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Mega Event of Arba'een, A Manifestation of Religious Tourism

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Abstract

Religious tourism can be regarded as a type of tourism that lies between pilgrimage, on the one hand, and tourism, on the other. With regard to Arba'een ceremony, one could say that such a collective action can be considered as a pilgrimage besides being a type of religious tourism; because it is the incentives and behaviors of the travelers that determine if their journey is pilgrimage or religious tourism. There are some individuals among the participants of Arba'een event whose motives and behaviors are like those of a pilgrim or a religious tourist. In this research, through studying the Arba'een event, it was made clear that the life threatening dangers and lack of infrastructure and facilities, have not weakened the pacifist Arba'een walk. Despite being an Islamic action, this event has been developed to other religions too.

Keywords

Event, Mega event, Arba'een, Religious Tourism.

Introduction

In the present age, culture and cultural issues are an important part of contemporary tourism. From this perspective, one can claim that that tourism as a phenomenon is of a complicated and intersubjective nature. It is needless to say that long before the emergence of new types of tourism in the contemporary era, this activity has always existed as a cultural action and has been the source of numerous effects in development of civilizations. It can be said that the multiplicity

and diversity of material and spiritual products of various cultures is a basic attraction and motive for tourism. Without culture, which creates differences, human life regardless of geographic location would seem similar. Therefore, different lands without having different cultural heritages will have nothing to offer to attract travelers for tourism (Homayoun, 2012: 33).

If culture is considered to be "a set of symbols expressing meaning" (Hamilton, 2011: 337), then religion represents those symbols that deal



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with “sacred meanings”. It also undertakes the responsibility of transmission, creation and reproduction of meanings which have taken form around the sacred symbols. According to this definition, religion can be regarded as a part of cultural system of the society that includes four dimensions: religious belief; religious ritual; religious ethics; religious faith (Nazari, 2014:45). Accordingly, religion can be considered as “an institutionalized set of beliefs regarding the sacred, transcendent, immaterial & superhuman existence, values, rituals, morals & beliefs which have taken form based on this belief” (Serajzadeh, 2011: 23). In Shia’s religious tradition like other religions and denominations, there is a set of rituals that has its origin in religious rules and decrees as well as certain religious events (e.g. martyrdoms and births, festivals and other existing events in the calendar). Meanwhile, some religious symbols and rituals enjoy higher importance among the followers compared to other rituals. The reason of prominence of some religious symbols and rituals among the followers of every religion can be sought for in the context in which the religious memory of that community has taken form as well as various readings that have been done of different religious symbols in various historical eras. Imam Hossein’s movement and various narrations that have been extracted from the event in the course of history have given a live and dynamic impression to Imam Hossein and Ashura and this dynamicity can be seen in the specific mourning rituals of Ashura and Arba’een; as if Imam Hossein in the social life of Shia Muslims moves along with time. In various narratives which are perused of the same event in the contemporary history compatible with the needs and demands of the political regimes, intellectuals, and laity, we can see the explicit instrumentalization of this event. Thus, this event is sometimes used as a means for

“criticism” and some other time as a means for “mobilization of the masses” and even sometimes as a means for “suppression” and sometimes as a motive for “resistance”. This diversity of narratives demonstrates the potentialities of this event for re-interpretation, aimed at retention or creation of social-political interests of the majority and minority. This story has become part of the religious memory of the Shia in various historical eras. One needs to take it into account that the formation of the political and social life of Shia has been based on a movement that opposes the dominant political hegemony and has continued to resist the dominant course in the course of history. Meanwhile, the third Imam of Shia Muslims as a warrior and leader of a movement enjoys a special place among Shia and has been always a source of inspiration for their protesting movements.

To analyze Arba’een ceremony, the context of social and political life of Shia and its protesting nature should be taken into account. A look at the background of the Arba’een ceremony in the history of Iraq reveals the continuous conflict between the political regime and religious minority. This conflict has been continuously acted as a barrier for holding this ceremony. And one of the reasons of the extensive participation of Shia Muslims in this ceremony in recent years can be sought for in the transition of political power in Iraq and the resolution of the aforementioned conflict.

