

Hybrid Tourists in Faith-Based Destinations: Exploring Experience-Driven Consumption and Local Revenue Outcomes

Kapil Tiwari¹, Dr. Anuj Kumar²

¹Research Scholar, Arni School of Management

²Assistant Professor, Arni School of Management

Abstract:

The shift of the tourism experience to an experience-based paradigm has brought about a great change in faith based travel. This paper examines the development of the so-called hybrid tourists, or persons who blend religious interests with leisure, cultural and experience seekers at faith-based destinations. This study will be based on a secondary, data-driven framework employing a recent report by UNWTO, WTTC, and the Ministry of Tourism (India) and peer-reviewed sources (2020-2025) to focus on the impact of experience-focused consumption trends on local revenue. As is shown, hybrid tourists make a substantial contribution to the diversified local economies by spending on the hospitality, transport, cultural products, and experiences. The paper identifies a transformation between the traditional pilgrimage and the experience economy structures with consequences in terms of policy design, destination management and sustainable economic development.

Keywords: Hybrid tourists, faith-based tourism, experience economy, religious tourism, local revenue, India, secondary data analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world tourism environment has experienced a radical change in the last twenty years, which shifted towards the traditional consumption of services to the new experience-focused and more immersive paradigm. It is in this shift, which can be conceptualized in terms of experience economy, that has made a major impact on different types of tourism, including faith-based travel. Conventionally, the spiritually motivated tourism otherwise known as pilgrimage tourism was largely motivated by spiritual requirements, religious attachment, and ritual purposes. Current trends, however, show that no longer is the travel done based on devotion, but instead it has become more hybridized where spirituality is incorporated with leisure, cultural interest, and experience consumption. The concept of hybrid tourists in an informative context has become a critical category of analysis in this changing context. Hybrid tourists are the visitors of the religious sites that seek not only spiritual satisfaction but also participating in a variety of non-religious activities like heritage tourism, cuisine, wellness travel, shopping, and online interactions. This change is more pronounced in such countries as India where religious tourism is a significant portion of domestic travel. Varanasi, Amritsar, Tirupati and Ajmer are of late becoming multi-purpose destinations that fulfill both sacred and secular demands of tourists. Consequently, these destinations cease to be the subject of ritualistic activity but are now becoming sophisticated socio-economic ecosystems.

The emergence of hybrid tourism is directly associated with the general socio-economic and technological reshaping. The rising disposable incomes, enhancement of transport infrastructure, digitization of travel services, and the rising power of the social media has transformed the way tourists behave. New travelers particularly those that are in the younger age brackets desire more personalized and memorable

experiences that extend the limits of traditional consumption. This has in faith-based destinations, been converted into demand curated experiences like guided heritage strolls, immersive narratives, attending local festivals, yoga and meditation retreats, and authentic culinary engagements. This has led to the fact that the lines that distinguish pilgrimage, cultural tourism and leisure tourism are becoming increasingly obscure. Economically, the advent of hybrid tourists has a lot of repercussions on how local revenues and regions are to be developed. Compared to the traditional pilgrims, whose spending is usually restricted to simple accommodation and even spiritual provisions, hybrid tourists are characterized by a greater diversified consumption pattern. They also use their money in the hospitality, transportation, local handicrafts, food and beverage, wellness services, and digital tourism platforms. The result of this diversified spending is a multiplier effect in local economies, and it brings incomes both in the formal and informal sectors. According to secondary data of global and national tourism reports, it is evident that faith based destinations are recording upward per capita tourist expenditure which is highly fueled by experience-driven consumption. In addition, the experience economy has led to the integration of the experience economy to faith based tourism and this has led to destination managers and policymakers re-examining the traditional thinking of tourism development. It is also being increasingly realized that improving visitor experiences is a sure way of boosting economic results besides boosting destination competitiveness. Governments and other tourism agencies especially in India have embarked on numerous programs which are geared towards the development of infrastructure, enhancement of cultural values and the encouragement of local entrepreneurs in the religious destinations. Themes circuits, projects to conserve heritage, and the use of digital tourism platforms are all pointers to this strategic change.

