

## **EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND ECONOMY OF AJMER CITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ajmer is a picturesque city situated in the serene Ajmer valley. It is located in the central part of Rajasthan. Therefore, also called as 'the heart of Rajasthan.' Due to its strategic importance, it became the economic and cultural hub as located on the major trade routes. Ajmer city was founded by Raja AjayPal, a Rajput Chauhan prince. It became a centre of religious devotion and faith for people of various religions like Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsi etc. Due to the religious faith, many tourists both domestic and international come every year to Ajmer city. Thus, the effect of tourism is felt on Ajmer city. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused disastrous effect on the Ajmer city. The paper tries to study the importance of religious tourism, economic impacts of religious tourism, the adverse effects of Covid-19 and the relief measures undertaken to tackle the menace caused by Covid-19 in the Ajmer city. The primary data was obtained regarding the economic impacts of Religious Tourism and secondary data was obtained from various government reports, papers etc.

**Key words:** F.E.E., Economic Impacts, Adverse effects, Relief measures

### **I. Introduction**

Ajmer city is located in the beautiful valley which is surrounded by one of the oldest mountain ranges of the world, Aravalli Mountains. Ajmer city was founded by Raja Ajay Pal, the Chauhan King. The Ajmer city is not only famous for its natural beauty but also for the numerous religious centres. These religious places are the seats of reverence for people of various religions. The Lord Ganesh temple, Khawaja Moin-ud-din Chishti shrine, Soni-ji-ki-Nasiyan temple, Fire temple, Saint Anslem Church, Balaji temple are some of the major religious places which attract people from all over the world.

Ajmer is also geo-strategically located in the heart of Rajasthan and on major trade routes which makes its easily accessible to tourists world-wide. In recent times, the flow of international and domestic tourist had completely stopped due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. This had resulted into numerous kinds of problems which needed to be addressed immediately. In such trying times, when the entire humanity was on the verge of extinction, religion played a key role in our lives. It instilled the faith in the God and hope for bright future that the normal time would once again prevail.

## **II. Objectives**

The present study was carried out keeping in view the following objectives:

1. The research paper explores the importance of religious tourism in Ajmer city and its economic impacts on the Ajmer City.
2. The paper critically tries to find out the adverse effects of Covid-19 pandemic on Ajmer City.
3. The research paper also tries to identify the various relief measures undertaken to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on the Religious Tourism in Ajmer City.

## **III. Study Area**

The study area of the proposed research study is the Ajmer City. Ajmer is one of the most important cities of Rajasthan. Its population was 542321 in 2011 Census and ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in terms of population. Ajmer's latitudinal extent is 25°38' N to 26°58'N and longitudinal extent is 73°54' E to 75°22'E. Ajmer City is located in the central part of Rajasthan. It is easily accessible from all parts of the India and world.

## **IV. Methodology**

The research paper is based on the Primary Data and the Secondary Data. The Primary Data was obtained from the survey collected by the researcher himself to find out the impacts of Religious Tourism and important religious places. The Secondary Data was collected from the various government reports, research papers etc. The primary data collected by the researcher on various economic variables was compiled and run-on SPSS 24. The Principal Component Factor Analysis was done with varimax rotation procedure. Various statistical tests like the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of Sample Adequacy test, the Bartlett's test of Sphericity and the Cronbach's Alpha of Reliability were done.

## **V. Religious Composition of Ajmer and Importance of Religious Tourism**

There are numerous religious places in Ajmer City which are the seats of reverence for the people of various religions. People from various parts of the world come to visit and pay their respect. Mohamed & Suleiman (2011) observed that people of different religious faiths flock to Palestine to engage in sacred pilgrimages. The peace and beauty of Ajmer City have prompted people to settle here and give a unique secular identity to the city.

**Table 1: Religious Places in Ajmer City**

S.N.	Religion	Religious Places
1.	Hindu	Jagatpita Brahmaji Temple, Temple of Badri Nathji, Sri Rama Vaikuntha, Bajrangarh Temple.
2.	Muslim	Khawaja Moin-ud-din Chishti Shrine.
3.	Jain	Nareli Tirtha, Soni-ji-ki-Nasiyan.
4.	Christian	St. Anslem's Church.
5.	Sikh	Gurudwara at Pushkar.
6.	Parsi	Agiray Temple.

