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“Spiritual journey of foreign travelers in Varanasi”

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research thesis is aimed to find out the motivations of international tourists visiting Varanasi. The main research question of the thesis is "How do international tourists perceive and interpret their spiritual journey in the sacred city of Varanasi and what variables affect these encounters?" The outcomes of the thesis will be beneficial for the DMC, local government, tourism stakeholders, and future international travellers.

The thesis' theory emphasis on Varanasi and spiritual tourism with an objective to learn more about the spiritual tourism making it easy for the reader to understand the importance of it in this constantly evolving world. There is emphasis given on how Varanasi is an essential city in terms of spirituality. Varanasi is a city located on the banks of Ganga river and is considered one of the sacred cities in Hindu religion. The city offers numerous cultural practices and has temples of Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist religion. There are several cultural ceremonies practiced in the city and is also a center of educational institutions in the field of mythology.

The research is based on travellers who have shared their experience about Varanasi in past interviews, vlogs and research papers. Tourism stakeholders views on international travellers were also recorded in this research. This type of research helps in understanding the motivations of international travellers and how community responds to them.

The findings of the study show that international tourists travelled to Varanasi from different countries and their motivations were mostly identical. Most popular activity during their stay was boat excursion in morning and evenings. To experience Varanasi spirituality at first hand, tourists went to view dead bodies being burnt at the ghats of river Ganga. Other activities like visiting local markets, watching Ganga Arti and Buddhist temples also gathered tourists interest. The majority of them were impressed with their spiritual trip to Varanasi whereas few of them got disappointed with their travel.

Keywords: spirituality, Varanasi, spiritual tourism, international travellers, motivations, culture, foreign travellers

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION	4
1.1 Difference between religious tourism and spiritual tourism	5
1.2 Purpose of the study	6
1.3 Study Questions.....	6
1.4 Methodology.....	7
2 VARANASI	7
2.1 History of Varanasi.....	8
2.2 Geographical location	10
2.3 Demographic data.....	12
2.4 Religious Importance	13
2.5 Culture and traditions of Varanasi	15
2.6 Famous places of Varanasi	18
2.7 Summary	21
3 SPIRITUALITY AND TOURISM	21
3.1 Spiritual tourism destinations around the world	23
3.2 Spiritual tourism and destinations in India	25
3.3 Motivations of Spiritual travelers	27
3.4 Effect of COVID-19 on spiritual tourism.	29
3.5 Impact of spiritual tourism on the environment	31
3.6 Role of technology In Spiritual tourism.....	32
4 EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN TRAVELLERS IN VARANASI	34
4.1 Dan's Experience.....	36
4.2 Matt Phillips experience.....	37
4.3 Anna's travel experience	37
4.4 Andrea Marchegiani's experience	38
4.5 Gabi's experience	39
4.6 Joe and Liisu	40
4.7 Jack and Paige.....	41
4.8 Summary and Conclusion	41
5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	42
6 DISCUSSION.....	57
7 CONCLUSION	61
8 REFLECTION	62
REFERENCES	64

1 INTRODUCTION

Spiritual tourism has seen an increase in the number of travellers since the Covid era. It is one of the popular forms of tourism in India and is expanding at a rapid rate comparing other regions of world. Tourists spiritual experiences of Varanasi will be explored in the thesis hence providing important information on their motives.

Tourism is an important reasons behind globalization as it motivates people and groups to exchange thoughts among cultures and religions. There is a specific surge in the list of travellers visiting destinations as spiritual seekers. United Nations World Tourism Organisation in 2016 quoted religious tourism as one of the fastest-growing forms of tourism. (Dowson, Yakub & Raj, 2019, p.14.)

Spiritual travel academically is often analyzed by its social, economic, and historical factors. Feeling of spirituality could be defined as a sense of deep affection of gaining self-confidence, worthiness, motivations, and understanding that surpasses physical states, emotions, and societal roles. Spirituality refers to the conviction that there's more to life than what can be seen or recognized, leading to a sense of wholeness, inner harmony, & tranquillity. (Van Kamm, 1986.)

Defining spiritual tourism as an important asset in the current times, as the world is not any more secure and reliable, witnessed during the COVID-19 times. A virus that started from a small city and was able to conquer the world with its effects. There were lockdowns which made people rethink the world they live in and how it impacted their lives. Feelings of stress and anxiety were developed among people therefore changing their approach towards social and cultural environments. Long-term perspective changed people's thinkings

towards spiritual travel. Society seeks benefits from spiritual tourism when they are under mental stress hence forming relationship among them. (Marco, Snigdha & Nimit, 2023.)

Spiritual tourism does not only cover religious tourism destinations, but occur at different places where a traveller can gain cultural experience therefore influencing their mind and spirit with a soothing effect. There are various destinations around the world that offer spiritual tourism such as Machu Picchu and The Sacred Valley of Peru located in Southern America, where one can participate yoga and meditate in nature, another destination is Rishikesh in India known as the yoga capital of the world, next destination is Kyoto in Japan where a spiritual traveller visits the temples and participates in mindfulness practices, and the destination covered in this thesis, is Varanasi in India considered as one of the holiest cities in the Hindu mythology and is located on the banks of river Ganga. (Worldpackers, 2023.)

1.1 Difference between religious tourism and spiritual tourism

To differentiate between the religious and spiritual tourism, as it is difficult to define religious tourism without the use of spiritual feeling, where religious tourism is based on the religion found in every culture of the world and its based on values (Norman, 2011, p.17). Spirituality is defined as an individual search for meaning of life and is found in every religion (Horri, 2018). In spirituality, a person connects with their soul to know about the world and experience what is beyond it (Kale, 2004, p.93).

Differentiating in reference to the motivation of the travellers, a religious traveller is of a religion that he follows and visits the site based on it whereas a spiritual traveller could be of any religion and visit a site that would help him in gaining spiritual knowledge. Religious tourism in simple terms is a travel made to a religious destination and the motive of the visit is religion. (Blackwell, 2007, p.37.) Spiritual tourism is defined based on a search for life, with a spiritual

quest, creating a demand to travel, hence motivating a traveller to visit the destination (Kujawa, 2017).

1.2 Purpose of the study

Varanasi is a sacred city in India and is a famous destination worldwide for its spiritual tourism. The purpose of the study will be focussed on understanding the motivations of international travellers, as why an international traveller will choose a destination such as Varanasi for its spiritual tourism. In this, there could be personal and cultural factors that could determine their choice of destination.

Another purpose of the study is to take in consideration the experiences of an international traveller faced during travel. Travellers' experiences of spiritual activities and its effects on their personal growth, therefore helping in finding their motivation and making it easy to understand their travel choices.

Spiritual tourism effects on the stakeholders would also be considered as it could improve their interactions in the future. The suggestions cover challenges faced by the international tourists and what are the opportunities for the stakeholders.

The study will also consider raising awareness of spiritual tourism in the academic literature and will create understanding amongst the future travelers to undergo the spiritual journey at Varanasi.

1.3 Study Questions

The research topic involves experiences of people involved in spiritual practices and are able to transform their lives in a meaningful way. To consider the main reasons that motivate them to visit spiritual destinations and what do they expect from it in return. The expectations, in this case, could be considered before and after travelling their travel.

Considering the sustainable and ethical practices of the city that a traveller visits different from their culture and how the site reacts to the inflow of tourism? Tourism in the city will affect its economy and the local people hence could face backdrops of excessive tourism.

Another question that will help us through the research is issues that the travellers experience during their spiritual journey. Research also focuses about the chances of improvement for cities that could enhance in attracting more spiritual tourists from around the world. Thus, how a sacred city like Varanasi could make contributions to global spiritual tourism.

1.4 Methodology

The approach utilized for the thesis is qualitative research conducted by means of case reports integrated with interviews and information provided by foreign tourists visiting Varanasi. In addition to this, personal accounts from various travellers will be included in this thesis.

To get a better understanding of traveller behaviours, videos and blogs will be investigated and knowledge based on facts will be employed in this thesis. During the thesis process there will be special consideration would be given to the religious and cultural sensitivities of the people.

2 VARANASI

Varanasi, a city known for its sacred values among the Hindus and is considered as a link between Hindu rituals, their sacred journeys, and festivals. The town follows a pattern that largely resembles a heavenly archetype signifying the strength of Cosmo's magical forces. It is mapped in such a way that it connects shrines and sacred sites in a circle. (Rana, 1993, p.1-2.)



Picture 1. Photo of banks of Varanasi on Ganga River, Rajesh Balouria

According to my views as Hindu the city is considered as one of holiest cities in our religion and is located on the ghats of sacred river Ganga. It is believed in the Hindu methodology that a bath in the Ganga River can take away all your sins from your life. The city is considered as a place where death can take you to nirvana hence breaking the chain of being re-born. In this chapter of the thesis, I will be going through the different aspects of the city including its historical background, geographical and demographical information, religious and cultural importance, and spiritual landscape.

2.1 History of Varanasi

It was the first time in the 2nd century when Dash Ashvamedha ghat of Varanasi was mentioned in the books because of the massive horse sacrifice rite carried out by the Naga dynasty's kings. The ghats of Varanasi got involved in economic trades and commercial activities in the Gupta era during the 3rd to 6th centuries. There were 5 ghats that became popular in 11th century named

Adi Keshava, Trilocana, Kapalamocana, Vedeshvara, Svapaneshvara. People visited these ghats on solar and lunar eclipses, mostly to see the performances and offer donations to Hindu preists. (Rana, 2004, p.3.)

According to Mark Twain, "Banaras is older than the history, older than traditions older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them together". In the 17th century the ghats, festivals, and rituals of Varanasi became popular among the people of this area. The ghats were rebuilt and re-shaped in the 19th and 20th centuries, and after the formation of the Uttar Pradesh government in 1950 there were stairs built, and a special care of the ghats was taken. The major construction of temples, Sanskrit schools, and monasteries took place at the riverfront. There were rest houses built by kings of different states in India to accumulate the pilgrims visiting Varanasi. (Rana, 2004, p.3.)

In the history of Varanasi, it was the capital of the state Kashi. Although these two names are used for the city in recent centuries and are fully exchangeable. In the Veda like Atharva Veda which is considered a sacred book in the Hindu religion, Kashi was always referred to as the state and Varanasi was its capital city. The name Varanasi is taken from the holy book of Mahabharata which is derived from the name Varana, as it was the name of the river in the north of the city and the word Asi comes from the other water stream that flows in the south of the city. (Kuber, 1974, p.1-15.)

In the Buddhist literature, Varanasi was referred to as Banaras and is now used by the masses. The name Banaras was used during the British and Mughal rule in India. According to Hindu literature, the place is named Avimukta which means the city was never abandoned, another name mentioned in the literature is Anandavana that means forest paradise with the presence holy river Ganga, Rudravasa the name mentioned in the Hindu books which means the city of lord Shiva, the city in Hindu literature is also mentioned as Mahasmashana meaning "The Great Cremation Ground". (Rana, 2009, p.24-25.)

Varanasi as a town developed over the ages which started to grow during the Muslim empire in India. After the end of the Muslim empire the town began to expand marking its fame and importance amongst other cities in India. The city was famous for its Vedic culture in the early period of history and had enough wealth generation through agricultural produce and other dairy products. Some sources of wealth for the city were the handicrafts produced through the raw materials of agricultural sector. There were artists that produced silk cloth as it was the main attraction to businessmen from different parts of India and the world. (Kuber, 1974, p.22-23.)