Besides the social and political development of contemporary Iraq and the dynamic narratives of Imam Hossein’s Movement and the lively presence of this movement in the formation of the religious identity and practices of Shia Muslims, one can refer to another factor that plays a significant role in the tendency of the Shia Muslims towards Ashura event and its related rituals. It has a strong intra-discourse characteristic and is originated in the very texture of Shia Islam. It is the same as numerous

traditions and narratives that can be found in many of Shia texts quoted from Imams and other religious characters in which the engagement in rituals and specific pilgrimages to the third Imam has been highlighted¹ Given what was said, it is clear that a religious event has emerged in recent years in an unprecedented fashion relying on certain political, social and ideological potentialities.

Research Question

Religious tourism has been defined and delineated by researchers in an extensive way. Meanwhile, the sacred triple called food, drink and residence has played an effective role in the formation of tourism. Arba'een as a mega event is performed with different features which is in conflict and challenge with the existing definitions and requirements. The current essay seeks to determine the specific nature of Arba'een Mega event as a form of religious tourism.

Theoretical Foundations

• Mega event

Event industry is one of the greatest mechanisms in the world and is associated with numerous positive effects. The first step for understanding and presentation of every analysis regarding the Arba'een event is that we first offer a definition of the event. Various definitions have been provided of events so far. Nevertheless, there is no consensus as to the classification and determination of key works of these definitions. An event could gather people together for a certain goal, then some people define events according to their goals. Another group of scholars insists on the unique features and characteristics of every event in their definitions. In a comprehensive definition, it should be said that events are phenomena that mark and determine individual and collective realities (Zhou, 2008: 18).

Events are temporary phenomena, each being unique and this uniqueness is due to the interaction between the parts of event, people and management systems (design, planning & execution). It is important to note that in order to make use of this unique experience, one needs to be present at the place so as not to miss the chance of experiencing it. Of course, virtual events or media related events provide both various interests and values for tourism industry and it is a different type of event experience.

Mega event: In the discussions of event tourism, the term mega event refers to the greatest events in which the participant's number is more than one million people (Ibid: 21). These events are so great that exert great influence over the economy and their fame is reflected in the world media. Hall (1992) defines mega events as phenomena that explicitly target huge and international markets of tourism and deserve to be described as super in view of the size of participants, goal, financial resources of the government, potential effects, media coverage, structures and institutes, infrastructures and political, economic and social effects on the host society.

Getz (1997) defines mega event as follows: their size is huge and the media coverage and its prestige and economic effects over the target society and government are great. The key point in the definition of Gets is that an event might be not so extensive with regard to the high number of the participants but considering its media coverage, it covers an extensive domain; thus, acquiring high reputation. Such an event could be considered a mega event with regard to the image that the target is manifested in the various dimensions (Zhou, 2008: 20).

Although mega events are temporally short, their effects are long-lasting. Since these events have high number of audience in national and international

levels, they can have great influence on the tourism economy of the host society, transportation, welfare issues, touring and accommodation and other infrastructures of tourism and provide a desirable atmosphere for economic growth and urban development. The income rise resulted from it can also lead to inflation decrease and industry development (Kim, 2015: 23). Moreover, governments can take advantage of hosting events for self-promotion and acquisition of political and international prestige.

Furthermore, events can impose considerable economic costs like tax to the hosting country and could have negative social and psychological effects like disorder, security decline as well as the traffic density/flow.

Along with these potential negative effects, these events are also associated with some social advantages like national pride, social picture, and cultivation of political stability. Negative effects always exist and what is important here is the channalization of these positive and negative effects. Contrary to the economic effects, evaluation of the social effect is a very difficult task. For this purpose, there are always quantitative studies in this regard. For evaluation of the social effect, the tangible and intangible effects should be taken into account (Ibid).

