



From Temple Trails to Riverside Retreats: Mapping Youth-Centric Trends in Spiritual Tourism

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Abstract

Historically renowned as a sacred city for elderly pilgrims, Varanasi is now undergoing a generational shift. In recent days, young Indian tourists (18–35) are increasingly seeking emotional renewal and spiritual connection in Varanasi, moving beyond traditional spiritual frameworks, and influenced by post-pandemic mental health concerns and the pervasive impact of digital media. This study argues that these tourists are reshaping spiritual tourism through experiential practices such as walking under the moonlight, listening to distant chants, photographing ancient ghats, engaging with locals, and savouring local art and food. Though so-called non-spiritual, these practices are deeply reflective and transformative, remoulding spiritual tourism through an experiential lens where emotion, mindfulness, and digital expression converge. Employing a quasi-qualitative approach that combines in-depth interviews and digital ethnography via Instagram, this study analyses how youth-led narratives are reimagining Varanasi's spiritual landscape. The study also identifies emerging trends, including riverside retreat tourism, and spiritual healing tourism, and categorizes them into mystical night tourism, experiential heritage tourism, community-based tourism and etc. based on the spiritual experiences and activities, reshaping the tourism sector. Furthermore, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on youth-driven sacred engagement and the evolving dynamics of spiritual tourism, underscoring how immersive, affective experiences are shaping new trends in spiritual tourism and offering a fresh perspective on the reimagination of sacred spaces like Varanasi.

Keywords: Spiritual Tourism, Spiritual Experiences, Young Spiritual Explorer, Riverside Retreat Tourism, Spiritual Healing Tourism, Varanasi.

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Introduction

Spirituality and spiritual tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries globally (Badrinarayanan & Madhavaram, 2008). South Asia, and particularly India have long witnessed a steady inflow of global tourists seeking spiritual experiences and practices – from meditation and yoga retreats, ayurvedic healing and wellness, spiritual traditions, spiritual *gurus* (a spiritual mentor) and *ashrams* (a place of Hindu retreat), temples to spiritual magnetism of specific destinations (Nair & Dileep, 2021, 2009; Haq & Madhekar, 2020; Bhalla. et al. 2021; Choe, 2020; Ma. et al. 2021). Little or no academic attention has been given to the nature of domestic tourists who seek to explore spiritual tourism and experiences in India or within the larger Asian perspective (Buzinde, 2020). Often, such spiritual tourism is associated with elderly domestic tourists (Pandya 2016) who may be searching for *moksha* or salvation (Shameerudeen, 2024). Yet an increasing number of young domestic tourists are seen sharing their spiritual experiences on social media platforms like Instagram. They are often found sharing posts with captions and descriptions on finding *sukoon* (peace) in a destination like Varanasi, or that one does not require a therapist as sitting on the *ghats* (steps towards the river) of Ganges and watching *Ganga Aarti* (a devotional Hindu ritual) would be enough (@sukoon_e-kashi. Instagram. February 2, 2025). Infrastructural connectivity and digital communication on social media have not only popularised spiritual tourism but have documented, circulated, and enhanced widely these experiences within the young populace (<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2024/7/6/gen-z-social-media-helping-fuel-spiritual-tourism-in-india>). With *Dev Depawali* (a Hindu festival of lights) being celebrated in Varanasi, on 15 November 2024 numerous posts have been made on social media urging young tourists to ‘save the date’, leave their cafes and Coldplay rock concerts (recently held in India for which tickets were sold out within hours) and to have an almost magical experience of *Dev Depawali* (@makclickz. Instagram. November. 2023). Aakash, an avid young tourist tells us that travel is no longer a pursuit of leisure but also about finding oneself and keeping oneself ‘grounded’, discovering a purpose and meaning in life, and reconnecting oneself with the contemporary world. Rakesh, a pan India tour operator validating Aakash’s narrative admits that an increasing number of younger tourists are traveling in the post-pandemic to ‘detox’ and ‘de-stress’ themselves and cope better with their lives, at the same time searching for a more fulfilling, joyous and meaningful life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Miao *et al*, 2022). An emerging trend is being observed among young tourists who are going beyond conventional religious tourist experiences and are looking for meaningful, immersive spiritual experiences that do not fall within the realms of traditional religious practices. The focus of the paper is to understand these emerging categories of spiritual tourism among domestic tourists, particularly young tourists in India and to identify the general trends and unpack the spiritual experiences that constitute them.

Defining Spiritual Experiences and Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual experiences are increasingly perceptible today but the question remains how is it to be defined and what is its purpose? Spiritual tourism and spirituality in particular as Bone (2007) argues is difficult to define as the concept is “abstract and open to various readings and is distinct and amorphous rather than definite and bounded”. It must be pointed out that the practice of spirituality is more oriented towards a journey of self-discovery, personal growth, and finding peace and purpose (Houtman & Aupers 2007). Thus, understanding of spirituality revolves around notions of connectedness, meaning-making transcendence, purpose, and sacredness (Rockenbach, et al. 2015).

