

# Pilgrimage tourism in Kurukshetra (Haryana): a sustainable development approach

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## Abstract

Tourism is one of the biggest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the global economy and has significant environmental, cultural, social, and economic effects, both positive and negative. Pilgrimage tourism is one of the pre-requisites of achieving sustainable development which can be taken as a remedy to manage tourism effects. This paper focuses on the sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in Kurukshetra situated in the state of Haryana. Kurukshetra has been an emerging tourist spot due to its magnificently diverse religious tourist potential and rich cultural heritage. The main objectives of the study are the formation of tourist areas, to highlight the factors creating hindrances in sustainable tourism development and suggest suitable measures for sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in Kurukshetra. A field based systematic survey was carried out at selected tourism spots in the study area. The result of the study brings feasible suggestions and recommendations for further development of tourism in this region.

**Keywords:** Economic, global, sustainable, emerging, heritage, development.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the tourism industry has shown sustained growth in revenues and number of tourist arrivals, mainly through foreign exchange earnings, contributions to national income, generation of employment, business opportunities and has left extensive economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts almost every part of the world (Dabour, 2003). As a result, there is now increasing agreement on

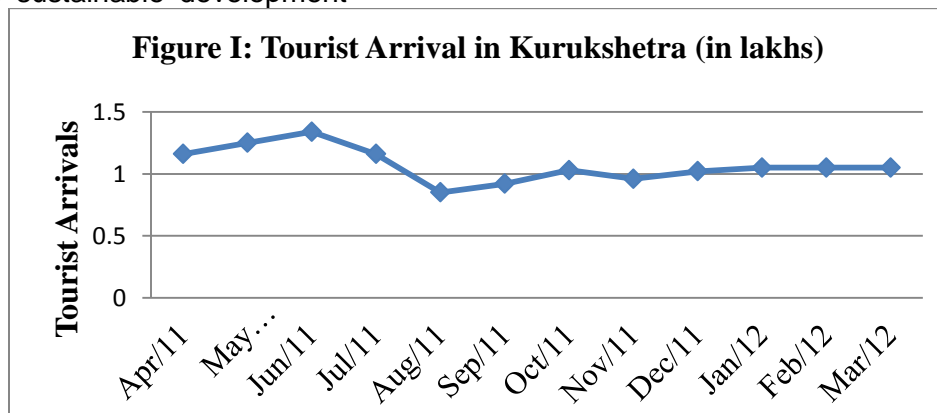
the need to promote sustainable tourism development to minimize its environmental impact and to maximize socio-economic overall benefits at tourist destinations (Ahmed, 2013). Hence, sustainable development is achieved if the economical, social and ecological development of a country is done in a sound and fair manner (Filho, 2000). This means that in order to achieve sustainable tourism, sustainable practices must be achieved in every sector related with tourism industry and

put on agenda of nations' strategies and policies.

Gupta (2007) highlighted that among various tourism forms pilgrimage tourism can achieve the goal of sustainability effectively as it is inherently having features such as less burdens on environment, killing of animals is mostly prohibited, local communities are involved to a large extent, and very less cultural difference between guest and host as well it occurs or performed during certain times in a year. Pilgrimage tourism in India has been practiced since time immemorial. It is the land which is blessed by several masters (gurus) for spiritual enlightenment (Gupta, 2007). It is land of religions and pilgrimage centers and is showing phenomenal growth in this phenomena (Chand, 2011). Instead of its rich potential for pilgrimage tourism it fails to bring the maximum number of tourists and tourism business due to lack of sustainable practices. Venkatachalam & Patwardhan (2011) highlighted that many destinations in India already struggling with issues\ related to the sustainable development

of pilgrimage tourism such as the managing the tourist activity, preservation and environmental management and cultural tourist resources as well as safety & security of the visitors. Hence, Kamra (1996) emphasized to give proper attention to adequate development of tourism and economy as a whole. It is necessary to focus on the issues related to its sustainability.