• **Religious Event**

Religion and spirituality have been among the motives due to which people have travelled since long ago and in present age, many people are travelling because of religious reasons. Destinations of many of these journeys are places which are hosting religious events: “today religious events are of great importance in attraction of tourism in an international scale” (Cerutti & Piva, 2015: 55). In fact, religious events are a powerful attraction factor for people who have strong religious incentives and interests as well as

those who are interested in cultural aspects of the religious event. In these events, the participants are more interveners rather than mere spectators.

Getz (2005) considers religious events to be a type of planned events and a subset of cultural ceremonies. Another typology of events has been offered and as it has been shown in Figure (1), religious events are classified as an independent category. Such a division shows that religious ceremonies require particular management and religious tourism experience (Lee Po, 2015: 224) (Fig. 1).

sports event, corporate events, music events, commercial event, personal and private event, governmental and political event, religious event

• **Religious Tourism**

Presentation of a clear definition of the concept of religious tourism is not a simple task. In the tourism literature, there are various typologies and categorizations of tourism and many of the classifications and studies that have followed these divisions, have used such notions as religious tourism, pilgrimage tourism, cultural tourism, spiritual tourism, and even cultural heritage tourism in an interchangeable fashion.

The reason why the cultural and religious journeys are often used interchangeably, lies in the fact that most of the cultural tourists visit religious places as part of their trip. Then, it is evident that cultural tourism is considered to be a type of religious tourism. Religious tourism is one of the areas of tourism studies and it is interesting to note that it is one of the oldest forms of tourism.

An example of these classifications is shown below. This classification is based on Noli's idea of 2005 (Nieminen, 2012: 14). But what is evident is the lack of a conceptual understanding of the limits and definitions of each one of these concepts in the domain of tourism studies. Accordingly, if we consider the criterion of distinction and

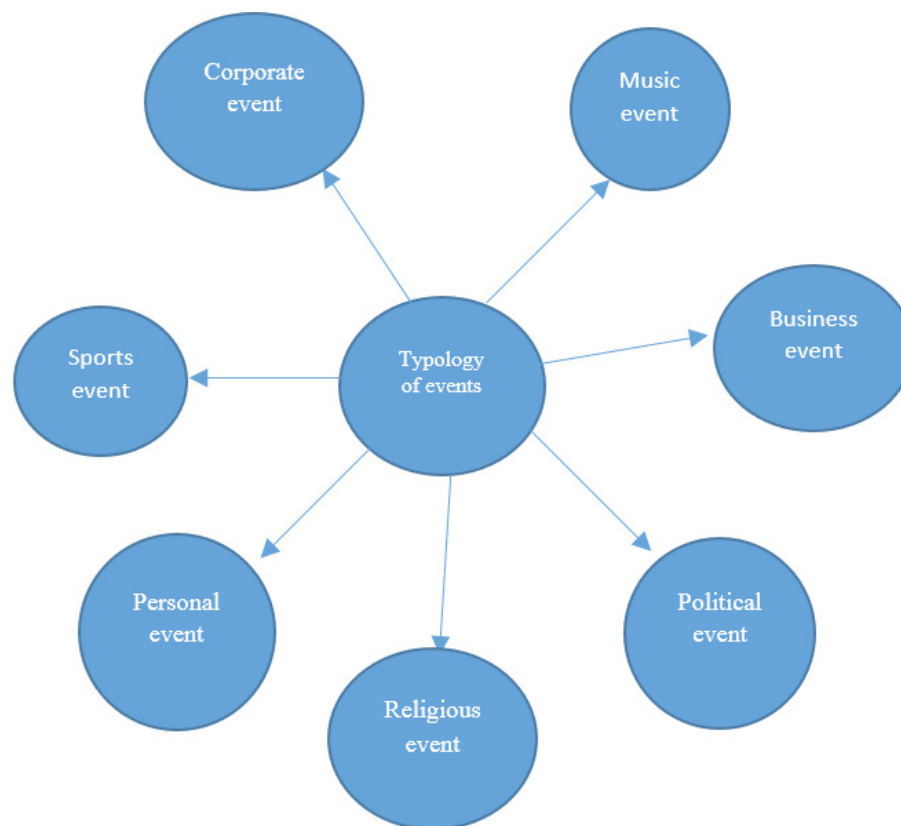


Fig. 1. Typology of Events, Source: Lee po, 2015.

