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# Leveraging the cultural and economic value of fairs and festivals in India

Fairs and  
festivals in  
India

417

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to summarize and review the opportunities and challenges that India offers in terms of leveraging the cultural and economic potential of the fairs and festivals.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper draws from the findings of the theme issue contributors. All the papers in the theme issue have drawn inputs from diverse types of fairs and festivals organized in different parts of India.

**Findings** – The paper summarizes the key opportunities and challenges with respect to leveraging the cultural and economic potential of fairs and festivals in India. Some of the issues that emerge across the board revolve around lack of basic infrastructure, indifferent government support, local apathy toward cultural commodification and poor stakeholder engagement.

**Practical implications** – There are a number of practical implications for practitioners and policy-makers that will allow India to optimally leverage the huge cultural and economic potential that the various fairs and festivals offer, but this requires a holistic understanding that will ensure that aspirations and concerns of all key stakeholders are taken into account.

**Originality/value** – The on-the-ground narrative brings out the real issues, challenges and opportunities that can then be analyzed to offer direction to policy-makers, tourism sector and government at various levels. The outcomes of the theme issue summarize the above.

**Keywords** India, Leverage, Cultural tourism, Fairs and festivals, Stakeholder participation, Economic potential

**Paper type** General review

## Overview

Events, fairs and festivals can make an immense contribution to the economic development of a region. They can bring more awareness and economic value to the regions where they are celebrated and hosted. There are social benefits as well. Communities can be engaged in livelihoods; there could also be more social bonding and strengthening of ties between people. These festivals can also help to reinforce cultural roots and values and enable communities to preserve their traditions too.

This theme issue addressed the question: “How can the economic and cultural value of fairs and festivals in India be leveraged?” To explore the question, academic researchers engaged with key stakeholders to capture valuable insights, experiences and viewpoints. The research covers a diverse range of fairs and festivals, as India is a land of fairs and festivals. There are some which are celebrated across all regions while some are more regional or local in character.



How might economic and social values be enhanced through such an event? That was the key question that the theme issue sought to address.

### **Issues and challenges in leveraging the cultural and economic value of fairs and festivals in India**

Despite the immense potential, the fairs and festivals organized and celebrated in India remain under deployed. Some key issues and challenges that emerged are:

- *Lack of basic travel related infrastructure:* From roads to parking, poor facilities at railway stations in terms of rest rooms, basic cleanliness and hygiene, overburdened rail connections and the lack of air travel infrastructure remain a key deterrent.
- *Carry capacity determination and management:* India is a populous country; cultural events like fairs and festivals can attract participation that is way beyond the capacity that can be managed. This results in a lack of board and lodging facilities, a congested experience of the event and safety and security issues. In the past, there have been many cases of disasters with loss of human life at such events. Further, the unplanned presence of visitors in large numbers can have a negative impact on local communities, often causing them to feel apathetic or even hostile toward the fair or festival.
- *Economic leakage:* The economic benefits from the fair or festival must be fairly distributed among the stakeholders. This is often not the case, and local communities can find themselves burdened with negative impacts and few if any economic gains. This leakage creates a disincentive for the local community.
- *Role of Stakeholder engagement and local community participation:* Irrespective of whether a fair or a festival has a large pan-Indian presence or is more local in character, the ability of the various stakeholders to work together in a coordinated manner impacts visitor experience, enlarges negative impacts and dilutes the potential economic gains. The government at multiple (central, state and municipal) levels, local communities, event organizing bodies and other stakeholders need to be in sync to achieve successful management of these cultural events.
- *Cultural commodification and loss of authenticity:* Focus on economic gains from cultural activities like fairs and festivals can often result in negative impacts like loss of authenticity, where the cultural customs, traditions and rituals are lost in translation or modified to play to the demands of visitors or tourists. This can result in an irreparable loss of cultural heritage.