Nair & Dileep (2021) on the other hand bring out the fact that spiritual tourism can be viewed from multiple perspectives and multiple forms of it may co-exist in different contexts. Nair & Dileep (2021) examine three forms of spiritual tourism – namely, religious tourism, yoga tourism, and wellness tourism. Though the terminologies are often interchangeably used a closer look at tourist profiles, behaviours, objectives, and activities (Robledo, 2015) reveals that each form is distinct. Instead of categorizing wellness tourism under one umbrella, the authors divided it into two subcategories: spiritual tourism and yoga tourism (Nair & Dileep, 2021). Additionally, a global rise in non-materialistic motivations has contributed to the emergence of “spiritual tourism” as a distinct travel category (Halim et al., 2021). But who exactly are spiritual tourists? Norman (2012) describes them as individuals who travel with the conscious intention to enhance their physical and mental well-being, sense of purpose, and identity. Spiritual tourism offers various potential benefits, including the opportunity to escape mundane routinized lives, find mental peace, and use travel as a form of stress relief and renewal (Lopez et al. 2017; Nair & Dileep, 2021).

Smith (2003) on the other hand, equated spiritual tourism with “escapism.” Expanding on Smith’s idea, Norman (2011) and Bescke (2014) suggested that people are drawn to spirituality as a counterbalance to highly ambitious, materialistic lifestyles. Unlike traditional tourism, Rodrigo (2019) asserts that individuals who have experienced spirituality or heard of places with reputed healing qualities are increasingly engaging in spiritual tourism (Nair & Dileep, 2021). Among the young as Gezon (2017) points out most are not intentionally seeking spiritual experiences but are in a quest to transform oneself or to find interconnections of the mind-body-spirit.

Today younger tourists are in search of new kinds of spiritual experiences (Kujawa. 2017; Sayre et al., 2010). Many are now centered on digital media tourism that not only have a vast array of information and services at their fingertips but are co-producing and creating new experiences of spirituality (Hussain & Wang, 2024), thus expanding different forms of spiritual tourism.

Study Area: Varanasi the Spiritual City

Varanasi, India's spiritual capital has long been a popular destination for Hindu pilgrims, mainly because of the *Kashi Vishwanath temple* (a famous Hindu temple dedicated to lord *Shiva*) and other places of worship (Singh, 2022). Notable among them are *Durga Mata*, *Kalbhairav*, *Maa Annapurna*, *Sankat Mochan*, *Mritunjay Mahadev temple*, *Bharat mata temple* (Halder, 2022;<https://varanasi.nic.in/temples-of-importance/>), etc: many of which are located near *kunds*(a holy waterbody), such as *Durga Kund*, *Manikarnika kund*, *Lolarkkund* and many others(<https://www.varanasiguru.com/kunds-of-varanasi>). According to mythological beliefs, many of these *kunds* (Dam 2025) are thought to have the power to heal illness, bring about salvation, and promote virtue (<https://kashiarchan.com/>). The city is also believed to be *Moksh-Bhoomi* (place of liberation) with the holy Ganges washing away sins of past and present lives (Zara, 2016;2011). Thus, the 84 *ghats* along the Ganges, five of which are considered sacred as mentioned in *Kashikhand*(A part of the *Skanda Purana*, a Hindu holy book, is about the city of Varanasi)– *Manikarnika* (burning *ghat*), *Dasashwamedh* (praying *ghat*), *Assi* (a southernmost *ghat* draws significant tourist attention and is especially popular among young people), *Adikeshav*(a *ghat* of confluence of two rivers, namely *Varuna* and *Assi*), and *Panchganga ghat* (bathing and praying *ghat*) are part of the spiritual landscape of Varanasi(Trivedi, S. 2015). Along the *ghats*, everyday religious rituals, e.g., *Subha-e-Banaras*(A morning ceremony held on the ghats of Varanasi) and *Sandhya-aarti*(ceremony for the Lord that happens at sunset), are performed and practiced to add to the spiritual experience of Varanasi. Religious festivals like *Mahashivaratri*, *Rangbhari Ekadashi*, *Masan ki Holi*, *Dhrupad Mela*, *Sankat Mochan Sangeet Samaroh*, *Buddha Purnima*, *Panchkoshi Parikrama*, *Bharat Milap*, *Nak katayya*, *Dev Deepawali*, *Ganga Mahotsav*, *Annakut*, *Ganga Mahotsav*, *Nag Nathaniya* (<https://culturalheritageofvaranasi.com/kashi-fairs-festivals>) too enriches the spiritual atmosphere and amplifies the city's spiritual experience.