Kurukshetra is very popular among the national and international visitors who primarily visit for pilgrimage purpose. It is known universally as the war of Mahabharata battled here is one of places of India which offers variety of experiences to the tourist. Thus, there is need to focus more sustainable practices in this industry. This study focuses on sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in the study area of Kurukshetra. Month wise tourist arrival in Kurukshetra is shown below:



**Source: Ministry of Tourism, 2012**

Kurukshetra was the best suited place for pilgrimage tourism in the state of

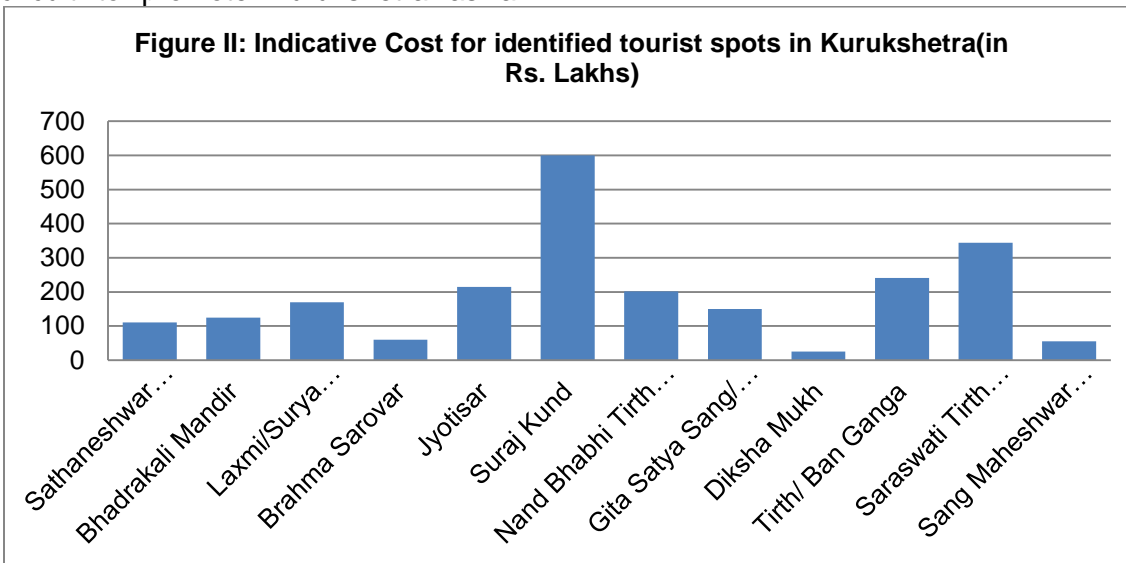
Haryana. It has great pilgrimage centres for Hindus, and 860 places of

pilgrimage related to Mahabharata even exist today (Tomer, 2011). Pilgrims significantly explore the places like famous temples of Bhadrakali temple, Brahma Sarovar, BhismaKund, Jyotisar, Sri Krishna Museum, Gita Birla Mandir, Pehowa, the famous sikhGurudwara and so on (Singh,2011).

Ministry of Tourism (2003) after understanding the pilgrimage value of this place started various projects and schemes to benchmark this place as a tourist hub in the region such as Kurukshetra and Morni Hills projects and Kurukshetra-Thanesar-Pehowa-Kaithal-Jind-Hissar tourist circuit. The Haryana Tourism policy (2008) of the state also focused on to develop Panipat-Pinjore-Kurukshetra as tourist circuit and Mahabharata circuit, Sufi circuit, eco-tourism circuit and heritage circuit to promote Kurukshetra as a

pilgrim destination with world class infrastructure. Furthermore, The Ministry of Tourism (2012) has focused on to develop Kurukshetra as major tourist circuit by adjoining Kalka - Panchkula - Naraingarh- Yamuna Nagar –Kurukshetra - Thanesar – Pehowa- Panipat.

