



Research Article

Development of Holistic Religious Tourism through Ancient Indian Technique of Yagya: Exploration With Ashwamedha Yagya

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ABSTRACT. Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism and a rapidly expanding economy. Religious tourism to pilgrimage sites has existed since the dawn of time in every part of the world. People frequently went on pilgrimages despite journey inconveniences. Hence, it begs the question of the purpose of their visit and what makes their visit most efficient? The present study examined the purposes of religious tourism in the present times vs. Vedic times and proposed considerations for holistic religious tourism. For different purposes, tourists visit religious sites to obtain benefits i.e. 1) religious, 2) spiritual, 3) academic, and 4) pleasure purposes. However, this model of religious tourism is not holistic. In the Vedic model, pilgrimage sites should have religious-pious personalities and a spiritual environment for effectively guiding tourists for new resolutions in life holistic model. In addition, the pilgrimage should result in nation-building and social-cultural benefits besides building the economy. For the same purpose, spiritual practices like Yagyas and Ashwamedha were performed in Vedic times at pilgrimage sites resulting in a holistic model of religious tourism i.e. 1) pilgrimage site has Rishi like personalities, 2) tourists, locals aid in preserving natural resources, 3) culture and social upliftment resulted in nation-building. The core of keeping a holistic pilgrimage site was Yagya. Yagya is a core practice keeping Teerth alive. The Cultural campaign of Ashwamedha and live Teerth is capable of reversing the maladies that have entered public minds. The current study presents that the Ashwamedha Yagya can act as an important component of religious tourism and gives a newer dimension to religious tourism by providing holistic development of the participants at religious sites through Ashwamedha for national unity, peace, and harmony.

KEYWORDS. Religious Tourism, Holistic Model, Vedic Model, Pilgrimage Sites, Ashwamedha Yagya, Teerth



INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism and a rapidly expanding economy. The etymology dates back to antiquity. Religious tourism to pilgrimage sites has existed since the dawn of time in every part of the world. Pilgrims traveled all over the world to pay homage to sacred sites and their guardians. In the last 2,000 years, tourism to sacred sites has merged with pilgrimage (1). Since ancient times, people have visited holy places at various stages of their lives with specific purposes (2).

Around the world, pilgrimage has a history back to ancient times. Ancient times were not only crucial in the development of the pilgrimage but has specific purposes. The sources for retracing ancient pilgrimage routes have been preserved to this day, including pilgrimages to Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Arabia, Persia, India, China, the Maya country, Greece, and Rome. Archaeological studies confirm the existence of places of worship, which must have involved pilgrimages among pre-Christian northern European peoples such as Celts, Germans, and Slavs" (3). "In ancient Egypt (3000 BC), pilgrimages were made to places of worship such as pyramids, temples, and the graves of loved ones or Gods." "The most people gathered during the periodic games at Olympia and Nemea." Typical religious journeys grew in popularity until the late Roman period when they were primarily associated with pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Pilgrims had the most distinct goal of travel in the Middle Ages (3).

Wharton (2008, p. 105) writes, "the word pilgrimage has religious undertones, implying a journey undertaken for spiritual reasons". He also observed that besides these reasons, the focus has more moved to visitors seeking joy and pleasure

(4). However, in India since ancient times, the major mass of travelers seek religious or spiritual motivation for solving their life issues along with relaxation from their routine life stress (5).

India is full of pilgrimage destinations. Historians had shown that Indians travel from one part of the country to another end for pilgrimage even before 5000 years ago in the form of 'Teerth Yatra' (pilgrimage journey). The concept existed since the Vedic time. Even historical records show that travelers from Europe, China, etc. started visiting India around 2000 years ago (1).

Almost all sects and religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism have major and minor pilgrimage centers in various parts of India. Even today they travel to various religious sites. Such huge practice of culture still exists and is the core of religious tourism. People frequently went on pilgrimages, oblivious to unfavorable weather, poor health, or other inconveniences. Hence, it begs the question of the purpose of their visit and what makes their visit most efficient?

The present study examined the purposes of religious tourism in the present times vs. Vedic times. The study also examined if the current pilgrimage sites fulfilled the purpose they were made; the present study also proposed what are the considerations if they need to be holistically developed for religious tourism in the present time.