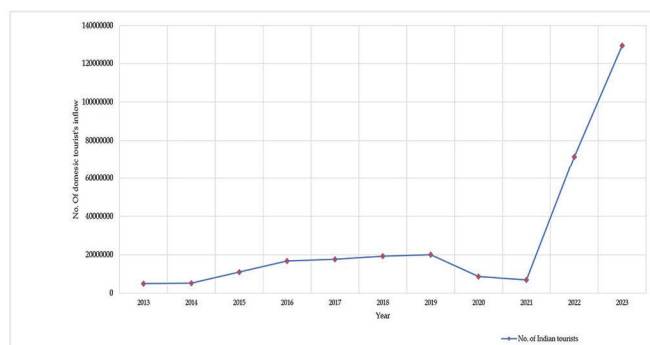


Figure 1: Representing a decadal inflow of domestic tourists in Varanasi (2013-2023)

Source: <https://varanasi.nic.in/tourism/>

According to the Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism, Varanasi received 12.92 crore domestic tourists in 2023(<https://varanasi.nic.in/tourism/>). The decadal trend from 2013 to 2023 (see Fig. no. 1) shows a steady increase in domestic tourism, with a decline between 2019 and 2021 due to the global pandemic. However, the data only reflects the total number of tourists without providing insights into their demographic composition, raising the question: Who truly visits Varanasi?

Prabhash, a local observer, noted, “We are witnessing an increasing number of young tourists visiting Varanasi, drawn to its spirituality—contrary to the belief that only the elderly come here” (Prabhas, 9th April 2024). At *Assi Ghat*, he often encounters young photographers and tourists waiting to capture the *Ganga Aarti*, namely *Subha-e-Banaras*. When asked if they were vloggers, one replied they were professionals, drawn by the ritual’s visual and cultural appeal. Before leaving, he asked for Prabhash’s Instagram, saying he’d upload reels and tag him. This moment reflects a broader trend: young tourists are experiencing Varanasi’s spirituality (Jasrotia. et al. 2021) through the lens—engaging with rituals not just as observers, but as content creators. Their posts, often tagged (Lund. et al. 2018) with #spiritualbanaras or #banarasculture, contribute to new digital narratives of the city.

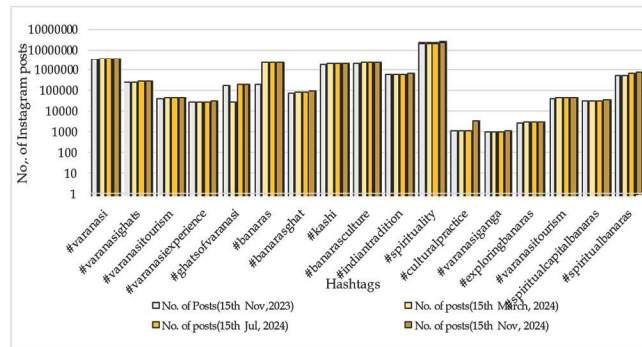


Figure 2: Analysing Instagram data based on specific hashtags (Hashtags are selected from the commonly used words of narratives)

Source: Authors

This bar chart (Fig no.2) highlights a steady rise in Instagram posts using Varanasi-related hashtags (Rasel. et al. 2025) from November 2023 to November 2024, reflecting the city’s increasing appeal, particularly among young. While **#spirituality** shows significant global traction, its presence in this dataset points to a broader youth-driven interest in spiritual content across platforms. This global influx of spiritual engagement is mirrored in Varanasi, where hashtags like **#banarasculture**, **#spiritualbanaras**, and **#spiritualcapitalbanaras** have seen notable growth. Additionally, hashtags such as **#varanasiexperience**, **#banarasghat**, and **#varanasiyatra** indicate

that young tourists are engaging with the city's spirituality through visual storytelling and content creation. These hashtags act as cultural signals, showing how spirituality – and Varanasi – is being redefined through digital engagement by the young.

Research Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative approach and is based on field ethnography and digital ethnographic methods. This section can be further subdivided into data sources, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. The following schema (figure no. 3) explains the research design of the paper.