Although the role of hybrid tourism has been on the increase, the current scholarly literature is not coherent as most studies concentrate either on religious tourism or experiential tourism alone. The absence of combined research that looks at the impacts of hybrid tourist behavior on local economic outcomes is quite significant, especially when the studies are analyzed in the context of experience-based consumption. Moreover, empirical studies on this field are not many and detailed analytical models synthesizing the existing secondary data to comprehend the emerging patterns and trends are necessary. It is in this context that the current research aims to fill this gap in research and investigate the role of hybrid tourists in the context of faith based destinations and how their experience oriented consumption pattern can be useful in generating local revenues. Using secondary sources of information including UNWTO, WTTC and the Ministry of Tourism (India) in the study, the macro-level of the analysis is adopted to investigate the convergence between spirituality, experience economy and regional economic development. This research is relevant because it is interdisciplinary as it incorporates knowledge in tourism research, cultural economy and development research. It adds to the body of knowledge that is already in existence as it brings a conceptual and analytical insight of hybrid tourism and its economic effects. Also, such results of the study are practically relevant to policymakers, destination planners, and the local stakeholders as they point to the necessity to utilize integrated and sustainable tourism strategies to balance the promotion of economic development and the cultural and religious sensibility. In a nutshell, the shift of faith-based tourism to the experience oriented phenomenon is indicative of more global shifts in consumer behavior and economies. The emergence of hybrid tourists can be seen as both a change in the motivating power of travelling as well as redesigning of the local economy and destination processes. This transformation should be understood in order to come up with inclusive, sustainable and economically viable tourism models in the modern era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Evolution of Faith-Based Tourism

Faith-based tourism, traditionally conceptualized as pilgrimage, has long been associated with religious devotion, ritual performance, and spiritual fulfillment. Classical studies positioned pilgrims as spiritually motivated travelers whose primary objective was religious merit rather than leisure or consumption.

However, recent scholarship (2021–2025) demonstrates a paradigmatic shift in this understanding, emphasizing the growing complexity and diversification of motivations underpinning religious travel. Contemporary researchers argue that faith-based tourism now operates within a broader socio-cultural and economic framework, where religious destinations function as hybrid spaces combining sacred, cultural, and commercial elements. According to recent global tourism reports, religious tourism constitutes a significant proportion of domestic tourism in countries like India, Italy, and Saudi Arabia, yet its character has evolved from purely ritualistic engagement to a multi-dimensional experience. This transformation has been driven by globalization, urbanization, and the commodification of culture, which have redefined religious spaces as both spiritual centers and tourist attractions. As a result, faith-based tourism is increasingly analyzed through interdisciplinary lenses, integrating perspectives from cultural studies, economics, and tourism management.

2.2 Emergence of Hybrid Tourists

The notion of hybrid tourists represents a critical development in contemporary tourism literature. Hybrid tourists are defined as individuals who simultaneously embody characteristics of pilgrims and leisure tourists, engaging in both sacred and secular activities during their visits to religious destinations.

Recent studies highlight that hybrid tourists:

- Seek spiritual enrichment alongside entertainment and relaxation
- Engage in cultural, culinary, and experiential activities
- Exhibit flexible and multi-layered travel motivations

Empirical evidence suggests that younger travelers and international visitors are more likely to display hybrid characteristics, driven by changing lifestyle preferences and exposure to global tourism trends. Researchers have also noted that digital media plays a crucial role in shaping hybrid tourist behavior, as social media platforms influence destination choice, experience expectations, and consumption patterns. Furthermore, the hybridization of tourist identities challenges traditional dichotomies between “pilgrimage” and “tourism,” suggesting the need for new conceptual frameworks that capture the fluidity of modern travel behavior. This shift has significant implications for destination management, as it requires the integration of spiritual authenticity with experiential offerings.

2.3 Experience Economy and Tourism Consumption

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the experience economy framework, which posits that consumers increasingly value memorable and immersive experiences over tangible goods and services. Recent applications of this framework in tourism research emphasize that destinations must create emotional, sensory, and participatory experiences to remain competitive.

In the context of faith-based tourism, the experience economy manifests through:

- Educational experiences (e.g., heritage interpretation, guided tours)
- Esthetic experiences (e.g., temple architecture, sacred landscapes)
- Escapist experiences (e.g., spiritual retreats, meditation programs)
- Entertainment experiences (e.g., festivals, cultural performances)

Scholars argue that the integration of these experiential dimensions enhances tourist satisfaction, increases length of stay, and encourages repeat visits. More importantly, experience-driven consumption leads to higher expenditure levels, as tourists are willing to pay for unique and personalized experiences.

Recent studies (2022–2024) further emphasize the role of digital technologies in augmenting tourism experiences. Virtual tours, mobile applications, augmented reality, and online storytelling platforms have transformed how tourists interact with religious destinations, making experiences more accessible and engaging.

2.4 Economic Implications of Hybrid Tourism

A growing body of literature examines the economic impact of tourism, particularly in terms of revenue generation, employment creation, and regional development. In the case of faith-based destinations, hybrid tourism has been identified as a key driver of economic diversification.