THE PRESENT MODEL OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM, ITS PURPOSES, AND LIMITATIONS

Religious tourism is an important part of the tourism industry which can also be called special interest tourism, which is usually related to the



followers of particular faiths who visit locations that are considered holy sites.

Religious tourism purposes in present time

Religious tourism, in its broadest sense, refers to travel with the primary goal of participating in religious activities and activities related to art, culture, customs, and architecture (1, 2). Religious (pilgrimage) sites are visited by religious, spiritual, and non-religious tourists. They can be categorized into four groups based on their intent to visit the pilgrimage site.

1. Religious purposes

It is widely acknowledged that the majority of religious travel is an act of worship (1). There are two major aims of pilgrims to worship at religious sites. The first is to express gratitude or fulfill a vow second is to confess sin or repent for past-wrong deeds. In both ways, the pilgrim is supposed to make new resolutions for an ideal life in the future (6).

To obtain the new resolution or guidance in life, many times pilgrims or tourists communicate with co-religionists or commemorate and celebrate specific religious events (7).

2. Spiritual purposes

The ultimate benefit to achieve in either religious or spiritual visits is to solve life issues or get motivation for life. The spiritual purposes are such as to obtain a life learning process and to experience a transformational journey, to challenge oneself and obtain self-discovery, and to achieve social and spiritual salvation (7).

3. Historical and Academic purposes

One group of tourists visiting the religious sites is one interested in site seeing of monuments and

artifacts. Religious sightseeing can be motivated by any of several kinds of interest, such as religion, art, architecture, history, and personal ancestry. People can find holy places interesting and moving, whether they are religious or not (8).

Another group of tourists is from the academic field. Such kind of tourism is a journey in which new insights are given, a deeper understanding is attained, new and old places are visited to find existing knowledge (8).

4. Joy and pleasure

Another group of tourists visiting the religious sites is one searching joy and pleasure to get relaxation from daily life stress. Such tourists also are knowingly-unknowingly are in search of solutions to the problem they are facing in life.

It is interesting to note that the religious and spiritual visit to ancient religious sites is still prevailing even today with the same purpose for centuries. With the growing market or serving facilities for tourists in religious tourism, the question arises if the tourism industry is fulfilling the purpose of the visit, especially for religious and spiritual purposes.

Religious tourism limitation and need

For different purposes, tourists visit religious sites to obtain benefits. However, this process is single-sided communication and does not give anything in return to the pilgrimage site and surroundings. It is not providing any social and cultural benefits to the local community rather just contributes to the economy. Besides, in the present model of religious tourism, no mechanism stimulates pilgrims for preserving natural resources. Thus, the present model lacked holistic development of such sites

which involves tourists, local community as well as natural resources (Figure 1, top).

Institutions deviating from the purpose or objective of establishment go on suffering. Whether it is an organization, family, temple, or, pilgrimage. Earlier days, pilgrimage sites – Devalayas (temples) were the center of public awakening. Now due to the loss of their life-consciousness, only idol worship is left. As a result, tourists buy humor and locals take advantage of traffic to business; if only this is the only undertaking of pilgrimage, then it sends the message that an artistic statue of the temple is being used just like a museum (9)

To achieve the purpose of religious tourism for all four categories of religious tourists as described, the holistic religious site should be developed having the following qualities: 1) the ideal religious site especially for religious tourists should have religious-pious personalities and a holy environment for effectively guiding tourists for new resolutions in life, 2) the ideal religious site for spiritual tourists should have spiritually elevated-pious personalities and an environment for experiencing a life-transforming journey, 3) the ideal religious site for tourists for historical or academic purposes, there should be proper preservation of history, culture, knowledge, and tradition, 4) the ideal religious site for tourists for tourist seeking joy and pleasure should have a mechanism for preservation of natural resources (9). Such holistic religious site as described in Vedic traditions are very rare nowadays and needs

to be developed and might be the right need the for religious tourism industry especially considering Indian pilgrimage sites.

VEDIC MODEL OF HOLISTIC RELIGIOUS TOURISM THROUGH ASHWAMEDHA YAGYA AND TEERTH

Sharma and Sharma (2015) mentioned religious tourists are an integral part of the tourism sector and are important to understand the values in this sector. (10). Indian pilgrims travel to holy temples or sacred pilgrimage sites, which are referred to as 'Teertha', in Vedic tradition. In Vedic tradition, Teerth's are the places where human beings come face to face with the divinity in contemplation within the sacred space and they have the opportunity to transcend themselves.