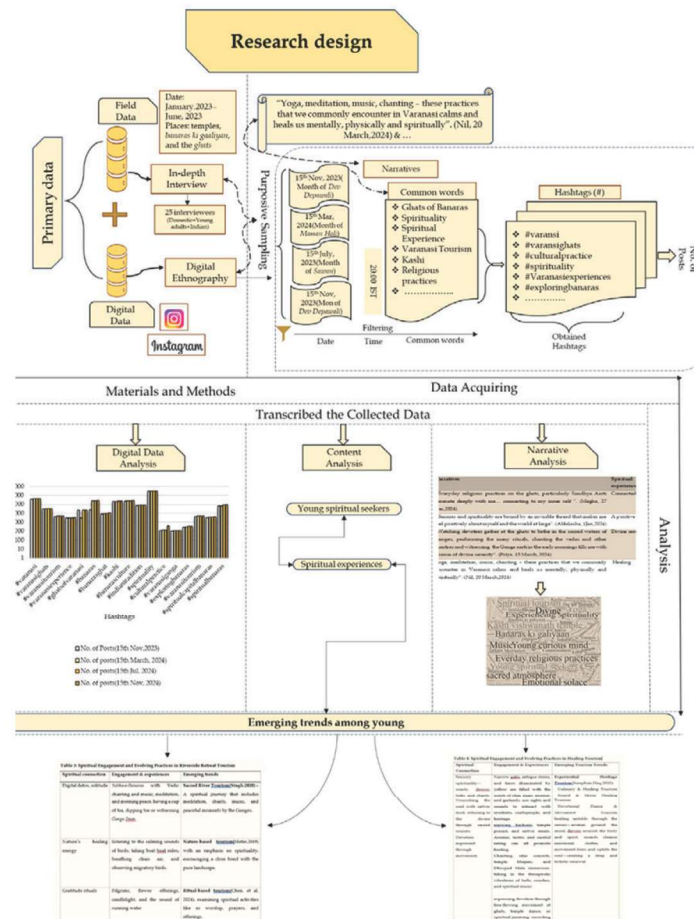


Figure 3: Research design
Source: Authors

Sources of data

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 25 young Indian tourists aged between 18 to 35 (Guldager et al. 2023). A focused sample was chosen using the purposive sampling method. The criteria for the selection of interviewees were as follows: interviewees must have visited Varanasi at least once, stayed for a minimum of three days, perceived an experience of spirituality, and maintained an active Instagram account. Table no 1 below provides a summary of the demographic profile of interviewees, including their age, gender, purpose, frequency of visit, and length of stay.

Table 1: Demographic profile of interviewees

| Age group | Male | Female | Total |
|---------------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|
| 18-21 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| 21-24 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| 24-27 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| 27-30 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 30-33 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| 33-36 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 13 | 12 | 25 |
| Purpose of visit | No. of interviewees | | |
| Work-related | 5 | | |
| Experiencing spirituality | 8 | | |
| Healing | 4 | | |
| Photography | 5 | | |
| Filmmaking | 1 | | |
| Family trip | 2 | | |
| Frequency of visit | No. of interviewees | | |
| 1st visit | 7 | | |
| 2nd visit | 16 | | |
| 3rd visit | 2 | | |
| Length of stay | No. of interviewees | | |
| Less than 3 days | 4 | | |
| 3 to 6 | 10 | | |
| 6 to 9 | 7 | | |
| More than 9 | 4 | | |

Source: Authors

According to Forbes 2024, India had 362.9 million Instagram users at the start of 2024, with a higher usage rate among young people(<https://datareportal>.

[com/reports/digital-2024-india](#)). This focus on youth underscores the rationale for selecting Instagram as a primary data source for digital ethnography, complementing field-based research (Seibel, 2024).

Methods of data collection:

For gathering field-based data in-depth interviews, were conducted between January and June of 2024 primarily in common tourist sites such as temples, *Banaras ki gaaliyan* (narrow lanes of Varanasi), and the *ghats*. To collect the data, an open-ended and well-organized interview schedule was developed which covered three themes: spiritual experiences, the perception of the young tourists, and the nature of spiritual tourism in Varanasi. Approximately 90-120 minutes were allotted for each interviewee. The privacy and confidentiality of each interviewee have been maintained and, in most cases, their names have been changed. For the digital ethnography (De. 2022), the period from November 2023 to November 2024 has been divided based on major festivals in Varanasi, including *Dev Deepawali* in November, *Massan Holi* in March, *Sawan* in July, and *Dev Deepawali* 2024 in November again. These festivals were selected due to their exceptional popularity on digital platforms, particularly Instagram. The selected hashtags were identified through keywords derived from the interviewee's narratives. From Instagram, a mid-month date, specifically the 15th, and 20:00 IST has been chosen for analysis. This timing is significant for collecting the number of posts against each hashtag because 20:00 IST is considered the peak time for Instagram engagement, as people tend to post at this hour to maximize visibility and interactions (<https://www.iconosquare.com/blog/the-best-time-to-post-on-instagram-and-how-to-find-it>). This method was employed to capture the virtual scenario of trending hashtags (figure no. 2) on Instagram related to spiritual tourism and Varanasi.

Methods of data analysis:

Using narrative and content analysis, field-based data collected through in-depth interviews was analysed. Additionally, digital ethnography was employed to conduct a hashtag-based trend analysis on Instagram.

Result and discussion:

Varanasi is generally perceived as a pilgrimage site for the elderly and older tourists who visit to atone for past sins and seek *Moksha*. However, young tourists are reshaping this established perception in unexpected ways and are visiting Varanasi to experience the city's ancient customs, festivals, temples, and winding lanes. The spiritual experiences of the young tourists diverge significantly from those of the traditional, elderly, and older tourists. It is not surprising to know when Maya, a young tourist admits, that *Kashi*

(Varanasi) is not only for the elderly but also for young people like herself who are seeking a different kind of spiritual experience (Maya, 19th April, 2024).

Table 2: Narrative Accounts of Individuals and the Emergence of Spiritual Experience

| Narratives | Spiritual experiences |
|--|-----------------------|
| "Everyday religious practices on the <i>ghats</i> , particularly <i>Sandhya Aarti</i> resonate deeply with me... connecting to my inner self". (Malini, 27 th Dec,2024) | Connectedness |
| "Varanasi and its spirituality are bound by an invisible thread that makes me feel positive about myself and the world at large". (Abhilasha, 1 st Jan,2024) | A positive feeling |
| "Watching devotees gather at the <i>ghats</i> to dip in the sacred waters of the Ganges, performing the many rituals, chanting the Vedas, and witnessing the <i>Ganga aarti</i> in the early mornings fills me with a sense of divine serenity". (Megha. 15 th March, 2024) | Divine serenity |
| Yoga, meditation, music, chanting – these practices that we commonly encounter in Varanasi calms and heals us mentally, physically and spiritually". (Neel, 20 th March,2024) | Healing |

Source: Authors

The narratives from above Table No.2 suggest that for the young tourists in Varanasi, their experiences have been transformative - whether it is connecting with their inner selves, seeking solace, positivity, serenity, and healing themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually. Young tourists are discovering new ways of experiencing spiritual tourism. The graphical map (Fig.4) illustrates some of these diverse spiritual encounters based on the narratives collected.