Secondary data-based studies indicate that hybrid tourists contribute to:

- Increased per capita spending
- Expansion of local markets and micro-enterprises
- Growth of hospitality and service industries
- Strengthening of informal economic sectors

Unlike traditional pilgrims, whose spending is often limited to basic services, hybrid tourists engage in a wider range of consumption activities, including accommodation upgrades, dining experiences, cultural products, and wellness services. This diversified spending creates a multiplier effect, benefiting various stakeholders within the local economy.

Recent reports also highlight that religious tourism contributes significantly to GDP in several countries, with India emerging as one of the largest markets for domestic religious travel. The integration of experiential elements into faith-based tourism has further amplified its economic potential.

2.5 Role of Policy and Institutional Frameworks

The role of government policies and institutional frameworks has been widely discussed in recent literature, particularly in the context of developing sustainable and inclusive tourism models. Policymakers are increasingly recognizing the economic potential of hybrid tourism and are implementing strategies to enhance infrastructure, promote cultural heritage, and support local communities.

In India, initiatives such as:

- Development of pilgrimage circuits
- Smart tourism infrastructure
- Digital tourism platforms
- Public-private partnerships

have contributed to the transformation of religious destinations into integrated tourism hubs. However, scholars also caution that excessive commercialization may undermine the spiritual and cultural authenticity of these sites.

Therefore, there is a growing emphasis on balanced policy approaches that ensure economic growth while preserving religious sanctity and cultural heritage.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and analytical research design, grounded in the use of secondary data to examine the phenomenon of hybrid tourists in faith-based destinations. Given the emerging and interdisciplinary nature of the research topic, an exploratory approach is appropriate to develop conceptual clarity and identify patterns in tourist behavior and economic outcomes.

The study is non-empirical in nature, relying exclusively on existing datasets, reports, and scholarly literature rather than primary data collection. It employs a descriptive-analytical framework, wherein existing information is systematically reviewed, categorized, and interpreted to understand the relationship between experience-driven consumption and local revenue generation. Furthermore, the research follows a thematic synthesis approach, enabling the integration of diverse strands of literature—faith-based tourism, experience economy, and tourism economics—into a unified analytical framework. This approach facilitates a macro-level understanding of trends and patterns, particularly in the context of developing economies such as India. The study is also cross-sectional in scope, focusing on recent developments in tourism (primarily 2020–2025), thereby ensuring relevance to current policy and market

dynamics. The research design is aligned with socio-economic and interdisciplinary perspectives, combining insights from tourism studies, cultural economics, and development studies.

3.1 Data Collection Sources

This research is based entirely on secondary data, collected from credible and authoritative national and international sources. The selection of data sources was guided by criteria such as reliability, recency, relevance, and academic rigor.

(A) International Reports and Databases

- United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports on global tourism trends
- World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) economic impact reports
- World Bank and OECD tourism-related datasets

These sources provide macro-level insights into global tourism patterns, economic contributions, and emerging trends in experience-based travel.

(B) National-Level Data (India)

- Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (India Tourism Statistics Reports)
- State tourism department publications
- NITI Aayog and related policy documents

These datasets offer detailed information on domestic tourism trends, religious tourism circuits, and economic contributions at the national and regional levels.

(C) Academic Literature (2021–2025)

- Peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science
- Research papers focusing on faith-based tourism, experience economy, and tourism economics

The literature was selected to ensure inclusion of recent and high-quality academic contributions, consistent with Scopus publication standards.

(D) Industry and Institutional Reports

- Reports from consulting firms and tourism boards
- Digital tourism and travel platform insights

These sources provide practical perspectives on tourist behavior, spending patterns, and industry innovations.

Data Inclusion Criteria

- Published between 2020 and 2025
- Relevant to faith-based tourism, hybrid tourism, or experience economy
- Focus on economic outcomes, consumption behavior, or policy frameworks

3.2 Tools and techniques used for analysis

S. No.	Tool / Technique	Description	Purpose in the Study	Outcome / Contribution
1	Thematic Analysis	Systematic identification and categorization of recurring themes across literature and reports	To analyze patterns in hybrid tourist behavior and experience-driven consumption	Identification of key themes such as hybrid tourism, experience economy, and revenue impact
2	Content Analysis	Structured examination of textual data from reports, policy documents, and journal articles	To extract relevant information and interpret qualitative insights	Organized and filtered data on tourism trends, consumption behavior, and policy frameworks
3	Comparative Analysis	Comparison across different destinations,	To distinguish between traditional	Understanding of behavioral differences

		tourist types, and consumption patterns	pilgrims and hybrid tourists	and their economic implications
4	Conceptual Synthesis	Integration of multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified framework	To link hybrid tourism with experience economy and local revenue generation	Development of a conceptual model explaining tourism–economy relationships
5	Descriptive Data Interpretation	Interpretation of numerical data from secondary sources (reports, statistics)	To support qualitative findings with quantitative evidence	Enhanced validity through supporting statistics on tourist inflow and spending patterns