In Vedic tradition, the process of pilgrimage was designed for multifaceted benefits. The main principle behind all the processes was to inspire to live an ideal life making divine personalities. The pinnacle of such divine personalities were Rishis and who have given maximum weightage to pilgrimage in achieving it. (11). Through pilgrimage, they were able to guide to remove daily life stress and give relaxation, rather at the pilgrimage sites there were provisions for religious-spiritual guidance through such personalities in a carefully made spiritual environment. This way pilgrims used to find direction for the ideal life and solve life issues. Such a capable sacred site was termed as alive.

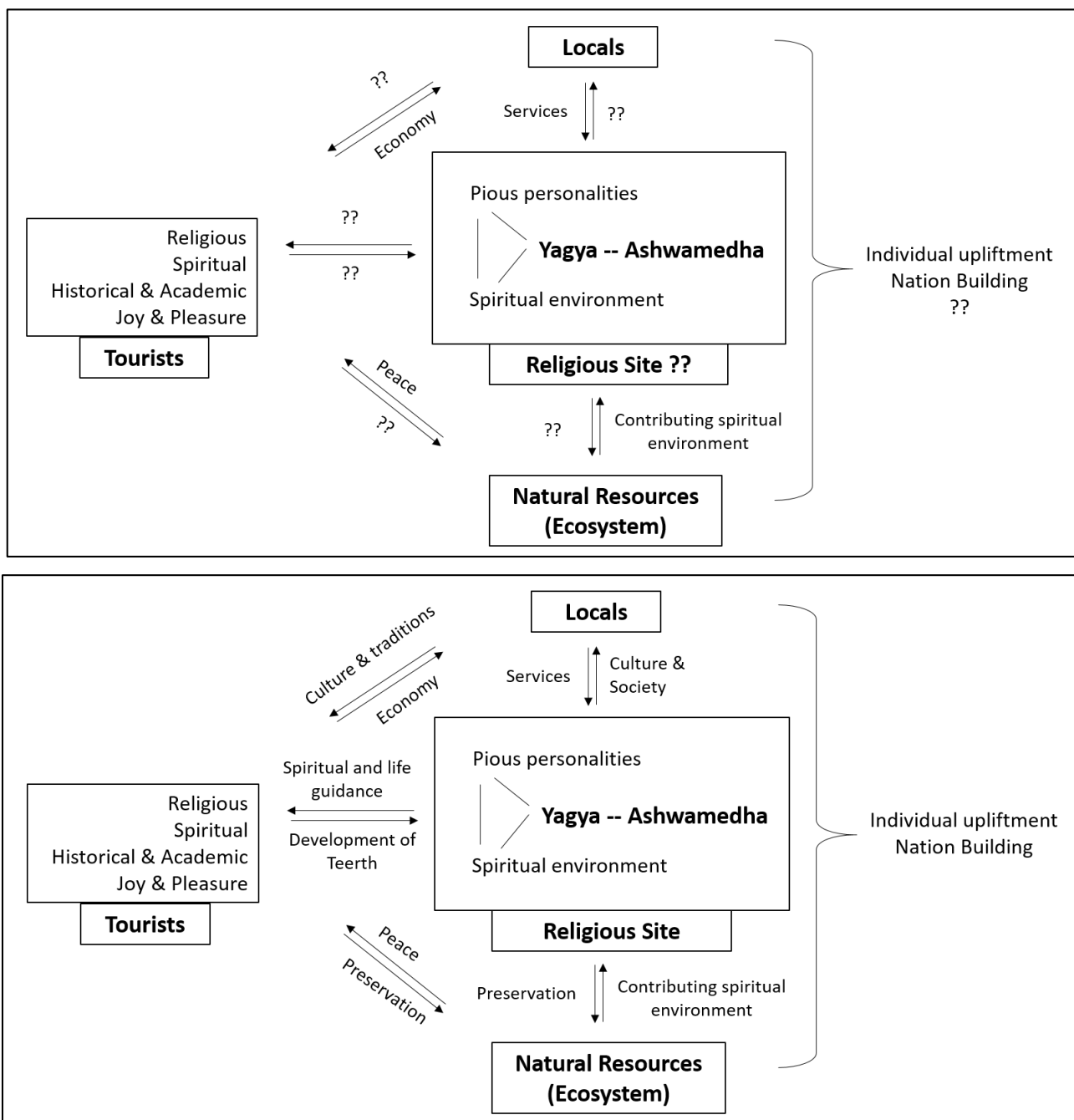


Figure 1. Holistic Model of Religious Tourism as per Vedic traditions. The top image is showing the limitations of the religious tourism model of the present time; the bottom image is showing a model for the holistic development of pilgrimage sites through religious-spiritual practices like Ashwamedha resulting in holistic interaction among religious sites, locals, and natural resources.