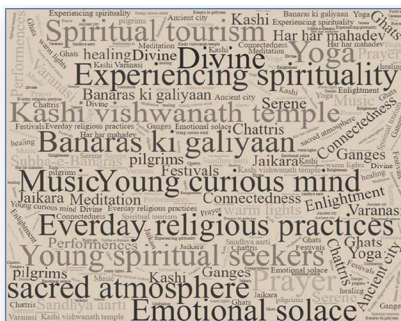


Figure 4: Spiritual experiences among young through a word cloud

Source: by using wordart <https://wordart.com/create>

Raka, one of our interviewees claims that the spiritual experiences in Varanasi act like a 'reset button' that mends her mind, body, and soul (Raka. 2nd April.2024). Most of the young tourists interviewed, emphasize that for achieving a fulfilling and healthy life one needs to prioritize physical and mental health (Chadda. 2018). According to them, the youth today faces significant challenges, including competitive pressures across various domains i.e. unemployment, familial and societal expectations, financial difficulties, and breakdown of interpersonal relationships that lead to anxiety, self-doubt, distress, and other mental health issues (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/youth-mental-health>). Sayan, tells us, 'The COVID, the breakdown of his three-year-old relationship made me feel lost. I lost all purpose in life, there was an emotional void and I was suffering from depression. However, a trip to Varanasi changed my life' (Sayan. 20 March 2024).

Sayan continues that, after visiting Varanasi, he felt the healing power of the city by simply sitting on the *Ghats*, watching the devotees performing everyday rituals and hearing the soothing chants, talking and sharing little joys and sadness of their lives with people, almost strangers he encountered on ghats brought a sense of serenity and he returned home filled with optimism and happiness. The historic *ghats*, the temples, the people, and the spiritual atmosphere made Varanasi a relaxing location for young tourists to unwind, reconnect with themselves, and achieve inner peace.

Influence of Digital media:

According to Richards & Wilson (2003), young people primarily travel to experience different cultures, broaden their education, and relax (Saikia.2018) However, one additional factor needs to be considered the sharing of their experiences by posting and uploading photos and videos on the multiple social media platforms. Neel, mentions that during the pandemic, he could no longer pursue his passion for exploring new places. But right after the lockdown while choosing a place to travel he came across a series of reels on Varanasi (Neel.5th April. 2024). The reels capturing the sacred ambiance of Varanasi drew him to the city and suddenly he realized he needed a place to travel to and unwind, and Varanasi seemed like the perfect choice. After experiencing the city Neel admits that he 'made one of the best decisions ever'. This is how a growing trend among young tourists shows many are inspired by social media to include Varanasi in their itineraries or dream of visiting at least once. This influx has led to new, more personal forms of spiritual tourism (Gezon.2018). In the wake of post-COVID emotional exhaustion, a growing number of young tourists are turning to Varanasi not just as a spiritual destination, but as a space for healing. This shift reflects a deeper need for peace, clarity, and emotional renewal (Lee et al., 2020; Robledo et al., 2023). As Malini put it, "Varanasi gave me that *sukoon* – not just to me, but to my inner soul" (Malini. 3rd June. 2024).

Unlike traditional spiritual tourism, this emerging form centers personal reflection and mental well-being (Fuller, 2001; Arora et al., 2021; Xia et al. 2024). Instagram amplifies this turn, offering visual cues of serenity. Megha shared, “During lockdown, so many reels came into my feed with captions like ‘Here is the peace,’ showing *Ganga Aarti*. I thought, when all this ends, I’ll go—just to take a long breath” (Megha, 3rd Feb. 2024). For many, Varanasi now represents not ritual obligation, but a therapeutic escape from post-pandemic burnout (Jha. Sachdeva. 2024). From this exhaustion—and shaped by digital media influences—a new trend is emerging: one that is rooted in direct, sensorial, and deeply personal experiences.

New emerging trends in tourism catering to young tourists

Building on the preceding discussion, it is evident that Indian youth are shaping new trends in spiritual tourism in Varanasi through diverse and immersive experiences. Emerging practices are no longer centered around the city’s iconic temples, mosques, monuments, or conventional tourist sites. Instead, they are rooted in the narrow *Banaras ki galiyaan*, the serenity of the Ganges, the city’s distinctive aromas, warm lighting, chanting, and atmospheric nuances. Indian youth are increasingly shaping spiritual tourism in Varanasi through personal, immersive experiences that move beyond visiting temples or monuments. Their engagement is rooted in the everyday experiences of the city—*Banaras ki galiyaan*, the calm of the Ganges, and the sensory feel of light, sound, and atmosphere.

