

## The Rise of Spiritual Tourism in South Asia as Business Internationalization

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### Abstract

*Globalization and digitization are motivating organizations around the world to manage and internationalize their products and services. Adaptively, most Asian companies are internationalizing their businesses with respect to various industries; one obvious example is the tourism industry. The global tourism industry can be segmented into niche types such as heritage tourism, dark tourism, medical tourism, including spiritual tourism. The objective of this paper is to analyze the rise of spiritual tourism in South Asian countries and discusses its operations that are internationalized rather than being region-centric or locally focused. It is argued that public and private tourism operators in South Asia have realized that spiritual tourism presents an attractive product to invest and market based on people, places, and events. However, the challenge is to internationalize multi-faith spiritual tourism in the context of people, places, and events that would be the only way to develop and sustain this niche segment of the tourism business. It is discussed that there are various factors that could enable South Asian countries to effectively internationalize their spiritual tourism destinations. The paper concludes that business internationalization of South Asian spiritual tourism, will not only achieve economic development objectives, but also social and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and bi-lateral diplomatic goals for regional peace and prosperity.*

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**Keywords:** spiritual tourism, South Asia, business internationalization, tourism management, globalization, sustainable development.

## 1. Introduction

A review of the history of internationalizing Asian businesses indicates that Japan was the first country to be recognized as a pioneer in this area. During the early decades of industrialization when countries such as the US and Western Europe were dominating markets for all types of products and services. Japanese government and businesses were the first to plan, have a research and development strategy, manufacture and market their value-added goods in electronics, synthetic fabrics, plastics and pharmaceuticals and service sector as banking to international markets (Asakawa & Westney, 2013; Howcroft, Ul-Haq, & Hammerton, 2008; Trevor, 2019). Japan was followed by Korea and Hong Kong that triggered the birth of the Asian Economic Tigers in the 1990s. The opening of the Chinese economy in 1997 further shifted the domination of international businesses. Furthermore, today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one can see China and India as the rising business stars of Asia. Digitization, globalisation, innovation, societal change, growing purchasing-power, air connectivity, and visa-on-arrival facilities is driving the growth of the global tourism sector (UNWTO, 2019).

It is worth noting that after the 11 Sep, 2001 terrorist attacks, societies across countries were witnessed to be further oriented towards spiritual affairs. Due to many individual and communal factors, individuals and societies are seeking spiritual solutions for worldly endeavours (Blomfield, 2009; Kraft, 2007; Mitroff, 2003). This rise in spirituality across the globe has also influenced the corporate world, including several industries (Brownstein, 2008; Fernando & Jackson, 2006; Lewis & Geroy, 2000).

The travel and hospitality sector is among those industries that realized the influence of the shift of international commerce and trade towards spiritualization (Cohen, 1992; Finney, Orwig, & Spake, 2009; Geary, 2008; Tilson, 2005). This influence of spirituality on tourism related businesses inspired Asian countries to innovate, redesign, and repackage their tourism sites and destinations by adding value. Each country could present and

attract the global traveler; for instance, some under-developed countries can offer their heritage, customs, and ecological sites for keen travelers seeking something different (Seraphim & Haq, 2019; Haq & Medhekar, 2019), and develop new innovative spiritual tourism products and services. Governments in many countries are eagerly exploring and investing in their country's tourism potential to attract more tourist dollars. As a chain reaction, many nations are appreciating the support from tourism focused on employment growth, encouragement of small businesses, infrastructure, sustainable economic development, and poverty reduction (Vu & Turner, 2009). The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) specified that travel and hospitality covered about 35% of the global service industry and more than 70% in 'Least Developed Countries' (WTO, 2007). WTO (2007) further illustrated that worldwide expenditures on tourism were forecasted to reach US\$2 billion per day.

A study from World Tourism Organisation WTO (2009) indicated that 689 million tourists travelled overseas in 2000, from which 40 million people journeyed for spiritual reasons believing in religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. The study of religion and in the context of religious/spiritual tourism has attracted many disciplines from heritage, culture, history, sociology, tourism economics, marketing, and business studies. Tourism can claim to be the major area of academic study with emphasis and linkage with religion and spirituality.

