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M-commerce in Indian Tourism - A Case of Buddhist Tourism

Charu Sheela Yadav & Suyash Mathur

Introduction

The Buddhist Circuit is a sacred route that follows in the footsteps of Buddha. This iconic route only includes places where Buddha actually spent time, and these sites – all of which are over 2500 years old – are among the most significant

and revered for all Buddhists. The Buddhist Circuit is an important pilgrimage destination for the approximately 487 million practicing Buddhists as well as travelers interested in history, culture or religion (Pew Forum – Global Religion Landscape). The places included in the circuit are:

Lumbini (in Nepal)	:	The Birthplace of Lord Buddha.
Bodh Gaya (in Bihar)	:	He Attained Enlightenment.
Kapilvastu (in Uttar Pradesh)	:	He Grew up as a Child.
Sarnath (in Uttar Pradesh)	:	He held his First Public Discourse.
Kaushambi (in Uttar Pradesh)	:	Buddha Delivered many a Sermons.
Sankisa (in Uttar Pradesh)	:	He Descended after Addressing his Mother in Heaven.
Sravasti (in Uttar Pradesh)	:	His Favorite Monsoon Resort.
Nalanda and Rajgir (in Bihar)	:	He Lived and Taught, and Nalanda, in Particular, Became the Center of Buddhist Learning and Teaching.
Vaishali (in Bihar)	:	Buddha Delivered Last Sermon.
Kushinagar (in Uttar Pradesh)	:	Where he Attained Mahaparinirvana (Demise)

With more and more travelers choosing to book and select their travel products via their computers and hand held devices, M-Commerce is now paramount to the future of the tourism industry. The M-commerce in tourism in India is still

in its infancy. M-commerce can serve as a unique tool for the tourism industry to enhance their services as there is a growing demand of M-commerce. Mobile phones account for about 40% of online travel search and this share is bound to go up

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in India where smart phone penetration is expected to grow to 50 million devices by 2020 (The Economic Times, June 2015).

M-commerce is a subset of electronic commerce (E-commerce) where M-commerce or mobile commerce enables customers or users to buy, sell, or exchange information on goods and services by using mobile devices such as smartphones (E. W. T. Ngai, A. Gunasekaran). Tourism mobile e-commerce refers to transaction activities between tourism service consumers and suppliers by mobile devices via wireless and wired integrated network, with certain means of payments (Siqing Liu, 2005). These advantages help tourists enter the network of mobile e-commerce in a more flexible and convenient way.

The objective of this research paper is to ascertain the profile of the tourist who is visiting the Buddhist destinations in India and also to understand where do M-Commerce stand currently with respect to Buddhist destinations in India, and the gap between the demands of m-commerce services for travel products related to Buddhist tourism in India vis a vis supply. The source of information of this research paper is secondary data collected from books, reports, journals, newspapers, internet (surveys, blogs, and websites of DMOs etc).

Understanding the dynamics of Buddhist tourist in India

Buddhism though born in India, has more prominent Buddhist population beyond its borders. Today there are 450-500 million practicing Buddhists in the world

which is about 6% of the total population of the world. The following Table 1 and 2 lists the main Buddhist Countries and Top 10 countries with most Buddhist population respectively.

Table 1: Main Buddhist Countries

S. No.	Main Buddhist Countries
1	Bangladesh
2	Bhutan
3	Cambodia
4	China
5	Hong Kong
6	India
7	Indonesia
8	South Korea
9	Laos
10	Japan
11	Macau
12	Mongolia
13	Myanmar
14	Malaysia
15	Nepal
16	Singapore
17	Sri Lanka
18	Taiwan
19	Thailand
20	Vietnam
21	Philippines

Source: http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html

Table 2: Top 10 Countries with Most Buddhist Populations

Country (Year 2010)	Estimated Population Buddhists Population	Percentage Of Population Buddhist	Percentage Of World
China	244130000	18.2%	50.1%
Thailand	64420000	93.2	13.2
Japan	45820000	36.2	9.4
Burma (Myanmar)	38410000	80.1	7.9
Sri Lanka	14450000	69.3	3
Vietnam	14380000	16.4	2.9
Cambodia	13690000	96.9	2.8
South Korea	11050000	22.9	2.3
India	9250000	0.8	1.9
Malaysia	5010000	17.7	1
Total	460610000	15.3	94.5
Remaining World Total	26920000	0.7	5.5
World Total	487530000	7.1	100

Source: Pew research centre forum on religion and Public Life. Global religious landscape 2011(Estimates)

It is interesting to note as per the HVS report 2015, some of the Buddhist practices are very popular in the West. More than 40% of the international tourists visiting the Buddhist Circuit are from Europe and North America. Another major contributor to tourism along this circuit is the domestic traveler. The Buddhist population in India may be less than 2%, but the estimated absolute numbers of nine million practicing Buddhists are a good number to boost the Buddhist Circuit.