The Ministry of Tourism (2012) started various plans and strategies from time to time to reap the multiplier benefits of tourism in the study area of Kurukshetra by adopting Public-Private- Partnership mode in collaboration with several other concerned bodies. The Government has also planned attractive outlay for identified tourist circuits in the state. A brief snap shot of outlay for various tourist sites of Kurukshetra introduced by Ministry of Tourism.



**Source: Ministry of Tourism (2012)**

The above facts showed that Kurukshetra is among major pilgrimage tourist destination of the state. But tourism industry in Kurukshetra has

failed to attract desired number of tourists due to lack of policy guidelines, resource constraints and lack of marketing orientation, hence, a study on this area is essential to uncover the relevant facts regarding sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in Kurukshetra. The present study attempted to fill the existing gap by focusing *'Pilgrimage Tourism in Kurukshetra (Haryana): A Sustainable Development Approach.*

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The development of tourism throughout the globe has brought, on the one hand, immense economic opportunities and benefits as well as it has put huge pressure on the natural environment, societies and cultures (Boora, 2007). These pressures over the period of time become reason for the decline of tourist inflow and thus depriving the coming generation of the benefits of tourism. It is difficult to accurately enumerate the benefits of tourism (Mbaiwa, 2003) but, there is no doubt that the tourism market will develop swiftly to provide alternative income and employment opportunities for countries to grab upon (Chibuikem, 2009; Rodgers 2009). Tourism provides such an opportunity for a pilgrimage destination like Kurukshetra which is longing for effective economic diversification. The need to protect tourist resources for the future generation is becoming an essential aim for tourism due to its contribution to national economy and its opportunity for assisting sustainable development are becoming more evident for all stakeholders. Thus sustainable development of tourism at pilgrimage

destinations has emerged as one of the major issues for the stakeholders (Venkatachalam & Patwardhan, 2011). After understanding the vital importance of pilgrimage tourism in the study area the present study will contribute towards the development of pilgrimage tourism in a sustainable way. The vital idea behind the selection of this topic is discuss the importance of pilgrimage tourism.

Pilgrimage tourism is most suitable for sustainable development of tourism (Gupta, 2007).The products and services that offered to the pilgrims at the destinations expose that they are more perceptive to the environment at the destination which is significant for sustaining the pilgrimage tourism market. Whereas tourism in a framework of abandoned growth which puts increasing stress on the natural, cultural and socio-economic environment, hazards, retreating the pilgrim's experience at the pilgrimage centre visited. Hence, increasing market of pilgrimage tourism can only contributed to sustainable development of tourism if its negative pressures or impacts can be proper planned and managed (Venkatachalam&Patwardhan, 2011). This can be possible by giving proper focus on sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism.

Pilgrimage tourism has grown so significantly in recent years, involving millions of international travelers that some travel agencies and tour operators have began to specialize specifically in this form of travel (Olsen and Timothy 1999; Russell 1999; San Filippo 2001). A part from devotional aspect looked at from the broader point

of view, pilgrimage involves sightseeing, travelling, visiting different places and in some cases voyaging by air or sea, etc., and buying the local memorabilia, almost everything a tourist does (Gupta 1999). Given the importance and magnitude of pilgrimage tourism, the infrastructure and services at the pilgrimages sites needs to be developed in such a way that it can be positively sustained for the coming millenniums. Sustainability is a positive approach intended to reduce the tension and friction created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment and the communities which are host of holiday makers. Sustainable tourism development work for the long-term viability and quality of both natural and human resources (Gupta, 1998).

Pilgrimage tourism is rooted within a composition of heritage tourism and mass tourism activities. The inter-relationship is complex, and interaction with local communities is main to the understanding of pilgrimage tourism in creating sustainable development (Rotherham, 2007). Sustainability in pilgrimage tourism includes ecological, socio-cultural, economic and experiential dimensions with an aim to diminish the harmful impacts of tourism in order to heighten tourist spiritual experiences and to strengthen the interrelationship of different stakeholders associated with the tourist destination. By understanding this Kaul & Gupta (2009) stated that the balance between sustainable development and pilgrimage tourism not only improve economic development but must also be

synonyms with environmental, socio-cultural preservation and protection in order to ensure a successful pilgrimage tourism industry (Kaul & Gupta, 2009).