Sharma and Sharma (2015) studied the impact of multiple fairs and festivals that are organized by the local community in Pithoragarh from a cultural and economic standpoint. Their survey results clearly show the following:

- Local communities are critical of the extent to which fairs and festivals enable them to ensure continuity of their cultural beliefs and traditions. That said, these events do allow them to connect with their art, craft, food, dance and other forms of cultural expression.
- There is a positive economic impact on the local community, as fairs and festivals add economic vitality during the periods when they are organized.

Sharma and Sharma also identify issues that need to be addressed to expand the reach of these cultural events and generate significant tourist inflows into the region. The core issues are:

- transport infrastructure, poor quality of roads; and
- lack of support from state and local government and its various departments toward improvement in the facilities (rest rooms, venue locations and quality of stalls) that are offered at the various fairs and festivals organized year round.

Sharma and Sharma list the following implications for practitioners:

- Pithoragarh needs to be promoted as a tourist destination. Often referred as “Little Kashmir”, the region has an immense natural beauty and cultural heritage that if marketed well can bring in tourists in a big way.
- Emphasis on infrastructure, which includes roads, transport, basic civic amenities through both state and local government support and investment.
- Retain the authenticity of the local food and cultural goods sold to visitors, as they are currently appreciated.
- Focus on revenue opportunities through ticketed events, bring in industry sponsors and deploy these to enhance the scale of the fairs and festivals as well as the services and facilities available to visitors.

Babu and Munjal (2015) review the economic and social impact of the “Pandrandu Vilakku” festival which is celebrated in Kerela. Kerela is recognized as a rather successful tourist destination both in terms of domestic and international tourist visitation. The challenges identified by the authors are:

- adverse impact on worshippers due to lack of visitor control;
- inadequate planning and coordination issues at organizer level;
- commercialization of the event, focus has shifted from the religious aspects and the temple area has become a marketplace of sorts;
- locally made authentic art, craft and other goods are being sidelined with cheap Chinese products;
- stakeholders are neither clear of their responsibility nor is decision making around the festival structured well enough to facilitate an integrated effort; and
- economic gains are not finding their way to the local community; the event is becoming an irritation in the lives of local communities, as negative impacts are overshadowing benefits.

Babu and Munjal make the following recommendations with related implications for practitioners:

- Protect the interests of local sellers to prevent economic leakages, and the related sense of irritation by the local community.
- State government needs to be an involved stakeholder; coordination between key stakeholders needs to be facilitated.

- Policy action is needed to prevent loss of heritage and the cultural context of the festival, and if required, legal recourse should be considered to protect the authenticity of the festival.
- Funding should be structured in a manner wherein the temple trust is able to invest in infrastructure and facilities required to improve the visitor experience at the event.

Munjal (2015) in her paper looks at the critical role of building a participatory framework that allows all key stakeholders to work toward sustaining fairs and festivals in small towns in India. The paper documents the case of Sohna, a small town in the State of Haryana.

Munjal categorizes the fairs and festivals as:

- tourism driven; and
- local community driven.

According to Munjal, to leverage the potential of fairs and festivals, the cultural resources that they are linked with the event (such as built heritage, local arts and crafts, religious attractions and indigenous socio-economic frameworks) must be integrated to expand their significance and drive urban development.

The author also believes that it is critical for the sustainability of fairs and festivals that “traditional stakeholders” and the “emergent stakeholders” are in dialogue, and there is clarity on “who decides, who implements and who benefits”.

With respect to the case of Monsoon fair at Sohna, stakeholder engagement demonstrated the following strengths and weaknesses:

- (1) Strengths:
  - a self-reliant framework that is integrated with regional economy; and
  - satisfaction of socio-cultural and economic requirements in the local community.
- (2) Weaknesses:
  - stagnation in the offerings of the fair;
  - existing socio-political hierarchies are rigid and dominant; and
  - poor integration with existing cultural resources to improve the Monsoon Fair experience.