In Vedic tradition, shrine or pilgrimage site is kept alive so that it can provide multifaceted benefits such as 1) resentment of sins, 2) obtaining Punya's through good deeds at Teerth, 3) TeerthYatra: physical benefits obtained through the long walk to Teeth, 4) participation in devotional music and Mantra chanting to relieve stress, 5) future guidance

to youth, married, retired through Gurukul and Aranyak system in Teerth, 6) guidance to solve life issues for married life as well as for parenting, 6) spiritual guidance and utilization of time for social welfare to retired ones, etc. Thus, Teerth used to be a model where spiritual guidance and solutions were provided to all age pilgrims i.e. youth,

married, parents, retired, etc. Not only that, pilgrims used to contribute to the development of the Teerth providing volunteering time, donations, cleaning rivers and preserving plants and forests, and practicing spiritual practices to create a sacred environment (9). This way Teerth used to be a holistic model of religious tourism in which the give and take principle will be applied.

Yagya is core practice keeping Teerth alive

For keeping Teertha, a sacred pilgrimage site alive, which can provide vital guidance to all pilgrims and provide the spiritual environment, different spiritual activities like Yagya, Penance, Mantra-chanting, Bhajans, religious-spiritual practices were performed by enlightening personalities, Rishis. Thus, Teertha used to be a symbol of faith and a living model of guidance and life energy (9, 11).

Yagya is a philosophy as well as a ritual representing the basis of Indian culture. Scriptures described Yagya as the core nucleus of the universe (9, 11). Yagya's philosophy in life is represented by best altruistic deeds or selfless actions. Yagya rituals along with implications in life a spiritual practice generates enlightened and pious personalities. Besides Yagya connects all the spiritual energies of the universe along with maintaining a spiritual ecosystem among humans, animals, plants, the environment, and others. Hence, in Vedic traditions, Rishis has considered Yagya as an important component of Teerth. Many ancient Teerth in ancient India was established through the performance of the king of Yagya i.e. Ashwamedha Yagya (Shatpath Brahman chapter 13) (9,11).

Ashwamedha was performed for making a spiritual environment, upliftment of individuals by making divine personalities, and uniting a nation through such big religious activity (Shatpath Brahamana - 13.2.6. : *Rashtram va ashwamedha*) (14). Thus, this process leads to the development of the ideal society and nation (9,11).

Examples of Teerth resulted through Yagya and Ashwamedha Yagya

Most ancient Teerth had a history of large and continuous performance of Yagya's in their establishment as Teerth (11). There are a few examples where Ashwamedha Yagyas were performed in ancient times and are now popular religious places for tourists.

Prayag (Pra+Yag) is the most famous site since ancient times. Its name itself means sufficiency of (Pra) Yagya (Yag) (11).

Kashi, Varanasi is very famous as a Teerth. It is also known as Dashashwamedha Teertha. According to *Skand Purana*, Kashi king Divodas organized ten Ashwamedha Yagya (11).

Naimisharanya is an ancient Teerth that is still a very popular pilgrimage site. It is a place where 88,000 rishis performed Ashwamedha Yagya for thousands of years (11).

Ayodhya is known as the birthplace of Lord Rama but is an ancient Teerth. King Vaivswat Manu Chakravarty has performed Maha-Yagya continuously at the same place, which made the place so powerful that the scriptures described that during his ruling time, there were no suffering and death at this place (11).



These examples indicated the power of Yagya especially Ashwamedha a Yagya in the establishment of Teerth which is still our topmost pilgrim site in India. Tourists still visit these sites worshipping with faith and devotion to get blessings (Punyas) and to remove sins. However, these places had a mechanism for spiritually and holistically keeping alive these Teerth through continuous Yagyas and Ashwamedha (11). Yagyas. Such kind of process is lacking nowadays and is revived by All World Gayatri Pariwar for making a holistic environment (12).