The year 2018 witnessed that the share of leisure travel accounted 56%; visiting friends and relatives, health and religious purposes (27%), business (13%), and 4% did not specify (UNWTO, 2019). In 2018, South Asia received 32.8 million international tourist arrivals, generating US\$ 43.6 billion (UNWTO, 2019). Further, globally international tourists' arrivals in 2019 was 1.5 billion, an increase of 4% over 2018, with a projection of 4% increase in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic unprecedentedly damaged all sectors of the economy including travel and tourism, due to closing borders and all countries imposing travel restrictions, country lockdowns, and social distancing where Umrah and the annual Hajj-2020 are most affected.

The literature on business internationalization generally discusses cases of products and manufacturing where services, specifically tourism, have been respectively ignored. This research aims to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on business internationalization related to the niche segment of spiritual tourism. The context of South Asian countries is used to indicate how business internationalization could be applied through spiritual tourism. The paper contributes to the knowledge body of business internationalization and tourism management by presenting a conceptual model of applying people, places, and events to spiritual tourism in six South Asian countries.

## **2. Business Internationalization**

Johanson and Vahlne (1977) are considered as pioneers of the study on business internationalization. They defined this concept as the “process in which the firms gradually increase their international involvement” (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, p. 23). Among South Asian countries, India and Pakistan could be considered as the forerunners of internationalization of trade in services, but predominantly as exporters of service talent rather than exploiting its inherent expertise domestically (Haq & Medhekar, 2019). The business internationalization as an incremental process is suggested for services since the international association concludes in a sequential method to market expansion among various countries (Kahiya, 2020; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). However, another local services industry that has experienced exponential progress is the tourism industry. It is generally observed that the internationalization of tourism businesses has also shifted from western tourism dominance to eastern destinations. Asian tourism organizers have realized that even if they lack proper transport infrastructure, they have a strong cultural, spiritual, and centuries old heritage infrastructure that can attract a large number of international tourists.

## **3. Spiritual Tourism**

Spiritual tourism has been perceived as a new thought or notion in travel and tourism literature. It is a niche segment of tourism, where a person travels to seek and experience spirituality. In fact, the literature indicates that spirituality and religion related factors

have been part of the main motives for pilgrimage, journeys and adventures for people throughout history (Haq & Jackson, 2009; Hall, 2006). Religion and tourism are agreed to be interlinked by the way of pilgrims going on a pilgrimage to visit religious and spiritual places, temples, mosques, shrines, ashrams, and monasteries (Hall, 2006). Traditionally, journeys of human beings as spiritual tourists have identified them as explorers, voyagers, pursuers, pilgrims, enthusiasts, and believers.

Spiritual Tourism is a sacred journey for each tourist based on his or her personal experience. Cultural and spiritual experience has to be well managed and enhanced for the spiritual tourist journey by the organizers (Jauhari, 2010). There are many examples in history where people travelled for pilgrimage across-borders. Nolan and Nolan (1992) identified differences between religious tourists, non-religious or a secular tourists, “regardless of their motivations, all visitors to these attractions require some level of services, ranging from providing for the most basic human needs to full commercial development that rivals the most secure resort” (Nolan & Nolan, 1992, p.69).

Literature provides numerous empirical studies related to spiritual tourists travelling to Macca, Lourdes, or Jerusalem, as well as ayurvedic wellness and spiritual retreat Ashrams in India and Thailand (Finney et al., 2009; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). To conceptualize spiritual tourism, an acceptable description for a spiritual tourist can be used for this research to support the South Asian tourism business as: “someone who visits a specific place out of his/her usual environment, with the intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature, but within a Divine context, regardless of the main reason for travelling” (Haq & Jackson, 2009, p. 145). Tilson (2005) presented a qualitative study that is based on interviews content analysis examining religious or spiritual tourism, in the context of promotional campaigns and advertising in Spain. It analyzes a Church-State marketing plan in Spain, to attract foreign travelers to Santiago de Compostela to follow the track of St. James which leads to the holy site of St. James the Christian Prophet.

### **3.1. Religions and Spiritual Tourism**

The preceding section discussed spirituality and religion as inter-linked and inseparable. Even if some visitors consider themselves as non-religious spiritual tourists, still the spiritual value of the product, people, place, and event for that destination must be imbedded with a religious belief or rituals (Vukonic, 2015; Haq & Jackson, 2009; Rinschede, 1992). Hence, spiritual tourism in South Asia has to be affiliated with one or more formal religion/s. Some of the major religions spiritual tourism practices in South Asia are analyzed here.

