

# The Role of Religious Tourism in Religious Moderation: A Case Study on Hindu Places of Worship in North Sumatra

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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of religious tourism, particularly in Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra, on religious practices and levels of religious moderation among adherents, especially non-Hindus. Religious tourism is increasingly popular globally, including in Medan, Indonesia. This study aims to analyze how religious tourism influences religious practices and levels of moderation among adherents, specifically non-Hindus in the area. Participation in religious tourism can influence the process of religious moderation, whereby tourists' experiences at places of worship can open their minds to a more inclusive and tolerant understanding of religious diversity. This can foster the development of moderate attitudes in religious practices and interfaith interactions. Non-Hindu adherents who visit have the opportunity to expand their symbolic understanding of Hinduism, thereby promoting tolerance and better understanding. The results of this study have significant implications for promoting religious moderation and interfaith harmony in Indonesia. This article suggests that religious tourism can be used to enhance interfaith dialogue and support efforts toward religious moderation in various religious communities. These implications can assist policymakers and religious practitioners in designing more inclusive and supportive programs and policies to build a more tolerant and moderately religious society.

## Keywords

Religious tourism, Hindu places of worship, religious moderation, non-Hindu.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism has become a global phenomenon in recent decades. Many people from around the world are interested in engaging in spiritual and religious tourism. This article provides a general overview of religious tourism as a global phenomenon, discussing its impact on religious practices and travelers' experiences (Rashid, 2018). This phenomenon affects how people worship and fosters better interfaith dialogue and understanding (Weiss et al., n.d.). One religion significantly involved in religious tourism is Hinduism, with significant followers in various countries, including Indonesia.

In Indonesia, especially in the city of Medan, religious tourism involves followers of the same



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religion and those of other religions who want to learn more about Hindu religious practices. This creates an environment where interfaith meetings and dialogues can naturally occur (Choe & O'regan, 2015). Researchers seek to explore the influence of religious tourism on Hindu temples in Indonesia and its impact on the understanding of Hindu religion and culture in North Sumatra, particularly in Medan.

Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra, such as temples and other places of worship, often become destinations for religious tourism for non-Hindus who want to deepen their understanding of Hinduism. In this context, Hindu places of worship are not just places for worship but also serve as centers of religious education that help broaden the understanding of Hindu religion and culture among non-Hindu communities (Dharmika et al., 2019).

One crucial aspect of this phenomenon is how religious tourism can influence religious moderation among both followers and non-followers of a religion. Interfaith meetings and exposure to different religious practices can help promote tolerance, understanding, and moderation in religious practices, comparing various interfaith dialogue initiatives in different countries to promote religious moderation and interfaith tolerance (Kayaoglu, 2015). Through its processes, practices, and beliefs, religion has the power to influence the attitudes and behaviors of individuals (Pandey & Singh, 2019).

Therefore, in-depth research on the role of religious tourism in Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra, particularly in religious moderation, becomes relevant and important. Examining interfaith interactions in the context of religious tourism across various cultures and analyzing their impact on understanding religion and moderation levels.

Through this research, we aim to understand how interactions between Hindu and non-Hindu followers in Hindu places of worship can influence religious moderation in both groups. We will conduct a comprehensive case study to reveal key findings in this regard and provide valuable insights into religious tourism's role in religious moderation.

There is insufficient information about how religious tourism, especially in Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra, specifically influences the process of religious moderation among visitors, especially those who are not Hindu adherents. While several studies have revealed the general impact of religious tourism, specific information on how experiences in Hindu places of worship alter the attitudes and religious practices of visitors of different faiths is still not adequately available (Kasim, 2011).

This article makes a significant contribution by exploring the specific impact of religious tourism on religious moderation, particularly in Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra. By highlighting this case study, the article provides deeper insights into how interactions with Hindu places of worship can influence visitors' attitudes and religious practices from various belief backgrounds. This contribution is important for enriching an understanding of the role of religious tourism in promoting tolerance and

interfaith understanding, as well as for providing a stronger basis for developing policies and programs supporting religious moderation in society.