*Source: Primary Data collected by the Primary Researcher*

**Table 2: Population of different Religious Groups in Ajmer City**

S. N.	Religion	Total Population	Percentage of Population
1.	Hindus	4,53,013	83.53%
2.	Muslims	62,825	11.58%
3.	Jains	13,583	2.50%
4.	Christians	6,813	1.26%
5.	Sikhs	5,101	0.94%
6.	Not Stated	658	0.12%
7.	Buddhist	267	0.05%
8.	Others	61	0.01%

*Source: District Census Handbook, Government of Rajasthan, 2011*

In Ajmer City, the largest religious group as per the 2011 Census was the Hindus accounting to 83.53% of the total population. The other major religious groups are the Muslims, Jains and

Christians which accounts to 11.58%, 2.50% and 1.26% respectively. The people belonging to Sikh, Buddhism, Parsi and other religions are in less numbers. They live peacefully with others making it a peaceful and secular city.

Tourism can be referred to all the commercial activities organised for the tourists who visit the area. Tourism can be of various types like religious tourism, medical tourism, adventure tourism etc. The Religious Tourism is very important as it leads to employment, increase in foreign revenues, increase in income of local population etc. The most important impacts of tourism are generating employment, developing entrepreneurial culture and skilled development of manpower to benefit the local community of a region.

**Table 3: International Tourists Arrivals in India**

Year	I.T.A. in World (in Million)	I.T.A. in India (in Million)	Percentage share of India	Rank of India
2014	1134.0	13.11	1.15	24 <sup>th</sup>
2015	1184.0	13.28	1.12	24 <sup>th</sup>
2016	1235.0	14.57	1.18	28 <sup>th</sup>

*Source: UNWTO Barometer of April 2014, August 2015, May 2016*

In the year 2014, I.T.A. in World was 1134 million which increased to 1235 million in 2016. Similarly, the I.T.A. in India was 13.11 million in 2014 which increased to 14.57 million in 2016. Thus tourism has tremendous scope of attracting international tourists to India and Ajmer. Unfortunately due to the outbreak of Corona epidemic there has been a complete ban on the tourists world-wide. We would witness very less number of international arrivals in the coming years as only Indian origin tourists would return to their country after lifting of the travel ban. The tourism industry has suffered a lot and affected the lives of billions of people world-wide.

**Table 4: Foreign Exchange Earnings of India from Tourism**

Year	F.E.E. (in Million US\$)	% change over previous years
2014	20236	9.7
2015	21071	4.1
2016	22923	8.8
2017	13230	22.3

*Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2011-17*

The Foreign Exchange Earnings of India was 20236 million US\$ in 2014 which increased to 22923 million US\$ in 2016. Thus we find that tourism is an important source of earning for the government but due to the ban there is a steep fall in earnings. The F.E.E. has witnessed the greatest fall. The vaccination in near future throws a promising light as it would make people confident to resume their visits to the religious places.

**Table 5: Domestic Tourists Visits**

Year	D.T.V.s (in million)	Annual Growth
2014	1282.80	12.3
2015	1431.97	11.6
2016	1613.55	12.7

*Source: State/Union Territory Tourism Department Report, 2016*

The scene of Domestic Tourist Visit was bright earlier but the panic situation created by the Corona disease has totally changed the scene. In 2014, the Domestic Tourists Visits were 1282.80 million which increased to 1613.55 Million in 2016. The situation completely changed in the early 2020 with the most states banning the movement of people from other states and countries. The growth in this sector has been seriously hit by the Corona epidemic. The vaccination drive by Government of India is the biggest vaccination exercise in the world and has instilled confidence of the return of the normal times.