The last historically noted Ashwamedha performed around 1500 years ago which is now systematically conducted by All World Gayatri Pariwar since 1993 (Table 1) providing benefits to society, environment, and people (13). All World Gayatri Pariwar has performed Ashwamedha Yagya in many different places. Among the many places that have developed into living Teerth in form of Gayatri Shaktipeeths where Vedic spiritual tourism-like activities are happening (Table 1) (12).

The Cultural campaign of Ashwamedha and live Teerth is capable of reversing the maladies that have entered public minds and revoking untouchability, immorality, and foolish beliefs (11). Thus, whenever there is a need for the complete renovation of the nation and its environment, Vedic tradition performed Ashwamedha Yagya resulting in Teerth (9, 11).

HOW ASHWAMEDHA CONTRIBUTES TO DEVELOPING ENVIRONMENT FOR HOLISTIC RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Scriptures described many sutras which explain the holistic impact on nature, individual beings, society as well as the development of the holistic pilgrimage site.

For natural resources, Ashwamedha Yagya is a spiritual experiment and provides an ecological balance (11). “*Nikame – Nikame nah parjanya varshatu*”, explains that by Ashwamedha, universal Prana is balanced which helps in nurturing and development of natural resources. ‘*Falvatyo nah aushadhayah pachyantam*’ (Shatpath Brahmana 13.1.6), explained that the effect of Yagya helps in the growth and development of our medicinal plants and trees.

According to *Matsya Purana*, participating in Ashwamedha Yagya is a very pious act which results in saintly fruit equivalent to visiting sacred pilgrimage site Gaya, or sacred pilgrimage act i.e. taking a holy dip in river Ganga and Yamuna. In *Atri Smriti*, it is mentioned as ‘*Sarva kamdhuk*’, which explains that it fulfills all the aspirations of a person, especially for inner development. *Nardiye Purana* explains that all those divine herbal medicines and divine mantras which are used in the process of the Yagya affect the participants in increasing their meritorious talent and destroying the diseases (11).

Besides preserving nature and uplifting individual consciousness, Ashwamedha Yagya takes care of collective consciousness. In the Shatpath Brahmana (13.1.6) it is stated that “*Rashtram va ashwamedha*” explains the real meaning of Ashwamedha i.e. to administer and manage the country efficiently. This sacrifice was performed which symbolizes good governance (14). The Yagya’s main objective is to rekindle true Vedic traditions in addition to cleansing the environment of physical and psychic pollution. Also, the mega event was marked by progressive ideas and ideals. One concrete achievement of benefiting mass consciousness was the involvement of all sections of society in one place helping nation building (14).



The holistic model of religious tourism based on Vedic Tradition

Ashwamedha Yagya can act as an important component of religious tourism and gives a newer dimension to religious tourism by providing holistic development of the participants at religious sites. When tourists visit not for just mere personal benefits but also to prepare themselves for contributing towards a bigger purpose. This is represented as a holistic model of religious tourism as described in Figure 1 (bottom).

Tourists visit pilgrimage sites with great devotion for health, peace, happiness, and harmony (4). At a holistic site, they would obtain these benefits through participation in various religious-spiritual practices. They perform different sanskars of Vedic tradition such as marriage ceremony, Guru-Diksha, birth-ritual, etc. to purify subtle and physical environment benefits to the society and different components of the human life i.e. physical, emotional, social, and spiritual components. In return, they would benefit from spiritual and life guidance for their development.

If such spiritual activities will be performed by the tourists at the pilgrimage site then it will re-energize the divine powers of the sacred site. While in return they would get guidance from pious personalities at the pilgrimage sites to solve their life issues. Thus, it will aid in the development of live Teertha.

In addition, tourists at such sites would benefit economically the local community and in return, they would learn the culture and traditions from them. Also, tourists would be involved in activities at the sacred sites for preserving natural resources to maintain ecologically and in return would get

peace from such natural and spiritual environment (15). Through spiritual and religious activities such as Sadhana, Ashwamedha Yagya, Penance, rituals Tourists would participate in the overall goal of nation-building and individual development with a goal of the development of holistic society. All of these processes and benefits of the Ashwamedha Yagya happen through holistic pilgrimage sites and tourists participation.

CONCLUSION

In Bhumi-Sukta of Atharva Veda, it is described as a divine opportunity for humanity to bring a bright era by organizing and participating in Yagya (9). There is a need for collective effort to organize and participate in the Yagya for a noble cause in which the religious tourism industry plays an important role.