## 2. METHODS

In this study, we employed a qualitative approach to examine the influence of religious tourism on religious moderation in Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra. Our primary data were obtained through direct observation and interviews with visitors and Hindu religious leaders in the region. Additionally, we utilized secondary data from relevant literature and official documents related to religious tourism in the area. Informants were selected based on inclusion criteria covering visitors from various faith backgrounds and Hindu religious leaders relevant to the research topic. We utilized interview guidelines and observation checklists to gather data, analyzing it using a thematic analysis approach. This methodology was designed to provide a deep understanding of the relationship between religious tourism and religious moderation in Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra, offering insights into developing policies and programs related to religious tourism in the region.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. *Visits by Non-Hindu Tourists*

With its religious diversity, Medan has become an appealing destination for tourists interested in visiting places of worship and experiencing various religious activities. Religious tourism is increasingly popular in Medan, with tourists visiting historic and intriguing mosques, churches, temples, and shrines. Additionally, specific religious festivals and celebrations attract local and international tourists who wish to experience Medan's cultural and religious diversity. Thus, tourism and religion are interconnected and mutually influential in the context of Medan's cultural diversity.

Islam, as the majority religion in Indonesia, has a significant following in Medan. Islamic activity centers include the Grand Mosque Al Mashun, one of the largest mosques in Medan, and various other mosques throughout the city. Christianity also has a large congregation in Medan. Prominent churches in the city include the Church of Saint Francis Xavier and the Catholic Church of St. Mary Assumpta. Buddhism also has followers in Medan, with several important viharas, such as Mount East Temple and Mount Kwan Im Temple, serving as centers for Buddhist religious activities. Although smaller in number than other religions, Hinduism also has followers in Medan. Hindu activity centers in the city include the Great Temple of Jagatnatha and the Dharma Siddhi Temple.

The presence of diverse religions and ethnicities encourages people to adopt a moderate stance amid the continually changing social dynamics, expecting to strengthen solidarity among them. The majority religion must practice tolerance toward minority religions and vice versa. There is potential

for minority religions to contribute positively to the existing communities in Indonesia. For example, the cultural Hindu community in Bali Village has the potential to become a prominent tourist destination in North Sumatra in terms of social, religious, and cultural aspects.

Fladmark (1998) observed that even though tourists travel to ancient sacred places and religious sites such as temples, driven by religious motives, many of them may also be motivated by non-religious reasons such as a desire for adventure, discovery of new things, and cultural enrichment (Shuo et al., 2009). These motives are what also drive people to visit Bali Village, even if they are not followers of the Hindu religion. Their arrival is part of an effort to understand Hindu culture and religion, emphasizing the values of moderation.

The Bali Hindu community in Bali Village, North Sumatra, has long been building Pura, a typical place of worship for Bali Hinduism. Building Pura is carried out through active community participation and self-funded efforts. The construction is gradual, and the temple has undergone some changes over time. Pura has been added with three statues of deities, which are significant symbols for Hindu devotees.

The Bali Hindu community in Bali Village allows anyone to visit their place of worship as long as they adhere to the applicable rules. Tourists who come to Pura must wear a sarong tied with a yellow sash around their waist, whether Hindu or non-Hindu followers. This symbolizes that when entering Pura, one must focus on positive things and is certainly not allowed to think about negative aspects (Desky, 2022).

The potential for developing spiritual or religious tourism in Indonesia, especially in Bali Village, is significant because several destinations are highly suitable. Lately, the trend of spirituality has been increasing worldwide, with many people focusing more on the spiritual dimension than religious aspects. Therefore, spiritual tourism destinations do not require excessive facilities and infrastructure; as long as there is accessibility, it is considered adequate. However, it is important to note that although spiritual tourism can promote spiritual values, it is not always directly associated with marketing Hinduism or any specific religion.

