



TRACING TEMPLE TOWN'S TRANSFORMATION: Experts during the session on religious tourism

'Temple to open floodgates of economy in Ayodhya'

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With an estimated footfall of over three lakh tourists per day and around 6.8 crore tourists visiting Ayodhya by 2030, the land of Lord Ram is set to emerge as a one-of-a-kind temple city, principal secretary, tourism department Mukesh Meshram during 'Divine Ayodhya' conclave organised by TOI on Tuesday.

In a session on 'Religious Tourism, Temple Economy and the Potential Ayodhya Holds', an erudite panel deliberated on Ayodhya's potential in ushering the new era of employment-intensive development.

Principal secretary, tourism, Mukesh Meshram said the consecration of Ram Mandir would open floodgates of economic opportunities in Ayodhya. He said that by government estimates, Ayodhya is expected to welcome twice the number of tourists than Varanasi does daily.

"For the last few years, we have been on a mission to create a temple city in Ayodhya that gives a feel of Vedic times and provides a wholesome experience to tourists. We have upgraded infrastructure in Ayodhya and are working to make it a model solar city. The efforts of PM Narendra Modi and CM Yogi Adityanath are already showing results. From less than 2 lakh tourists in 2017, Ayodhya welcomed over 2 crore tourists in 2022. This figure will only rise, and we are in the works to accommodate the exponential rise in demand," Meshram said.

He added that Ayodhya holds the

potential of attracting diverse religious tourism offering memorable experiences to pilgrims of different religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sufism, and Christianity.

"Ayodhya holds importance not just for Hindus. It is also an important city for Jainism as 18 of the 24 Jain 'tirthankars' have deep connections with the city. Besides, Sufi tourism will also get a boost as sites such as Deva Sharif are in proximity. Similarly, sites like Kapilavastu are close by and that would boost Buddhist tourism as well," he added.

Highlighting the preparedness of the government to take on these chal-

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lenges, principal secretary (urban development) Amrit Abhijat asserted that the government is working on a 360-degree model to provide gold standard amenities like clean drinking, round-the-clock electricity, a vast network of permanent and mobile public toilets dotting the city and ghats, adequate public transportation, enhanced drainage network, river rejuvenation projects, integrated traffic management systems, to name a few.

"After Jan 22, we'll face a dynamic situation in terms of tourist footfall.

To ensure that we are not taken by storm, our systems are well in place and we are also working to create an exhaustive network of public amenities to ensure that tourists go back with a lingering experience of divinity and warmth," Abhijat said.

He claimed that the government was not dismissive of the displacement of the people that took place for erecting the mammoth infrastructure for the temple city and said that the government was providing rehabilitation under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY).

Prof Devashish Das Gupta from IIM-Lucknow suggested that the government should consider developing a tourist circuit by focusing on nearby cities and sites to accommodate the large influx of tourists.

"Ayodhya is a rising star. Besides tourist influx, there would also be reverse migration and in-migration of people looking for livelihood opportunities. Thus, new models of engagement and collaboration would be needed to manage crowds within the temple complex. Something like a ticketing system as we see in Somnath temple. Likewise, a tourist police could also be a good idea. Other than a seamless integration of various departments would become essential for better management," he said.

Sameer Kumar Sharma, associate director-sales, at IndiGo Airlines, said: "There is a huge demand for air travel to Ayodhya. One of the key routes that is emerging is Varanasi to Ayodhya and vice versa. We are working out our itinerary for this route and others as well."