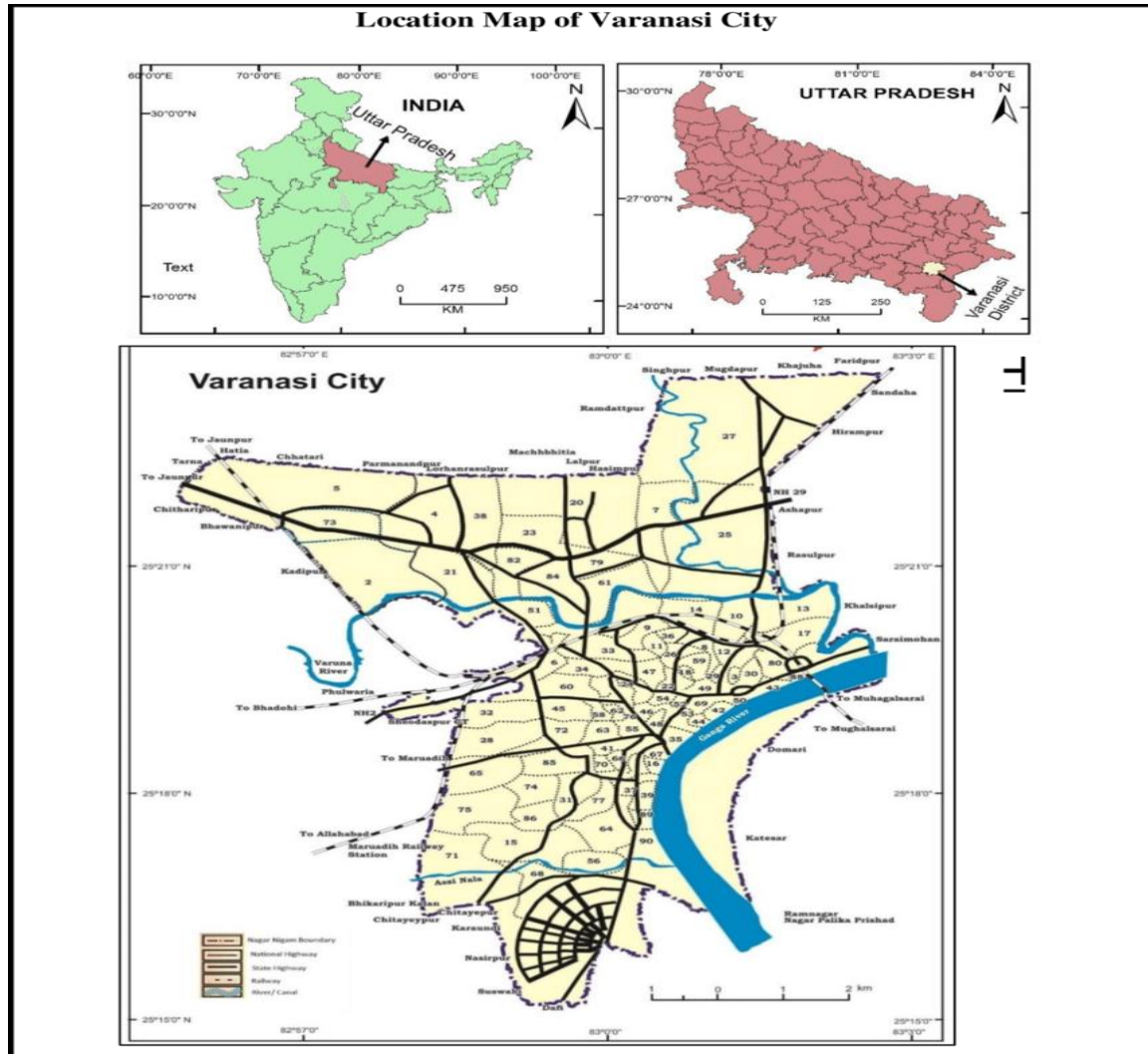
There were fairs organized in the earlier times in which people from different parts of world came to buy goods, and made Varanasi a central marketplace of India. This was made possible due to an excellent transport system of the city through water and road. (Kuber, 1974, p.28-29.)

There were Shreshthies (merchants) who made the backbone of the city in its commerce owning huge some money, as they used to order and transport goods in bulk quantities to distribute it all over India. The Shersshthies were considered as friends of the king and they participated in different occasions of the Kingdom. The journey of merchants was not limited to India, but they used to carry goods to different parts of the world including China, and central and western Asia. In the 18th and 19th century India witnessed the rule of Britishers and there were several products introduced at cheaper prices compared to the local craftsmen of Varanasi hence making locals business conditions less profitable. While the trade continued to be successful as the city survived on the rich businessmen trades through the river waters. (Kuber, 1974, p.36-38.)

2.2 Geographical location

Varanasi is situated in the middle of the Ganga Valley, and there is a bank formation on the left side of the river Ganga where the city has been built. The

city is well connected through the rail networks, which connect it to major cities of India such as New Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. (Rana, 2009, p.18.)



Picture 2. Location Map of Varanasi City, Praveen Kumar Rai

Varanasi has a sub-tropical monsoon climate, which features 3 major seasons, the summer season from March to mid-June which records a fluctuating temperature between 32°C to 41°C, the winter season from November to February, and the rainy season from mid-June to September. The dry months of the year face heat waves and dust storms whereas the months of the rainy season witness high humidity up to 90%. Due to high temperatures in the

summer season and high humidity levels in the rainy season, it is recommended to visit the city in the winter months. (Rana, 2009, p.22-23.)

2.3 Demographic data

Varanasi is often described as the Cultural capital of India, and it started to grow in population after the 18th century. In the year 1991, the city recorded a population of a million which increased to 1,211,749 in 2001. The city is also called the city of learning as it has different types of schools both religious and degree colleges. It is densely populated in the old city centre where it is hard to implement development projects. Some projects are planned by the government which could change the course of the city, but they would be conducted at the cost of a decrease in the no. of parks and open grounds. (Rana, 2007.)

Varanasi has always seen an increase in the population except the years from 1891-1921, as this was majorly due to the floods, pandemics, and effects of World War 1. It witnessed an increase in the population even after World War 2 as people came to the city in search of employment. During the late 20th century, the city became more urban hence there was an increased influx of population due to the rural-to-urban migration. The city's growth became slower as the decades past indicating less focus taken on building different industries. (Rana, 2007.)

The urban area of Varanasi has increased since the year 1991 which marks it as density of 7081 persons/per sq. km, and was at 9434 persons/ sq.km in 1981. The population of Varanasi was around 1,203,961 according to the 2001 census out of which only 26.64% population was employed. The industrial and manufacturing jobs accounted for around half of the employment. Most industrial jobs were spinning, weaving, metal manufacturing, electrical machinery, and publishing. (Rana, 2007.)

According to the latest updates in the year of 2020, the city had a population of 2.7 million people and it was ranked as the 41st most populated city in Asia, where around 853.7 thousand workers were employed as a labour force. The city has also inclined towards other sectors for employment apart from the major sectors of manufacturing. Merchant wholesalers, administrative services, food services, real estate, construction, and technical services are some of the employable sectors of the city. (Metroverse, n.d.)

2.4 Religious Importance

Most people in India are associated with some form the religion and it plays an important role in their lives. Around 78% of people in India follow Hinduism, apart from Hinduism there are other religions practiced in India such as Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. (Peter, 2002, p.7.) That is why the country believes in the philosophy of harmony through diversity.

Varanasi has people settling in from different religions, integrating into the city's diverse culture while preserving it's uniqueness. Therefore, Varanasi reflects Indian customs and culture including diverse ethnicities, traditional methods of learning, faiths, incredible architecture, and holy spots. (Rana & Dar, 2003, p.1-11.)

Three religions took birth in India, which are Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, and all of them have deep connections with the sacred city of Varanasi. Therefore, most religious places belong to Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism religions and people come to perform rituals, celebrate their festivals, and worship in the temples or holy places. The city maintain its ancient reputation uninterruptedly and gives a effective understanding of the Indian religions. (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40.)

Varanasi is one of the most sacred places for Hinduism, it like Mecca to Muslims and Vatican to Catholics. It is known as Sapta puri considered as one of the 7 holiest places for Hindus providing salvation(moksha) to them. There

are around 50000 Brahmins who live here and perform religious services in the city. (Myra, 2001, p.121.) There are around 3000 Hindu temples in the city and most of them belong to lord Shiva. The city is considered as a permanent place of residence for lord Shiva who is regarded as the destroyer in Hindu literature. (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40.)

Most Hindus bath in water of Ganga River and give honour to their ancestors and gods by holding river water in their palms and pouring it back into the river. People offer flowers to the holy river and carry water of the river to their home and use it for ceremonial occasions. Hindus carry the ashes of their loved ones and bury them in the river. (Niels, 1994, p.194-209.)

In Hindu mythology, Varanasi is considered so holy, in which the belief holds as when a soul leaves a body, it is considered pure enough to enter the afterlife without the need for reincarnation. Most of the spiritual Hindus wish to visit Varanasi once in a lifetime and have been reluctant to die in Varanasi in their old age. (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40.) Other than that, there are riverbanks in the city of Varanasi which are called ghats and will be discussed further part of this thesis.

Buddhism is believed to start at a place located 13kms northeast of Varanasi. The place is Sarnath where Gautam Buddha conducted his first lecture about the principles of Buddhism. After his lecture ended the park was declared as a pilgrimage site for the Buddhist community. (Shobhna, 2003, p.11.) It is believed that Gautama Buddha travelled from Bodhgaya to Sarnath after he obtained enlightenment (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40).

The Buddha presented his initial talk on Dharma and the eight-fold teachings at the deer park of Sarnath. The park has a cylindrical brick monument named dhammeka Stupa acting as a landmark spot of Gautama Buddha. (Joanna, 1975, p.171-192.) Spiritual Buddhist travellers travel from different parts of the world to visit this stupa. Around Varanasi there are ruins of Buddhist monasteries and temples which were made by Burmese, Tibetan, and Chinese Buddhists. (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40.)

Jainism is another religion that holds a special importance towards Varanasi, known as the birthplace of Parshvanatha, a prominent person in Jainism. Jainism focuses on approach towards life in which it promotes happiness. There were 4 Tirthankaras (the ford makers) born in Varanasi hence the place is considered as a holy place in Jain religion. (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40.)

The region of Sarnath holds importance in the Jain holy places as it has Jain temple and stupas located over there. It is believed that the 11th Jain Tirthankara named Shreyanshnath was born in Sarnath,. (Cemil Kutluturk, 2013, p.36-40.) There are also Jain ghat located in Varanasi near the birthplace of 7th Jain Tirthankara. These temples hold significant importance in the Jain religion and people consider visiting these places as once in a lifetime experience. (Bharat, 2002, p.42.)

2.5 Culture and traditions of Varanasi

Varanasi is famous for organizing melas(fairs) of devotion throughout the year where rituals and traditions started by ancestors are followed with devotion and dedication. The festivals and fairs portray the real culture of Varanasi to the world, and they are an important aspect of the city. (Bala, 2022, p.43-49.)

Some of the notable fairs are as following; The Anant Chaudas Mela which marks the beginning of festival named Ram Lila in Ramnagar district, The Asnan Jatra Mela where the devotes visit to see Lord Jagannath(Hindu god) being bathed in the holy Ganga river, The Bawan – dwadasi Mela as devotes take bath in the Ganga river and male devotes in the evening go to watch dramatic performance of their lord Vishnu, The Burwa – Mangal Mela in which the Hindu devotes visit the temple of goddess Durga and spent their night on boats where they performing dancing and singing during the night, The Anark – Chaudas Mela which is celebrated on the birthday of Hindu Lord Hanuman and devotes apply scents and perfumes, after which they go for a bath in the Ganga River, The Vriddhkal Mela, The Batasparikhsha Mela, The Dashahra

Mela, The Durga Mela, The Dhela Chauth Mela, The Dhan Teras Mela, The Diwali Mela, The Dharaddi Mela, The Dangan Mela, The Fatima Mela, The Gan-gaur Mela, The Ganga-Saptami Mela, The Ganesh Chauth Mela, The Gazi-miyan ka Mela a festival for Muslim religion devotes, celebrated for the respect towards nephew of the Sultan Mahmud of Ghizni where Hindu devotes also participate in good numbers, The Holi Mela, The Kajri Mela, The Kartik Purnima Mela, The Lota Bhanta Mela, The Lolarik Chhath Mela, The Narsinh Chaudas Mela, The Navratri Mela, The Nirjala Ekadasi Mela, The Nag Panchami Mela, The Nagarpradakshina Mela, The Panchkosi mela, The Rath Yatra Mela, The Surya Mela, The Ran-Naumi Mela, The Sankuldhara Mela, The Vedavyas Mela, The Shiva-ratri Mela, The Yamadwitiya Mela. (Bala, 2022, p.43-49.)



Picture 3. Varanasi-Photographing Kartika Purnima/ Dev Diwali Festival and Ancient Traditions (Darter, 2022)

Varanasi has got rich culture that is based on its ghats. It has streets that are old and restricted, consisting of stalls with food, clothes, and spices. There are marriages carried during the whole night with rituals that end up by taking blessings from the river Ganga. It is believed that Indian classical music had

originated from Varanasi. Famous devotional musicians such as Tulsidas, Raidas, Kabir, Meera, Surdas have connections with Varanasi which made it a flourishing music center. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Vallabhacharya are some of the pronounced saints who promoted the music in Varanasi. The Indian classical music styles such as Chaturang, Dadra, Kajri, Bhajan, Dhrupad, and Kathagyan have links to Varanasi. (Baral, Sharma & Amulya, n.d.)

