

THE ETERNAL JOURNEY: A HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INDIAN TOURISM FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the multifaceted history of Indian tourism, tracing its evolution from ancient spiritual pilgrimages and medieval royal circuits to the formalised colonial era and the post-independence developmental phase. By examining the socio-economic drivers of travel across different epochs, the study highlights how India transitioned from a destination for enlightenment and trade to a global hub for cultural, heritage, and medical tourism. The discussion further delves into the institutionalisation of tourism via the Ministry of Tourism and the “Incredible India” campaign, analysing the impact of globalisation and digital transformation on India’s travel landscape. Drawing upon a wide range of secondary sources, the study situates tourism within broader historical and cultural frameworks and argues that India’s tourism history represents a continuous dialogue between its civilisational identity and its modern economic aspirations.

KEYWORDS: Indian Tourism History, Travel, Pilgrimage (*Tirthayatra*), Trade, Globalisation

INTRODUCTION:

Tourism in India is not a modern phenomenon but a deeply rooted cultural practice that predates the contemporary definition of leisure travel. For millennia, the Indian subcontinent has acted as a magnet for seekers of spiritual truth, merchants of luxury goods, and scholars of ancient sciences. The Sanskrit phrase *Atithi Devo Bhava*-“the guest is God”- encapsulates the civilisational ethos that has governed Indian hospitality for ages and continues to inform its contemporary tourism philosophy (Bhatia 45). This principle is not

merely symbolic but reflects a deeply ingrained ethical system that shaped social interaction and continues to influence India's tourism practices in the global era.

Historically, travel in India was dictated by three primary motives: faith (*dharma*), trade (*vyapaar*), and conquest (*vijay*). From the accounts of Chinese monks like Xuanzang to the Victorian-era "Grand Tours" of the British elite, the evolution of Indian tourism reflects broader shifts in global geopolitics and technological advancement (Singh 23). Travel, therefore, functioned not only as a means of movement but also as a mechanism of cultural exchange, intellectual engagement, and economic interaction. In this broader theoretical context, tourism may be understood as "the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes" (World Tourism Organization 10), thereby linking ancient mobility practices with modern conceptual frameworks.

To understand this transformation more critically, theoretical frameworks from tourism studies offer significant insights. John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" suggests that tourism involves a socially organised way of seeing, where landscapes, monuments, and cultures are consumed visually and symbolically (Urry 1). This perspective is particularly useful in analysing how Indian spaces—whether sacred rivers, Mughal monuments, or colonial hill stations—have been reinterpreted over time to cater to changing expectations of travellers. Complementing this, Dean MacCannell's notion of "staged authenticity" highlights how cultural practices are often reconstructed and presented in ways that appear authentic while being carefully curated for tourist consumption (MacCannell 91). These frameworks are crucial for understanding how Indian tourism evolved from lived cultural experiences into commodified representations in the global tourism market.

Scholarly discourse on Indian tourism reflects a rich and interdisciplinary engagement. Bhatia's work foregrounds tourism as an organised sector shaped by economic and institutional forces,

while Singh emphasises its cultural and religious roots, particularly the significance of pilgrimage traditions (Bhatia 67; Singh 41). Historians such as Chandra and Richards have examined the infrastructural and administrative developments of the medieval and Mughal periods, demonstrating how roads, *sarais* (inns), and trade routes enabled structured mobility (Chandra 112; Richards 89). Kennedy's analysis of hill stations situates tourism within colonial modernity, illustrating how leisure spaces were constructed as extensions of imperial power (Kennedy 5). More recent studies by Chaudhary and Sarkar explore tourism marketing and cultural representation in the era of globalisation, highlighting the shift towards branding and commodification (Chaudhary 134; Sarkar 78). Despite these contributions, there remains a need for a comprehensive narrative that connects these historical phases, which this study seeks to address.