Based on repeated themes in field interviews and observations, the authors identified two concrete emerging trends: riverside retreat tourism (Heintzman. 2013) and spiritual healing tourism (Norman.2011). These categories were not drawn from theory alone, but from the lived experiences and narratives of the young tourists themselves.

Neel, for example, described, “For me, the *ghats* and the adjacent places, *galis*, rituals, seeing the river—refer to a retreat”. He, like many others, spent innumerable hours sitting alone by the riverside, simply experiencing the place, the people and the life on the *ghats*. This recurring pattern among participants led to the framing of riverside retreat tourism, where the *ghats* function as an experience of calm, solitude, and emotional grounding.

On the other hand, Sayan explained how Varanasi “healed” him—emotionally and mentally—through its energy and environment. His experience was not about sightseeing but about inner transformation. Accounts like his informed the second category: spiritual healing tourism, where tourists come seeking relief, clarity, and transformation.

These two trends reflect how Varanasi is being experienced by younger generations—not just as a spiritual capital, but as a place for quiet retreat and personal renewal.

Riverside retreat tourism:

Rivers have long been central to spiritual and tourism experiences. Fachrudin & Lubis (2016) highlight the rise of river-based tourism, while Fandeli (2001; Sembiring, 2022), Made (2002), and Hein et al. (2024) claim rivers to be an integral part of cultural and historical landscapes. Wolski and Jankowski (2019) argue that riversides serve as religious and meditative spaces, reinforcing Wyrzykowski's (1994) view that rivers enrich tourism through their natural and cultural significance. This evolving relationship is reflected in the emerging trends in tourism as tourists seek not just scenic beauty but also spaces for spiritual experiences, fostering self-discovery and emotional renewal (Linders & Lancaster.2013; Heintzman.2013; Voigt & Pforr.2014; Ashton. 2018) highlight the role of riverside meditation in deepening spiritual engagement, marking a shift from passive sightseeing to immersive, experiential spiritual tourism.

The Ganges, a symbol of faith and cultural continuity (Kumar, 2017), reflects this shift in tourism. Its *ghats*, once solely ritualistic spaces, now blend spirituality and personal retreat. Young tourists engage differently—capturing the river's beauty, meditating at dawn, or experiencing the rhythmic life along the ghats. As modern pressures grow, the Ganges emerge not just as a sacred site but as a space where tradition meets contemporary experiential travel, transforming riverside experiences into journeys of reflection, cultural engagement, and aesthetic appreciation.

Table 3: Spiritual Engagement and Evolving Practices in Riverside Retreat Tourism

| Spiritual connection | Engagement & experiences | Emerging trends |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Digital detox, solitude | <i>Subha-e-Banaras</i> with Vedic chanting and music, meditation, and morning peace. Have a cup of tea, dipping your toe, or witnessing <i>Ganga Snan</i> . | Sacred River Tourism (Singh.2020) – A spiritual journey that includes meditation, chants, music, and peaceful moments by the Ganges. |
| Nature's healing energy | listening to the calming sounds of birds, taking boat rides, breathing clean air, and observing migratory birds. | Nature-based tourism (Metin.2019)-with an emphasis on spirituality, encouraging a close bond with the pure landscape. |
| Gratitude rituals | Pilgrims, flower offerings, candlelight, and the sound of running water | Ritual-based tourism (Chen. et al. 2024)- examines spiritual activities like as worship, prayers, and offerings. |

| Spiritual connection | Engagement & experiences | Emerging trends |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Connection with the people | The rhythmic echoes of <i>Sandhya Aarti</i> , floating lights, and evening prayers. Bollywood mashups, devotional music, ghats, and gentle chants. Sharing music on cold nights, enjoying Maggi and masala tea, and documenting moments online. Taking pictures, absorbing the atmosphere, and interacting with tourists and residents while enjoying the <i>ghats</i> on the riverbank during festivals. | Community-based sacred tourism (Prakoso. 2020) - taking part in spiritual rites in a communal setting. |
| Collective prayer and remembrance | Water flowing, silent offerings, floating diyas, and the soothing illumination of candles. | |
| Moonlit reflection | Silent contemplation on the moonlit ghats, where the Ganges shimmers, distant chants echo, and temple lamps cast a serene glow. | Mystical Night Tourism (Chen et al. 2024) – Deep reflection, moonlit spirituality, and profound Ganges experiences. |
| Ultimate reality of life | Some young people at the burning <i>ghats</i> (<i>Manikarnika ghat</i> and <i>Harishchandra ghat</i>) Confront death, while others look for purpose. They record fleeting moments as they see the celebration in opposition to the final reality. | Thana tourism (Khatun.2024) – A spiritual journey that explores death as a release and combines life and death through rituals, reflection, and remembering. |

Source: Authors

Table No. 3 illustrates how spiritual tourism along the Ganges is evolving as young tourists seek deeper, more personal connections, giving rise to diverse emerging trends. Moving beyond structured rituals, their experiences are shaped by quiet mornings, nature's embrace, gratitude practices, communal prayers, and festive celebrations where devotion and joy seamlessly blend.