The famous ritual of cremation is done on the ghats (riverbanks) with an open-air surrounding, where people earn money by doing the business of death. (Parry,1994.) Most people of Banaras believe in the concept of Masti regarded as living a life without any worries and care. People usually try to enjoy their lives along working hard in their occupations. They opt for music, art, and Varanasi's food for their enjoyment. (Pramila,1996, p.3.)

The city has people from different backgrounds, castes, and religions who live together and celebrate each other's festivals with unity. The interactions between different backgrounds of individuals help them understand each other's religions where they can learn moral values and live an enhanced life. There are rituals among some individuals in which they follow their ancestors' practice of not consuming food until they take a bath and offer a prayer to their god. (Radhika, 2018.)

The ritual practiced in the history of Hindu religion is still practiced in Varanasi, consisting of giving up a lot of things in a woman's life when she becomes a widow and wearing a white dress for the rest of their lives. They are not allowed to wear any coloured dresses and jewellery to practice a simple life. It is still a choice of a widow to practice this ritual as she could have become a widow at a young age in life. (Radhika, 2018.)

Varanasi holds a rich culture and heritage hence it could be represented as a museum for Indian culture and artistic endeavours. The city is famous for Banarasi silk sarees known for their zari and zardori embroidery famous among the international markets. The other industry related to the culture is

wood carving industry involving carvings depicting legendary characters including Gods and Goddesses of Hindu religion. Carpet manufacturing is also embedded in the culture of Varanasi, the carpets are made up of wool and silk using methods of Persian and Tibetan techniques. The carpets started to be in use during Mughal eras to offer prayers. Metal also forms an important element in the culture of Varanasi, Meenakari art is an in demand art of metal articles used to make ornaments. (Baral, Sharma & Amulya, n.d.)

2.6 Famous places of Varanasi

Varanasi has a variety of tourist attractions in the form of religious, sacred, and food tourism. One of the key elements in those attractions is the ghats (riverbanks) along the river Ganga. There are 84 ghats in Varanasi that are filled with spiritual and religious traditions, offering tourists a chance to offer Brahmins (priests) donations to fulfil their wishes. (Sayantani, Anwesham Ranjita, & Adrija, 2015, p.20.)

The Dashashwamedh Ghat is a primary and prominent ghat in Varanasi and is situated near the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Hindu mythology believes that the ghat was built by lord Brahma to welcome lord Shiva during a Vedic ritual. The ghat was prominent amongst the Indian rulers where they demonstrated their royal rule. The ghat has tradition, where a group of Brahmins gather in the evening to perform Agni Puja (worship of fire) dedicated to lord Siva, Surya (Sun), Fire, and river Ganga. (DIP, 2018.)

The Agni puja when performed at the ghats of Ganga is known as Ganga Arti. In this ceremony several bells are rung, conch shells are blown, and brass cymbals are clanged by the priests who are dressed up in dhoti kurta and they chant the Vedic mantras and raise the brass lamps in the air. The duration of arti is 45 minutes in which idol of Goddess Ganga is worshiped with the help flowers and incense sticks. (Incredible India, n.d.) The Ganga Arti is also performed at the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Ghat adjacent to Dashashwamedh Ghat. The ghat is influenced by the Mughal – Rajput architecture and has

painted ceilings and ancient windows. The ghat has a Man Mahal where an observatory was created by the Sawai Jai Singh 2 and is now managed by The Archaeological Survey of India. (Sayantani, Anwesham Ranjita, Adrija, 2015, p.20.)



Picture 4. Evening Ganga arti is being performed at Dashashwamedh Ghat, Varanasi, India (Wikimedia Commons, 2022)

The Panchaganga Ghat is a sacred ghat situated at the meeting point of five heavenly rivers: Saraswati, Ganaga, Yamuna, Kirana, and Dhutpapa. The ghat has a Alamgir Mosque mosque built by emperor Aurangzeb and it is believed that the mosque was built on the ruins of a Vishnu temple constructed by the Marathas. (Sayantani, Anwesham Ranjita, Adrija, 2015, p.21.)

2 ghats are famous among the people of Varanasi for cremation; Harish Chandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat. Harish Chandra Ghat serves for cremation, based on the belief of truth and charity. Before the 1980 the cremation took place only with woods which has now being modernized with electric systems inaugurated at the ghat after the 1980's. It is believed that a soul of the body cremated here reaches salvation(moksha). The Manikarnika

ghat is known for its death anniversary rituals therefore the ghat is known as Mahasmasana (great cremation ground). Tarakesvara temple of Lord Shiva is at this ghat, and it is believed that a body burnt at this ghat gets salvation (moksha) lord Shiva helps in this process by whispering the Taraka mantra in the ears of the deceased. (Sayantani, Anwesham Ranjita, Adrija, 2015, p.21.)



Picture 5. Great manikarnika ghat. (Pinterest.n.d.)

Kashi Vishwanath Temple is one of the most 12 sacred temples (Jyotirlingas) of lord Shiva and is located on the western banks of the river Ganga. The major deities worshiped in the temple are Vishweshwara and Shri Vishwanath referring to "Lord of universe". The place is of great significance in the Hindu religion as there is a belief that Vishweshwar Linga in the temple grants peace in the form of salvation and fulfils the requests of the faithful. (Shweta, 2020.)

Varanasi is also known as the city of temples as it has numerous numbers of temples. Some of them are the Durga Temple also known as Durgakund, Maha Kali Temple, which is also named Lakshmi Kund, The Vishalakshi Temple where rituals are dedicated to Goddess Parvati, Maha Saraswati

Temple also known as Bhageshwari Kund, Bharat Mata Temple which is based on concept of love towards Mother India. (Shweta, 2020.)

2.7 Summary

Varanasi is mix of culture offering travellers different forms of activities to pursue their spiritual journey. The city's location is in the central India with temperatures that are suitable to travel. The city is not that much overcrowded like big Indian metropolitan cities offering an sense of peacefulness. Almost all religions are performed here making it a diverse destination for the travellers. It is rich in culture and heritage as it has ancient monuments and temples. The city represents the everlasting nature of Indian spirituality and tradition.

3 SPIRITUALITY AND TOURISM

Among the vast and expanding fields of tourism, innovative ways of travel have evolved, which incorporate in many aspects such as health, culture, religion, and nature (Gee & Fayos- Sola, 1997). People take in consideration of these aspects as one aspect ways more than the other while choosing a travel destination. If a person travels to a traditional medicine destination for the betterment of his health, he also gets involved in practices such as meditation, and yoga and be in nature to experience different cultures. (Maria, 2020.)

Spiritual searchers engage in practices such as meditation and prayer to fully immerse themselves in the surroundings and are not like the other tourists that just visit a destination to take photo (Attix 2002). Humans have a variety of reasons to travel to sacred sites including devotion, ceremonies, schooling, and exploration (Morinis, 1992). The tourism stakeholders have increased their interests by investing in spiritual travel destinations and packages, as travel nowadays have become easily accessible and affordable. Spiritual tourism is

one of the least studied aspects in this field, as the first attempt to study this topic academically was made in the year 1992. (Daniel & Dallen.)

To define a spiritual traveller who may also be known as a cultural traveller, is a tourist who experiences cultural attractions and engages in numerous activities during his stay, regardless of his primary motive for travel. Spiritual tourism includes both concrete goods and services such as places of worship, temples, spiritual centres and intangible offerings like education, celebrations, spiritual events, and social gatherings. (McKercher, 2002.)

Spiritual tourism differs from religious travel as it aims to provide an authentic spiritual journey without the influence of conventional religious ideas (Kuijawa, 2017). It all depends on the belief of the traveler which could be religious or non-religious (Gill et al. 2011). The difference between both forms of tourism is discussed in the introduction part of the thesis.

Wellness tourism is a term in which both yoga tourism and spiritual tourism belong, but in a broader concept yoga tourism is completely different from spiritual and wellness tourism. Moreover, yoga tourism is more inclined toward retreat tourism, which focuses on physical well-being and psychological evolution. (Bowers & Cheer, 2017.)

Tourists can have spiritual awakening through various means that include retiring to a monastery or attending ceremonies of faith (Abbate & Nuovo, 2013). Within the tourism industry pursuing spiritual endeavors can be demanding, intense, philosophical, divine, and even life-altering or uplifting (Cheer et al., 2017, p.187).

According to Halim et al., (2021), spiritual tourism emphasis on the personal development of a traveller with some key elements like yoga meditation and improving their thought process, helping in improving the psychological self. Through spiritual tourism travellers gain understanding and insight to reach their full potential and achieve high awareness, helping them to overcome daily life obstacles and feel fulfilment in life.

In today's world where most things are materialistic and the world seems to move more towards this direction, spiritual tourism seems to be an emerging tourism trend. Some common issues like stress, anxiety, and depression seem to be spread all over the world, which gives a chance for spirituality to increase in the following years.

3.1 Spiritual tourism destinations around the world

Sedona serves as a prominent tourist destination that is in the middle of the state of Arizona, USA. It is famous for its stunning red-rock scenery and known for being holy and possessing influential energy vortexes, that help in the healing process, meditation, and exploration of oneself at various levels. (Naylor, 2020.) Sedona's tourism sector started to emerge in the early 1950s whereas most of its infrastructure was built during the 1980s and 1990s. Travelers visiting Sedona often put their emphasis on spirituality and faith which involves unconventional activities. Most of the tourists visiting Sedona go to archaeological sites, festivals hiking trails, museums, tours, galleries, and wellness and spiritual centers. (Weldon Rychman, 2021, p.2-4.)

Machu Pichu is referred as the historical marvel of the Incas, bordered by jewel-green hills which is a dream location for several travelers (Keely, 2009). Tourists visiting Machu Picchu find it difficult to describe their feelings, as the place provides an energy that is tough to describe. According to the studies conducted on tourists, the energy might originate through the ground or its surrounding buildings. Several places in that area possess an energy that affects the tourists such as the sacred rock which is a massive unevenly formed shiny rock with mountain-like curves and is believed to exude spirituality and energy, The Guardian's House is the highest archaeological site in the city which is made up of rustic stone and served as the clock tower, tourists come here to relax and practice yoga hence making it the most spiritual place of the city. Intihuatana is a rock placed on a platform that earlier worked as an astronomical calendar and tourists receive a magnificent amount

of energy from the rock, as it receives energy from the sun. (Ticketmachupicchu, 2020.)

Koyasan is a holy site located in Wakayama Japan and is surrounded by mountain peaks. It is a site of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism which aims to express gratitude towards nature and offer prayer to its ancestors. There are two major sacred places in the city: Dabjo Garan in which monks are being trained and Okunion which is known as the meditating place of the founder monk in this form of religion. Koyasan gained popularity among the domestic and international markets after it was registered as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004. Apart from acting as a spiritual tourist destination, there are also other motivations to travel to this place which consists of religious and experience tourism. (Kaori, 2021, p.9-10.)

Chiang Mai, located in the north of Thailand has a population of over 200000 inhabitants. The place is known for Lanna Buddhism which is a type of Theravada Buddhism that originated in the northern part of Thailand. Several travel businesses in Chiang Mai offer spiritual pilgrimage packages, containing a variety of spiritual activities such as mountain retreats, and yoga places in the downtown area, where one can explore oneself spiritually based on their understanding and interest. (Jaeyeon & Michael, 2020.) According to (Choe & O' Regan 2015; Schedneck 2017) Chiang Mai's attractiveness to international spiritual travelers originates from its simplicity, creativity visible legacy, sacred sites, interactions.

Indonesia a country that consists of most of the Muslim population and has an Island named Bali with more than 84% of the Hindu population. Bali is a favorite destination among international travelers because of its weather, recreational activities, and affordable prices. In Bali, there is a small rural village named Ubud which is famous for its spiritual tourism among international travelers. (Bell, 2014.) Ubud's quasi-spiritual rituals have become popular among the Western world, who want to seek spiritual comfort. The village has destinations that bring enlightenment, peace, and harmony among

the travelers who act as vital elements in promoting the place among other tourists. (Claudia, 2019.)

