

Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems for Sustainable Hospitality and Tourism

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Abstract

‘Atithi Devo Bhava’ is a Sanskrit adage (अतिथिदेवो भव) and is a traditional Indian saying that means “Guest is God” and is the essence of true Indian Hospitality. This essentially considers guests as divine beings, making it a central tenet of Indian values when welcoming them. It is based on the traditional of revering guests with the same respect as God.

This study helps us to gain knowledge on the ancient Indian practice of Hospitality known as Guest-Worship, Atithi Devo Bhava. Indian Hospitality can be traced to the Vedic period and is still being practiced, though it has undergone change from its original concept through the ages. Contemporary Indian hotels offer personalized service to a guest, giving him the status of God, using the traditional Hindu-Buddhist greeting of “Namaste” and welcoming a guest with a traditional Aarti, Tikka and Garland.

The paper will study the evolution of Indian hospitality and the integration of Indian Knowledge systems, its relevance and sustainability in contemporary Hospitality and Tourism. The study is based on secondary data sourced through hospitality case studies, research articles, books and papers. The study conducts a detailed review of ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas, Puranas, Dharma sutras, and classical Sanskrit literature. These texts provide insights into the rituals and customs associated with guest-worship and the socio-cultural aspects of hospitality in ancient India vis-à-vis contemporary hospitality and tourism. The research identifies how traditional values can enhance modern hospitality and tourism experiences.

Keywords: Atithi Devo Bhava, Namaste, Hospitality, Tourism, Incredible India

“ATITHI DEVO BHAVA: THE ESSENCE OF INDIAN HOSPITALITY”

Introduction:

‘Atithi Devo Bhava’ is a Sanskrit adage(अतिथिदेवो भव) and is a traditional Indian saying that means “Guest is God” and is the essence of true Indian Hospitality, considering guests as divine beings, making it a unique aspect of Indian values while welcoming them to one’s home. It advocates an aspect of the guest-host relationship, which includes the traditional of revering guests with the same respect given to God.

The phrase “Atithi Devo Bhava” is taken from a mantra from the Taittiriya Upanishad, Shikshavalli I.11.2. which says: matrudevo bhava, mitradevo bhava, pitrudevo bhava, putradevo bhava, acharyadevo bhava, atithidevo bhava. It means “be one for whom the Mother is God, Friend is God, Father is God, Child is God, Teacher is God, and Guest is God” and each word is a samasta-pada.

Research Methodology

The study is based on secondary data available in different research articles, books and papers. The study conducts a review of ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas, Puranas, Dharma sutras, and classical Sanskrit literature, providing insights into the rituals and customs associated with guest-worship and the socio-cultural aspects of hospitality in ancient India. The research identifies and analyses key themes related to hospitality and tourism. The study compares ancient hospitality practices with contemporary hospitality and tourism models, to highlight how traditional values can enhance modern hospitality experiences. The research contextualizes the practice of guest-worship within the broader framework of Indian theological literature and societal norms, examining how these practices have evolved over time and their relevance in today’s hospitality and tourism industry.

Evolution of Hospitality in the Ancient era:

This study helps us to gain knowledge on the ancient Indian practice of Hospitality known as Guest-Worship, i.e. ‘Atithi Devo Bhava’. Indian Hospitality can be traced to the Vedic period and is now still being practiced and reflected in contemporary hospitality and tourism, though it has changed from its original concept. In Dharma sutras, the term “Guest” is defined as someone who arrives from far- off places, hungry and thirsty; during the ‘Bali-Vaishwa’ rite,

which involves offering cooked food to all Gods.

The study investigates rituals reflected in Indian theological literature and analyses socio-cultural aspects of prescribed guest-reception customs, found in ancient texts such as **Vedas, Puranas**, and other classic Sanskrit literature. The concept of hospitality in Indian theology offers valuable insights for modern Hospitality and Tourism in India. Promotion of inclusivity and equality in guest-worship practices ensure that all guests are treated with respect and provided with appropriate hospitality regardless of their ‘varna’ background. The contemporary version of guest welcome inscribed in Vedic literature as “Atithi devo bhava” has been adopted by India’s tourism department as its promotion tagline. There are various factors with regards to ancient Indian culture in the practice of welcoming guests in Hotels and Homestay tourism, wherein guests are provided with warmth, love and involvement in Indian customs, rituals and traditions, reflecting a deep connection to Indian culture and heritage.

The definition of a “Guest” according to ancient literatures, like, Amarakosha and Sabdakalpadruma, is one who may arrive without prior information, or one who visits on specific occasions like festivals and may be extended hospitality including food, accommodation and shelter. The Vedas (Atharvaveda), the Vishnu Puranas (Bhavishyapurana, Srimad Bhagwat purana, Matsyapurana) and texts like, **Aitareya Brahmana and Taittiriya Brahmana**, discuss rituals such as, **Atithi-Satkar** having references of guest-worship, extending a warm welcome, offering a seat, and providing wholesome meals. The tradition of Guest-worship is discussed in epics, like, the **Mahabharata** and **Valmiki Ramayana**; categorized as **nityakarma**, an essential duty as well as in Indian theological texts, such as the **Gautama Literature, Apastamba Literature, Manusmriti, and Yajnavalkyasmrti**. These highlight the importance of treating guests with respect and fulfilling their needs, welcoming the guest, offering a seat, washing of feet, engaging in pleasant conversation, serving food, and seeing them off politely. Food plays a significant role, as outlined in the Dharma sutras.

