

As UP basks in Maha Kumbh bounty, religious tourism in India is transforming the pilgrimage economy, throwing up lucrative opportunities for businesses

BRANDS DISCOVER POWER OF PAYER IN PILGRIM RUSH

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Luxury stays, seamless travels, curated experiences, exclusive interactions. Pilgrimage in India is fast embracing a level of sophistication perhaps not seen since the introduction of VIP queues at major shrines. As the best that money can offer the holidaymaker becomes available to blessings-seekers, things are looking up for the religious economy. In 2022, the sector earned about \$16.2 billion, estimates the Union ministry of tourism. Spiritual tourism is expected to soon provide employment to over 10 crore people and generate around \$59 billion in revenue by 2028.

Rise Of A New Pilgrim

Historically, the pilgrimage circuit in India has catered primarily to lower socio-economic classes and the older demographic. But, today, affluent religious tourists, non-resident Indians (NRIs) and even overseas visitors are looking for spiritual fulfilment with modern comforts.

"The pilgrim economy was always big, but it was earlier concentrated amongst lower SECs and older cohorts. But, in the last few years, religious tourism has become more mainstream and upmarket. Starred hotels now welcome well-heeled pilgrims who fly in and out. So, lots of money is now going devotional. Also, NRIs are now a large component of blessings-seekers. The services on offer are, therefore, large and varied," said Sandeep Goyal, chairman, Rediffusion.

One in four Indians travelled to a religious destination over the past year, according to data from leading insights and consulting firm Kantar TGI (Target Group Index). Big-ticket events like the Ayodhya Ram temple inauguration last year and this year's Maha Kumbh fuel such travel and are also magnets for brands looking to connect with consumers.

Brands Are Loving It

What's common to sectors like fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI), automotive, hospitality and aviation? They are all being drawn by the expansion of the religious economy, looking to woo buyers at scale. Other sectors, too, are jumping on to this bandwagon. Brands say

DEVOTIONAL WINDFALL

Not just Prayagraj, the temple towns of Varanasi and Ayodhya, too, were major gainers from the heavy Maha Kumbh footfall. In fact, UP govt says that its economic impact touched at least half-a-dozen neighbouring districts and Lucknow as well. Now, five new pilgrimage corridors have emerged

FIVE NEW HOLY CORRIDORS

Shukra Teerth
Mathura
Vrindavan
Naimisharanya
Lucknow
Ayodhya
Gorakhpur
Banda
Prayagraj
Rajapur
Varanasi
Vindhyachal

HOW KUMBH BROUGHT IN ₹3L CR

Transport, Travel	₹1,50,000 cr
Food	₹33,000 cr
Hotel	₹40,000 cr
Puja items	₹20,000 cr
Donations	₹660 cr
Toll tax	₹300 cr
Miscellaneous	₹66,000 cr

Source: UP govt



Actor Raveena Tandon at Maha Kumbh last month. The 45-day event saw celebrities and tycoons make a beeline for a holy dip at the Sangam

high-footfall events like the Maha Kumbh and the Ram temple inauguration are fertile territory for building meaningful relationships with consumers. "A direct engagement with consumers during such traditional melas, haats and religious gatherings helps us strengthen our bond. Greater the strategic attention to a unique demand, greater the chances of the product's success in rural pockets... It actually offers companies the opportunity to get consumers to touch, feel and experience their brands and build a greater connect. This will generate sales in the days to come," said Dabur India CEO Mohit Malhotra.

The objective is to go beyond mere sales and create authentic, memorable experiences that resonate culturally. "The Maha Kumbh is not just a spiritual gathering; it is a melting pot of cultures, traditions and communities... We believe there are several pillars of building a brand, and one key pillar is 'culture-centric marketing'," said an ITC executive.

Too Good To Miss

Not just FMCG brands, automobiles, too, are finding that religious events present significant business potential.

"A car is an aspirational product, and connecting with prospective customers is a continuous effort — whether through promotions during festive seasons or at religious centres. The Maha Kumbh was a particularly valuable opportunity, like it is at other major pilgrimage centres during auspicious periods, especially when footfall is way above normal," said Saharsh Damani, CEO of Federation of Automobile Dealers Association (FADA).

Needless to say, airlines and hospitality companies are tapping into the trend, too. If ITC Hotels has strategically expanded near key pilgrimage sites, hospitality technology company OYO announced last month that it will add 500 hotels at key religious centres across India to boost religious tourism. Indian Hotels Company is also increasing its presence in such locations.

Not to be outdone, BFSI firms also got into the act, especially the brands focused on digital onboarding, educational sessions, and experiential touchpoints. Companies such as LIC, Paytm, DSP Mutual Funds, SBI and the likes of RBI and AMFI were active during Maha Kumbh, drawn by the diverse socio-economic profile of the visitors — from the poorest to the richest. "Be it the ubiquitous SBI or Paytm and AMFI, which would want more people to adopt mutual funds, Maha Kumbh provides a great opportunity," said Venkat Chalasani, chief executive of AMFI.

Eying Authentic Connections

However, companies say it's important to keep in mind that over-commercialisation can invite a backlash. Those on a spiritual quest may view excessive branding as exploitative. This makes cultural alignment critical. The challenge, therefore, lies in creating a symbiotic relationship that respects and integrates cultural nuances. But the rewards are high.