The World Tourism Organization has adopted the sustainable approach to tourism, and applied sustainable tourism as one that, "Meets the need of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunities for future." Similarly, the basic needs for sustainability are similar to pilgrimage/ religious tourism generally, ranging from trying to make large-scale pilgrimage tourism with low environmental, socio-cultural damage to destination and its communities (Venkatachalam & Patwardhan, 2011). Kurukshetra is known for the great war of Mahabharata is also famous for its pilgrimage tourism. It has acquired its importance from ancient past. The scriptures depicted that all Gods come here on the occasion of solar eclipse. A large number of pilgrims from different places visited here to take a dip in this sacred eclipse but stakeholders at Kurukshetra fail to sustain its growing continuance (Chaudhary, 1998). The reason behind this is the lack of sustainable management of pilgrimage places of Kurukshetra. To achieve a sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of tourism impacts, introduction of necessary preventive and /or corrective measure whenever required (Bansal and Singla, 2007).

The maintenance of environmental, social and cultural heritage at pilgrimage site is only means to guarantee the proper growth of this sector. As there have been only a few

studies that focused on the sustainable development through pilgrimage tourism in Kurukshetra.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The present study has certain research objectives. They are as follows:

- To identify the major pilgrimage spots of Kurukshetra which have enough potentiality for development.
- To identify the factors which create hindrance in the sustainable development of tourism in the study area.
- To suggest recommendations which develop the tourism in Kurukshetra in a more sustainable way.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is generally exploratory in nature and used both primary and secondary data source to meet the objectives of the study. Most significantly the study used secondary data sources such as previous studies i.e. books, journals, reports, magazines and online data sources. However, researchers also conducting some fieldwork. During the field, investigation, observation method as well as informal personal communications with some related persons has made for the purpose of verification of data. Furthermore, some facts of the study also presented through graphs to make them more presentable.

### **STUDY REGION PROFILE**

Kurukshetra is one of the most ancient places of religious travel in the world. It

is situated in the state of Haryana, India, 160 km north from Delhi and 91 km south from Chandigarh and known as The land of the Bhagavad-Gita. The city is well connected by rail and road network and lies on the Delhi-Ambala stretch of the National Highway number 1. The two state Government tourist complexes namely Parakeet and Neelkanth Yatri Niwas situated in the city. In addition to that a large number of accommodation facilities both private and government are there in Kurukshetra for pilgrims/tourists. Kurukshetra is well connected by Road, Train and Air. To provide adequate information about Kurukshetra, three tourist information centres have been established at Pipli, Brahm Sarovar and Jyotisar. During peak sessions (Gita Jayanti festivals and Sun Eclipses) special arrangements are made for providing medical aid to the pilgrims/tourists. Kurukshetra is one of those holy towns that have borne the imprint of Lord Krishna's footsteps. Tradition holds that the great 18-day battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas in which Lord Krishna played his enigmatic part, as described in the pages of the epic Mahabharata, was fought on the plains of Kurukshetra. It is said in the Puranas that those who visit this area or reside here even for a while, go straight to heaven after life. Kurukshetra is home of a number of tourist sites.

### **PILGRIMAGE TOURISM SPOTS OF KURUKSHETRA**

**Brahma Sarovar:** Among the holiest of water tanks in India, the Brahma Sarovar is an important place to visit in Kurukshetra. This large water body is

edged with wide platforms, stairs and a wide 'parikarma'. A number of meditation chambers have been built for the convenience of religious tourists. It is believed that it is the cradle of Indian civilization because Lord Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, conceived the Earth here. A dip in the Sarovar bears the sanctity of performing Ashwamedha Yajna, absolves one of all the sins.