differentiation of each one of these classifications to be the meaning behind each concept, then the limits of each tourism type will be determined and also the relevance and position of each of these types can be specified compared to other types based on its stance. For example, two notions of religious tourism and cultural tourism in empirical and theoretical literature of tourism have been frequently used. Now if we focus on the meanings of each one of the two concepts of “culture” and “religion”, we will find out that culture has always included religion as a whole and the religious can be regarded to be part of the cultural system of a society. Accordingly, one can argue that religious tourism is a subset of cultural tourism and is merely referring to those journeys that are concerned with sacred symbols; while cultural tourism deals with such trips that owe their content to symbolic realities (both sacred & secular).

Many forms of cultural tourism include visiting religious destinations but they are not considered as cultural tourism. For example, paying a visit to Vatican is not an example of religious tourism but if behind this journey we find a religious and spiritual motive, it will represent religious tourism (Ibid: 15).

Despite all the existing disputes over the definition of religious tourism in this part, we seek to discuss the definitions and limits of this concept.

This type of tourism can be regarded as a “journey for the sake of visiting a sacred place” in which besides “participation in religious ritual” or “observation of the rituals of others” one should have “religious experience” and religious belonging and presence through being present in that place. In fact, a tourist trip includes visiting religious places like church or mosque but mere presence in such places does not constitute the

religious trip, rather the traveler should also have a religious intention (Ibid).

• **Types of Religious Tourism**

There are various classifications for religious tourism and for the sake of brevity, we mention just one of the most comprehensive one.

• **Pilgrimage Tours**

Pilgrimage can include the following cases: examination of the roots of faith and religion; discovering the aids of religion to the western civilization; searching inspiration from distinguished religious figures; learning of past religious people; searching for spiritual and emotional medication.

Pilgrimage is mostly performed on foot. In this form of tourism, the destination and its historical background are of great importance for the tourist.

• **Missionary Trip**

The goal of missionary trip is bringing glad tidings of religion. Today, there are numerous opportunities for such trips; because many organizations are involved in this type of religious trips. Missionary trips can be short-term and long-term.

In volunteer tourism, people offer their help in line with various human needs. Both forms of missionary and voluntary trips are organized by churches in Christianity.

• **Religious Event**

Religious event includes camps, conferences, and sanctums. The importance of this part is high for the tourism as a whole including tourist guides, hotels and airlines. Some international religious events like World Youth Day can attract millions of tourists to a certain destination (Ibid: 17).

• **Fellowship Tours**

Fellowship tours which have become more popular lately refer to the trips in which people with common interests and the same goals are taking part in religious tours. Travelling with like-minded people is a very pleasurable and meaningful experience and strengthens the faith and goals of people. The

element of fun via recreation, play and in fact making others happy in the course of the religious tour are considered to be important parts of of a religious journey and these cases are occurred in their best and guaranteed form in fellowship tours. What is of importance in these trips is the existence of a common language for worshipping or orations by the orators (Ibid: 18).

Intentions of Religious Tourism

A sacred place is a location where the traveler has access to God. This place is usually a locus where people worship the God in anyway possible. This place can be a natural landscape like a mountain besides being a sacred site in which people can see the mysteries of the world and have also spiritual experience. Sacred sites act like a magnet that attracts the religious tourists towards itself but in addition, people, tour type, and destination (city or town) are effective in attraction of tourists.

In addition to the fact that the destinations of pilgrimages and tours are kinds of sacred spaces, they can further be categorized into several groups as follow:

- Global centers like major Christian sites based in history and tradition or their special nature;
- International centers whose range does not exceed one continent;
- Superregional centers which are known outside their region, but attract a few cases outside their region
- **Religious centers**

The missionary and volunteer travel together with religious events and fellowship tours are forms of worldwide religious tourism. The destinations of pilgrimage and tours are focused in this section (Ibid: 23).