At dawn, *Subah-e-Banaras* offers a meditative retreat – Vedic chants, tea by the river, and the gentle flow of the Ganges weave a sacred rhythm. Nature becomes a silent healer: migratory birds, misty boat rides, and crisp morning air evoke moments of renewal. As the day progresses, floating flowers and flickering candles turn gratitude into ritual, while the *Sandhya Aarti* infuses spirituality with collective energy – echoing chants, glowing lanterns, and strangers sharing Maggi and tea at *Assi Ghat*. Under the full moon, the *ghats* shimmer with temple light as distant chants dissolve into silence. The river, still yet restless, reflects unspoken thoughts. At the burning *ghats*, life and death intertwine – not with fear, but with quiet acceptance. This evolving sensibility gives rise to Riverside Retreat Tourism, where spirituality unfolds through solitude, ephemeral connections, and the timeless, sacred pull of the Ganges.

Spiritual healing tourism:

With rising mental health challenges among the youth due to academic pressure, social media, and family dynamics (<https://tinyurl.com/2p9fk9h9>), alternative approaches to well-being are gaining attention. Contemporary lifestyles often lead to chronic stress and dissatisfaction (Jelincic & Matecic, 2021), making tourism-driven healing a compelling solution. While spiritual and mindfulness tourism offers psychological benefits (Norman, 2011; Norman & Pokorny, 2017), healing tourism goes further, using travel as a structured means of psychological aid. Similar to psychological tourism (Chen et al., 2013), it focuses on developmental counselling that promotes “wellness over the lifespan” (Ivey et al., 2006).

As Varanasi, historically associated with spiritual transformation, has long provided an immersive space for healing. Zara (2016) describes walking through the city’s narrow lanes and along the *ghats* as a profoundly sensual experience – prayers echoing through the air, the scent of burning pyres, and the feel of temple stone under bare feet – evoking a deep sense of positive sensation throughout the body, mind, and soul. In Varanasi, one does not need to seek out healing activities; the city itself inspires a sense of renewal and healing from within. She observed young backpackers, seekers of yoga and ayurveda, and tourists drawn to the city’s enigmatic aura, all engaging with Varanasi in deeply personal ways. This undefined yet powerful form of introspection aligns with the rise of healing tourism, where individuals seek emotional and psychological renewal beyond structured therapeutic frameworks.

Table 4: Spiritual Engagement and Evolving Practices in Healing Tourism

| Spiritual Connection | Engagement & Experiences | Emerging Tourism Trends |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Sensory spirituality – scents, <i>damroo</i>, bells, and chants.</p> <p>Nourishing the soul with sattvic food.</p> <p>Attuning to the divine through sacred sounds.</p> <p>Devotion is expressed through movement.</p> | <p>Narrow <i>galis</i>, antique stores, and lanes illuminated by yellow are filled with the scents of <i>chai</i>(tea), <i>paan</i> (betel leaves), incense, and garlands.</p> <p>Use sights and sounds to interact with residents, craftspeople, and heritage.</p> <p>Enjoy <i>kachoris</i> (deep-fried spicy stuffed pastry), temple <i>prasad</i>, and sattvic meals.</p> <p>Aromas, tastes, and careful eating can all promote healing.</p> <p>Chanting, sitar concerts, temple <i>bhajans</i> (a type of Hindu devotional song), and <i>Dhrupad Mela</i> (a type of Indian music festival)</p> <p>Immersion. taking in the therapeutic vibrations of bells, conches, and spiritual music.</p> <p>Expressing devotion through free-flowing movement at <i>ghats</i>, temple dance, spiritual jamming, recording, or taking part in spiritual experiences through art.</p> | <p>Experiential Heritage Tourism (Seraphim. Haq.2020)-</p> <p>Culinary & Healing Tourism</p> <p>Sound & Music Healing Tourism</p> <p>Devotional Dance & Movement Tourism</p> <p>healing unfolds through the senses – aromas ground the mind, flavors nourish the body and spirit, sounds cleanse emotional clutter, and movement frees and uplifts the soul – creating a deep and holistic renewal.</p> |
| Embodied experiences of spiritual renewal. | Sacred rites, energy purification, and fire ceremonies at ashrams and temples. Healing under guidance from spiritual <i>gurus</i> and emotional catharsis. | <p>Sacred immersion tourism (Silva et al. 2024)-</p> <p>These exercises promote a deep sense of regeneration, align inner energy, and relieve emotional burdens.</p> |

| Spiritual Connection | Engagement & Experiences | Emerging Tourism Trends |
|--|--|--|
| Restoring balance through body and breath. | Sunrise yoga on <i>ghats</i> , guided meditation, <i>pranayama</i> , and detox retreats. Engaging in sound healing with bells, conches, and chanting. | Wellness & Mindfulness Tourism (Lengyel.2015)- It promotes the healing process by promoting in-depth introspection and emotional equilibrium. |
| Creativity as devotion— traditional art, music, dance, storytelling. | Meeting storytellers, musicians, and painters on the BHU campus and alleyways. Capturing heritage, taking pictures, or engaging in cultural expressions. | Cultural Expression Tourism (Antons. 2009)- Encourages healing and spiritual connection via shared heritage, art, and storytelling through experiences. |

Source: Author

To visualize the depiction of Table No. 4, Megha's statement offers a compelling insight:

"I went to Varanasi just to take a break—from my breakup, my exhausting job, my monotonous life," Megha said. "But somehow, this city understood exactly what I needed and gave it to me unconditionally." She hadn't come searching for healing, yet it found her. Standing amidst the *Sandhya Aarti*, she watched the priests move in unison, flames flickering, chants rising. Without warning, tears welled up—not from sadness, but from an overwhelming sense of being seen, held, and understood.

