IMPACT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ENHANCING SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN UTTARAKHAND

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has emerged as an important as well as an organized industry which scattered its benefits over large segments of the population. Infrastructure has been globally recognised as an important factor in shaping the economy of a country. Infrastructure influences the industrial growth of a country to a great extent. The perceived importance of spiritual destination attracts the potential tourists to the place. However, there are still infrastructural inadequacies that are constraining the growth of tourism in India. New opportunities came in the tourism industry with the development of Information Technologies (ITs) and also with the emergence of the internet facilities. The ease of access, abundance of information, and low transaction costs of the web has motivated the tourism industry to provide online tourism services. Tourism websites are becoming increasingly popular as tourist's can browse these websites at the convenience of their workplace or homes, compare offerings from multiple websites with the click of a mouse button, and make reservations online for a variety of services such as transportation, lodging, meals, entrance fees to attractions, entertainment, and guide services etc. However, the actual decision of the tourist, in turn, is influenced by the infrastructural supports he would be getting during the course of his visit. Uttarakhand being one of the most popular states for spiritual tourism needs attention for a well-organised Tourism Network website. Spiritual tourism, as one of the major service sector industries in the state of Uttarakhand. Contributes significantly to the state's economy. Thus. It is apt to analyse the impact of these linked factors on spiritual tourism of Uttarakhand. The present paper aims to explore the new avenues of the tourism industry by keeping track of the tourist profile and problem and opportunities with respect to accommodation, accessibility, attractions, amenities etc. and design an effective Information Technology enabled model for spiritual tourism.

Keywords: Infrastructure, IT, Spiritual tourism, Tourism, website.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism defined Tourism in terms of particular activities selected by choice and undertaken outside the home environment (Wheeler, 1995). New opportunities came in the travel industry with the development of Information Technologies (ITs) and also with the emergence of the internet facilities. The ease of access, abundance of information, and low transaction costs of the web has motivated the tourism industry to provide online travel services. Tourism websites are becoming increasingly popular as travellers can browse these websites at the convenience of their workplace or homes, compare offerings from multiple websites with the click of a mouse button, and make reservations online for a variety of services such as transportation, lodging, meals, entrance fees to attractions, entertainment, and guide services (Lu *et al*., 2007).

Tourism is an unusual product, in that it exists only as information at the point of sale, and cannot be sampled before the purchase decision is made (WTO Business Council, 1999). The information-based nature of this product means that the Internet, which offers global reach and multimedia capability, is an increasingly important means of promoting and distributing tourism services, the ease of use, interactivity and flexibility of Web-based interfaces suggests an allied and important role for World Wide Web technology in destination marketing, and indications are that tourism Websites are constantly being made more interactive (Doolin *et al*., 2002).

Tourism as an industry has been flourishing and growing since time immemorial, but it has been in the last few decades that specific attention has started to be given to this smokeless industry. Tourism has emerged as an important as well as organized industry which scattered its benefits over large segments of the population. Uttarakhand, 27th of India republic, known universally as the abode of gods, is one of such states of India which offers variety of experiences to the tourist. Tourism needs variety and Uttarakhand has varied tourism products which satisfy the needs and demands of almost every class of visitors. But, despite of various resources and potential of satisfying the needs and motives of almost every class of visitor, the state of Uttarakhand have not been able to attract more and more tourists, particularly international tourists, to their shores. Uttarakhand being one of the most popular states for spiritual tourism needs attention for a well-organised Travel Network website. The present paper aims to explore the new avenues of the tourism industry by keeping track of the tourist profile and problem and opportunities with respect to accommodation, accessibility, attractions, amenities etc. and design an effective Information Technology enabled model for enhancing spiritual tourism.

2.0 INFRASTRUCTURE

Khadaroo and Seetanah (2007) carried out an investigation on the significance of transport infrastructure as a factor in destination development, showing it to be part of the classical demand for international tourism functions. The authors have also established from their study that the infrastructure base of a country is as a potential determinant of the attractiveness of a destination. In an online survey (Govers *et al.* 2007) has developed a neural network-based approach for content analysis which was used to measure destination image from a phenomenographic post-positivist perspective.

Tourism involves activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for leisure, business and other purposes. Tourism infrastructure demands for goods and services, and the establishments which provide such services are considered as part of the tourism industry. Further, the tourism infrastructure also includes establishments whose products are mainly sold to visitors, though they do not form a major share of tourist consumption. Several infrastructure sectors like power, telecommunication, water supply, roads and some production sectors like travel items, sports equipment, photographic materials, medicines and cosmetics are included in this category along with tourism infrastructure.