Some of the other spiritual destinations around the world include Half-moon Caye in Belize, Ladder Ranch in New Mexico USA, Sabi Sands in South Africa, Isle of Arran in Scotland, and Cape Reinga in New Zealand (Lyn, 2023).

3.2 Spiritual tourism and destinations in India

As an Indian citizen, I have traveled to different places around India which offer spiritual tourism and hold importance in our heritage and culture. The spiritual places could have different meanings for different travelers depending on their beliefs. A tourist destination in India could offer different types of tourism such as a religious destination for a tourist could also be a wellness destination for another traveler. Therefore, in India, it is difficult to focus on a specific destination that could offer only certain forms of tourism.

India has been promoting itself with a campaign named 'Incredible India' and has a slogan of 'Atithi Devo Bhavah' which when translated into English means 'Guest is God'. The country plans to improve the travel arrangements for all religions and highlight the significance of spiritual tourism. In earlier times medicine was the main reason for domestic and international travelers that boomed India's spiritual tourism. (Medhekar & Haq, 2009.)

There are several spiritual destinations in India where there are Ashrams and a traveler can practice yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda. These locations attract spiritual travelers from both domestic and foreign regions, and provides them with a sense of spirituality. Some of the notable spiritual locations are Auroville in Pondicherry, ISKON in Mayapur, ashrams in Uttarakhand, and Shanti Ashram in Andhra Pradesh. (Subhadeep, Soumendra & Seema, 2020.)

Rishikesh is a city in India located on the banks of the river Ganga and is famous around the world for its yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda. Spirituality is

one of the main reasons for travelers to visit this destination. Tourists practice yoga and meditation on the riverside spiritual centers whereas the teachings of Ayurveda are given at renowned colleges. Foreign tourists visiting these destination are in search of a simple life that could make them reach the divine life. The city holds the potential to become more popular among spiritual travelers as it has excellent tourism offerings in the form of spiritual sites and has gained significant growth of spiritual travelers as the world's attitude is changing towards spirituality. (Vinay, 2015.)

Bodh Gaya is a Buddhist religious destination in India and is worshiped by more than 550 million Buddhists in the world, it is also an important site for Hindus and holds an integral part in their religious faith (Doyle, 1997). The city has Mahabodhi Temple an UNESCO World Heritage Site and another attraction that is important for travelers is the Bodhi Tree where the Buddha accomplished enlightenment (Rinku, 2023). Bodhgaya attracts spiritual tourists with its outstanding architecture which was not created before the entrance of the Buddhist community therefore spirituality and architecture are mutually linked with each other (Prasenjit, n.d.).

Pondicherry is an Indian Union Territory and is known as famous gateway in the southern part of India. The city is famous for its French architecture and consist of peaceful beaches and spiritual atmosphere. Tourists who are seeking spiritual experiences, volunteering opportunities, wellness, and well-being have a special interest in the destination. (Sibi & Sherry, 2017.) Auroville is a site in Pondicherry that focuses on sustainable living practices and is known as a universal that attracts tourists from different corners of the world (Auroville, 2015).

Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, India also known as Ram Janmabhoomi which means the birthplace of Lord Rama. The place is also the birthplace of Jainism's first Tirthankara, named Shri Rishabh Dev. The city is also famous for its Buddhist temples and centers of learning which were made during the Gupta Dynasty and the Mauryan Empire. (Bansal, Sandeep & Prashant, 2014.) Ayodhya offers uniqueness as it is a destination that is popular amongst

spiritual tourists due to its long history of culture. Spiritual tourists can relate to city's rich history and beliefs which offers them real experiences of the place. (Singh & Patel, 2019.)

3.3 Motivations of Spiritual travelers

The world has seen a drastic change in globalization that started in the Western world hence therefore creating negative feelings amongst those citizens (Smith, 2003). These modern developments have made humans advance towards a more materialistic world where they lose hope towards loving their inner self and a reason to live with a purpose. In this type of world, a traveler should take into consideration of spiritual development while planning travel. (Shanthakumari, 2017.)

The reason for spiritual travel could be related to one's physical or mental health, as they could participate in spiritual activities such as yoga, spas, meditation, and ayurvedic medicines (Ruth, Jabar & Razaq, 2019, p.48). Based on the literature of (Pargament, 1999; Smith, 2003; Bash, 2004; Maclean and Walker, 2004; Reisenger, 2006; Ambroz and Ovsenik, 2011; Papatya et al., 2011; Matheson et al., 2014; Cinar and Eti Aslan, 2017) the main reasons for spiritual travel are; change in the human values, isolation in the modern world, faithless relationships, money-oriented life, disturbing modern city life, more use modern technology, no human touch social life, life without hopes, more working lifestyle, assuming to gain happiness from materialistic things, no changes in daily routines, loss of old tradition and values. These factors are making tourists change their plans for travel and move to a certain environment which has more of nature and less materialistic hence making their travel simplified and relaxing (Smith, 2003). Therefore spiritual tourism helps in enhancing travelers of principles that includes the experience of moral values in a society, creating a feeling of love, trust, and happiness, travelers can find the purpose of their life which gives them hope to live their life and at last, it generates some good habits amongst them such as being tolerant in difficult

situations and a feeling of forgiveness (Baloglu & Karadag,2009; Cinar & Et Aslan, 2017).

To define a particular means of motivation for a spiritual tourist is to first understand the main purpose behind the travel (Norman, 2004). The desires of a traveler with their spiritual journey could be enhanced by goals that are bound to the human awareness, which could help in transforming their life, therefore add a meaning to it, and eventually make them find the purpose of their lives (Cheer et al., 2017).

According to Lapierre (1994) model where the purpose of spirituality could be defined in six forms such as the seek for the purpose in existence of life, a feeling of belonging to a society, individual development, seek to find the supreme truth or the greatest significance of life, to experience the enlightenment, and gratitude for the enigmatic nature of creation. A traveler could be posing all these motives, or a single motive is enough for him to take on spiritual travel.

According to Shanthakumari (2017) there are 5 kinds of spiritual tourists; Sightseeing spiritual travellers that have the primary objective of travelling to a destination for vacation and enhance their spiritual growth, where sightseeing acts as the main purpose to visit and spiritual growth is the secondary reason, Purposeful spiritual travellers have a single motive in their mind to grow them spiritually and make themselves close to feeling of divinity, Incidental spiritual traveller has irregular experience with spiritual travelling and spirituality does not affect their travel decisions, Casual spiritual travellers which have low interest of taking spiritual experience during their travel, Serendipitous spiritual traveller experience the effects of spirituality accidentally without being taking it in consideration during their travel plans.

To summarize the reasons for spiritual travellers the main motivation is described as travellers in search of the creator, divinity, and spiritual experience, making themselves enlightened by raising their self-awareness by searching for real truth, going through a purifying process of their physical and

mental powers, finding a purpose of life and achieving a state of spiritual salvation, to understand the powers of nature and connect more towards it (Ruth, Jabar & Razaq, 2019, p.48).

Taking in consideration the motivation factors that drive a tourist to Varanasi are its rich culture and heritage. The major two spiritual destination that attract tourists to Varanasi are Kashi Vishwanath Temple dedicated to lord Shiva and Ganga Arti performed on Dashashwamedh Ghat. The reasons to visit Varanasi could also based on personal views and life situation of an individual traveller such as getting affection towards god, to receive support in worse times, finding linkeage to honesty and belief, to take part spiritual rituals and to know the reality of the world. (Ritesh et al, 2019.)

3.4 Effect of COVID-19 on spiritual tourism.

The COVID-19 epidemic has proved to have a profound impact by disturbing the ease of traveling. The pre-pandemic beliefs of people about the travel industry were shattered during the COVID era, as restrictions were being placed on the mobility of people as air transport being canceled, borders being closed and destinations closing all their travel amenities. This led to some of the new trends of living such as being isolated, globalization, and loyalty towards a region. These elements changed the behavior of travellers, and they are now reconstructing their travel plans to grow themselves in their personal lives in the post-pandemic world. (Li et al, 2022.)

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up the global economy and livelihoods of people which disrupted society. These issues made people go through stress and anxiety, as they were experiencing an uncertain world where they were losing their loved ones to the lethal virus and their job situation was also unstable. (Snigdha et al, 2022, p.220.) These issues affect a person's mental state; as earlier discussed, these are some of the main motivations for spiritual travelers. The patients who suffered Covid 19 disease have reported developing post-traumatic syndrome which was the result of staying isolated

from the social environment, the patients tend to show symptoms such as disruption in sleep patterns and feelings of anxiety which might lead to suicidal thoughts .(Bo et al, 2020; Kasapoglu, 2022.)

As spiritual tourism is known to create a positive effect on one's well-being, it was one of the first approaches taken by people to heal themselves from the effects of the pandemic such as feelings of stress and anxiety among them (Snigdha et al, 2022, p.220). Hence it is also believed that in a state of disruption of the environment, people tend to move towards spirituality to cope up with their feelings stress (Margetic et al, 2022). In this new world where online connection with each other has been developed as new approach to travel, hence playing an important on experience of the travelers (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, approaches related to spirituality such as yoga and meditation were widely followed as these methods were inexpensive and gave a feeling of relief for the people from the stress, anxiety, depression and feeling of loneliness (Bhalla et al, 2021; Gotman& Bechtoldt, 2021; Stankov & Filimonau, 2020; Wang & Blasco, 2022; Zhu et al, 2021). Due to these factors when the world started to reopen there was strong interest amongst the travelers for choosing a destination that can make them recover psychologically and improve their mental health (Choe & Lew, 2022, Ma et al., 2021).

Varanasi's spiritual tourism industry is focused on the Ganga River ghats that are visited by majority of the foreign tourists. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was 90% decrease in tourist influx as no meeting were permitted and daily rituals of arti and puja were absolutely prohibited. (Shahid & Anjan, 2022.) Thus it shows how impactfull was Covid 19 for Varanasi's tourism industry.

3.5 Impact of spiritual tourism on the environment

Travel is becoming an essential part of today's normal life where spiritual tourism destinations can see an increase in the no. of travellers from different parts of the world and ultimately it has made sites reform their managements to tackle this situation (Olsen, 2006, p.107). As most of the spiritual sites are connected to the roots of culture, heritage, and religious beliefs there might be challenges in tackling this situation of over-tourism (Olsen, 2006; Shackley 2001).

Spiritual travelers in a spiritual event could pollute the environment of the event in the form of river pollution and littering the environment of the event. Take as an example Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia which receives around three million spiritual travelers and causes an environmental concern for the government. The challenge made due to this huge amount of people traveling raises a concern about managing the travel, taking into consideration the environment. (Ahmad, 2019.) Another example of a big spiritual event that marks participation of more than 120 million people is the Kumbha Mela in India faces a lot of environmental impacts as the participation is at an enormous scale (Shinde, 2018).

There 3 major environmental impacts of unrestricted tourism are depletion of resources, physical changes in environment and pollution. In the case of Varanasi the depletion of water resource acts a major concern for the city as the increase in the number of tourists could lead to increase in requirement of water at the hotels and restaurants. The major resources of water in Varanasi are groundwater and water from Ganga river which could not be utilized directly. The depletion of land is another environmental impact caused due to increase in tourism. The fertile soil of agricultural lands are being transformed into tourist facilities such as hotels and restaurants. Due to increase in demand of tourism of Varanasi there is pollution caused in form of solid waste, sewage waste, construction waste produced by tourism stakeholders. The city also experiences river pollution as bodies are being burnt at the ghats. The overall impact of these activities leads in disturbing the ecosystem and wildlife causing

shrinking of water resources, soil erosion and building of sand mines on the ghats of Ganga. (Tahereh, 2015.)

3.6 Role of technology In Spiritual tourism

In this advanced world of digitalization, there is a trend to market the product online on different web platforms instead of marketing the product face to face as it poses a challenge for companies due to its limitations (Schutte & Chauke, 2022). This type of marketing culture made the companies apply a hybrid model in their plans which includes tourism marketing as well (Cisneros, Crawley & Whatley, 2020). The use of a hybrid marketing model increased during the Covid era when there were restrictions to market products face to face (I Gede, 2024).