**Sri Krishna Museum:** This museum is dedicated of Lord Krishna and was established in 1991 after collecting various art objects which celebrated the theme of Lord Krishna. The artifacts of museum present, Krishna as a God, a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, a great Philosopher, an epic hero, an astute statesman and a supreme lover. Idols and frescoes found during various excavations in the area have also been displayed in this museum.

**BhishmaKund at Naraktari:** It is the place where Arjuna shot an arrow towards the earth to quench Bhishma Pitamah's thirst. A temple and water tank (BhishmaKund) is situated here. The tank resulted when Arjun shot an arrow in the ground to arrange water for BhishmaPitahma when he laid on the arrow-bed.

**Lakshmi Narayana Temple:** The Lakshmi Narayana temple is dedicated to Lord Narayana and His consort Lakshmi. Temple has a huge double storied building having three traditional architectural components. The first section lies on a high plinth having seven projections whereas the second chamber is a long corridor hall having

seven projected areas on either side, bearing transacted windows.

**SannihitSarovar:** Sannihit Sarovar is yet another sacred water tank. It is believed that hundreds of years ago people, burdened by their sins, and they sought help from the Lord. At this, the Lord said 'On the days of Amavasyas (nights of total darkness) or on the days of an eclipse, if you collect the water of Sannihit tank, your sins will be absolved.' Ever since, the tank has been the venue of millions of devotees who perform the Ashwamedha Yajna. Bathing ghats and steps have been set up here for pilgrims. Temples dedicated to Dhruva Narayan, Mother Goddess Durga and Lord Hanuman can be seen here.

**Gita Mandir:** Popularly known as Birla Mandir, it was built by Jugal Kishore Birla in the mid-fifties of the 20th century. It is one of the premier temples of this region and also a specimen of Hindu architecture in modern times. The main deity of the temple is Lord Krishna. Full text of the *Bhagavadgita*, the song celestial, is engraved on the walls around the main temple. Another attraction is a large size all marble chariot driven by four horses and depicting Lord Krishna delivering the message of the *Gita* to Arjuna. Janamashtmi festival is celebrated here with great enthusiasm.

**SthaneshvaraMahadev Temple:** It can doubtlessly be said that the presiding deity of Kurukshetra is Lord Shiva. It is after the Sthaneshvar *Shiva Linga* that Thanesar (twin town of Kurukshetra) gets its name. *VamanPuran* categorically mentions its

importance and legends tell us that Lord Brahma Himself laid the first *Linga* of Lord Shiva at this temple. It was renovated in recent times.

**Bhadra Kali Temple:** From the legend of *Sati*, springs the existence of MaaBhadra Kali temple. The legends say it is the sanctity of a *SidhaPeeth* (Place where wishes are fulfilled). It lies at a short 4 Km. drive from the railway station. The temple has been renovated with red stone. The inner sanctum of the temple houses are inspiring and the sublime forms of the Mother Goddess *Kali*. Thousands of devotees throng the temple on the holy days of Navratre (March-April and September-October) and every Saturday.

**Sheikh Chehli Mausoleum:** The tomb of Sheikh Chilhi Jalal is a fascinating monument, octagonal in shape, crowned with a dome of white marble and surrounded by a white marble courtyard. Tourists can also check out Chini Masjid and Pathar Masjid, built in the Mughal architectural style. A peer dargah is also situated inside tomb.

**Gita Jayanti Celebrations:** It falls in November / December every year. A fair of festivity pervades the town of Kurukshetra. The event celebrates the birth of *Shrimad Bhagwadgita*. Discourses on the *Bhagwadgita*, pageants based on the epic *Mahabharata*, ballets that celebrate Lord Sri Krishna, camps for social service and the unforgettable *deep daan* at the Brahma Sarover are an experience one has to see.

**Gurudwaras:** A few gurudwaras at Kurukshetra have acquired great sanctity and have become places of religious interest. The site where Guru Nanak stayed is now worshipped as GurdwaraSadbhiti. Another gurudwara stands besides it where the sixth Guru HarGobind stayed during a visit. Again, the ninth Guru, ShriTeghBahadur stayed at spot near the SthaneshwarTirtha that is marked by a gurudwara. Another prominent gurudwara called Raj Ghat is devoted to the memory of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh.