The infrastructure for tourism thus includes basic infrastructure components like airports, railways, roads, waterways, electricity, water supply, drainage, sewage, solid waste disposal systems and services. Moreover, facilities like accommodation, restaurants, recreational facilities and shopping facilities also comes under the ambit of tourism infrastructure. Planning for sustainable development of tourism infrastructure, therefore, involves the integrated development of basic infrastructure and amenities along with all the tourism facilities in a balanced manner. Uttarakhand being the land of Gods attracts spiritual tourist every year. The Char Dhams, the four most sacred and revered of Hindu temples lie in this state which attracts large number of foreign tourists. The places are well connected with roadways but government has to take adequate steps for better operations of it. Special tourist trains can operate in the foothills for the convenience of the tourists. The increase in flights services will put Uttarakhand on the national and international map. The government has to take immediate steps to make at least one helipad in each district of Uttarakhand which will attract more and more foreign tourist to this celestial land.

3.0 INTERNET AND TOURISM

Internet has become a platform for companies in the travel and tourism industry to bring their products and services to the customers around the world in a direct, efficient, and cost-minimising fashion ((Lu et al., 2007). The information-intensive nature of the tourism industry suggests an important role for the Internet and Web technology in the promotion and marketing of destinations (Doolin et al., 2002).

The use of the Internet radically changes the communication process, from the traditional media of ''the language of tourism'' based on monologues and unilateral communication from Western senders (tour operators) to Western receivers (tourists), to the electronic ''Word-of-Mouth" (Govers et al., (2007). Moving from simply broadcasting information to letting consumers interact with the Website content allows the tourism organisation to engage consumers' interest and participation (increasing the likelihood that they will return to the site), to capture information about their preferences, and to use that information to provide personalised communication and services. The content of tourism destination Websites is particularly important because it directly influences the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer.

4.0 IMPORTANCE OF COMMERCIAL TOURISM WEBSITES

Commercial Website development typically begins simply and evolves over time with the addition of more functionality and complexity as firms gain experience with Internet technologies. Many researchers have developed models for business purposes. Doolin *et al*., 2002 in their research studied on evaluating the web for tourism marketing of New Zealand and evaluated 26 websites during 2001 and examined in detail the various functions performed by each site and noted in spreadsheet file. The functions and features across all the sites were analysed and were grouped according to their level of interactivity and sophistication. This resulted in some 14 levels of functionality, from basic to full electronic commerce which is shown in the Table 1.

KEY: LEVEL OF FUNCTIONALITY	
1.	Email contact details
2.	Images
3.	Description of regional tourism features
4.	Systematic links to further information
5.	Lists of accommodation, attractions, activities, events with contact details and/or links
6.	Multiple value-added features (key facts, maps, itineraries, distances, news, photo gallery)

7.	Web-based inquiry or order form
8.	Interactive value-added features (currency converters, electronic postcards, interactive maps, downloadable materials, special offers, guest books, Web cam)
9.	Online customer support (FAQs, site map, site search engine)
10.	Searchable databases for accommodation, attractions, activities, dining, shopping, events
11.	Online bookings for accommodation, tours, travel
12.	Advanced value-added features (multi-language support, multimedia, email updates)
13.	Non-secure online payment
14.	Secure online payment

Table 1. Functionality of electronic Tourism Organisations (.(Doolin et al., 2002)

The Government of Kerala State, Ministry of tourism has developed a model of 6'S framework for analysis of Tourism Development in Kerala. The framework is shown in Table 2.

Fig 2. 'Six S' Framework for analysis of Tourism Development

(*Source:* Kerala's Approach to Tourism Development: A Case Study Ministry of Tourism & Culture, Government of India)

5.0 SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN UTTARAKHAND

Uttarakhand is one of the most beautiful and enchanting regions of northern India. It is located in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas and is bestowed with majestic peaks, magnificent glaciers, valley of flowers and dense forests with their varied flora and fauna. Nature has endowed this land with so much beauty and spiritual bliss that it is also known as "Dev Bhoomi", the Land of Gods. Ganga, Yamuna and scores of other rivers originate in Uttarakhand. Among them, Ganga is most holy and prominent as she represents the soul of India because of her rich culture, history and civilization. Uttarakhand is divided into thirteen districts and is well known for their spiritual sites. This state has a tremendous tourism potential and Information Technology can help immensely for its growth.

Spiritual tourism, also termed as religious heritage tourism, includes all the religions, religious places associated with, emotional attachment to these centers and infrastructure facilities for the tourists. This can also be referred to as pilgrimage tourism, as clients are not looking for luxury but arduous journeys to meet the divine goal or simple life. Travels to spiritual places at Uttarakhand have recorded a phenomenal increase in the recent years. People's strong believe in spirituality has caused them to travel since long even with poor travelling and communication infrastructures.

6.0 ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

In a short span, Uttarakhand has today become a leading state of the country in the field of Information Technology (IT) due to the multipronged efforts of the government. The information revolution of today is necessary to combat the challenges of the 21st century, and Uttarakhand has kept in step by taking IT techniques to different sectors as well as to the remote villages. Before the creation of Uttarakhand, progress in the region

in the field of IT was negligible, but now the new state has made IT one of the main pillars of progress. There has been an exceptional increase in spiritual travelers both domestic and foreign in the recent years in Uttarakhand state owing to generic changes in the people's attitude towards spirituality. As a result, IT has many functions to take part which can help in enhancing the Spiritual tourism in Uttarakhand. Since the Spiritual places in Uttarakhand are remotely located, here IT can help immensely.