**VI. Economic Impacts of Religious Tourism**

**Table 6: Economic Impacts of Religious Tourism in Ajmer City**

Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Improves Quality of Life	140	3.1643	1.39171	1.937
Increase in demand of Historical Things	140	3.0714	1.27873	1.635
Increase in Per-Capita Income	140	3.4000	1.29637	1.681
Increase in Employment	140	3.2857	1.20123	1.443
Increase in Rent of houses	140	2.9857	.92126	.849
Smuggling increases	140	3.9786	.85215	.726

Commercialization of Traditions	140	3.7071	1.10262	1.216
Displacement of Residents	140	3.6071	1.11688	1.247
Increase in Cost of Land	140	4.4500	.99874	.997
Scarcity of goods during Fairs and Festivals	140	3.3357	1.28416	1.649
Valid N (list wise)	140			

*Source: Primary Data compiled by the Researcher*

A survey was undertaken to find the Economic Impacts of Religious Tourism in Ajmer City before the Covid 19 pandemic. A total of 140 persons were surveyed and the observations recorded on 05 point Likert Scale. A Questionnaire was prepared and tested beforehand. Later the observations were recorded of various variables and respective values were assigned to them. The data was run on SPSS 24. At first Principal Component Factor Analysis was done with Varimax rotation procedure. Also, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sample adequacy test was done. The result of KMO test was 0.922 which is considered as Marvellous by Kaiser. If the KMO test result is higher than 0.5, the data can be considered suitable. The Bartlett’s test of Sphericity was done in which the Chi-square Output was 2998.037. The significance should be  $p < 0.5$  and it was 0.000. Also, the Cronbach’s Alpha of reliability was 0.985.

An interesting and thoughtful situation had risen due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. There had been no tourism activities in pandemic times as the government had banned all such activities. No tourism meant, no economic impacts on Ajmer City. The economic effect of religious tourism in Ajmer city was seen in the variables having Mean more than 3.00. There had been less negative economic impacts of Religious Tourism like decrease in smuggling and less commercialization of traditions which is good for the people of Ajmer. The Covid-19 has also decreased the positive economic impacts caused by Religious Tourism. Tosun (1998) stated that tourism is a stimulus to local economy. There had been decrease in the income of people and fall in employment opportunities.

**VII. Adverse effects of Coronavirus pandemic and relief measures undertaken**

Coronavirus pandemic was caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 which is believed to have originated from Wuhan City of Hubei province in China. To avoid it’s spread the central government had issued a Lockdown I from 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and the Lockdown II from 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020 to 03<sup>rd</sup> May 2020. The third wave of Covid occurred in 2021 and early 2022. During the pandemic period the government had put complete ban on movement of people from abroad and in India. The central and state governments have now

lifted the Lockdown, paving way for the slow resumption and recovery of the daily lives. Government has stressed on 'Social Distancing and Self Isolation' to contain the disease. The adverse effects of Coronavirus pandemic in the Ajmer City and the relief measures under taken were:

### **Spread of Coronavirus in the dense residential areas**

In Ajmer, the density of population in the city core area is more than the other areas of the city. The Dargah area, Moondri Mohallah, Diggi Baazar, Madar Gate and the Ganj areas which are densely populated had witnessed increased cases of disease. The government plea of social distancing and self- isolation was a challenge in such areas.

The only solution to check the spread of the disease was to declare such areas as *Containment Zones* and ban the complete movement of people. Such ban had added to the miseries of the people who have faced great difficulties to procure food and medical supplies. The local administration was partially able to implement lockdown with strict policing. The lockdown has been lifted in recent times. The administration had also appointed nodal officers for regular supply of daily food items and medical supplies by dividing the containment zones.

### **Less availability of food grains and less nutrition**

The Coronavirus had created a peculiar situation in Ajmer city. The plight of daily wage earners was quite difficult as neither they could go out for work nor they could afford food. They were totally dependent on government supplies through Ration Shops and Bhamashahs who donated food. Food is indispensable as it is the key to fight this disease. A good balanced diet ensures immunity. As without food, the immunity can not be increased.

Public distribution of free dry ration had tried to alleviate worries of people to some extent. Government's plan to increase allocation of food grains through ration shops was commendable. Also, the prices of food products increased exponentially as some businessmen resorted to hoarding and black-marketing. The government failed to control the prices of food, medicines and other essential products.

### **No regular income of people**

The state government had issued complete lockdown from 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 for few months and banned the people from venturing out. This had resulted into no regular income for the middle and poor class of people residing in Ajmer. The central government and the state government neither had clue to fight the pandemic nor they had contingency plans to bail people out financially as it was done by the U.S. government.