During the Covid pandemic which started in the year 2020, the world saw different types of health protocols used for travelling and most of them used technology significantly, thus this made the tourism businesses to adopt the new way of travel patterns in the pandemic hit the world (Chugh, 2021; Sengel, 2021). While talking in consideration of spiritual tourism the Covid era saw an increase in people participating in spiritual activities such as going to wellness retreats and yoga centers which involved use of technology to travel (Sutarya, 2020).

Talking about India as a fast-growing spiritual tourism destination, it aims to develop ideas to attract travellers from different parts of the world by investing in the technology sector and promoting more research. To make it accessible for travellers government is using the help of Artificial Intelligence which will help in creating a mix of physical and virtual involvement. (Mondal et al, 2023.)

The latest technology that is been used is ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-training Transformer), a language of Artificial Intelligence and an easily accessible tool to transform skill sets in spiritual tourism. The software has a large, educated database and includes independent learning sources making

it better than conventional Artificial Intelligence software. In November 2022, the ChatGPT was introduced in the Indian abode, and it was marked as an achievement in the field of technology. (Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023.)

The use of ChatGPT has been a successful experiment in spiritual tourism where the result can be seen in the form of personalized itineraries planned according to customer needs, easing operations of tourism stakeholders, and improving customer satisfaction (Samaddar & Mondal, 2023). The decision-making process of spiritual travelers is made easy with the use of chatbots like ChatGPT which gives human like discussion experience and helps them find a conclusion to the discussions (Tony, 2023).

ChatGPT is a powerful tool that enhances a tourist's travel plans during different parts of their journey. This could be divided into 3 main parts where an individual is involved in his decision-making process including a pre-trip where an individual could engage in discussion with the chatbot about which spiritual destination to travel on the basis of the activities offered and reading about past travellers experiences at that destination, next is the en-route stage where the chatbot could resolve their issues while being in spiritual travel, and the last is the post-trip stage in which travelers can explain their travel experience with examples and implement them in their future decision making. (Vinith et al, 2024.)

Due to increase in the usage of technology such as social media platforms where travellers can share their experiences and make it heard to larger groups of audiences (Heidari et al., 2018). These views shared by travellers' impact in the decision-making of further travellers to travel. There are different platforms that people use to share their views which include Instagram, WhatsApp, X, Facebook, TripAdvisor, and Thrillophilia. The decisions of travelers depend as why they want to travel to a spiritual destination and the motives of their travel could be influenced by the stories displayed on social media. (Alpana et al, 2021.)

Varanasi, as a spiritual destination, has tremendous possibilities due to developing technologies in the fields of virtual reality, augmented reality and mixed reality. These will improve travellers' experiences at cultural sites and museums. Virtual reality allows travellers to access various festivals and visit museums online. Technologies will help to create jobs and attract new investors. The use of these tools remains a controversial issue in terms of spirituality as it depends on human attraction to the environment. (Shyju, 2020.)

4 EXPERIENCES OF FOREIGN TRAVELLERS IN VARANASI

Foreign travellers' first belief of Varanasi is linked with religion, Ganga river and a sense of devotion. Visiting the ghats of Ganga river and experiencing the activity of boating particularly during sunset and sunrise offer them a wonderful experience. Travellers when asked about their first impressions of Varanasi to which they responded the Varanasi's Railway station architecture, presence of rickshaws and cows in the city, masses of tourists and the chaotic environment contributed during interaction with city. (Rana, 1988.)

Culture shock is a feeling described as when an individual experiences a different culture due to which there are feelings of unknown stimulation among them (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). It refers to an uncomfortable experience of an individual while visiting something strange and is also based on one's perspective before visiting a new culture that differs in their experience while visiting. Dealing with a new cultural surrounding, learning different methods of doing things, responding to a foreign environment, and discovering new foods may appear intimidating. Visitors encountering a foreign culture could experience challenges in adjusting to the new surrounding and have negative feelings like loss of harmony. People with difficulties to adjust in a new environment can suffer with cultural shock as it is a natural element in a new cultural surrounding. Culture shock is also regarded as a negative impact caused due to intercultural

interactions based on discomfort with others. Cultural shocks could be experienced while interacting with taxi drivers, local shopkeepers, custom officers and hospitality professionals. The reason behind this behaviour is one culture may be weird and unacceptable to another. Tourists travelling in travel packages are less likely to experience culture shock as they have advisor who help reduce their stress. Most of tourist who want to immerse in new culture are more likely to experience culture shock. Individuals that are active towards the cultural activities experience culture shock as they can easily understand the emotions and fit to a new society. (Bilecik & Anadulo, 2018.)

Spiritual awaking is a term majorily related to being confound, isolated, nervous but also a cherming feeling of life. There is a change in a life of spiritual awaking person as life becomes more purposeful and notable. Spiritual awakening process has 7 stages; First stage arises when a person goes through feelings of depression and discouragement caused due to life changing experiences, second stage is of change in perspective due to negativity experienced from society, third stage consists as one goes for the definition of life and a way to react to the situation, in fourth stage an indivisual experiences a feeling of rejoice, admiration and relation with life, fifth stage includes feeling of getting lost again and drives them towards more spiritual experiences, sixth stage is of getting to know oneself deeply and practice activities like meditation and interpersonal activities, last stage of spiritual awakening makes them broad minded as they find peace oriented with inner self. Spiritual awakening has physical symtoms such as dizziness, change in sleeping pattern, food intolerances and vibrations via body, whereas emotional symptoms include asking deep questions from innerself, feeling of being lost, relating others unhappiness, getting more isolated and becoming more sensitive. (Aletheia & Mateo, 2019.)

The relevance for choosing these traveller for this study, as they provide authenticity through their spiritual experiences that are published in the form blogs on authentic sites and vlogs on YouTube. Their experiences include videos and pictures of events that they participated during their visit. This makes the choice of these travellers relevant as they corresponds to the

research question of the thesis and have authentic experiences of Varanasi. They shared their experiences in depth and belonged to different corners of the world. These travellers put out deep reflection of their journey which aligns with research objective and makes the research more reliable. Their stories were recorded with a proper consent and all ethical considerations were taken care. The journey of every traveller would be around prior expectations and situations that faced while visiting the city.

4.1 Dan's Experience

Dan a blogger from U.K. wrote a blog post on his website about Varanasi sharing his experiences titled Cremations and Celebrations: One Day in Varanasi, India's Holiest City. At the start of his blog, he explained how excited he was to visit this city and wanted to explore it fully. (Dan, 2024.)

During his journey to Varanasi, he started his day waking up early around 4 am to catch an Auto rickshaw to experience the famous Hindu ritual of Ganga Arti known as Subah e Banaras, performed just before the sunrise. After attending the Ganga Arti, he went to try boating in the river Ganga where he experienced the daily morning routine of the local people. Apart from that he witnessed dead bodies being burnt along the riverbanks and people bathing in the holy water of Ganga. (Dan, 2024.) This type of experience was soul-touching for him, and he could sense the vibe of the city through the reflection of the morning events. It could be regarded as soul awakening encounter, experienced at spiritual environment.

After early mornings soulful experience next thing that came to his mind was to have breakfast as it was already 9 in the morning. He went to the nearest breakfast place and ordered a famous delicacy of the city where he found himself waiting in the crowds to try it. After breakfast, he decided to visit a silk handloom store famous worldwide for its Banarasi Sarees. (Dan, 2024.)

As the day passed, he went again for the boat ride to attend the famous evening ritual of Ganga Arti. During the evening event, he tried to get fully involved in the activity by experiencing it naturally instead of taking photographs and feel the energy while being in a crowd of thousands. After the event, he went to experience some local cuisines of the city which were offered by the street food vendors. Finally, he showed a graceful gesture to a local by buying the leftover candles from her and paying respect to the river Ganga with them. According to him, a day in Varanasi could be different for every individual and everyone has a different story to explain it. (Dan, 2024.)

4.2 Matt Phillips experience

Matt Phillips a geologist who was not happy with his life situations and traveled to Varanasi, India from the western part of the world. In his blog, he explains the Varanasi vibe as he arrives in the city. The first thing he did after landing in Varanasi was to go to the riverbank of the Ganga River and see the bodies being burnt there. After seeing them he developed a feeling of peace and calm which made him experience a sense of soulfulness. (Matt, 2020.) These type of feeling is an example of soul awakening experience which is seen as intent to have some life changing experience on his unhappy life situation.

4.3 Anna's travel experience

Anna is a travel blogger, a yoga teacher, and a digital nomad who has lived in India and traveled to Varanasi several times during her stay. She is originally from UK and has been traveling the world since 2013. In her travel blog, she describes Varanasi as one of the most spiritual travel places in India. According to her experience, she describes Varanasi as a city that holds deep spiritual values, culture, and religion. The place is described as a must-visit destination by her as she was amazed by the travel experience and advised others to visit it for at least 3-4 days to get the real vibe of the city. (Anna, 2023.)

According to Anna some of the most spiritual activities that she did in the city were visiting the Ghats (riverbanks) of the Ganga River, boating in the river during sunrise time, and experiencing the daily rituals of the city such as bodies being burnt, people performing prayers, children playing cricket, sadhus meditating and taking bath in the river. Apart from this, she experienced the ghats where the funerals are being carried out 24/7 such as Manikarnika Ghat and Harishchandra Ghat, as these sights could be emotionally difficult for people who have less experience of Hindu culture. In her blog, she also mentioned visiting different spiritual sites such as Sarnath to see the ruins of Dhamekh stupa, monastery and taking an evening boat ride to experience the evening, Ganga Arti. (Anna, 2023.) From her experience she took part in most of the rituals of the city and it is seen that she was influenced with them spiritually. Through her experience it is easy to understand that individual travellers are more involved through cultural exchange as they do not have a proper travel schedule and try to indulge in-depth experiences of a culture.

4.4 Andrea Marchegiani's experience

Andrea Marchegiani is a photographer and blogger from Italy who wrote a blog about his stay in Varanasi and what to expect from the city. While leaving the town after a one-week of stay he described a feeling of regret as he desired to stay in the city for more time. He described the city as not an Indian city but a multidimensional gateway. According to him the cities' main attractions could be visited in 2-3 days, but they possess a feeling of attraction to visit them more and more. (Andrea, 2022.)

The feeling of using a boat taxi to get sensational views of the city, he discovered a sense of enlightenment witnessed through the daily rituals of the city. Then he described ghat such as Manikarnika where he saw dead bodies being burnt in open spaces and pictured the place with a special permit. As a foreigner, he was not allowed in the Kashi Vishwanath temple where only locals are allowed to go and worship. He also shared his experience of Ganga Arti where he was stunned by the sound of the bells and smells that were

produced during the event which later attracted his soul. Apart from this he shared his experience of visiting local eateries and shopping markets, and found local people friendly and took some pictures with them. (Andrea, 2022.) As Andrea took part in Varanasi's rituals, he felt a culture shock during rituals like Ganga arti as he experienced loud sounds of bells and strong smells. Rituals like Ganga arti were completely new to him as he comes from a culture which is based on western values.

4.5 Gabi's experience

Gabi is a world traveller who resides in Thailand and describes his experience of Varanasi on his YouTube channel Ride with Gabi. He visited the city for 5 days and uploaded an 8-minute video on YouTube with the title " I can't believe what I am seeing! Varanasi. In his video, he said that Varanasi was his dream destination to visit, and he traveled a long distance on his bike to reach the destination. (Ride with Gabi, 2022.)

His first impression of the city was the feeling of spiritual energy that the place provided with people performing their daily rituals and practices. While rooming on the narrow streets he encounters shopkeepers speaking with him in Italian and trying to sell him goods. While walking around he visits a tea seller where they talk about the culture of Varanasi and sees a dead body passing just next to them noticing no reaction on the face of the seller as it is a daily visual for him. (Ride with Gabi, 2022.) Gabi experienced the sense spiritual awakening as he entered the city. He had a desire to visit Varanasi as it was his dream destination which makes us easy to understand his experience. The factor to choose him for the research is interpreting ones expectations before going to destination and displaying his experience during his visit.

After the tea experience, he decides to go on a boat ride to visit the famous cremation site on the riverfront The Manikarnika Ghat. On his boat ride, the driver of the boat narrates the story of the ghat and tells him that it takes around 3 hours for a body to be burnt but still the bodies here are not burnt fully. To

complete the cremation the father or the elder son of the dead needs to bring water from the Ganga River in a clay pot and throw it over the ashes of the body hence breaking the bond between the family and the dead therefore the soul is set free. (Ride with Gabi, 2022.) The city's rituals and the burning sights made him understand the importance of life and positively affected his soul.