### **3.2. Buddhism**

Buddhism is a growing religion in many countries, for example, in Australia it has been observed to be the fastest growing in numbers. Religious and spiritual sites that attract Buddhists are linked with the life of Buddha, his actions, travels, and achievements (Agrawal, Choudhary, & Tripathi, 2010; Hall, 2006; Rinschede, 1992). Buddhist religious and spiritual tourists visit various holy sites in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and India, and these sites attract millions of devotees from around the world (Gupta, 1999; Rinschede, 1992). Several religious sites linked to Buddhist relics and spiritual institutions are also found in Pakistan (Haq & Medhekar, 2019).

### **3.3. Christianity**

Various authors have written about Christianity-related spiritual tourism since the birth of Jesus more than two thousand years ago (Vukonic, 2015; Fleischer, 2000; Rinschede, 1992). The literature on Christian traveling is very rich and descriptive. The descriptive information presented on Christianity-related religious tourism and pilgrimage have concentrated on recording information about three types of major attractions: holy places directly associated with Jesus Christ in the Holy Land (today's Israel); churches, cathedrals, and shrines of various Christian Saints located in different countries; events and festivals linked with the Christian faith. In South Asian countries, since visits of Christian missionaries to the Mughal courts and colonization, Christians have been residing since 1600s and practicing their religion under various sects. Most Christian-related spiritual

tourism is linked to Churches and Cathedrals that were built during the European colonization of South Asia.

### **3.4. Hinduism**

Hinduism is claimed to be one of the oldest faiths and its evidence found in the 5000 years old archaeological sites of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan civilizations and of Katas-Raj Temple complex (now in Pakistan) and has multiple deities. Hindus believe in many Gods and Goddesses and link various spiritual rituals and physical benefits to various Gods and Goddesses. They also believe that every creation is part of the creator God, as in pantheism, and hence in one way or the other all creatures are holy (Gupta, 1999; Rinschede, 1992). Throughout the year, Hindus are seen celebrating religious festivals linked to various deities and they travel to specific destinations on special dates (Gupta, 1999; Bhardwaj, 1998) based on the lunar calendar. The Kumbh Mela celebrated every 12 years in Allahabad and the pilgrimage to the Ganges River could be accepted as most renowned Hindu sites in India (Gangwar & Joshi, 2008; Gupta, 1999; Phukan, Rahman, & Devdutt, 2012; Rinschede, 1992). Many Indian ashrams are well known for welcoming several local and international spiritual tourists traveling for spiritual education and experience (Gangwar & Joshi, 2008; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005) for promoting yoga, meditation and ayurvedic medicine for overall wellness of the physical body and the soul, to discover oneself and know the meaning of life (Aggarwal, Guglani, & Goel, 2008).

### **3.5. Islam**

In Islam, journeys that are linked to religion and spirituality are divided into three types, hajj/umrah, rihla or ziyara (Timothy & Iverson, 2006; Bhardwaj, 1998; Kessler, 1992). The mandatory trips of Hajj and Umrah are ordained for all Muslims; umrah can be performed at any time of the year while Hajj can be completed only on given dates (Haq & Jackson, 2009). Rihla is an adventure of a Muslim man or woman seeking knowledge, wisdom, health, or philosophy (Kessler, 1992). While, a Muslim's voyages to be present at Mausoleums, shrines, mosques, or khankahs for spiritual growth and love towards the holy people are labelled as Ziyara (Charan, Wang, & Yao, 2018; Timothy & Iverson, 2006;

Bhardwaj, 1998; Kessler, 1992). Spiritual tourism for Muslims encompasses all three types of journeys mentioned above (Haq & Wong, 2011).

The influence of Muslim mystics generally called as Sufis, and their adventures imply that an explanation of Muslim spiritual tourism could not be concluded without mentioning Sufism. Sufism is considered as the mysterious and mystical core of Islam, it advocates meditation as a means of clarifying the mind – ‘fitra’ (Smith, 2007, p. 478). There is an overwhelming amount of literature on Sufism with some recent works based on a growing interest in both Islam and Sufism (Haq & Medhekar, 2019).