Tiwari (2015) documents the success of “Shilpgram” as a tourist destination in Rajasthan. It can be seen as an example of public-private partnership wherein a “cultural resource” like the art, craft, food, etc. of Rajasthan has been packaged and marketed to attract both domestic and international tourists.

According to Tiwari, the “Shilpgram” has helped in enabling continuity of traditional (tribal and folk) crafts and art forms, provided economic benefits to rural and urban artists. While there is potential to improve the visitor experience through improved facilities and services, the model can be replicated across other states to help promote cultural resources and also unlock their economic potential.

Durgamohan (2015) offers an evaluation of the cultural and economic significance of the Hampi festival that is organized in Hampi, a World Heritage Site, widely acclaimed

as the largest open air museum in the world. The key findings of his research with implications for practitioners and policy-makers are:

- With visitation by a large number of patrons, the cultural heritage of the region benefits.
- Local community support is evident; the event celebrates local culture and brings in direct and indirect economic benefits.
- Benefits (economic) to local craftsmen are not on a par with reputed artists/craftsmen, that said the event allows them to interact and learn from those who have received acclaim.
- Resource allocation by the government to improve the services and facilities is a must for the festival to realize its true potential.
- Infrastructure development that focuses on tourism is required; lack of air transport connectivity and other travel related infrastructure components is a drag.

Durgamohan recommends development of a master plan that brings all key stakeholders together and covers the following aspects:

- mapping the tourist circuit, identifying all cultural resources of tourist interest;
- identify gaps in meeting visitor needs and providing required facilities and services, including boarding and lodging elements;
- funding aspects – determine budget and secure funding through a public-private partnership framework; and
- broaden the stakeholder framework to include NGOs that bring valuable guidance with respect to sustainable practices for managing cultural resources.

Gaur and Chapnerkar (2015) also explored aspects of large scale festivals like the “Ganapati festival” which is celebrated in many parts of the country, with millions of Indians participating with much enthusiasm. In this context, a master planning approach will help improve the experience of devotees, and it will also allow stakeholders to leverage cultural and economic potential to its fullest. Given the mass appeal of the event, the economic impact is substantial, but there are key implications for practitioners and policy-makers. They need to:

- develop a single nationwide plan;
- make provision for legally binding action to ensure that only biodegradable materials are used to make the idols used for immersion;
- manage noise pollution emanating from the celebrations and related announcements on loudspeakers; and
- prevent loss of cultural interpretation – one message, one belief aligned with the cultural heritage.

### Summary

The research shared by the authors who have contributed to this theme issue clearly establishes that “Fairs and Festivals” constitute a vibrant part of the Indian cultural

landscape. There is a positive orientation among visitors with respect to these events. On one hand, these ensure continuity of tradition, customs and cultural heritage; on the other, they generate positive economic impact resulting in direct and as indirect gains for a range of stakeholders. While the potential of fairs and festivals as drivers of cultural and economic value is clear, there is evidence that they have not been leveraged adequately. The key challenges are the deficiencies in infrastructure elements, lack of funding for facilities and service enhancements and, lastly, non-integrated stakeholder engagement to manage the fairs and festivals in a manner that protects cultural authenticity. Fairs and festivals in India represent a vast cultural resource that awaits its optimal deployment.

There is a wealth of opportunity that each state in India can develop by framing a vision for these fairs. A systematic approach to involving industry and creating unique experiences can bring in substantial tourism revenue for the state. There are some experiments which have been initiated, such as activity-based tours – living with locals, learning culinary traditions and also meditation and wellness. These could be taken much further so as to provide authentic cultural experiences and great memories. There are lessons to be learned from global experiences as well. The “Incredible India” campaign projects an aura for each state. The related cultural depictions and activities could help to create outstanding tourist experiences and many more employment opportunities. The emergent cultural extravaganza can be depicted in many new forms which today’s technology can exploit so that stories can be told like never before.

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