4.6 Joe and Liisu

Joe and Liisu are world explorers from Estonia who went on a backpacking trip to Varanasi. To explore Varanasi, they started by dressing up like local people and taking a Rickshaw to the city center. While visiting the city center, they realized that the city has a special essence towards its equation to life and death as both are widely celebrated in the city. (Wild Viking Travels, 2023.)

After visiting city center they headed to ghats of Ganga River to witness the real lifestyle of locals and saw people bathing and washing laundry in the river, to children playing on the riverbank. To get the spiritual feeling of the city they walked towards the Manikarnika ghat where the bodies are been burnt for 24 hours and have been practiced for centuries. There they had spiritual discussions with locals who told them that the place provides them with a feeling of not being greedy towards materialistic things and at the end of life nothing goes with us. In the evening, they went for a Ganga Arti at the Dashashwamedh ghat and felt spiritual to be in such surroundings. Their experience was life changing as they saw the city honoring life and death on its streets. (Wild Viking Travels, 2023.) The reason for choosing these travellers for this study was their relevance to the research objective of the study. Their experience will help in understanding the motivations of a traveller's visit to Varanasi and activities chosen by them. From their video it is understandable that they wanted get deeply immersed in the city culture and traditions.

4.7 Jack and Paige

Jack and Paige are a British couple who share their travel experiences on YouTube. While visiting Varanasi they started their trip by taking an evening boat ride in the river Ganga. They had spiritual discussions with the boatman and saw the burning ghats of the Ganga River. They described the visuals as beautiful and tragic as they passed the burning ghats. The next day morning they went to visit the city center and went on a cultural experience. They explored the market, church, and interacted with locals to get more insights into the culture. (Jack Aynsley Travel, 2023.) It is seen from their experience of visiting the ghats, that they felt culture shock at that time. They were not able express their feeling of the experience and were stunned by the activity performed there.

4.8 Summary and Conclusion

Varanasi in terms of international tourists prospective looks to offer variety of spiritual activities making them spend multiple days in the city. The major spiritual activities are visiting the Manikarnika ghat to see rumination of death and life, the old temples of different religions, participating in spiritual ceremonies along the ghats of river Ganga, and going for boat ride during the sunrise and sunsets.

The travellers selected in this section did most of same spiritual activities mentioned in the thesis. The motives of the travellers were different to visit Varanasi but in the end they were fulfilled with a feeling of spirituality. Some travellers spent more than one day whereas few visited the city for one day. The travellers that visited for one day tried to get most of spiritual experience and rushed towards their activities. Overall the Varanasi offered a vibrant thread of spirituality that invited these travellers to consider their opinions and observations, therefore provided a larger picture of the oldest known traditions.

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this thesis revolves around qualitative research that include previous interviews published in the research papers, and articles. The sole purpose of using this type of research is to find out the real motives of international travellers as it could give insights of their travel purpose. The main reason behind using the old interviews and online sources is the unavailability of the author to visit the place and perform a participant observation study and real time interviews. The focus group in this case are the international travellers who tend to visit the destination for spiritual reasons. In this research, there will be an overview of researches conducted in the past hence it will make the findings more reliable.

Qualitative research is a method of examining individuals experiences in depth and uses techniques like group discussions, article analysis, biographies and interviews. The approach of using this research in social and cultural developments is beneficial as it provides respondent experiences and is referred to as interpretive approach. The use of qualitative research method helps researcher to understand the lives of individuals in context of cultural, social and economical aspect. The method also solves the purpose of a researcher who wants to understand how a situation is processed and also understands its influences. It is a preferred study method in case of research performed on less number of participants. The views generated through interviews, writings, and focused group discussion are interpreted to get the results. (Monique, Inge, Ajay, 2020, p.10-21.) The research used in this thesis involves sensitive cultural and religious contents arising due to emotional interactions among tourists, guides, boatman, local stakeholders who are involved in touristic activities of the city. As the topic of the research was sensitive in nature and involved religious and cultural element, qualitative research was found to best source of researching on this project.

Conducting research on exposed population involved in cultural and religious practices requires ethical perspective which protects them from being

disclosed from data collection methods. The data collected could be based on communal practices of the society and can cause conflicts among them. (Peter, 2015.) Privacy of the individuals should be maintained and an unexpected harm to the society should be avoided (Webster et al., 2014). A researcher deeply immerse himself in subject of the qualitative research making himself influenced by the society's values (Stella & Luciana, 2022). A qualitative research project does not includes ways to directly harm the individuals but has a possibility to harm humans mentally, culturally, morally, intellectually and socially (Kottow, 2008).

Two research papers are analysed in this section as they have strong connection with the objective of the study. These research papers are an open source of knowledge and available online on google scholar. In depth research was conducted on all the online channels and these 2 research papers were finalised for the thesis. These research papers were published by renowned institutions during the last decade hence making them trustworthy source.

The first research paper includes deep research on international traveller's experiences by Cristiana Zara and the topic of her research is "Sacred Journeys and Profane Travellers: Representation and Spatial Practice in Varanasi (India)". In her research, she has written about the difficulties that she faced while conducting interviews in Varanasi. She said it took her weeks to get an interview as the people reacted differently as she approached them. For her research, she used participation observations, visual methods, one-to-one interviews, questionnaires, and documentary research. While conducting her questionnaire research she distributed it to local guides and Hotels, where she found that there was not so much response from them till a few weeks. To get it done she used to go to the ghats every day which made her recognizable for the people hence they started to take her tasks seriously, she realised that to be able to perform some tasks with strangers in India, its always good to build up a relationship with them. However, some interviews were conducted easily as the travellers seemed interested in participating and sharing their spiritual journey. A total of 19 personal traveller interviews and 7 tour operator interviews were conducted, as well as local people were also interviewed in

her research. (Cristiana, 2011.) Here are some of the interviews that she conducted which will be able to solve the purpose of this study.

Cristiana in her field research met a male Italian traveller at a Nepalese Italian restaurant, she had a random conversation with the traveller as he started to ask her, “What do you do here in Varanasi?”, to which she explained that she was carrying out her research on international tourists. The conversation went forward as he replied:

Italian traveller: ‘...a research about tourists? Really? Interesting...’

Cristina: ‘Yes...’

Italian traveller: ‘...So you are observing us?!’

Cristina: ‘...yes, I’m here to observe you and write everything down... so you better behave!’

(Cristina, 2011.)

In an interview given by a 22-year-old French backpacker traveller to Cristina during her field study where she said:

“People come here and they search for depaysment, the difference...if we come here we want to see something different.. Indian culture is different, Hindu religion is very different from our country, from Christianity, Islam...”

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina as a part of her field study interacted with a female local guide during the Ganga arti, and exchanged thoughts with her. Her conversation started with a guide when she asked them help her to distribute surveys among their international guests, to which the guide responded :

Woman local guide: ‘We’re happy to help you in your research. Then when you will write your thesis you will have to mention all our names...’

Cristina: ‘So I need to know the names of all of you..’

Woman local guide: ‘Just mention “all the local official guides of Varanasi”. But include also male and female!’

Cristina: ‘I’ll make sure that the female guides are included in my acknowledgments!’

Woman local guide: 'Yes, please, otherwise people think only to the male guides'.

(Cristina, 2011.)

During her fieldwork Cristina encountered one female Italian traveller aged 53 and one female Polish traveller aged 22 who said Varanasi resembles as Venice in Italy. Italian traveller said "When I arrived in Varanasi – it was sunset – I went straight to the old city and walked around through its narrow lanes. Surprisingly my first thought was: I'm in Venice!". Whereas the Polish traveller said "I feel Varanasi is like Venice, maybe for the water, the spirituality...".

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina also got a chance to interview 2 officers from the Up Tourist Bungalow office in Varanasi, in which they said:

"The essence of the real culture of Varanasi is on the riverfront. That's why people want to go there. Some of them stay in the Cantonment at the luxury hotels because they don't want to give up luxury."

"Ganga is not 'attraction', it is our faith, Westerners come to see and to also do Hindu Rituals, this for us is a medium to spread our culture."

"Rows of pedal rickshaws out of the expensive hotels of the Cantonment at around 6 pm to carry tourists that go to see the Ganga Arti puja on the main ghat. This is a tourist attraction and a religious ritual. Hindu people don't mind being watched by tourists, it's a way of sharing their culture. Tourists go to the ghats by taxi, but for the Arti puja they go by pedal rickshaw."

"Tourists come to Varanasi to learn something: there is medical tourism, people come to learn ayurveda, music tourism, yoga tourism... this is peculiarity of Banaras, because Banaras has its own style, take kathak dance for example: there is the Banaras style kathak..."

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina took a boatripe during her fieldwork in Varanasi, where a boatman explained her expectations of the international tourists and what are they ideally seeking while visiting the riverbanks. Cristina recorded their conversation in her field notes where Boatman said:

"I take them to the burning ghats... because of the cremations, tourists get more interested there! They want to see the rituals, if there is no cremation activities going on at that time at the ghat, then we just.. see go there and spend less time."

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina during her fieldwork usually visited the Manikarnika and Harishchandra ghat where she meet the touts who think of foreigners just wanting to know the Indian culture and take a sense of meditation in India. Wherever she walked around the city she heard some of the famous sentences as she was an international traveller, said by the Indian boatman, shop salesman, tourist guides, and people along the ghats. The phrases from her field notes include:

'Burning is learning, cremation is education.'

'Banaras Shiva city!'

'Madam buy flower, no business today.'

'Photo Kijiye! Good picture!'

'Do you want to get high, fly high in the sky?'

'Ash, madam? Shiva bhang'

'Do you buy candle? Make puja, good karma to all family and you!'

'Ganga puja good karma!'

'Candle-madam-good-luck puja? Make a wish, right time karma.'

'Charas madam'

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina used to visit the tea stalls as part of her fieldwork to get a better understanding of how locals look at Western travellers and their expectations. When she visited a tea stall a local Banarasi (people born in Varanasi) friend of hers shared his view on Westerners in which he said:

"...They (Western travellers) work like crazy in their country, they have many taxes to pay, they work like dogs! And when they come here they just want to be "shanti" and forget all the things. "

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina got a interview with tour leader of Mistral Tour (an Italian tour company famous for tours to India). She asked the tour leader about the boat rides and what are the expectations of tourists. To which the tour leader said:

“...on the boat, eyes can roam, noises soften down, the atmosphere turns peaceful... and then come the cremation ghats and reactions are very intense, the sight is all focused on seeing, understanding... it's a voyeuristic gazing, perhaps even genuinely interested: cremation are not allowed in the west, I mean, you don't really see them, so there is bewilderment, perturbation sometimes. Cremations have a transgressive nuance: here death is revealed, is exposed, and that requires explanation, but the tourist is not always willing, or does not always have the time, to listen to that. Tourists are interested in trivial details: 'What are those people doing?', the fabric, the wood...”

(Cristina, 2011.)

There were some other interviews that Cristina conducted during her fieldwork with foreign travellers, a 39-year-old female Australian traveller, a 32-year-old female Italian traveller, and a 20-year-old male traveller who agreed with the thought of the Italian tour leader. To sum up, their interviews indicated that the incidents that took along the boat ride gave them a feeling of spirituality and it was an emotional experience in their journey. They were shocked to see the daily activities of the city and were stunned by the views that it offers. (Cristina, 2011.)

Some things made tourists remember the ghats for their exceptional experience which Cristina discovered in her fieldwork when she interviewed a 22-year-old male Polish traveller who said, 'I feel quite emotional here... people drinking Pepsi, next someone is burning, someone swimming in the middle, cows a bit further.' When the discussion continued, he stated '...yeah, there's a very thin border between life and death here, and this is fascinating.' Another 32-year female German traveller was interviewed while standing next to the ghats where she said '...everything is together in one place, it's quite overwhelming...(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina got an in-depth interview with a solo 48-year-old male Italian traveller who shared her similar interest as group travellers. Cristina asked him 'What are your main activities in Varanasi, your daily practices? To which he responded:

"Well, the practice of music for me is the main thing. (...) And then walking along the ghats, and the boat, especially in the morning and evening, (...) Going on the ghats gives me the feeling of being a tourist, whereas I feel I'm part of the system, of the city... and on the ghats instead I feel like a tourist, I mean the locals make you feel a tourist: the children who come and ask you 'candle?', the boatman, the characters who sell you the dope, silk... but it is also a moment of relaxation."