The traditional Hindu-Buddhist greeting of “**Namaste**”(I bow to the divinity in you) used to welcome a guest with humility, politeness and respect, is used by the Hospitality and tourism industry to greet guests as God. The Atithi Devo Bhava philosophy aligns with the UNWTO World Tourism Day 2024 theme “Tourism and Peace.” and aims to educate people about how to treat foreign tourists in India. This helps to establish and improve relations between the host and foreign visitors and was initiated by the Ministry of Tourism in 2002 to increase awareness amongst people towards the preservation of our rich culture and heritage; the motto being: ‘Our Guest is blessed, our tourist is God.’ To enhance the number of inbound tourists, the (DoT) Department of Tourism in India initiated the *Atithi Devo Bhava* campaign with the theme ‘ to portray India as an attractive by showcasing different aspects of Indian culture and heritage, like and . It provides training to service providers, like, Cab drivers, tour guides, immigration officers, police, Hospitality and other tourism personnel who interact directly with the tourist.

Homestay tourism, involves hosting tourists in private homes with local families to experience authentic Indian hospitality, learning traditional cuisines, cooking methods, local culture and customs and aligns well with the tradition of “Atithi Devo Bhava”, treating guests as manifestations of the divine – with the traditional “Shodashopchar Poojan” for welcoming a guest, using fragrance, lighting a lamp, and offering various items.

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems in contemporary Hospitality and Tourism needs to be responsible, accountable and sustainable, as given below:

Ayurvedic Spa practices: Hotels have in-house Spas, offering traditional Ayurvedic treatments like aromatic oil and herbal massages, dietary menus and cater to guests seeking holistic wellness experiences, hotels, like, Ananda Spa in Rishikesh; the Wellness Circle of the Taj Hotel Spa, etc. offering a journey of rejuvenation and unparalleled luxury.

Indian Culinary diversity: Hotels and restaurants serve local, authentic dishes prepared with traditional recipes and ingredients specific to a region, showcasing the diverse culinary heritage of India, inherited from the previous generations, based on our knowledge system ethic “Anna he purna brahma”.

Art and craft displays: Hotels are decorated with local art, handicrafts, paintings, and textiles like Madhubani, Warli art, reflecting the rich artistic culture of India.

Personalized service: Using “Namaste” (a welcome greeting gesture) and tailor service to suit individual guest needs based on their cultural background.

Knowledge of herbs and spices: Speciality restaurants use locally sourced herbs and spices in cooking, demonstrating

deep knowledge of their medicinal properties and flavor profiles. Aragama in Pune uses locally sourced, organic ingredients in its curated menus. Tea ceremonies: Offering traditional tea brewing techniques, using local herbs and spices, identifying the cultural significance of drinking brewed tea. Yoga and meditation retreats: Hotel Spas incorporate yoga classes, traditional Indian yogic asanas, pranayama and meditation practices into wellness packages. Nature walks with local guides: Agro tourism centers in Maharashtra, such as ATDC, Baramati and Saguna Baug Nisarg Niketan, Neral, provide visitors with learning opportunities about the medicinal properties of indigenous varieties of plants and the intricate relationship between local communities and the natural environment. “Atithi Devo Bhava” in the iconic Taj and Oberoi Hotels in India translates to treating guests with utmost respect and providing exceptional service, make them feel valued and welcome, fostering a positive and memorable experience by providing a warm welcome and personalized service, prioritizing guest comfort and well-being, being empathetic and ensuring customer delight by meeting guest expectations.

Suggestions for Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems for Sustainable Hospitality and Tourism: Contemporary tourism can draw inspiration from ancient hospitality traditions while aligning with inclusivity and sustainability. Suggestions for homestay tourism, derived from the study of ancient Indian hospitality practices, like, guest-worship include:

1. Inclusivity and Equality of guests.
2. Promote Cultural Immersion and ethos by offering local cultural experiences that highlight the rich cultural heritage of India.
3. Use traditional rituals and protocols for receiving guests, such as, Aarti, tikka, garland to welcome guests.
4. Prioritize and anticipate Guest needs, ensuring guest satisfaction and delight.

Conclusion:

The ancient Indian ethos of “Atithi Devo Bhava” is timeless. It highlights hospitality as both a spiritual and social responsibility that persists even today. Guest-worship principles enrich contemporary hospitality and tourism through homestays and cultural tourism, fostering meaningful cross-cultural exchanges. Emphasizing respect, inclusivity, and equality amongst guests; values that offer a framework for sustainable and culturally sensitive hospitality and tourism development. Integrating traditional hospitality into contemporary tourism promotes India’s rich cultural heritage while encouraging global understanding and respect.

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