**Jyotisar:** It is another very important place of pilgrimage. It is situated on the Kurukshetra Pehowa road. The old bed of the sacred river Saraswati lies near Jyotisar village in the shape of narrow canal. At Jyotisar, no relic is seen except a banyan tree which is said to have been there for more than 5,000 years. Lord Krishna is believed to have delivered his message of the *Bhagvadgita* to Arjuna at this place. *Adi Shankracharya* also visited this place on his way to Badrinath and Kedarnath.

**Pehowa:** It is an ancient town not far from Kurukshetra has been a centre of pilgrimage for ages. It is on the, left bank of the sacred Saraswati, twelve kilometers from Thanesar. Today, it is an ancient place of great sanctity, where prayer and '*pinddaan*' for ancestors is believed to grant '*moksha*' or redemption from the cycle of birth and death. Pehowa is also famous for temples devoted to Shiva and his son Kartikkya. Unlike the other temples, the temple dedicated to Shiva, has no *linga*. Instead, it has a *panch-mukhi* (5 faced) idol of Lord Shiva which is said



to be one of its kind. Haryana Tourism runs its Anjan Yatrika Resort for pilgrims visiting Pehowa.

### **FACTORS CREATING HINDRANCES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN KURUKSHETRA**

There are numerous challenges that are posed through diversified factors towards sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in the study area:

#### **Globalization**

Globalization has eminently affected the local culture & ethnicity, customs, traditions, handicrafts and folklores in adverse result. The rate of dynamism in cultures has accelerated over the years. This trend continues at a higher rate than it used to be. This effect deeply and greatly affects the thinking and altitudes of the locals, towards the conservation of the very tangible and intangible heritage that contacts and sustain cultural tourism. Hence, the challenge is how to sustain the pilgrimage tourism in this globalized world.

#### **Tourism negative Impacts**

Excess of tourist arrivals can bring exploitation and degradation to an area's social cultural, economic and environmental arenas if mechanisms to control and manage its negative impacts are not in place. Good examples can be taken from crowds of visitors in Sun eclipse and Gita Jayanti fair which imposes negative impacts of pilgrimage sites in the area.

#### **Local communities' participation and involvement**

The challenge on this particular area is how effectively, the communities are participating and involved in the planning processes. Local communities are subject to large influxes from tourism traffic, noise and possible prize increase in goods and services. It is, therefore, necessary that their well being needs be addressed in the planning, development, implementation and management processes.

#### **The Quality of tourism services**

The quality of the tourism services available in the study area are not up to the mark. There is lack of good quality hotels, resorts, transportation services; lack of guides & escorts, poor dissemination of information near major tourist spots is a hindrance in the development of sustainable pilgrimage tourism in city of Kurukshetra.

#### **Lack of Government Initiative**

There are shortages in various fields such as qualified experts, funding, marketing, facilities and amenities, poor policies, economic and physical planning mechanism, lack of funds for expansion of tourism are seen as issues pilgrimage tourism development.

#### **Lack of Cooperation among stakeholders**

Sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in the area requires that all those concerned learn to deal with conflicts and to explore the creative use of partnerships as a way of sharing knowledge, as well as risks, in tourism development. But it came to see poor cooperation and understanding among different stakeholders involved in touristic activity in Kurukshetra.

### **Impact Assessment**

The sustainable development of tourism requires a continue review of impacts of pilgrimage tourism activity on the area concerned but their lies a shortage of such type of assessment of programmes or policies from both government as well as private stakeholders. In Kurukshetra from concerned authorities.

### **Availability of beggars around pilgrimage centre**

There exist a crowd of beggars at pilgrimage centers which creates irritation among pilgrimage tourist visited. It indicates the poor management of pilgrimage centers in Kurukshetra.