### **3.2. Openness to Non-Hindu Pilgrims**

Hinduism employs various methods to connect with the divine, including yoga, meditation, worship, expanding knowledge, and more. One of the simplest and most accessible ways for everyone is by traveling to sacred places, commonly called Tirtha Yatra, Dharma Yatra, or Vita Sagara in Hinduism. Tirtha Yatra, or pilgrimage, is a religious activity to enhance spiritual life through visits to sacred places, followed by ceremonies, meditation, and japa (mantra repetition). Dharma Yatra is a

sacred journey by spiritual leaders to spread dharma teachings in sacred places. Meanwhile, Vita Sagara involves a sacred journey by crossing the ocean or Samudra (Tirtayatra n.d.).

Pilgrimage is a central feature of Hindu beliefs (Jacobsen, 2012). For Hindus, pilgrimage is a sacramental process that symbolizes the pilgrim's participation in the spiritual realm and actively forms a two-way relationship between the pilgrim and the divine (R. P. B. Singh & Haigh, 2015).

Many pilgrimage sites attract devotees with their reputation for providing various types of spiritual, social, and material blessings, usually reflected in the purifying and healing of the soul, mind, and body (Stoddard, 1997). However, in Hinduism, pilgrimage also serves as a social obligation, a rite of passage, and a way to seek divine favor. It also involves seeking spiritual experiences at specific locations while acknowledging that these material places exist outside the true spiritual and mystical reality (Sopher, 1987).

Motivations for pilgrimage are complex. Schmidt (2009) classified them into several types: devotional, healing, social obligation or demand, ritual cycles related to the calendar stages of human life, or "wandering," i.e., traveling without a definite purpose (Kim et al., 2016). Bhardwaj (1973) argued that pilgrimage to higher-level sacred places is more for spiritual gain, while pilgrimages to lower-level sacred places tend to seek more materialistic goals (Bhardwaj, 1973).

Singh R (2015) offers a typology with five classes of pilgrims. On one end are: (1) Tourists - those who come to enjoy the scenery, take photos, buy souvenirs, and taste local food but without deep emotional or spiritual involvement with the sacred message of the place. (2) Duty Pilgrims - people who travel to sacred places not out of belief but as a tribute to their social duty. It is something they must do and be seen by their community. Their pilgrimage is not primarily spiritual but is expected from them as a form of social obedience. (3) Need Pilgrims - Spiritual Seekers - people who undertake pilgrimage to achieve specific outcomes in the material world. They are believers, but challenges in material life haunt their minds. (4) Hope Pilgrims - Spiritual Tourists seek spiritual closeness to the Supreme, having spiritual goals that are mostly beyond the worldly realm, but they only do it occasionally. They access the spiritual realm mainly to add color to their otherworldly lives. (5) Unity Pilgrims - True Spiritual Seekers for whom every experience is a spiritual journey, following the path of dharma moksha, a way of seeking liberation from the material world and the cycle of reincarnation in Hindu beliefs (R. P. B. Singh & Haigh, 2015).

In a public space rich in socio-cultural diversity, community life rooted in communal harmony through local intellectual heritage acts as a balancer, ensuring that religious differences do not become obstacles. Social interaction runs smoothly, even across national borders. This becomes a highly interesting subject, especially considering the openness to pilgrims from non-Hindu backgrounds.

Visits from these pilgrims are also seemingly inseparable from the hope of gaining valuable learning and contributing to efforts to build peace among religious communities. Therefore, religion remains of significant importance in the public sphere, and globalization does not automatically result in isolation or neglect of the role of religion (Kasus et al., 2019).

Generally, in developed countries, pilgrimage emphasizes cultural motivations and gaining new experiences, which are considered more important than religious motives (Scaffidi Abbate & Di Nuovob, 2013). This trend is also increasingly spreading in developing countries (S. Singh, 2004). Therefore, pilgrimage should not be considered solely from a religious perspective. Globalization has turned pilgrimage into a global product with no exclusive connection to religion (Apollo et al., 2020).

In the village of Bali, Paya Tusam, Langkat Regency, residents of the Bali ethnic community have a unique approach to maintaining harmonious relations among people of different religions. This is reflected in the teachings of Bali Hinduism passed down from generation to generation, prioritizing the principle of brotherhood, including the concept of "menyama braya" (Ludji et al., 2020). Anyone who comes and visits Bali Village will be warmly welcomed.