### **3.6. Sikhism**

Sikh religious and spiritual tourists have two major destinations, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, and Nankana Sahib, Gurdwara in Sheikhupura, Pakistan. Guru Nanak the Prophet of Sikhism, was born in 1469 at Rai Bhoeki Talwandi, now known as Nankana Sahib and his resting place Kartarpur Sahib (Singh, 2019; Wannell & Hasan, 2008; Singh & Narang, 2004). In Pakistan, another place that is revered by Sikhs is called the Panja Sahib Shrine where a piece of rock has been restored with the palm print of Guru Nanak on it (Singh & Narang, 2004). Several Sikh religious and spiritual tourists from affluent Western countries travel to India and Pakistan to visit these places and pass on Sikh spiritual teachings, rituals, and culture to their younger generations. The recent opening of the corridor for Kartarpur Gurdwara in Pakistan has obviously boosted the spiritual tourism by attracting several Sikhs from India and around the world (Kamboh, Kamal, Nisar, & Kamboh, 2018; Saifi & Suri, 2019; Singh, 2019).

The main research purpose of this paper is to make a connection between the internationalization of South Asian businesses in the context of the rise and growth of spiritual tourism in South Asia. This research examines spiritual tourism practices in South Asia associated with places, people, and events to indicate the emergence and internationalization of Asian businesses. This paper manages the research problem by identifying the goals of internationalizing the businesses related to specific spiritual tourism sites and destinations in multi-faith South Asia. The major

aim of this study is to present a connection among various religious practices in South Asian countries that lead towards designing niche spiritual tourism products, targeting international spiritual tourists.

#### **4. Internationalization of South-Asian ST Businesses**

The conceptual understanding of spiritual tourism linked with faith and religions in South Asian will be used to assess the business internationalization of tourism potential for selected countries. After discussing major religions of the region and their recognition of traveling for a spiritual purpose, a detailed study of the tourism in general and niche spiritual tourism in particular was conducted. The findings of this research reflecting on selected countries in South Asia with respect to their spiritual tourism are explained below.

##### **4.1. India**

The Indian Government has been proactive and constructed the spiritual tourism circuits branded as following the 'Footsteps of Buddha' circuit. Many spiritual tourists follow these circuits making it convenient for their adventures. Other religions circuits are being planned to attract more spiritual tourists from around the world. The 'Incredible India (2015)' campaign and website have also played a big role in attracting foreign tourists. The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2015) forecasted the foreign tourist inflow in India to improve annually by 6.5%. The international tourists' arrivals in 2008 India were 2.5 million, hiked to 6 million in 2010 and they are forecasted to reach 10 million by 2020. The credit for tourism success goes to the smart 'Incredible India Campaign', tourism fairs, and conferences arranged in many countries based on the strategic partnership between the government and the industry. Related trade and commerce opportunities were identified for several niche products for example farm and rural tourism, eco-tourism, medical, heritage tourism, cultural tourism, and spiritual tourism designed to attract local and foreign tourists during all seasons.

India alone with its population of 1.25 billion, along with the neighbouring South Asian countries as members of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Pakistan,

Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Maldives can approximately add up to near over 2 billion people living in the Indian sub-continent. Development and internationalization of this new and niche market packaged as Spiritual Tourism can find many opportunities for developing sustainable tourism as an engine of growth between the SAARC countries. Spiritual tourism will lead to cooperation, friendly and trustful relationships (Sinha, 2019) and peace between the SAARC nations, which will help to mutually protect the cultural heritage, monuments, religious archaeological sites and places of worships for the benefit of the local economy and to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Shinde (2007) studied the local pilgrims' journeys from an informal to an organized and formal business of religious tourism in Vrindavan, Mathura near Agra. Shinde (2010) concluded that spiritual/religious tourism was in the process of creating a new type of business opportunity for business management and internationalization.

Tourism to Sir Aurobindo Ashram was investigated by Sharpley and Sundaram (2005) regarding British travelers in southeast India. It was discovered that there were few regular spiritual tourists and some casual travelers to the Ashram seeking to learn the Indian spirituality. It was established: "there is a continuum of Spirituality inherent in tourism, though this is related to tourists' experience rather than initial motivation" (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005, p.166). The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2005) advocates Indian pluralistic society that it cannot be seen as a Hindu Country, ignoring interactions between Hindus and Muslims in the social and cultural spheres, with large numbers of Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists living together for centuries. As stated by Bandyopadhyay, Morais, and Chick (2008) "India's civilization, which is believed to be over 5000 years old, has been enriched by consecutive migrations which were absorbed into the Indian way of life. As a result, the country's heritage is inextricably related to six major religious identities (i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity). Out of these, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were homegrown, while Islam and Christianity were imported. The cultural past of these religious identities in India is reflected in

their cultural heritage and architectural splendor. Moreover, religious heritage sites are the major tourist attractions that are intensely visited, and incessantly promoted” (p. 792).