The present study aims to trace the historical evolution of tourism in India across different periods, examine the socio-cultural and economic drivers that shaped travel practices, and analyse the role of institutional frameworks and technological advancements in transforming tourism into a global industry. The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive methodology based on secondary sources, including books, research articles, and reports from organisations such as the World Tourism Organization and the World Travel and Tourism Council. A chronological and thematic approach has been employed to analyse the transformation of tourism practices across time, while also interpreting their broader cultural and economic implications.

ANCIENT PERIOD: THE ERA OF PILGRIMAGE AND SCHOLARSHIP:

The history of travel can be traced back to almost the origin of civilization. The origin of the word 'travel' is seen in its earliest form *travail*, meaning painful and laborious effort (Holloway 9). This etymology highlights the arduous nature of early journeys, where travel involved significant physical hardship and uncertainty. Food gatherers can be treated as the first 'travellers', and since then,

the human urge to explore and move has been a constant feature of civilisation.

One of the greatest milestones in the history of tourism is the invention of the wheel. It improved the speed of travel and enabled individuals to cover larger distances, thereby stimulating interaction and exchange. The increasing trend in travel necessitated the provision of rest and shelter, leading to the emergence of inns, which marked the beginning of an organised system of hospitality (Dileep 34). The traveller of the past was not a leisure tourist in the modern sense but a merchant, a pilgrim, a scholar, or a curious wayfarer seeking knowledge and experience.

Travel for religious purposes assumed a significant importance in ancient India. The concept of the *Char Dham* and the *Saptapuri* encouraged people from different regions to undertake long journeys, thereby creating a sense of cultural unity. These journeys were not merely spiritual exercises but also facilitated economic and cultural exchange. Pilgrims required specialised services, leading to the establishment of *dharamshalas*, which represent the earliest form of organised accommodation (Bhatia 52). In theoretical terms, these practices may be seen as an early form of the “tourist gaze”, although rooted in devotion rather than leisure. The pilgrim’s gaze was directed not towards aesthetic appreciation but towards spiritual fulfilment, indicating a fundamental difference from modern tourism. In ancient India, travel was synonymous with *tirthayatra*, the journey to sacred sites such as rivers, mountains, and temples, which may be regarded as one of the earliest forms of domestic tourism (Singh 56). The travel for pilgrimages was largely undertaken by foot or horseback. Subsequently, the religious nature of travel gave way to education, learning and sightseeing. People began to appreciate the importance of education, arts, science and culture.

India’s reputation as a centre for higher learning attracted scholars from across Asia. Institutions such as Nalanda and Taxila became hubs of intellectual activity. Travellers like Faxian (Fa-Hien) and Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) visited in the early 5th century CE to collect Buddhist scriptures & in the 7th century AD to provide

ethnographic records respectively. Both of them documented their journeys in detail, providing valuable insights into Indian society, culture, and infrastructure, and their narratives may be considered early precursors to modern travel literature. The latter's records serve as the first 'tourist guides' to ancient monuments.

THE MEDIEVAL SYNTHESIS: ROADS, TRADE, AND IMPERIAL NETWORKS:

The medieval era introduced new dimensions to Indian travel. The arrival of Islamic dynasties integrated India into broader Afro-Eurasian trade networks, linking it to the Silk Road and facilitating long-distance commerce (Chandra 118). The gradual opening of trade routes significantly boosted travel, as merchants, officials, and travellers moved across regions. With the opening of the trade routes, travel became easier and more regulated. At the marketplaces, travellers made contacts with each other resulting in increased flow of trade and commerce.

Travellers from distant lands began to visit India in large numbers, contributing to increased interaction and exchange. The accounts of Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan traveller who spent years in the court of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, highlight the existence of sophisticated infrastructure, including post stations and well-maintained roads (Chandra 130). Similarly, European travellers such as Marco Polo and François Bernier documented the wealth and grandeur of Indian courts, shaping global perceptions of India (Richards 102).