The word "menyama" means having a relationship as siblings in the context of society, regardless of differences in ethnicity or religion (Desky, 2022). Respecting others is essential for the current generation to maintain an inclusive life amid diversity.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the values of tolerance toward followers of other religions who travel for tourism or visit Hindu places of worship are real examples of practicing menyama braya. The Bali Hindu community uses the term "nyama selam" to refer to the Muslim community and "nyama kristen" for the Christian community.

Researchers also found that openness to non-Hindu visitors is influenced by the social integration carried out by the Bali Hindu community. This is evident in the changes after the Bali community moved to Sumatra Island. One of these changes is in terms of lineage continuity. Marriage plays a crucial role in continuing life.

In Bali Village, there are cases of interfaith marriages. Some people who were originally Muslim embraced Hinduism, and vice versa, some who were initially Hindu later embraced Islam. This happened because the legal marriage process required them to follow the rules in Indonesia, namely that the marriage process is carried out according to the husband's or wife's religion. Thus, marriage has influenced changes in values, religious norms, and culture for the Bali Hindu community and the surrounding communities around Bali Village.

### ***3.3. Promotion of Religious Tourism in Bali Village for the General Public***

Tourism is an activity involving the travel of individuals or groups to relax, develop, and visit

specific locations. Tourists are individuals engaging in tourism activities. The tourism industry encompasses various activities and relies on facilities and services provided by various parties such as communities, entrepreneurs, governments, and local authorities.

Tourism involves all activities related to travel, is highly complex, involves various disciplines, and has emerged as a need for individuals and nations. It also entails interactions between tourists and the local community, among tourists, governments, the local community, and business entities (Nyoman et al., 2018).

Global tourism began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, witnessing the introduction of cars, buses, and airplanes. This marked the expansion and spread of the tourism industry and various forms of global travel consumerism, leading to the creation of governmental and intergovernmental institutions managing and promoting tourism (Aukland, 2016).

A recent trend in travel motives is the search for deeper meaning from these experiences. This type of travel is spiritual or religious tourism, considered the latest wave or trend in the global tourism industry (Nicolaidis, 2014). Christians travel to the Holy Land, Jews visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Muslims undertake pilgrimages to Mecca, and Hindus visit the Varanasi Ghats (Bennett-Cook, 2022). Religious tourism is where the tourist's motive is to witness or participate in religious ceremonies (I Ketut Suwena, 2017).

In some communities, religious tourism often becomes part of routines, whether performed monthly, yearly, and so on. Besides providing tranquility and joy as a form of refreshment, this activity also helps participants gain a deeper understanding of historically sacred places, enhancing awareness and appreciation for the greatness of God.

Religious tourism is considered a high-quality form of tourism because its practices highly respect and appreciate local culture, value nature and the surrounding environment, and the majority of its visitors have a high level of education.

The recent growth in the religious tourism sector has been recognized through increased conferences and specialized publications on the subject. Although religious tourism is considered a relatively new tourism product, the phenomenon is not new. There is no widely recognized or official definition of religious tourism by the industry. However, literature presents an acceptable definition of a spiritual/religious tourist as someone who visits a particular place outside their usual environment, to seek spiritual meaning and/or growth, without overt religious coercion, which can be religious or non-religious, sacred or experiential but always in a Divine context, regardless of the main reason for the journey (Levy & Hawkins, 2009).

The development of religious tourism emerges as an interesting alternative to revive the role of religion in modern society, while aiming to enhance economic well-being. Fort and Schipani suggest

that businesses can contribute to strengthening peaceful communities in four ways: advancing economic development, adopting external evaluation principles, fostering a sense of togetherness, and leveraging second-track diplomacy. This contribution is based on instrumental and moral arguments that peace can be a universal business goal (Fort, 2007).

Regarding the number of religious tourists, UNWTO estimates that around 330 million people travel to famous religious sites each year, and this form of tourism has now become a major contributor to the economies of various countries. This form of tourism contributes to the economy and creates a broad scope for cultural exchange among tourists from various backgrounds. This visit also strengthens faith and beliefs related to religion in people's minds. According to the former Secretary-General of UNWTO, with its unique historical, cultural, and natural features, pilgrimage represents a vital opportunity to strengthen tourism's ability to advance intercultural dialogue and contribute to protecting religious and spiritual sites (Hassan et al., 2022).