The top 15 Source Countries from where India receives Foreign Tourists in 2013 are USA, UK, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Russian Federation, Canada, Germany, France, Malaysia, Japan, Australia, China(Main), Singapore, Thailand and Nepal. **Table 2** gives top 10 countries with

most Buddhist population –China, Thailand, Japan, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia, South Korea, and Malaysia.

The important source market for India especially for Buddhist circuit are China, Thailand, Japan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and they are also the countries in the list of top 10 countries with most Buddhist population. It was observed by the official Govt. figures, that arrivals from Buddhist countries comprised more than 18 percent of total foreign tourist arrivals to India in 2011. The growth in arrivals from Buddhist countries in 2011 was substantially higher than the overall growth in arrivals.

The shares of total arrivals of some Buddhist countries were significant from

countries like Sri Lanka (4.9 percent), Japan (3.1 percent), China (2.3 percent), South Korea (1.7 percent) and Thailand (1.5 percent).

The travelers from specifically the above said countries are technologically friendly, but are not linguistically English speaking and would prefer information in their own language, which is not used extensively in India. These travelers are majorly travelling as GIT (Group Inclusive Traveler).

Bihar is ranked 8th overall among all states

receiving foreign tourists and received 7, 65,835 foreign tourists in 2013, which is 3.8% of the total FTA in India in 2013 (Source Ministry of tourism, Govt. of India annual report 2014). Table 3 gives the statistics of domestic and foreign tourist visits to the places of Buddhist interest in Bihar. The table reveals that Bodhgaya is the most visited site by both domestic and foreign tourists.

Table 3: Statistics of Domestic and foreign tourist visits to the places of Buddhist interest in Bihar

PLACE	TOURIST	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
BODH GAYA	DOMESTIC	297155	464790	479860	745305	847731	832364	1006132	933153	398876	1647701
	FOREIGN	37001	52917	120431	143880	137985	96103	293519	207933	139556	225668
RAJGIR	DOMESTIC	322559	348277	890612	777350	1064882	1971454	1341433	3700446	1381121	1525107
	FOREIGN	5491	10885	32572	85497	107006	130570	201137	373186	162452	164314
NALANDA	DOMESTIC	0	0	0	0	0	255469	891799	934125	502341	1057317
	FOREIGN	0	0	0	0	0	47773	177884	190162	104580	124810
VAISHALI	DOMESTIC	233987	261223	226112	121227	46767	81004	63322	53276	90346	202509
	FOREIGN	8865	11461	9475	16709	8210	15600	29951	37533	71701	60108

Source: <http://bihar2025.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Tourism.pdf>

Uttar Pradesh is ranked 4th among all states receiving foreign tourists. The FTA for 2013 is 20, 54,420.

Table 4: Statistics of Domestic and foreign tourist visits to the places of Buddhist interest in Uttar Pradesh in 2014

SARNATH	DOMESTIC	838566
	FOREIGN	362113
KUSHINAGAR	DOMESTIC	750171
	FOREIGN	62292
SRAVASTI	DOMESTIC	109876
	FOREIGN	98642
KAPILVASTU	DOMESTIC	161434
	FOREIGN	30219

Source: http://up-tourism.com/oldwebsite/pdf/tourist_flow.pdf

In 2014 Sarnath is the most visited place by domestic and foreign tourists followed by Kushinagar and Sravasti.

According to the IFC-Ministry of Tourism joint report 2014, the average age of domestic tourists visiting the Buddhist Circuit was between 30 and 31, lower than the average age of international tourists of 38 to 39 years. Moreover, with international tourists, the average age of religious travelers was higher than that of the non-religious travelers. Sri Lankan, Thai, Japanese, and Myanmar tourists had the highest average age among tourists.

The respondents of the IFC-Ministry of

Tourism joint report 2014 reports destination information in the tourists own language is the most demanded facility, along with travel arrangements with local destination weather patterns. Travel bookings options, day sightseeing options along with booking facility with high speed internet mobile connectivity. The tourists also demand that the destination information should be on light and lean websites which use less media content, as it affects their data usage limits and with long buffering and stop start webpage and applications, the smooth experience can turn rather a troublesome case.

India is facilitating tourist with E Tourist visa. Table 5 shows E Tourist visa given by India to Main Buddhist countries.