The Mughal rulers contributed significantly to the development of travel infrastructure through the construction of *sarais* and the improvement of roads. Sher Shah Suri's reconstruction of the Grand Trunk Road stands as a remarkable achievement, providing facilities such as wells, trees, and rest houses. These developments standardised long-distance travel and contributed to the evolution of organised mobility.

THE COLONIAL ERA: THE BIRTH OF MODERN TOURISM:

The British colonial period fundamentally restructured Indian tourism. While the primary objective was administrative control and resource extraction, the infrastructure developed during this period laid the groundwork for modern tourism (Kennedy 22). The introduction of the Indian Railways in 1853 transformed travel from a laborious and uncertain process into a structured and predictable experience.

Railways facilitated large-scale mobility and can be regarded as one of the most significant factors in the emergence of mass tourism. As observed, “the railways did not merely transform travel; they reconfigured the spatial imagination of India” (Kennedy 24). This aligns strongly with Urry’s framework, as new modes of seeing and experiencing landscapes emerged. This transformation altered not only the physical movement of people but also their perception of distance and geography, effectively shrinking the vast subcontinent.

The development of hill stations such as Shimla, Darjeeling, and Ooty introduced the concept of leisure tourism. These destinations were designed as retreats and became centres of colonial social life. Tourism during this period thus shifted from necessity-driven travel to recreational mobility. Shimla, as the summer capital, became the social hub of the Raj, introducing the concept of seasonal tourism

POST-INDEPENDENCE : INSTITUTIONALISATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

After independence in 1947, tourism was recognised as a vital sector for economic development and national integration. The Sargent Committee (1945) had already recommended the creation of a separate tourism organisation. In 1958, a separate Tourism Department was established under the Ministry of Transport. The establishment of the India Tourism Development Corporation in

1966 marked a significant milestone in the formalisation of tourism (Gupta and Lal 75), which aimed to provide high-end accommodation and transport services where the private sector was hesitant to invest. Government initiatives focused on infrastructure development, cultural promotion, and international outreach.

Under the leadership of figures like Dr. Karan Singh, India began to market its “Unity in Diversity”. The focus shifted toward the Golden Triangle (Delhi, Agra, Jaipur), which remains the most popular circuit for international tourists. The 1982 Asian Games in Delhi served as a catalyst for a massive expansion in the luxury hotel segment and urban infrastructure.

Development of road and air transport, especially the former, is the major factor which was largely responsible for and continues to be so for the great spurt in modern tourism. Transport is the necessary precondition of travel. For the greater part of contemporary tourism, transport means airlines and private cars. Travel costs as much as about total holiday expenditure. As a broad generalisation it can be said that holidaymakers travelling away from home to a foreign country spend the major portion of their total holiday money on transport and travel. Tourist traffic, as we know it today, could not have developed without relatively inexpensive and efficient modes of transportation

THE INCREDIBLE INDIA ERA: GLOBALISATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION:

Tourism has long been recognised as a major force in the global economy, described as an “engine of economic growth”, a “determinant of development”, and a “key driver for socioeconomic progress” (WTTC). This rapidly expanding sector contributes approximately ten per cent to global GDP and provides direct employment for over 105 million people, accounting for 3.6 per cent of total employment. Including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, travel and tourism employed 276,845,000 people in 2014, representing 9.4 per cent of total employment (WTTC). The scale of the sector is immense: in 2015, more than 1.18 billion tourists

travelled internationally, while domestic arrivals in various countries exceeded seven billion, highlighting both the magnitude and the promising growth forecasts of tourism worldwide (UNWTO).

The evolution of Indian tourism reflects these global trends. The launch of the “Incredible India” campaign in 2002 marked a watershed moment in the nation’s tourism branding, presenting India as a modern, diverse, and vibrant destination rather than focusing solely on spiritual or historical imagery. This era saw the emergence of specialised tourism sectors, including medical, eco, and wellness tourism (Chaudhary 134). In recent years, the digital revolution has further transformed the industry. The introduction of the e-visa facility in 2014 simplified entry for millions of international travellers, while online platforms such as MakeMyTrip have democratised travel, making it more accessible to India’s growing middle class and reshaping the tourist experience (Ministry of Tourism). These developments underscore the dynamic nature of tourism as both an economic powerhouse and a rapidly evolving cultural phenomenon.