(Cristina, 2011.)

2 foreign tourists told Cristina that the feeling of being in Varanasi was out of this world, a 63-year-old male American tourist said 'beyond expectations. Connection with the other world.' Another 32-year-old male American tourist said 'Nice place; Siva (Sanskrit for "essence of life") is easily felt here. (...)' (Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina in her research got an opportunity to discuss the tour packages that are offered for international tourists. The interview was carried out with a representative of Le Passage to India who was the Varanasi branch head of the company. The representative said:

"One-night visitors arrive at the airport, are transferred to the hotel, and then in the evening we take downtown: Aarti ceremony, short boat ride, short rickshaw ride. We have to give them the experience in short."

"...if you want to explore Banaras you have to add some adventure: the cycle rickshaw, the boat, walking into the old part (of the city)... On the rickshaw, they (the tourists) feel that they're moving with the crowd, but they're away from the crowd. Besides, cars cannot go near the ghat, and we cannot make them walk too much. "

"(...) We explain to them that cremations are private rituals, so we explain everything before going to the site, as a form of respect for the Hindus in place,

who may not like to see people around asking questions. We tell them that from afar they can take pictures of the riverfront.”

“The city of burning and learning, this is what they read in books; they want to know why the city is called Kashi, Banaras... they ask about the communities living in the city, the communal relations between the locals (the relationship between Hindus and Muslims).”

“The walking tour at the ghats is not very common. We include this offer for those who are mentally prepared to Banaras, those who know about Banaras. We take them to Assi, just to start from there and walk through the narrow lanes; Assi Ghat is easily approachable... so we let them explore the area near Assi. But there is always a guide with them.”

(Cristina, 2011.)

International tourists showed a special interest in everyday activities that seem to be normal activities for the local people. The activity was to drink tea at the local vendors of the city. Three international travellers expressed their special interest in this activity while talking to Cristina on her field work, a 37-year-old male Australian traveller said”...I spend time with friends, most evenings I walk on the ghats, have Chai (tea) on the steps, in Assi ghat...”, a 22-year-old male French traveller said “I like meeting people, taking chai, talking to people”, another 26-year-old Chilean traveller said “... the boat ride, walking on the ghats.. I did that in my first days, now I feel more like going to the Ganga, take a chai there..”.(Cristina, 2011.)

Talking about the spiritual aspect of the city several international travellers saw Varanasi as a potential destination that attracted them spiritually. There were several travellers from different countries that Cristina interviewed, and they expressed their feelings of being spiritual while visiting the city. A 34-year-old Belgian traveller said: “There’s everything here in Varanasi! I’ve seen many cities in India, but here there’s just everything! There is the Ganga... it’s very spiritual city, it’s more... it’s like India amplified, there are lots of ceremonies... it’s a more spiritual city, yeah, seriously! I mean, I liked Kerala, very beautiful, but there’s not... this spirituality, very strong, this energy that is here, you don’t find it there”. A 22-year-old male French traveller explained his experience with

Cristina where he mentioned: “Varanasi is very powerful, not spiritual, just powerful: many people, noises, there is life in the streets, lots of noise, smell, colours...” Cristina during a discussion with a 49-year-old female Canadian traveller asked her, “So here you find this spirituality that celebrates the circle of life...” to which the Canadian traveller replied: “Yeah! I like the fact that... I wake up in the morning and you know there’s this big open-air mandir of ready plast (not clear), I love this! And I hear ‘oomm’... I hear... I can’t I’m not very musical, I wish I could represent it, but they, they play this chant for about an hour in the morning and it’s beautiful! ‘Om namah shivaya’... it’s beautiful! It’s musical! And I just like, basically, to be honest, I jump on the bed and right dance it around the room, you know, I love it, it affects me, makes me happy! I really miss the worshipful, the genuine joyful worshipful god. We don’t have this in Canada, I haven’t seen that. But here it’s like eeverywhere! And I love it!”

(Cristina, 2011.)

Cristina did an in-depth interview with an Indian tour leader of Intrepid Travel where the tour leader explained all the major questions and intents that foreign travellers ask them. In the interview, the tour leader said:

“People mostly ask about the cows, people read about the cows and they ask me why the cow is sacred (...). Then about marriages, what age people get married, are there child marriages, what is the marriage age (...). They ask about the caste system, what is caste, because they read some briefs about India and they want to know about religion, Hindu religion, how it is practiced, how many gods we have, because everybody reads different stories on the number of gods, so they are always curious of the number of gods, cows, religion, marriages, caste system... but number one is the cow!”

“another big question is: ‘Where are the women? I say traditionally man is supposed to work and woman is supposed to take care of the children, that’s why you see more men (...), women don’t go out that much as men go out.”

“They want to see very close to the cremations, they ask questions about rituals, caste system... some of them have already ideas; they want to know how the cremation is done, why, why cow is holy, why the Ganges is holy... they want to know the basics.”

(Cristina, 2011.)

While visiting the ghats of Varanasi, Cristina used to encounter various local guides during her field work with whom she used to understand more about the experiences of international travellers. Once she discussed this with an Authorized local tour guide, who told her:

"...and the first question: 'Is it possible to take pictures here'. And most of the time we have to say 'No, you cannot take pictures inside the shrine'. And the second thing, the funny question, everybody knows that we are in India and we have to go to the temple and we have to leave our shoes:' Do we carry our... you know the.. temple socks? ..Yes, yes, please! Because we're going to open the shoes (take the shoes off). And sometimes, lots of people, out of my experience with people, they say: 'Ok, we don't want to go inside the temple, because we don't want to leave our shoes outside'..."

"Normally tourists come with a bit of knowledge about Hinduism and India, they ask questions to elaborate their knowledge, for example: how many gods are there? Why is it that one god has many names? ...and so on."

"For me tourist is a newborn baby... so I have to teach them how to eat, and how to do the datum (a natural oral toothbrush), you know, that stick that we wash our teeth... I have to teach them how to eat the paan, and how to drink the tea in the small, you know, the clay pots... so for me he's like a new-born baby!"

"So that is the reason I always say: if you want to enjoy this city, just close your eyes and feel this city!... People love this!"

(Cristina, 2011.)

A 34-year-old female Belgian traveller met Cristina on the ghats during her field work where she expressed her spiritual experience of Varanasi to Cristina. She said:

"I like strolling... only by walk, no rickshaw, no anything, only walk, I like it most. I see the people, the shops, the food, the colours, many colours, flowers for puja, the writings on the walls... it's of great inspiration to me. I do that on the ghats, and in the inner city, in the alleys behind the ghats. I like it in the morning, when there are not many people around. To me, when I go in the

morning it's like a spiritual thing, it's a bit like a meditation on foot... a simple thing... you feel well with yourself and that's it, you don't expect anything, you only breath the air, see things, take the energy of the atmosphere..."

(Cristina, 2011.)

One major issue that foreign travellers experience during their stay in Varanasi are the stray animals that they face during their visit such as monkeys, dogs, and bulls. There was a 23-year-old British traveller who discussed this issue with Cristina, where she said:“(...) Wild dogs also a huge problem. Was attacked by 3 dogs on the ghats.” Another 22-year-old male traveller also said: “Ghats fascinating; considerable hassle – auto drivers at the train station. Attacked by stray dogs at the ghats.” (Cristina, 2011.)

There were 5 other international travellers that Cristina interviewed as they shared their views on their spiritual experiences of Varanasi. A 36-year-old French female traveller said: “Varanasi is an intemporal(timeless) city and I think it is maybe in the world the only one; very powerful city, like India.” A 59-year-old American traveller narrated her spiritual intent when she said: “I came here to experience Indian practice of spirituality especially at the end of life.” Another 58-year-old male British traveller said: “I came to Varanasi to see the culture, experience life in the city, to see the river Ganges and ceremonies nearby.” An Australian female traveller aged 25 expressed her feelings as she told Cristina: “Varanasi was a ‘must see’ on my Indian itinerary. I found the river and the ghats mesmerizing. I am infinitely glad I came here. You can really feel the history and the spiritual importance of this place.” A 22-year-old male French traveller also shared his views on sprituality where he said: “I spend most of my time on the ghats, because its shant, you know. But I like sometimes to go in the city centre, because real India is in the puja, you know, but the real India is also in the centre of Banaras, real India is on the ghats and real India is in Godaulia, yeah, both.” There was one 31-year-old male Irish tourist whose experiences were different from other travellers, where he said: I feel, like with most of India, there is no spirituality here at all. The pursuit of money is at the heart of everyone: Brahmins etc..” (Cristina, 2011.)

Several foreign travellers discussed one major problem that they faced while travelling in the city which was related to the traffic and the noise that it produced. A 35-year-old female Australian traveller said: "I like that there is no traffic along the ghats, no beeping from horns!". A 33-year-old male Spanish traveller expressed feelings about noise where he said: "I don't like the noise and the rubbish...". A 22-year-old male French traveller expressed his thought of his experiences of the city as he said: "you go in Godaulia, lots of noise... and once you go to see the Ganga, its waters... it's... like you go on top of a mountain or you go to the sea or desert." A 35-year-old male Italian traveller had a different about the noises to which he said: "I record music, noises, sounds, random noises, mantras... I'm thinking about making a CD."(Cristina, 2011.)

Varanasi has a different kind of climate, food and environment than the foreign travellers host nation. This made them feel disconnected to their natural surroundings. Some travellers told Cristina that they felt sick during their journey in Varanasi. A 36-year-old female Australian tourist said: "...was sick with food poisoning and the weather was 40+ degrees so unfortunately I wasn't able to give it as much energy and enthusiasm as I normally would." Another 22-year-old male French traveller expressed his feelings about getting ill when he said: "What I do depends on my stomach! (...) At the beginning I came for working in an NGO, but I got ill, had to take medicines... so I was in the NGO to make contacts, but I Didn't finish, and now I just have one week more..."(Cristina, 2011.)

Apart from visiting ghats along the Ganga River tourists also visit the Sarnath a religious site for Buddhists. Few foreign travellers shared their experiences of Sarnath with Cristina, a 34-year-old female Belgian traveller who said: "(...) I went to Sarnath, I needed to see trees! It's vital for me, I need to see some green every day, you know? Back home I go to the park almost every day! .(Cristina, 2011.)

The research objective used by Cristina to get results for her research questions is through immense ethnographic fieldwork. During her field work

the data is collected in the form of participant observations and interviews conducted with international tourists, tourism stakeholders, and through audio recordings and pictures and travellers questionnaires. (Cristina, 2011.)

Ethical issues were an integral part of Cristina's research as they were dependent on how the research was conducted keeping in mind of their ethical outcome. Other ethical concern in her research is related to the socio-cultural aspect to which she relates in her field work. While Cristina was involved in a farewell party of her in Varanasi where she noticed her friend being emotional for leaving him and made her realise the emotional engagement that a researcher could get into while performing the field study. Another ethical issue concerned in her findings is when she joined package trip with other international guests and recorded the data without the consent of the other traveller. Her thought process behind this was to get a raw form of data that could not be observed if the participants didn't know about her research. She made the tour leader informed about her research before the start of the trip making as an ethical research. (Cristina, 2011.)

During her field study she used to carry audio recorder in her pocket to record the sounds of the city, at that time she used to encounter people hence the conversations were recorded. Overall she had made it clear in her study that she does not want any personal details of a participant in her research paper. She also explained that her study was not revolved around any sensitive matters and exposed individuals. Proper consent was taken before having interviews during her field research by informing the interviewees about the research topic and its essence. Cultural considerations were taken during the field work as respondents were informed of the research and formal ethics were reasonably followed. During her research the information about foreign arrivals in hotels and big insituation were difficult to gather and it was recommended by locals to give bribe to the institution officers to get information. This activity sounded as breach of ethical practice in research and she avoided to be part of any such activity. (Cristina, 2011.)

Mari Korpela in her case study represents Varanasi as spiritual and ancient which aligns with India's tourism campaign named "Incredible India". During her case study, she used the ethnographic studies published by her in 2009. The study was conducted during the years 2002-2003 which consists field dairy work based on the society members observations and interview with the foreign individuals in Varanasi. Ivan a 45-year-old man was interviewed where he shared his experience of living in Varanasi:

"I like Varanasi because it's something like the heart of India. So much going on also about the Indian culture... (...) Varanasi is real India, still happening, and the religion that they practice here, religion is a big part of their daily life of the people living here, the local people, and it's a very old city, it's oldest actually existing city in the world."