#### **4.2. Pakistan**

Pakistan accommodates spiritual and sacred sites related to various religious traditions embracing Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Sikhism (Baloch & Rehman, 2015; Haq & Medhekar, 2019; Singh & Narang, 2004; Wannell & Hasan, 2008). Many churches and Christian monasteries are found in Pakistan constructed some centuries ago when the English were ruling over the united India. Similarly, various pre-historic and contemporary worship places and religious sites linked with different religions present spiritual experience to international tourists visiting today’s Pakistan. Regarding Muslim spiritual tourists, Pakistan offers a range of classic and contemporary places inducing Mosques, Mausoleums, and religious schools associated with Sufi Scholars (Haq & Wong, 2011). Pakistan also offers a treasure of heritage tourism places that are also considered as spiritual sites by followers of various religions (Seraphim & Haq, 2019). The Islamic Ijtima of spiritual tourists across the globe in Raiwind invites over two million devotees to educate and participate in Islamic knowledge and way of life (Haq & Wong, 2011).

The Muslim men traveling as tableegh groups is a general exercise in South Asia, which inspires them to go on a journey in groups to different Mosques for praying and staying (Haq & Wong, 2011). This spiritual travel practice originated in the start of the previous century in India, when factions of educated Muslim men would travel to pray and stay in different mosques, meeting with local Muslims to enhance the spiritual understanding of Islam as a religion and a way of life, the major goal was to keep Islam alive as faith and real practice (Sikand, 2006).

The tableegh journeys illustrate an example for spiritual tourism planning and packaging for tourists across the globe. Tableegh inspires large gathering of Muslims in central Mosques where they stay together as equal men sharing their spiritual knowledge and inspirations for spiritual enhancement. Such events are labelled as an Ijtima and are annually organized in central locations in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka (Haq & Wong, 2011).  
*Journal of Management and Research (JMR)* Volume 7(1): 2020

Wong, 2011). Due to the spiritual awakening in today's world, similar Ijtimas are also organized in main cities of the USA, Australia, England, South Africa, and Indonesia. The annual gathering at Raiwind near Lahore draws more than 2 million Muslim spiritual tourists coming from across the globe (Haq & Wong, 2011).

### **4.3. Bangladesh**

The main religion of Bangladesh is Islam and besides Hinduism and Christianity that has minority following. Bangladesh also has some historical mosques from the Mughal period besides old Hindu temples. There are archeological Buddhist monasteries built during the Pala and Deva Kings. Pahapur and Mahasthan are the Buddhist archeological remains of the largest monastery South East of the Himalayas. MainaMat area contains 50 primal Buddhist tribes as old as 8th to 10th century; Kutila Mura is a small hill with three stupas signifying the three charms of Buddhism (ESCAP, 2003). Besides the Buddhist spiritual sites, there are the Hindu and Islamic spiritual sites which are traditionally synonymous to cultural tourism (McKercher, 2002; Rahman, 2012).

These other religious sites need to be developed and promoted as spiritual tourism sites, to build peace, trust, and cooperation between the South Asian countries. Capital city Dhaka has many spiritual sites from Mughal period, including forts, palaces; seven-dome mosque, and star mosque, and tombs are a few of the Islamic religious sites. Hindu temples include the Dakeshwari temple in Dhaka and Adinath Temple at Moheshkali are archaeological spiritual sites, which the tourists from South Asian would like to visit if there is trust and friendly relationships and peace is built between the countries in South-Asia.

According to Sarker and Begum (2013), Bangladesh is a poor and over-populated country with a negative tourism perception regardless of opportunities for historical, cultural, and archaeological tourism. Bangladesh needs tourism planning and marketing through specialization in one product such as spiritual tourism, to attract tourists from South-Asian neighboring countries sharing a common history. Fahim and Dooty (2014) concluded that there were substantial opportunities for Islam based journeys in Bangladesh given their Islamic cultural heritage and archaeological

sites. However, there are many barriers to the development of Islamic tourism products leave alone spiritual tourism due to political instability, increasing poverty, and lack of infrastructure and awareness of spiritual tourism opportunities.