The materialistic approach to religious tourism highlights that this phenomenon brings significant positive impacts, especially economically, and contributes to global harmony. This is reflected in the satisfaction and comfort visitors feel, which also promotes tolerance and rejection of extremism. In particular, it is important to combat religious fanaticism that tends to be exclusive among diverse religious and ethnic groups, as observed in Bali Village, North Sumatra.

For the Hindu community in Bali Village, visitors or tourists who come to their village are considered an integral part of daily life. The arrival of tourists to their village shows the non-Hindu people's concern for Balinese culture and Hinduism. In return, the Bali Hindu community willingly welcomes visitors by providing services and creating a safe atmosphere.

The greater the differences that interact, even in limited spaces like places of worship, the higher the recognition and mutual respect. This process has driven the development of pluralism and reduced radicalization (Firdaus & Rahmat, 2019). Tourism has been recognized as important in creating peace by enhancing relationships and information exchange among various human communities (Din, 1988). Such social progress is a positive step in creating harmony in tourism that benefits all of humanity, especially in religious tourism to Hindu places of worship in North Sumatra.

The development of tourism in Bali Village that is currently growing, with its management system given to the community, is an idea in economic development that includes community values to form a new approach to community-oriented development, involving active participation from the community (Mistriani et al., 2023).

Developing Bali Village in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province, is not only as an attractive tourist destination but also as an economic opportunity for the surrounding residents. It also serves as a medium of solidarity among religious followers, especially between Hindus and non-Hindus. This



initiative is considered essential given Indonesia's diverse nation and requires various measures to maintain unity and unity in achieving optimal results in the development process.

It is expected that the tourism sector can be a means to foster an attitude of understanding and appreciation among followers of various religions. Through tourism activities, the spirit of understanding and appreciation of diversity is realized not only at the local level but also on a national and even international scale.

The management of religious tourism in Bali Village has proactively created promotional material tailored to each target market. This means that advertising strategies have been adjusted to the characteristics and interests of potential tourists. In this case, brochures will be presented with various introductions about Bali Village, as well as examples of brochures that highlight the interesting aspects of Bali Village.

Therefore, the goal of introducing the existence of the Bali community and Hindu teachings amid North Sumatran society and beyond can be realized. The management of religious tourism is directed towards creating promotional media suitable for the target market. Promotion content is presented with case approaches and examples of promotional media highlighting the village's uniqueness, temples resembling Bali, and various other cultural aspects. The aim is to make tourists interested and motivated to visit Bali Village directly. Combinations of religious names and symbols should be used for branding products designed for spiritual/religious tourism marketing (Haq & Medhekar, 2013).

However, the development and promotion of religious tourism in Bali Village must still follow the path of sustainable tourism development. This is because it is feared that it could become a disruptive force by damaging the natural environment, commodifying culture, reinforcing negative stereotypes between hosts and guests, and creating an economy too dependent on the service sector and sensitive to seasonal fluctuations, among other negative impacts (Burns, 1996).

### ***3.4 Branding for Bali Village Tourism***

Branding is creating a strategic identity to convey a message to the target audience (Elliot, 2010). The main goal of branding is to convey a message that emphasizes the needs and benefits fulfilled by the core and actual products (Dawar & Lei, 2009).

In general, a tourist village is an area that presents the authentic atmosphere of rural life. The socio-cultural, economic, customary, daily activities, building structures, and distinctive settlement layouts attract visitors (Andri Sulistyani, 2020).

The development of tourist villages should be based on empowering the community in tourism. This means that the local population must feel significant benefits from the development of tourist villages. Therefore, developing tourist villages should be implemented by actively involving the

community in all tourism activities (Saepudin et al., 2022). Therefore, developing tourism villages based on religious tourism needs serious attention. It must be acknowledged that religious tourism plays a fundamental role in the human soul and satisfies their needs (Paniandi & Paniandi, 2018).