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Key Findings

Based on the thematic and comparative analysis of secondary data, several significant findings emerge regarding the role of hybrid tourists in faith-based destinations:

1. Emergence of Hybrid Tourist Behavior

The study confirms a clear transition from traditional pilgrimage-based travel to hybrid tourism. Contemporary tourists increasingly combine spiritual motivations with leisure, cultural, and experiential pursuits. This shift is particularly prominent among younger travelers and urban populations, reflecting changing socio-cultural preferences and increased exposure to global tourism trends.

2. Dominance of Experience-Driven Consumption

Findings indicate that hybrid tourists engage extensively in experience-oriented activities, including heritage exploration, local cuisine, festivals, wellness programs, and digital interactions. This aligns with the experience economy framework, where value is derived from memorable and immersive experiences rather than basic services.

As a result, faith-based destinations are evolving into multi-functional tourism ecosystems, integrating religious, cultural, and commercial dimensions.

3. Increased Tourist Expenditure and Revenue Diversification

One of the most critical findings is that hybrid tourists exhibit higher and more diversified spending patterns compared to traditional pilgrims. Their expenditure extends beyond religious offerings to include:

- Accommodation upgrades
- Food and beverage services
- Local handicrafts and souvenirs
- Wellness and cultural experiences

This diversified consumption contributes to a multiplier effect, generating income across various sectors of the local economy, including both formal and informal markets.

4. Strengthening of Local and Informal Economies

The study finds that hybrid tourism significantly benefits micro and small enterprises, such as street vendors, artisans, local guides, and small-scale hospitality providers. The expansion of experiential services has led to:

- Increased employment opportunities
- Growth of local entrepreneurship
- Revitalization of traditional crafts and cultural industries

This indicates that hybrid tourism plays a crucial role in inclusive economic development.

5. Role of Digitalization and Infrastructure Development

Secondary data highlights the importance of digital platforms, improved connectivity, and tourism infrastructure in facilitating hybrid tourism. Online booking systems, mobile applications, and social media have enhanced accessibility and visibility of faith-based destinations, influencing tourist decision-making and experience expectations.

6. Policy Shift Towards Integrated Tourism Development

The findings reveal a growing emphasis on integrated policy frameworks that combine religious tourism with cultural and experiential tourism. Government initiatives in India and other countries are increasingly focused on:

Developing thematic tourism circuits

Promoting heritage conservation

Supporting local businesses

However, the literature also warns against the risk of over-commercialization, which may compromise the spiritual authenticity of religious sites.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that faith-based tourism is undergoing a structural transformation driven by the convergence of spirituality and the experience economy. The emergence of hybrid tourists challenges traditional conceptualizations of pilgrimage, necessitating a re-evaluation of tourism theories and models.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the integration of:

Faith-based tourism theory (spiritual motivation)

Experience economy framework (experiential consumption)

Tourism-led economic development (revenue generation)

This integrated approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary tourism dynamics.

From an economic standpoint, hybrid tourism enhances local revenue generation through diversification, reducing dependency on a single sector and increasing resilience of local economies. The multiplier effect observed in the study highlights the interconnectedness of tourism with other economic activities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the emergence of hybrid tourists in faith-based destinations and analyzed how their experience-driven consumption patterns influence local revenue outcomes, using a secondary data-based approach. The findings clearly demonstrate that faith-based tourism is no longer confined to ritualistic practices but has evolved into a dynamic, experience-oriented, and economically significant sector.

Hybrid tourists represent a new category of travelers who blend spiritual intentions with leisure and experiential consumption. Their presence has transformed religious destinations into integrated tourism ecosystems, where economic activities extend beyond traditional religious services to include hospitality, culture, wellness, and digital engagement.

A key conclusion of the study is that hybrid tourism contributes significantly to local economic diversification and inclusive growth. By generating demand across multiple sectors, it creates employment opportunities, supports small businesses, and enhances regional development. The experience economy plays a central role in this transformation, as tourists increasingly seek meaningful and memorable experiences.

However, the study also highlights the need for balanced and sustainable tourism development. While economic benefits are substantial, excessive commercialization may undermine the cultural and spiritual essence of faith-based destinations.

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