#### **4.4. Bhutan**

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is sandwiched between India and China. Bhutan is considered the world's largest Buddhist spiritual tourism destination with famous Buddhist temples and monasteries dotted in the Eastern Himalayas (Sharma, 2019). For examples, Taktsang Palphug, GangteyDechen OPhodrang Monatreis, and Padmasambhava temple complex, Bhuddha Dordenma, Trashigang Dzong and Pungtang Dewa chhenbi Phodrang temples, all reflecting Bhutanese belief that spirituality is the way to win the hearts of people (Sharma, 2019). The Prime Minister of Bhutan developed the Gross National Happiness Index (GNH-I) in 1979 based on a holistic approach to development which is socially equitable, cultural preservative, environmentally conservative and promotes good governance and health for its citizens and natural environment (Schroeder, 2015).

#### **4.5. Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka has many Buddhist heritage and spiritual sites which can be a business opportunity to develop and promote inbound spiritual tourism to Sri Lanka, from South Asia and South East Asian countries. Here the predominant faith is Buddhism with believers in Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The following Buddhist Spiritual Tourism sites are famous in Sri Lanka: Anuradhapura, 250 Km near Colombo, established during the 4th century BC, with a well-known Buddhist center for education with Bodhi tree nourished from the seedling that came from Sri Mahabodhi; Kelaniya Temple near Colombo, which was visited by Lord Buddha, 8 years after attaining enlightenment; Sri-Pada Temple (Foot print of Buddha) some refer to it as Adam's Peak (2,237m); Kandy, 11 km from Anuradhapura, is famous for the place where King Devanampiyatissa is said to be converted into Buddhism during 247 BC (ESCAP, 2003).

Teare, Bandara, and Jayawardana (2013) emphasize that for Sri Lanka to become a leading Asian tourism destination, it is

necessary to engage rural communities in an innovative manner for sustainable tourism development and planning to develop opportunities for employment and building micro-enterprises that are self-sustaining. Gunasekara (2015) also emphasized in his qualitative study that Sri Lanka has many famous Buddhist pilgrimage sites to preserve, promote, and exploit their potential as spiritual tourism destinations. Therefore, it is necessary to have a strategic development and marketing plan for spiritual tourism as a niche new product. Further, Samarathunga (2015) also concluded that since the end of the civil terrorism war, Sri Lanka should focus on developing its tourism potential to attract foreign tourists - starting with religious and spiritual tourism from South Asia, and other countries in South East Asian. According to Samarathunga (2015), spiritual tourism has been neglected in Sri Lanka by its government authorities for decades, while the research indicated a huge prospect to develop new Spiritual Tourism product in Sri Lanka through marketing and promotion of Hindu and Buddhist ancient monuments.

#### **4.6. Nepal**

Spiritual tourism is on the rise worldwide, and more so in countries which try to preserve their cultural and spiritual heritage and have annual domestic tourism related to spiritual rituals and pilgrimage as experienced seen in South Asia. Travellers these days are like pilgrims to gain secular understanding and meaning of life through the various experiences and visits to holy places of all religions as spiritual tourists (Jauhari, 2010). Spiritual tourism or religious tourism has not received much attention by policymakers and as a special conference theme, but there is a growing literature in reputed journals.

Nepal being a Hindu Himalayan Kingdom, Buddhism is also widely practiced besides other minority religions like Islam and Christianity. Recently in Nepal there is a revival of Buddhism due to the arrival of western tourists who are interested in Buddhism-solitary retreats and meditation camps (Nyaupane, 2009). Nepal (2000), argues that it is essential to carefully plan tourism policy and management. Partnerships are necessary between local-population; tourism industry and tourism professionals to develop and implement the sustainable tourism policy to protect the

Himalayan region. Thus, it is essential to reap the benefits from tourism in Nepal by diversifying and introducing new tourism products such as spiritual tourism for Hindu and Buddhist temples and monasteries by effective marketing strategies.

Pashupatinath and Guyeshwari temples at the banks of Bagmati River, is famous amongst the Hindus and Buddhist on the spiritual tourism list for pilgrims from South Asia, who outnumber the tourists throughout the year. It is renowned as the most sacred spiritual temple of Lord Shiva for thousands of years and is protected by United Nations World Heritage since 1979 (Nyaupane, 2009). Like Allahabad in India where the pilgrims visit every year to bathe in river Ganges, so is the ritual followed where pilgrims visit the Pashupatinath temple and bathe in the Bagmati river. Much improvement in maintaining the surroundings of the temple site and conservation of the temple is needed. DuCros and Johnston (2002) argue that at Pashupatinath Temple “Today, the tourist track is everywhere. Even those tourists who want to tread lightly may be doing harm to a culture, traditions, and spirituality that the visitor neither shares nor understands. Please need to be robust and well managed to cope with the extra stresses created by the visitors especially if they come in large numbers. What of the impacts on intangible values – on spiritual values? How resilient does a culture have to be to survive under the tourist microscope?” (p.41).