Bali Village, also known as Cipta Dharma Village, carries a meaning that interprets it as an effort to create goodness and truth. In a philosophical context, this name reflects the goal of the Balinese Hindu community residing there: to contribute to creating goodness and truth for all living beings around their residence.

The origin of the arrival of the Hindu Balinese community to Sumatra Island dates back to the natural disaster in 1963. After the natural disaster, the majority Hindu Balinese ethnic community had to adapt to a new environment and place of residence due to massive transmigration. As a result, it is estimated that several changes would occur in the social life of the Bali ethnic community.

Based on research conducted, it turns out that not all residents of Bali Village originate from Bali Island. Currently, in Paya Tusam Village, there are about 76 households from the Bali Village community, 36 of whom adhere to Hinduism and the remaining 40 follow Islam and Christianity (Desky, 2022).

In addition to religious differences, the people in Bali Village come from various ethnicities, such as Bali, Java, Karo, and others. This indicates that the Balinese Hindu community has successfully integrated into a community capable of adapting to various ethnic and religious backgrounds through social interactions suitable for their residential environment. Moreover, the Balinese Hindu community is a religious minority in Langkat Regency.

In Bali Village, people adhere to various religions. Each religious group has its place of worship nearby and can practice its respective teachings. This way of life has existed for a long time and has even become a characteristic of the religious and cultural identity of the people of Bali Village. Therefore, it is reasonable for many initiatives and collaborations to grow from local intelligence, social interaction, and cultural social solidarity.

The presence of diverse cultural attractions will provide tourists with many different choices when selecting the tourist destination they want to visit. Tourism development can also play a positive role in preserving historical areas such as Bali Village. Tourism branding related to history and culture, religious spirit, and values of moderation becomes an attraction that can be offered to attract tourists to visit Bali Village, Langkat Regency, North Sumatra Province.

Through the development of image and aggressive marketing of branding for religious tourism in Bali Village, the government is not only trying to utilize religious tourism and promote specific development agendas but also sees it as a platform to revive a stagnant economy (Geary, 2008).

In religious tourism, familiarity with the brand, related to religious or spiritual destinations, can

play a crucial role. Consumers familiar with a particular brand or destination in the context of religious tourism may be better able to evaluate the presence of religious accommodations related to that destination. They are also more capable of organizing information and evaluating the presence of religious moderation, depending on the crisis's relevance to their beliefs and spiritual goals, as researchers gather information from several tourists visiting Bali Village.

On the contrary, consumers less familiar with moderate religious tourism may be more sensitive to crisis information. They may tend to be more influenced by the crisis, regardless of how it relates to their beliefs or spiritual goals. Therefore, religious tourism managers must understand the role of religious moderation branding in responding to crises and consider it in crisis management as well as in the efforts to brand religious or spiritual destinations in Bali Village.

Herzberg (1974) also emphasizes in his motivation theory that people driven by hygiene and motivating factors are likely to travel and visit religious destinations. Therefore, this will motivate tourism management to improve destinations and focus on marketing mix and branding to attract, satisfy, and enhance the destination's image (Paniandi & Paniandi, 2018).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The visit of non-Hindu tourists to Bali Village showcases the importance of religious tolerance and cultural diversity in society. Pilgrims from various religious and ethnic backgrounds have helped strengthen social solidarity in the village. The Balinese Hindu community actively allows and welcomes the arrival of tourists, demonstrating an open and inclusive attitude towards visitors from diverse backgrounds. This visit also provides opportunities for cross-cultural learning and contributes to efforts to build peace among religious communities. Religious tourism in Bali Village relies on religious motivations and encompasses non-religious motives such as cultural exploration and adventure. The Balinese community has successfully integrated into a diverse environment, demonstrating high adaptability and tolerance. The development and promotion of religious tourism in Bali Village should consider aspects of sustainable development, including the preservation of the environment and local culture. Effective marketing approaches can strengthen the image and identity of Bali Village as a unique tourist destination, offering valuable spiritual and cultural experiences to tourists. Thus, religious tourism can serve as a means to strengthen interfaith tolerance and advance intercultural dialogue, while providing economic benefits to the local community.

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