A total of 90,949 people worked in the small scale, medium and large scale industries in Ajmer in 2020. Around 87,420 people were working as daily wage earners in small scale industry. The tourism industry provides employment to number of local people. Ghanie & Dar (2020) stated that the involvement of local people in tourism industry provides the necessary impetus to the growth of economy. The Coronavirus pandemic has resulted into loss of jobs of primarily those associated with the tourism industry. People faced difficulty in taking care of their families. The government didn't had any relief plan to counter such situations. The government could had financially helped people by transferring some relief amount in the *Jandhan Bank Accounts* opened by the Central government in such Covid like situations. The biggest tragedy was the people spending their savings in such conditions on food and medicine as it was *do-or-die situation*. The central government's request to all the industrialists to pay the workers was a good step but it needed to be backed by the legislature and the Supreme Court. The government should had ensured of provide jobs by lifting lockdown to minimise the sufferings of the poor. The government's plan to provide soft loans of small amount of Rupees Ten thousand to small traders was a novel idea as it helped them to restart their lives with renewed vigour.

### **Lack of government preparedness and poor health infrastructure**

The Corona Pandemic has caught both central and state governments unguarded as they didn't anticipated the pandemic of such magnitude. Most of the government hospitals were in poor shape due to the want of better medical practioners, instruments and medicines. The tourists who were stuck in Ajmer were in deplorable situation. Availability of good health services always ensures the steady arrival of tourists. In such times of pandemic, if the health facilities are improved then the tourists would feel inclined to visit Ajmer City without any health concerns in the near future. Mustafa and Sharma (2020) found that there was direct relationship between the tourists and health services in the tourist places.

There is need to increase the number of doctors and other paramedical staff along with testing facilities for better care. The central government's decision to open Covid-specialised hospitals in all districts of India was quite commendable. The central government's efforts to bring the entire population of India under medical coverage of Rupees Five Lakh per family through 'Ayushman Bharat Scheme' should be taken as serious work done by the government. Till date, as per media reports 80% of the India's population did not have any kind of medical insurance making them quite vulnerable to diseases.

### **Immunisation in India and its related fears**

In India, in recent times more faith of common man was on the God than the doctor and modern medicine. It is totally opposite of the situation, we had in ancient times. In ancient times, there



was complete faith of people in Ayurveda and the doctors. Unfortunately, with the passage of time the knowledge had been lost along with the faith of the people.

In the ongoing fight against Coronavirus, researchers have found that there had been less cases of Coronavirus victims in developing countries like India where B.C.G. vaccine was administered to the young children. In developed countries like U.S.A. etc. the B.C.G. vaccine was not administered and so they have large number of Coronavirus cases. Thus, there is need of proper vaccination which the government is trying to ensure under Mission Indradhanush.

The Government of India has started a big task of Coronavirus vaccination in mission mode. The government planned to vaccinate its people under various phases. In first phase, the doctors and paramedical staff were given vaccination. In the second phase, the defence, police and people of local administration were provided vaccination. The third phase was started on 01<sup>st</sup> March, 2021 with the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi taking his first dose of vaccination. The third phase is for the senior citizens above 60 years of age and people above 45 years with comorbidities. It is the biggest vaccination drive in the world. Government should allocate more funds on health as to ensure medical relief to its citizens.

### **VIII. Conclusions and Discussions**

Coronavirus Pandemic is a serious issue as it has threatened the entire mankind. We need to support our government unconditionally and abide by the golden rules of social distancing and self-isolation. All kinds of industries including tourism industry has been greatly affected by the pandemic. Rawat and Kannan (2018) have found religious places to be an important factor attracting tourists. So, the administration needs to focus more on the development of religious tourism to revive the tourism industry and all stake holders need to work in unison. Roy and Saxena (2020) felt that the task of rebuilding of tourism industry primarily falls on the government as all policy matters are looked and taken care of by the government. There is a need for collective decision to contain the disease from spreading and on complete eradication of it. All our efforts should be directed towards alleviating the worries of the 'poor' and contributing our bit in the global war.

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