There is an open debate on increasing the use of technology like cable cars to sacred places in Central Himalayan region to Manakamana temple to boost local tourism development opportunities (Bleie, 2003). Spoon (2012) claims that reliance on mechanical transport has blurred the distinction between the spiritual tourists on a pilgrimage or are just tourists visiting to enjoy the beauty of the Central Himalayas. It is possible that some of the normal tourists are there to see and experience spirituality in the Himalayan Mountains. According to Allen (1993), Manakamana Temple is surrounded by holy spiritual sites, caves, birthplace of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, lakes, and snow-capped mountain summits. Spoon (2012), also describes in his empirical study the importance given to the Himalayas-Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) region by the Sherpas as being spiritual place of mountain

protector deities with values of kindness and compassion emphasized and reinforced by tourism. Besides Hindu temples in Kathmandu and other mountainous regions, the most important Buddhist UNESCO World Heritage site (1997) is the birthplace of Buddha in Lumbini, Nepal.

A summary of the above discussion presents six in South Asia and their opportunities for business internationalization based on spiritual tourism. The explicit places, people, and events associated with spiritual tourism in the selected six South Asian countries are given in Table 1. Findings will be further discussed from a management and development perspective in the subsequent section.

**Table 1**

***Emerging Spiritual Tourism in South Asia Based on Places, People & Events***

<b>South Asian Countries</b>	<b>Places</b>	<b>People</b>	<b>Events</b>
<b>India</b>	Historical places or Temples for Hindus or Buddhists, Mosques, old Churches	Religious leaders and spiritual gurus	Special dates of Sufis and other religious leaders and related annual events
<b>Pakistan</b>	Mosques, Sufi Mausoleums, Madrassa, Hindu; Sikh & Buddhism historical places	Sufis from the past, Islamic Leaders	Anniversaries of Sufis, Tableeghi Ijtimas, multi-faith seminars
<b>Bangladesh</b>	Mosques, Sufi Shrines, Monasteries	Islamic Leaders	Anniversaries of local Sufis and Tableeghi Ijtimas
<b>Bhutan</b>	Historical places or Temples for Hindus and Buddhists	Buddhist Monks	Annual Buddhist festivals

<b>Sri Lanka</b>	Historical places or Temples for Hindus and Buddhists, old Churches	Religious leaders for Hindus and Buddhists	Annual gatherings for Hindus and Buddhists
<b>Nepal</b>	Historical & scenic Temples for Hindus	Hindu Religious leaders	Annual gatherings for Hindus

*Source.* Developed for this study

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The rise of spiritual tourism as a social and business practice has been accepted and utilized in different ways among South Asian countries. The Indian Government has been very active in seeking recognition of its tourism sites as in 2002, the Mahabodhi Temple located in Bodhgaya city of India was recognized as World Heritage site by UNESCO (Geary, 2008). The Tourism Department of Bihar State is marketing Bodhgaya as a multipurpose tourism place by Buddhism spiritual branding and by developing 18 holes' golf club and premium resorts. This vision for Bodhgaya, by the other tourism stakeholders given the world heritage site will help to generate jobs as well as preserve the heritage. If this was left to the government, then the condition of Bodhgaya could be in ruins and abused by the public, like many other heritage and spiritual sites in India and Pakistan that are neglected by authorities and vandalized by the public. Similarly, Vukonic (1992) supported that the economic influence of a specific place related to religion and spirituality must not be ignored as it has much in common with tourism in general.

A recent example of internationalization of spiritual tourism is the development, promotion, and opening of the Kartarpur Corridor between Indian Punjab and Pakistani Punjab that is renowned as Mecca by Sikh pilgrims. This was a historic peace Initiative by PM Imran Khan in collaboration with Indian government to develop Sikh spiritual destination for the Indian and global Sikh diaspora. The Kartarpur Gurdwara, where Guru Nanakji lived for the last 19 years of his life is one of the holiest places for followers of Sikhism (Singh, 2019). As quoted by current Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, Kartarpur Gurdwara

is “Mecca and Medina to the Sikhs”. The birthplace and the final resting place have been promoted internationally as the holiest Sikh pilgrimage place worldwide by the Pakistan government. This cross-border visa-free travel for Indian Sikhs will result in significant benefits and multiplier effect on the Pakistan’s economy, in terms of infrastructure development and job creation in construction, hospitality, hotel, tourism, tourism education, spiritual souvenir retailing, restaurants, local transport services, health services, and security for the pilgrims.