And this is how healing in Varanasi unfolds in fleeting moments. The scent of incense, the clang of temple bells, *Jaikara* (a devotional cheer) of the god, *Mahadev*, a simple plate of *chaat* (a type of Indian savoury) at *Kashi Chaat Bhandar* (a famous street food shop)—each becomes a quiet revelation. In the narrow *galis*, where *chai*, *paan*, *mithai* (sweets), *kachori*, and garlands perfume the air, conversations with boatmen, street performers, and shopkeepers turn into unexpected exchanges of stories, laughter, and perspective. As part of the healing experience, culinary & healing tourism, sound & music healing tourism, and Devotional Dance & Movement Tourism are emerging in Varanasi. From tasting *bhang* (a mind-altering substance derived from the

leaves and flower tips of the Indian hemp plant) on the streets to savouring *lassi* (yogurt-based drink with ice, spices, or fruits), from singing alone to hearing chants and music, swaying to temple *bhajans*, dancing at the *ghats*, or losing themselves in the hum of a *sitar*. From smiling at the vibrant crowds to returning at night and feeling a deep exhale—you feel free, relaxed, and renewed without even realizing how it happened, but it does.

There is no structured therapy here, no prescribed path to renewal. Yet, in its unspoken way, Varanasi embraces those who come seeking, offering healing not through answers but through its presence—the feeling that no one here is ever truly alone. From these experiences, a new form of spiritual healing tourism is evolving—one that goes beyond pilgrimage, weaving together tradition, introspection, and the city’s silent yet profound ability to heal and to evolving spiritual landscape, connecting spirituality, healing, and youth culture in a dynamic fusion.

Conclusion

The engagement of young tourists with spirituality reflects a notable shift from conventional, institutionalized spiritual practices (Nair. Dilep. 2021) toward more fluid, experiential, and individualized expressions of the sacred. No longer limited to temples, rituals, or structured pilgrimages, their search often centers around crafting a personal spiritual experience—at times, as quiet and introspective as sitting with a cup of tea, observing the Ganges and the everyday rhythms of the ghats, entering a self-fashioned ‘do not disturb’ mode. These moments of solitary reflection, often described by individuals as experiencing *sukoon*—a deeply personal sense of peace—coexist with outwardly participatory practices such as photographing the labyrinthine *galis*, documenting sacred ceremonies, tasting local delicacies like *paan* or *malaiyo*, or wearing ethnic and Indo-Western attire while engaging with the city’s atmosphere. Whether capturing the aesthetics of *Sandhya Aarti* through Instagrammable reels, listening to oral histories shared by long-time residents, or momentarily merging with festive crowds, such engagements are reshaping spirituality as a multisensory, performative, and affective experience.

Especially after COVID (Jha & Sachdeva, 2024), Varanasi is increasingly imagined as a site of retreat and healing—where wellness, introspection, and cultural immersion intersect. Young tourists now approach the city not only as a place of spiritual significance but as a transformative space that nurtures emotional renewal (Choe & O’Regan, 2020), self-exploration, and an experience of communal belonging. As Malini, one of the respondents shared, “I visited Varanasi, participated in the everyday life with locals, and after the exhaustion of post-COVID life and the extreme pressure of working from home, I felt it was what I truly needed.” These reflections show how,

often unknowingly, they are reinforcing a shift in traditional spiritual tourism—reshaping it through lived experience, emotional recovery, and digital expression.

This broader reorientation is also tied to growing urban stress and the fragmentation of cultural identities among youth. Within the umbrella of experience-based tourism (Åstrøm, 2022) and its emerging trends, Varanasi is no longer just a sacred place—it is evolving into a relational and co-created space. As travellers navigate the pressures of modern urban life, spiritual destinations like Varanasi are increasingly perceived not only as sanctuaries but as flexible cultural mirrors—spaces that respond to their emotional, psychological, and identity-based needs.

Looking forward, these evolving interactions between urban youth and sacred geographies open up fertile ground for future research. Beyond the scope of post-pandemic recovery, such inquiries might consider how spiritual tourism responds to accelerating urban alienation, socio-cultural anxieties, and generational shifts in meaning-making. Varanasi, in this light, may continue to emerge as a living archive of spiritual reinvention—anchored in experience, healing, and retreat (Norman, 2011; Heintzman, 2013). The spiritual experience continues to be reimaged through affective, sensorial, and relational modes of tourism—constantly negotiating between tradition and transformation in the contemporary world.

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