not only as a pilgrim centre but also as a tourist destination such that it serves both- the spiritually inclined and travel enthusiasts. Laden with an intricate interplay between spirituality, history and culture, the place has a lot of potential to attract diverse range of travellers seeking meaningful experiences. Harnessing the unrealised potential of spiritual tourism in the area will not only help to boost tourism in the state and country at large, but also help showcase *Neemsaar's* cultural and spiritual diversity to the world.

Some suggestions for promoting development and further boosting economic growth in the area have been presented under.

- Easy availability of information regarding various places that can be visited at this holy site, along with the timings must be available to the public.
- Strategic marketing via campaigns like 'Incredible India' have played a vital role in boosting the overall contribution of tourism in economic growth in the past. Such campaigns especially designed for this holy shrine can also be prove to beneficial in order to attract more and more tourists.
- The PRASAD scheme (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) run under the efficient governance of our Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi can further give a push to development in this area.
- Renovation of various pilgrim sites; development of transportation systems like road, railways and even waterways, along with running e-vehicles; generation of employment and a controlled traffic management system are some of the transformations that are much needed.
- The new travel trends show that nearly 70% of Indian travellers are currently seeking for spiritual stays that include wellness retreats and mindfulness getaways along with meditation and other holistic practices that elevate one's mental and physical health. *Naimisharanya* mythologically considered to be the holiest place on earth is blessed with lush green forests and therefore can be one of the choicest places in the region for development of various wellness retreats and resorts. This move will undoubtedly

give a push to economic growth along with generating employment opportunities for the locals.

- Spiritual travel enhances experience of travellers by helping them rejuvenate and break free from the daily monotony of life. To cater to this need, attractive range of packages that feature a combination of spiritual breaks along with unique local experiences like exploring the local villages, learning some local art and craft, enjoying local cuisines along with the opportunity to indulge in some local folklore sessions will offer fascinating experiences to the travellers. In this regard, training and capacity development activities along with guided tours can also be planned to cater to specific needs of the spiritual travellers.
- Organisation of some cultural activities to celebrate and commemorate special religious occasions especially at local level will help to enhance footfall in the region along with serving the purpose of keeping alive the local festivals which are a part of heritage but are slowly being forgotten.

To conclude, it can be said with full conviction that developing 'Naimisharanya' as a site for spiritual tourism on the lines of other popular destinations like Kashi, Prayagraj and soon to develop Ayodhya, will definitely fuel the growth of tourism industry in the state and country, making spiritual tourism bigger than before. This influx of revenue can invigorate local economies, support infrastructure development, and create employment opportunities. However, every idea comes with a set of its own challenges and there may be several issues arising out of inadequate facilities that impede the realization of this plan. But, by addressing infrastructure, preservation, marketing, and education, government and local communities can transform this religious site into a thriving hub of cultural and spiritual exploration.

Acknowledgement

The authors Dr Gagan Kumar: PI, Smt. Priyanka Bharti: Co PI and Anubhuti Jain express their gratitude to Government of Uttar Pradesh for financial assistance of this research project number 46/2021/603/Sattar-4-2021-4 (56)/2020, dated 30.03.2021 -

References

- Ahamad S., Sebastian T. et al (2019) A comprehensive study on religious tourism in Uttar Pradesh. *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*. Vol 7:4
- Blackwell, R. (2007) "Motivation for religious tourism, pilgrimage, festivals and events" in Raj, R. and Morpeth, N.D. (Eds), *Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Festivals Management. An International Perspective*. CABI, Cambridge and Oxfordshire, pp. 35- 47. 5.
- Chawla C. & Jha R.S. (2019) Avenues & problems of tourism in Uttar Pradesh. *Think India*. Vol 22:3
- Chawla C. (2019). Prospects and problems of tourism industry in Uttar Pradesh. *International Journal of Basic and Applied Research*. Vol 9:3
- Dasgupta I (2024). The unrealised potential of religious tourism in India. *Lifestyle News/3206311*
- Dhamija A. (2009). The increasing significance of religious tourism: A case from Uttar Pradesh, India. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*. Vol 8:7

Joshi M., Rana D.P. & Singh A. (2021). Naimisharanya: A case study of its present development and recommendations for development in future. *International journal of Modern Agriculture* Vol 10:2.

Naimisharanya-Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department. March (2023).

Noga Collins-Kreiner (2016). The lifecycle of concepts: the case of 'Pilgrimage Tourism'. *Tourism Geographies*. 18:3, 322-334.

Singh V.B. & Goel S.K. (2021). Problems and prospects of tourism industry in India with special reference to Uttar Pradesh. *Elementary Education Online*. Vol 20:6

Verma, N. (2019) Perspectives on Religious Tourism in India. *Jagran Journal of Management and Technology*, vol 1:1