Information Technology has a great role to play by coming up with more Tourist Information centers which can provide the tourist with in-depth information about the importance of the different sites, route information, weather condition, accommodation, kind of food available, health care, adventure, wildlife, environment, yoga and meditation etc. which the tourist like to be alert before visiting a particular place. Spiritual sites like Badrinath, Kedarnath, Ganotri and Yamnotri are well connected with roadways. Information regarding route information like route map, route condition, traffic, natural block and best time for visit etc. is very important pre-hand information for the tourist. IT facilities can also make the tourist convenient by making prior bookings for prayer and yoga which will help them to save ample amount of time in their busy schedule. Tourist will be exposed more too supplementary important information likes availability of Spa, shopping, other site seeing information etc. for which they can plan ahead and make prior bookings. Moreover the tentative cost of each information can be accessed which again can help the tourist to plan their journey appropriately. The model developed in Fig 1. depicts some of the major roles of Information Technology in enhancing Spiritual tourism in Uttarakhand.
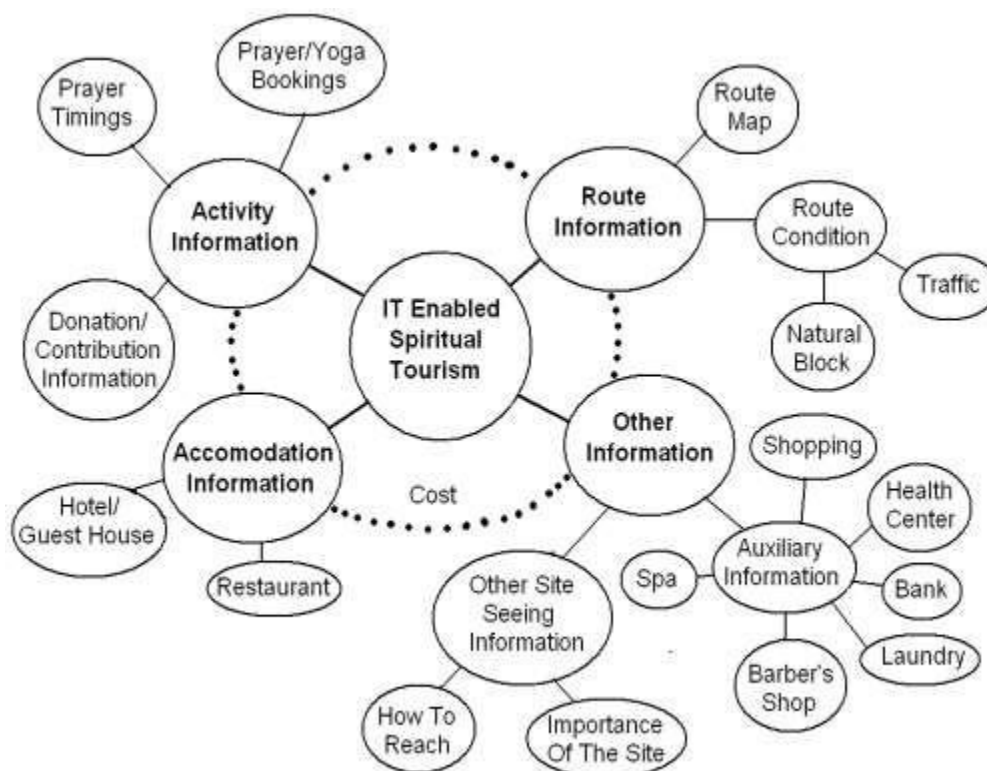

Fig 1. Role of Information Technology

7.0 CONCLUSION

There has been a exceptional increase in spiritual travellers both domestic and foreign in the recent years owing to generic changes in the people's attitude towards spirituality. Tourism being one of the most important sectors, the Uttarakhand state government has developed many significant plans to make tourism a firm base of the State's economy and put the State on the world tourism map. The traditional spiritual places have to be given a new look. The tourism websites of the state can help the tourist in making their journey a fruitful one. Along with the established tourist centres, some new tourist centres have also been developed. The government is improving the infrastructure facilities in the existing tourist areas, and on the other, it is developing new places of spiritual tourist interest, simultaneously ensuring that the environment is preserved. Tourist information centers should not only be located at important tourist destinations of the region but also at national and international gateways. So, the tourist particularly foreigners will not be misguided by the touts or other persons and will get the right information about the places. In order to make correct as well as speedy information all the information centers should be connected with each other through computerization. All these information centers should be provided with related literature and brochures, booking services for package tours and so on.

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