(Mari, 2017.)

There was another interview held with a foreign national named Noel aged 31 years old residing in Varanasi where he shared his experience of how different Varanasi from his native place is. He also mentioned the essence of being surrounded by nature and culture. Mari recorded the interviewee where he said:

"What I like most here (in Varanasi) is maybe that you are not disconnected with the nature. In a Western city, you never know how full the moon is, and it never has any effect on your life. (...) (Here) it's a huge difference: no moon, full moon, rainy season, hot season, people behave differently (...) You're very connected to nature here, as much as you can be in the city. (...) There are monkeys, and birds and cows. They are a living part of the city. Without these animals everything would rot, everything would be stinking. They also give milk, even cow shit is used for burning, for fertilising... as mosquito repellent. (...) In a way, it's men and nature living together in symbiosis. I like many things here, they eat from banana plates, and (...) everything is recycled."

(Mari, 2017.)

There were 44 interviews conducted by Mari during her fieldwork research in Varanasi out which twenty seven were men and seventeen were women. The criteria behind choosing the interviewees was based on their availability and

were already known by her. Most of the interviews were conducted in closed spaces and were recorded in the form of tapes, except the one who wanted the interview to be not audio recorded but written down in the form of notes. The interviews were based on open minded questions and were almost same with every interviewee. An average interview time was one hour whereas the extensive was conducted in three parts. The language used for the interviews was English and was the only means to connect it between people of different countries. The nationalities of respondents were not recorded only age was taken in consideration after an interview. The analysis of interviews were focused on respondents oneself, India, Indian values and lifestyle choices. While studying the field diaries she focused on recurring trends activities and interactions with the westerners. (Mari, 2009.)

Mari conducted her research as an anthropologist, taking in consent from the interviewees before the interviews. During participant observation in her field work she at start didn't used to inform the Westerners about the research but when the observations concluded she used to tell them that she observed their behaviour and is performing a research on them. She felt at risk during the participant observations as she used to participate in events and parties with Westerners and feeling to express her thoughts to them could harm their relationship hence making it difficult for her research. (Mari, 2009.)

Limitations of qualitative research can be discussed through its data collection methods. Observation is a method of collecting data based on the behaviour of people and surroundings making it a sensitive as the data is solely based on researchers interpretations. To conduct research through observations a early plan of travel to a place or a event is made making it time consuming. Field study method involved in qualitative research could only performed on small groups of people as it is a difficult process to visit a place and conduct interviews with a large no. participants. Focus group research method has its own challenges as it is difficult make people participate in a research that does not benefits them. When utilizing case study for research it is difficult connect your findings from it and get a conclusion. Considering structured and in depth

interviews as research perspective which requires deep preparation of it hence making it a time consuming process. (Andre et al, 2017.)

6 DISCUSSION

The qualitative research carried out in this thesis revolves around a main research question concerned with the motivation of international travellers that make them visit Varanasi as a spiritual place. The research is centered around this question hence all the literature reviews and findings from interviews can get a possible answer to this question.

To discuss the findings related to the first objective of the thesis concerned about the spiritual journeys of international tourists in Varanasi and what they expect from this experience. The thesis overall is focused on the motives of these traveller which could be found through the literature review, their experience and interviews expressed above. The first motive to visit the city is around its spiritual practices performed at various locations. The city offers practices like yoga, meditation camps, spiritual events that attracts people from around the world. As discussed by Ruth, Jabar & Razaq, (2019) the reasons of improving one's mental and physical health makes one travel to spiritual destination. The practices that they participate includes yoga and ayurvedic camps which are widely practiced in Varanasi. Another reason that motivates international travellers to have change in their travel plans and visit a spiritual destination as their lives are majorily surrounded by materialistic values. Varanasi as a city offers them raw life where they experience culture shock in the form of rituals, lifestyle of local people, food and influence their motive of living. The travellers are motivated to visit the ghats of Varanasi and witness the stories of bodies burnt there. For most of the travellers the first thing that they travel in the city is the burning ghats where they experience the feeling spirituality and get know the essence of life. Apart from ghats they are motivated to take the boat ride in the river Ganga and are excited to see daily life of local people. This could be seen in the experiences of travellers like Dan,

Anna, Matt, Andrea, Joe and Liisu, Jack and Page, and Gabi as discussed in chapter 4 of the thesis. Most of the travellers were attracted towards Varanasi's spiritual offering such as boat ride, culture, rituals and the burning ghats. Even when the researcher Cristina interviewed a 34 year old female Belgian traveller, the traveller said that she likes the spiritual feeling that the city offers just by roaming around the city and exploring its rituals. From her interview it could be understood that her motive to visit Varanasi relies on her personal wellbeing and get inspiration from the city. A 31 year old traveller discussed with researcher Mari about his motives to visit Varanasi. The travellers said the city offered a life that can not be experienced in the western countries.

The problems faced by travellers during their travel are thoroughly mentioned in the literature review and chapter 6 of the thesis. The issues are seen in travellers interviews conducted by researcher Cristina. The first issue could be the environment of the city that tourists visit as it could be different from their home environment. The challenges could arise in the form of food, weather, local lifestyle. There were several interviews given to Cristina where the interviewees got ill due to the food of Varanasi and felt loss of energy with high temperatures of more than 40 degrees. These issues could be seen among travellers of western countries that tend to visit a destination which has different temperature than their host city and their food is according to their culture. Concerning the impact traffic on journey of international travellers was seen in their interviews given to researcher Cristina. The traffic generated different kinds of loud noises that had negative impact on tourist journey. They used to avoid that feeling of staying at such a chaotic place and moved to the ghats where the city had a peaceful feeling. Varanasi has stray animals such as dogs, cats and monkeys who affected the experience of international travellers. In chapter 5 there were interviews of 2 international travellers who told Cristina that they were attacked several times by stray dogs on the ghats.

The effects on local people and stakeholders could be seen in the thesis chapter 5 where researcher Cristina interviewed the local people, guides and stakeholders of Varanasi. There were 2 UP tourist bungalow officers of the Varanasi told Cristina that tourists usually think Ganga as an attraction but for

us Hindus it is a sacred river. They told that Hindu people are not effected if foriegners watch them doing daily rituals and activities. Thus it shows that locals are not that much affected by presence of international travellers and are not shy of them being in the surroundings. In an experience shared by Cristina shared through her field work encountered locals who tried to sell different things to her. The locals used phrases of English hence making international tourists as important part for their livelihood. In Chapter 4 of thesis Gabi shares his experience of locals speaking in Italian with him and he was surprised to see them. This shows that locals have adopted the foreign languages in their business as it makes them easy to interact with tourists and increase their profits. Thus new languages have been learnt by locals stakeholders to gain more oppurtunities among international travellers.

The study also states the objective of improvements that could be made at spiritual destinations such as Varanasi. The improvements could be made with the help of some regulations been implemented at ghats of Varanasi as foriegners experience touts at ghats. This could be seen from the field work experience of Cristina as she mentions touts disturbing her experience at ghats. This issue could make international travellers spend more or buy things that are not of that worth hence affecting them economically. Another improvement that the city could implement is managing the stray animals. It seen from the experiences shared in the chapter 5 where traveller mentioned of being attacked by stray dogs during their stay.

The methods used to collect data in the thesis are through blogs published on internet, vlogs on YouTube, research papers and books. The choice behind choosing these methods was the realililty that is present in its results. The research papers analysed in the thesis were written by renowned authors in their respective fields and were of published by renowned publishers. The research paper written by author Cristina, who did her doctoral research on Varanasi for the Royal Holloway University of London in 2011. The interviews during field work in Varanasi are widely mentioned in chapter 5 of this thesis. Another sources that corresponds with the realililty of data collection method are by author Rana P.B. Singh. The author is an famous Indian geographer

and professor, and has written 6 books and 125 research articles directed towards Varanasi. The usage of his materials are widely displayed in this thesis hence providing support towards its reliability. Triangulation method was used for data analysis as facts were checked along different forms of sources therefore making the findings reliable. It was made sure that the data collected is from different resources in each chapter and is related to the research objective. Cross case analyses were in use to discover prevalent trends in spiritual travellers experiences hence the methods were defined to broader approach. Chapter 4 shows that different spiritual travellers experiences were utilized which were related to the objective of the study. This helped in finding the common elements among their motives of travel which were revolved around the study question. The research was undertaken by using the reflexive method, where disciplined self reflection assisted in reducing any preconceptions of evaluating information from each research paper and made the research more accurate. When writing the chapter 2 of the thesis I made sure that any personal thoughts did not affect my research process as the topic was previously well known to me. Although every source is distinctive, an initiative was taken to find research papers that corresponds with a wide range of perspectives. A thorough investigation was made of each sources hence providing with a reliable knowledge of the subject.

Ethical considerations in this thesis were crucial element of the research as the topic of the thesis is sensitive in nature. The interviews used in the thesis are from the research papers of Cristina and Mari where both the authors provided consent to the participants they interviewed. The interview participants minimum identity was shown by both the researcher thus ensuring their confidentiality of research. The overall study was carried out as an honest admiration towards the religious beliefs of the audience and authors personal perspective was not imposed during the research mythology. The data presented in the study represents the diversity towards religious sentiment and avoids preconceptions. Controversial topics related to the cultural and religious beliefs were discussed with a objective dignity hence diverse perspectives were represented evenly.

7 CONCLUSION

To conclude the thesis was set on objective that was understood with spiritual tourism conducted by International travellers in Varanasi. There were few questions asked at the start of this research which were answered with the help Qualitative research mythology as various blog, vlogs, case studies and research papers were utilized to get results.

The key findings of thesis reveal that international traveller were deeply immersed in the rituals of the city which was displayed in their experiences. The travellers were able to experience the spirituality feeling that city offers and explored it to its fullest. There were 4 key objectives narrated through the study: first was to know the motives of the international travellers which is answered through interviews and research papers, second study question was related to issues faced by the international travellers during their visit to Varanasi and can be seen in form of attacks from stray animals and traffic issues of the city, third question was about the effect of tourist on local stakeholder where it was noticed that the locals adapted new languages and culture while attracting with foreigners, last objective of the thesis was identify factors that could help improving the tourism of Varanasi and was the reflection of regulating the problems of the city.

Spiritual tourism has been on rise in the recent years and it saw extreme growth potential after the Covid 19 era. In the chapter 3 of the study it is shown that people experienced mental constraints in the form of anxiety, depression and loliness thus making them to move towards spiritual tourism. Apart from Covid's effect on increase in spiritual tourism, todays new world humans have been surrounded with materialistic things and increase in screen time thus people are developing more of mental illness hence making travel in search of spirituality. The ease in the use of technology and globalisation are positive aspect towards travel industry as experiences of being spiritual environment are shared worldwide, hence improving travellers descion making process of taking part in spiritual tourism.

The findings of the thesis have a profound effect on future studies as it offers fresh areas of investigation, filling gaps between present understanding and gives basis to pursue further learnings. The findings of the thesis present deep knowledge of traveller experiences of Varanasi hence future studies in this area can broaden the understanding of spiritual tourism in Varanasi. The future study on the personal growth and wellness could be conducted based on the findings of this thesis. The ethical challenges faced while conducted this research would be helpful for researcher concerned with sensitive topics.

8 REFLECTION

The academic prospect of the thesis topic and how it has reflected my personal growth starts from my interest in spiritual tourism which drove me towards writing it. The thesis made me academically stronger towards my interest in tourism where deep research about the topic and the choice of the city was also one of my deemed destinations to visit. Reading and writing more about this topic made me dive into deep research and I learned how to find content that could be reasonable for the research.

The reason for choosing this methodology was the broad variety of research already being done on this topic which makes the resources utilized to their fullest. There were challenges faced in the research as there were no new interviews conducted here and the data is based on previous research papers. Due to some time constraints and changes in life situation made me chose this path of study instead of visiting the destination and conducting new interviews.

To reflect on how the research on spirituality and tourism changed my perspective of life and deepened my interest in spirituality. Overall, the research was a bit challenging as it was difficult to find reliable source that

could relate to the topic, some of the research papers were paid to access which made it difficult to collect information. The research improved my understanding of using and depicting reliable sources which could be used in future projects.

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