The three elements of spiritual tourism presented in findings in Table 1 can be applied to this current example of Kartarpur as business internationalization based on spiritual tourism. (i) Place: Kartarpur Gurdwara located in Pakistan-Punjab); (ii) People: Guru Nanakji founder of Sikh religion; (iii) Events: 550<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Guru Nanakji was celebrated on 9<sup>th</sup> November, 2019. Likewise, the Pakistani Government is progressing to internationalize spiritual tourism related businesses, sites, people, and programs, to promote thousands of years old Hindu, Buddhist and Sufi shrines, temples, Indus valley, and Gandhara heritage and cultural sites and places of worship such as Katas-Raj temple complex.

There has been remarkable increase in local Indian traveling and tourism due to the broadcast of historical serials like Tipu Sultan, Forts of India, life of Buddha and Jodha-Akbar episodes on TV channels. Similar, to the case of the Turkish TV series ‘Ertugral’ that has inspired many people to know the Turk-Islamic history and visit the places linked to the great Turkish heroes of Islam. As religion is an integral part of the Indian Subcontinent in everyday life, most of these historical sites have heritage and religious significance blended, and thus majority of South Asians, travel domestically for spiritual tourism.

Major implications of this study recognize indigenous religious entrepreneurs to play a key role in spiritual tourism in India and Pakistan and South Asia in particular, which is usually a gradation of the customary pilgrimage economy, where entrepreneurship emerges from socio-cultural and knowledge of religious conventions between original representatives. Thus spiritual or religious tourism must be considered as economic activity from its

contribution to the local, national economy through its medium and small scale business opportunities that it generates, to a large scale contribution to the global economy, to be given that importance as a segment of overall tourism. Spiritual Tourism is, therefore, a major but a silent spiritual player in helping and promoting globalisation, as it deals with the movement of faithful, spiritual, and secular people who travel across border and take along their views, ideas, faith, and spirituality.

For tourism managers, this study highlights that spiritual tourism can be internationally managed by the three key factors: places, people, and events related to spirituality, as given in Table 1. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) are essential at local, national, and international levels for promoting and internationalizing spiritual tourism. The outcome can be empirically tested in the future from the supply-side and the demand-side, through qualitative interviews and quantitatively items developed to operationalize the construct with a survey.

## **6. Conclusion and Future Research**

This paper that is constructed on examining spiritual tourism potential and opportunities, presents related tourism people, places, and events. This study establishes that spiritual tourism is emerging as a tourism sector and South Asian countries are observed to be the front runners of spiritual tourism. This domination of South Asia on the spiritual tourism business is presented as a key move to indicate how businesses around the world are experiencing a paradigm shift from westwards to eastwards. International industrialization has already seen countries such as Japan, Korea, and China, and now Indonesia and Malaysia; dominating products' manufacturing and sales. The research presents a new dimension for the tourism industry as a step towards internationalization of businesses. Managing tourism in general and spiritual tourism as a niche segment in a competitive and sustainable manner, amidst the negative effect of terrorism and coronavirus risk is more critical than ever. Spiritual tourism needs to grow in value it offers to spiritual well-being and the economy, in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals in South Asian Countries.

The future research track indicates the need for a confirmatory study to support the findings of this paper. The reliability and validity of the conceptual conclusions of the paper showing the internationalization of Asian businesses could be achieved by follow-through qualitative and quantitative studies. The quantification of outcomes linked to tastes and preferences of South Asian spiritual tourists shall be conducted to achieve effective marketing strategies. Likewise, emerging segments of spiritual tourists visiting famous South Asian spiritual places such as Kartarpur Sikh temple in Pakistan or Ajmer Sharif and Nizamuddin Sufi shrines in India can be classified and related to religion, ethnicity and geographic backgrounds of travelers. Research surveys could be provided to tourists to learn about their needs and wants for spiritual tourism in South Asia. Direct interviews could be arranged with managers and planners of spiritual tourism destinations and events in South Asia, in order to collect detailed information regarding the internationalization of spiritual tourism packaging.

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