The Ashwamedha Yagya adds a new dimension to religious tourism where the concept of a live pilgrimage site is given. Also tourists not just visit for personal guidance but also to contribute to a larger cause to generate a spiritual atmosphere for future tourists, preserve natural resources, and regenerate the local culture and surroundings. Religious Tourism through Ashwamedha Yagya as per the Vedic tradition is thus for transforming the society to an elegant and well-developed structure of culture and civilization. If the consciousness of the Vedic tradition had remained in the pilgrimages, the living Teerth – holistic pilgrimage sites used to continue to exist. However, the concepts still provide the sutra for holistic development of Religious tourism and also seek the attention to revive the practices like Ashwamedha for world peace and harmony.



S. No.	Place	State/Country	Starting Date	Ending Date
1	Jaipur	Rajasthan	07-11-1992	10-11-1992
2	Bhilai	Chhattisgarh	18-02-1993	21-02-1993
3	Guna	Madhya Pradesh	03-04-1993	06-04-1993
4	Bhuvneshwar	Orissa	03-05-1993	06-05-1993
5	Leicester	UK, England	08-07-1993	11-07-1993
6	Toronto	Canada	23-07-1993	25-07-1993
7	Los Angeles	USA	19-08-1993	22-08-1993
8	Lucknow	Uttar Pradesh	27-10-1993	30-10-1993
9	Baroda	Gujarat	26-11-1993	29-11-1993
10	Bhopal	Madhya Pradesh	11-12-1993	14-12-1993
11	Nagpur	Maharashtra	06-01-1994	09-01-1994
12	Berhampur	Orissa	26-01-1994	29-01-1994
13	Korba	Chhattisgarh	06-02-1994	10-02-1994
14	Patna	Bihar	23-02-1994	26-02-1994
15	Kurukshetra	Haryana	31-03-1994	03-04-1994
16	Chitrakoot	Madhya Pradesh	16-04-1994	20-04-1994
17	Bhind	Madhya Pradesh	02-05-1994	05-05-1994
18	Shimla	Himachal Pradesh	22-06-1994	25-06-1994
19	Bulandshahar	Uttar Pradesh	17-11-1994	20-11-1994
20	Haldighati	Rajasthan	29-11-1994	02-12-1994
21	Rajkot	Gujrat	13-12-1994	17-12-1994
22	Jabalpur	Madhya Pradesh	28-01-1995	31-01-1995
23	Kota	Rajasthan	12-02-1995	15-02-1995
24	Indore	Madhya Pradesh	05-04-1995	09-04-1995
25	Chicago	USA	28-07-1995	30-07-1995
26	Anwalkheda, Agra	Uttar Pradesh	03-11-1995	07-11-1995
27	Montreal	Canada	26-07-1996	28-07-1996
28	Gorakhpur	Uttar Pradesh	25-02-1998	28-02-1998
29	New Jersey	USA	24-07-1998	26-07-1998
30	Haridwar	Uttarakhand	06-11-2000	11-11-2000
31	Tirupati	Andhra Pradesh	23-12-2001	27-12-2001
32	Sydney	Australia	01-10-2005	03-10-2005
33	Madurai	Tamil Nadu	29-12-2005	01-01-2006
34	Johannesburg	South Africa	03-05-2006	05-05-2006
35	Ludhiana	Punjab	05-10-2010	08-10-2010
36	Kashipur	Uttarakhand	13-11-2008	16-11-2008
37	Auckland	North Island, NZ	27-02-2009	01-03-2009
38	Haridwar	Uttarakhand	7-11-2011	10-11-2011
39	Bangalore	Karnataka	17-01-2014	20-01-2014
40	Brisbane, QLD	Australia	18-04-2014	20-04-2014
41	Kanyakumari	Tamil Nadu	28-01-2016	31-01-2016
42	Mangalgiri, Guntur	Andhra Pradesh	05-01-2018	08-01-2018
43	Telangana	Hyderabad	02-06-2020	05-06-2020
44	Sambalpur	Odisha	28-12-2008	30-12-2008
45	Narendrapur, Kolkata	West Bengal	06-01-2006	09-01-2006

Table 1. List of Ashwamedha Yagya performed by All World Gayatri Pariwar contributing making of Holistic environment since 1992 (13).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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