Table 5: Availability of Tourist Visa on Arrival Enabled with Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) facility to Main Buddhist countries

S. No.	Main Buddhist Countries	E Tourist Visa Facility is available to passport holders
1	Bangladesh	Not Available
2	Bhutan	Not Available
3	Cambodia	Available
4	China	Not Available
5	Hong Kong	Not Available
6	India	Not
	Applicable	
7	Indonesia	Available
8	South Korea	Not Available

9	Laos	Available
10	Japan	Available
11	Macau	Not Available
12	Mongolia	Not Available
13	Myanmar	Available
14	Malaysia	Not Available
15	Nepal	Not Available
16	Singapore	Available
17	Sri Lanka	Available
18	Taiwan	Not Available
19	Thailand	Available
20	Vietnam	Available
21	Philippines	Available

From the above table it can be seen that as nationals of Nepal and Bhutan do not require a visa to enter to India so this facility is not applicable on them. E Tourist visa is still not available to countries - Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Macau, Mongolia, Malaysia and Taiwan. China shall be the 77th country to be eligible for e-visas to India, and the government’s goal is to hit 150 countries by 2016 as conveyed by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi during his visit to China. Japan had the most tourists opting for visa on arrival.

A study conducted by online accommodation specialist AsiaRooms, and Lenovo, the technology company, comparing the travel habits of 6,000 Asia Pacific tourists with 6,000 non-Asia Pacific tourists revealed that in the year of 2013, 33% booked through mobile and 59% searched travel products on the smart phones and tablets. This exceeds the global average of 25% for booking and 46% for search considerably.

In 2015 there has been a sharp increase in bookings by Smartphone. China (10% share) took first place in the share rankings, followed by the USA (7% share) and Japan (5% share). Social media channels such as review portals, blogs and forums have also become very popular for planning trips, and are used intensively by more and more travelers around the globe. (ITB World Travel Trends Report 2014/2015)

Current scenario

Big private players in Indian Tourism technology like MakeMyTrip and Cleartrip are offering Smartphone enabled mobile applications, which allow the tourists to gather required information along with booking and transaction options. The Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India tourists information application has 5 million downloads till June 2015 from Google Play store with an average user rating of 3.8 on 5. The application gives out the names of local guides when Bodhgaya and Rajgir are searched for who speak Asian languages like Japanese and Mandarin to assist the multi or bilingual tourists. The Ministry of Tourism application is although more information based and does not allow any transactions. It is not exhaustive, as when the hotels section is clicked upon, it does not come up with any available pages. The Ministry has collaborated with Google Maps to give out destinations of interest on the

Buddhist circuit as an automated Google map location. Taking this forward, WoNoBo, an Indian mobile application developer, along with the Ministry of Tourism, has come up with 360 degrees street views of major tourist important cities in 2014, but does not include the sites on the Buddhist circuit like Bodhgaya, Rajgir and Sarnath.

The Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation (BSTDC) website is presenting a Buddhist image, as Bodh Gaya temple is the first image on the website; but there is only 1 tour package available and that too in Hindi language only. The website although does touch upon the Circuit concept. The state tourism board does not have a specific mobile interface of its own, but destinations like Gaya have various applications of themselves. One specifically developed by the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee, the main management body of the Bodhgaya temple. There is a new website of BTMC - www.bodhgayatemple.com - and an online donation facility for World Heritage Site Mahabodhi Mahavihara. With this, the Mahavihara has become the first religious shrine in Bihar to have an online donation facility.

The app is named "Bodhgaya" and devotees and the tourists willing to visit Bodhgaya from anywhere in the world can get information about the heritage city on their mobile phones too. The mobile app can be downloaded from Google Play Store or iTunes.

View More by this developer

Bodhgaya Bihar

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Category : Travel

Updated : 17 March 2015

Versin : 1.2

Description

Bodhgaya (Buddhagaya) in Bihar, India, is the place where Siddhartha Gautama, the prince of Kapilavasthu attained enlightenment and became the Buddha 2600 years ago. The land is venerated as the holiest place of Buddhist pilgrimage in the world. The main shrines of this holy land, the Mahabodhi (Mahavihara) Temple Complex with the

Bodhgaya Bihar Support:

What's New in Version 1.2

Minor Bug Fixes

...More

iPhone Screenshot

Fig 1: The official mobile Application of the Bodhgaya Temple Management

Committee

Source: <https://itunes.apple.com/in/app/bodhgaya-bihar/id959833752?mt=8>

The Uttar Pradesh tourism website enlists the various Buddhist site locations with all other destinations and the picture gallery contains good images of the various destinations all over Uttar Pradesh, including the Buddhist destinations. While there is a separate page dedicated to tourism Circuits in Uttar Pradesh the webpage does mention the Buddhist Circuit as an option. The Buddhist circuit is mentioned in heading "Important Websites" which comes when one scrolls down the whole page of U P Tourism website- <http://uptourism.gov.in/>. The state tourism board's mobile application is absent, but the destinations are covered by the Tripgator-Incredible India Application.