### **Increasing pollutions and litter at religious tourist spots**

It has been noticed in the study area that during peak season heavy influx of pilgrims visited Kurukshetra such as during the festival of Gita Jayanti, Sun Eclipses, SomvatiAmavasya, and so on spread the huge amount of solid waste and sanitation problems which cause pollution in Kurukshetra.

### **Poor Infrastructure**

The infrastructure in Kurukshetra is of poor standard such as poor conditions of railway stations, bus stands, poor quality of roads, dharamshalas, drinking water problems, lack of information & communication facilities and so on causes interruption in sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in the area.

### **Lack of safety & security of tourists**

Although Kurukshetra is famous destination for pilgrimage visits but

there is lack of safety & security of tourism themselves and their luggage/baggage. There is no provision of tourist police in the area which build the negative image of place in present and potential visitors.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As tourism development usually involves the financial, socio-cultural and natural resources of an area, it must be designed and managed in a way to achieve economic, social and cultural sustainability. Some of the suggestions that would improve the tourism industry and make it more sustainable include:

#### **Diversifying the areas of tourism:**

The tourism industry in Kurukshetra has mainly concentrated on pilgrimage tourism and neglected other forms of tourism to a large extent. It should diversify into other areas, like farm and rural, tourism which have the potential for future growth and development.

#### **Improving the infrastructure:**

Tourism development causes increased use of infrastructure like, road lines, railway stations, accommodation facilities, drainage and sanitation facilities etc. need to be enhanced immediately for faster tourism development.

#### **Improving the safety of tourists:**

Today many tourist specially women are facing many problems from the local people, especially as they do not maintain the hours and come back to the hotel or guest houses late at night. Many of the foreign women have faced molestation and other problems.

**Use of appropriate promotional technique:** Proper marketing and promotion should be implemented in achieving sustainable tourism development. The promotional activity must be acquainted in accurate advertisement of unique characteristics of the area in order to create knowledge of the same to the existing as well as potential tourists.

**Focus on the use of eco-friendly products:** By taking into account need of sustainability, the focus should be given on the use of eco-friendly products by the various stakeholders. For that purpose, strict laws should be applied in the locality for sustainable tourism development.

**Conservation of natural and cultural heritage:** Tourism Stakeholders should give proper concentration on the conservation of natural and cultural heritage that is essential for economic sustainability of the region.

**Facilitates manpower training and development:** There should be constant mechanism for training and developing manpower of international quality. The local people should be trained and aware about implications of tourism development so that they improve the quality standard of hospitality services in the area to ensure the sustainability of tourism at Kurukshetra.

**Use ICT for enhanced productivity and service quality:** ICT implementation can provide reliable and speedy information regarding prominent tourism locations,

connectivity through rail, road and airlines etc. It should be provided at various prime tourist locations for proper dissemination of information to tourists.

**Proper regulations and legalization:** The government should develop strict standards and regulations for environmental and cultural impact assessment, monitoring and review of existing and proposed tourism development in accordance with local community.

**Research and statistics:** For the sustainable development of the tourism in the study region, local government and/or other concern authorities maintain the records of the tourists visited to that place, it is beneficial for the planning and policy formulation as well as emphasis should be given on the research and different projects related to sustainable development of tourism.

## CONCLUSION

The pilgrimage destination of Kurukshetra has enough potential to benchmark it as famous tourist spots. It is evident from the study, that the sustainability aspect of tourism has not often been given adequate consideration in designing tourism policies. Kurukshetra tourism needs to focus more on sustainability issues to cope up with the present competition among the destinations. It is also necessary to adopt necessary effective measures in order to attract a significant number of tourists and persuade the potential tourists to select Kurukshetra as a pilgrimage tourist

destination. So, the concern authority needs to give priority and to visit the destination. If we consider the recommendations given above, definitely it will become paradise for overall development of the region. Conducting similar studies on some other destinations or on some other forms of tourism can also give new heights to the pilgrimage tourism.

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