CHALLENGES AND THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM:

Despite its historical richness and rapid growth, Indian tourism faces several modern challenges. Environmental degradation of heritage sites, over-tourism in sensitive regions such as the Himalayas, and inadequate “last-mile” connectivity are pressing concerns. Tourism is no longer a purely “smokeless industry”, as it generates a wide array of economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts (Dileep 210). Economically, it can cause inflation, labour migration, overdependence on the sector, opportunity costs, seasonal employment, and growing inequality. Culturally, it has contributed to commercialisation, commoditisation, staged authenticity, acculturation, reduction in cultural diversity, homogenisation, and occasional cultural clashes (Dileep 210). These complexities highlight the need for strategies that mitigate negative outcomes while sustaining growth.

In response, the focus has shifted towards sustainable and responsible tourism practices. Initiatives such as “Dekho Apna Desh” and “Responsible Tourism” encourage domestic travel to less-explored regions, including India’s North East, thereby distributing tourist flows more evenly and supporting local communities (Ministry of Tourism). By promoting environmentally conscious practices and cultural preservation, these measures aim to balance economic benefits with long-term sustainability. The goal is to ensure that tourism continues to contribute positively to the economy while protecting India’s natural and cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION:

The historical trajectory of Indian tourism reveals a profound transition from the sacred to the secular, and ultimately to the systemic. While the ancient and medieval periods established the cultural and ethical bedrock of hospitality through *Tirthayatra* and the *Sarai* system, the advent of industrialisation during the colonial era acted as the primary mechanist for modern transit. The introduction of the steam engine and the subsequent expansion of the Indian Railways fundamentally altered the “geometry of travel”, shrinking the vast subcontinent and replacing the laborious “travail” of the past with a predictable, schedule-driven experience. This industrial foundation allowed for the democratisation of travel, shifting it from an elite or purely spiritual pursuit to a mass-market reality.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, globalisation acted as the second great catalyst, integrating India into the neoliberal economic circuit. The 1991 economic reforms catalysed the aviation sector and invited international hotel chains, while the “Incredible India” campaign (2002) successfully commodified Indian heritage for a global audience. This era transformed India into a “global destination”, where ancient rituals like Yoga were repackaged as modern wellness products, bridging the gap between millennial traditions and the demands of the global middle class. However, this momentum faced an unprecedented existential crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting

lockdowns and periods of forced isolation brought the global tourism industry to a catastrophic standstill. For India, the pandemic served as a “Great Reset”. The era of isolation underscored the fragility of a tourism model over-dependent on international arrivals and revealed the environmental toll of “over-tourism” in sensitive zones such as the Himalayas. Yet, the lockdown also resulted in a new psychological shift- the rise of “revenge travel” and a renewed focus on domestic exploration. The government’s “Dekho Apna Desh” initiative reflected this pivot, urging citizens to rediscover their own heritage as a means of economic recovery (Ministry of Tourism).

Ultimately, the digital age has emerged as the final frontier in this evolution. The transition from physical isolation to digital hyper-connectivity has birthed a “contactless” tourism infrastructure, where AI-driven itineraries, e-visas, and virtual tours define the traveller’s journey (Ministry of Tourism). As India navigates the post-pandemic landscape, the history of its tourism suggests a resilient synthesis: the country continues to leverage the tools of industrialisation and globalisation while returning to its roots of sustainable, mindful travel. The journey from antiquity to the digital age confirms that while the modes of travel have changed from ox-carts to aircraft, the motive remains an eternal search for discovery, rooted in the timeless principle of *Atithi Devo Bhava*.

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