An initiative by the Indian Railways in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism

has been the *Mahaparinirovana Express*, the exclusive Buddhist circuit train. With a 7 nights/8 days commencing from Delhi, the journey covers Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Sarnath, Varanasi, Kushinagar, Lumbini (Nepal), Sravasti and Agra. At roughly USD 1155 per person it helps the tourist to cover the entire circuit comprehensively. Tourists and pilgrims from over 30 countries have travelled on this special train in the last six years (The Hindu, August 2013). Bookings can be done online but the train does not have a mobile application of its own which highlights the point of a service available which is not able to cater the M-Commerce market of the Buddhist tourists. Although, the website is available in Mandarin language, to help the travelers from China book their travels.

Challenges

Challenges for the M-Commerce for the

Buddhist circuit remains primarily focused on the products which are sold mostly by the very few specialist Buddhist Circuit operators, like Jataka Travels, Shashi Tours, Lall Buddhist tours etc and not by the general tour operator community. This hinders the growth of the vast network which can be developed for the tourist circuit. Also, as there is no clear brand identity which remains fragmented among private and public-sector role-players. The State Tourism Boards are not developing a focused view of the circuit which is evident on their official websites and web pages.

Very limited online or mobile marketing adds fuel to fire and takes the potential tourists away from India, which in turn look for other destinations to fulfill their travel plans. The reach and spread of the internet is a major roadblock to develop Tourism M-commerce related services as it is directly related to all the things under the umbrella of online travel services. More specifically poor internet connectivity at most tourist destinations and sites does not help the cause of the travelers which have no use of their modern devices if there is no connectivity.

During the early developing period of tourism mobile ecommerce, the content of traditional e-commerce websites were simply transferred into mobile friendly websites, which were actually original websites or their corresponding mobile web pages. This unfiltered content caused problems like unnecessary and harder reading, and poor pertinence (Xingyang Liu, 2009).

India is a major Buddhist destination and also the land where Buddhism was born, but still it is unable to attract the large chunk of Buddhist tourists from China. In 2014, 1.70 lakh Buddhist tourists visited India, which is not a high number

compared to the Buddhist population across the globe.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This research paper underlines that India, has only touched upon the massive tourist potential in attracting a worthy percentage of religious Buddhist travelers. According to the Govt. of India official figures year 2012, arrivals to India from Buddhist countries of south and south east Asia is 0.5 million, comprised an approximate, a mere 0.10 percent of all 487 million Buddhist followers in the world. Since the Buddhist Circuit is the area where Buddhism originated and where the Buddha lived his life teaching the sermons, the potential for Buddhist tourism growing large is massive.

Given that both domestic and foreign tourism on the Circuit has grown exceptionally well in the recent past, indicating potential for growth at destinations like Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Rajgir, Nalanda, and Kushinagar, which are so evidently the focal points on the Circuit and could become important role as destinations for a growth oriented approach. The Ministry of Tourism has to come up with various suggestive itineraries at both the physical level and mobile device level, with the complete circuit and also with single destinations

The *Mahaparinirvana express* train is a good tourism product and can catalyze the Buddhist tourism circuit but need to launch its mobile application in various Asian languages and integrate the same with the Incredible India page. The studies suggest that Asian tourists are growingly active on mobile and willing to book via mobile devices given the services is marketed well.

The markets need to be expanded of the Buddhist Circuit beyond just the

pilgrimage aspect segment. It will mean targeting to young, more educated tourist audience both domestically and internationally. This can be understood as, according to the IFC-Incredible India 2014 report, the mean age of the domestic traveler to the Buddhist sites is between 30 and 31. The international tourists mean age is in between 38 and 39. The averages help us to understand that the target audience is young and are accustomed to the use of hand held devices for their travel needs and will appreciate efforts made to connect to the right audience.

Because the profile of Buddhist tourist is young and technology friendly, this should be the segment where in the travel operators should design their M-commerce interfaces in the forms of Apps, websites, Beta information and transaction pages. This in turn should lead the private players to come up with user interfaces which are seamless and provide the destination information and the opportunity to transact for buying travel the ever dynamic future, which the tourism industry is looking at.

products and services. Growing digitalization in India, catalyzed by the Digital India movement launched by the current government and beginning of WIFI facilities at world heritage sites, along with recently launched E-Kranti – Electronic delivery of services are steps in the right direction.

The opportunity of M-commerce should not be missed by Bihar and Uttar Pradesh Tourism Boards also, where Buddhist circuit is an important tourism product. Such efforts will attract higher income and higher spending from travelers who will use their hand held devices to transact and gather information.

This paper covers the broad perspective of the M-commerce situation in the Buddhist tourist destinations of India, and has immense scope and can be taken further on studying at an individual country level of Asia, and its Buddhist tourists coming to India with the help of their Mobile phones and linking technology with tourism, because that is

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