Difference between Tourist and Pilgrim

Pilgrims travel throughout the world mostly

together as a group and most of them are members of the conservative and traditional social groups. Most of the trips take almost ten days unless only one city is the destination in which the trips last for five or six days. In case various countries are scheduled, the trip takes 14 days or more.

There are differences between tourist, religious tourist and pilgrim. Religious tourists, according to Cohen, are those who have come for visiting but also worship occasionally. Pilgrims are those who travel for the sake of worshipping God; while tourists travel just for visiting and observing. Of course, people may change on the way. According to Haab, someone who starts a trip as a cultural tourist, might become a religious tourist based on certain changes. Among the features of the faithful and pious pilgrims, the point can be referred that they usually spend their time in sacred places while religious tourists spend less time in these places because they want to visit other tourist attractions too” (Imani KhoshKhoo & Bod, 2016: 143).

The idea that religious tours should be recreative and attractive is now challenged. If the trip of a pilgrim takes one day, his concentration would be on visiting the sacred sites; but even in this case, he will need a restaurant to eat unless to fast for a whole day. Then, it is hard to agree with the idea that true pilgrims just think of visiting the sacred sites. Religious tourist can be defined in view of the degree of his religious motives. Their motives are material in some cases and this changes them into secular tourists; whereas some of them have moral, religious and spiritual incentives that turn them into pilgrims (Figure 2, pilgrim-tourist continuum); in the middle of the continuum, there are the religious tourists since compared to the pilgrims they have lesser spiritual motives and as compared to the tourists they have more religious incentives (Fig. 2).

To make the differences more clear, Richards

provides another figure. Religious tours are more spiritual and individual as compared to cultural trips and are considered to be a type of inner journey. It is needed to be reminded that today the pilgrimage trips package is not so different from that of secular journeys because they both include flight and hotel costs and excursion. Then, in the following figure pilgrimage trip refers to individual tours. However, even in a pilgrimage tour, an inner trip has a significant role because an individual would travel in group form but with individual and inner intention (Fig. 3).

In summary, when we categorize the religious tourists, motivational aspects are of great importance though the activities of the tourists are also of significance because they result in distinguishing the religious and secular tourists. The second group is more after observation and visit; while religious pilgrims and tourists are more seeking for the inner tour. It seems that religious tourism attracts the older women and this is correct in some cases; but the recent research shows that in fact religious tourism attracts individuals in all ages (Nieminen, 2012: 26).

Future of Religious Tourism

Reasons for religious tourism can be outlined in the following seven categories:

- Diversity of world religions;
- Search for spirituality;
- Effort for acquiring original experiences through cultural and religious traditions;
- Emergence of niche markets (forgotten points in the market);
- The increased frequency of short breaks;
- Belief and religion;
- Self-actualization and volunteerism.

As mentioned earlier, religion is becoming less popular, while spirituality or the search for belief through spirituality is more of a trend which will

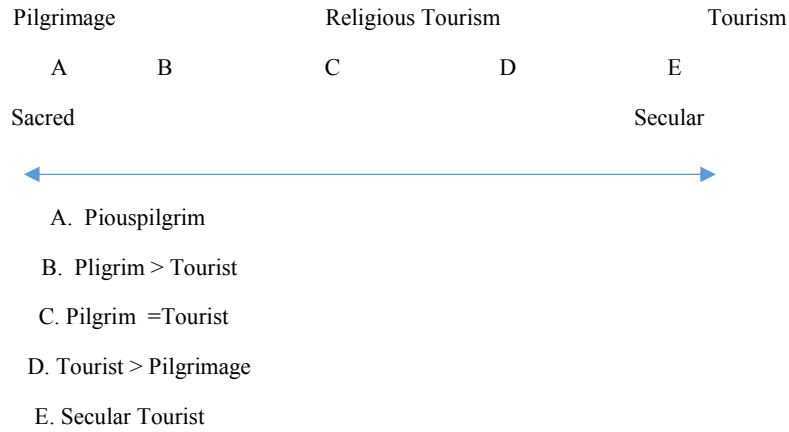


Fig 2. Pilgrim-Tourist Continuum, Source: Haab, 1996.

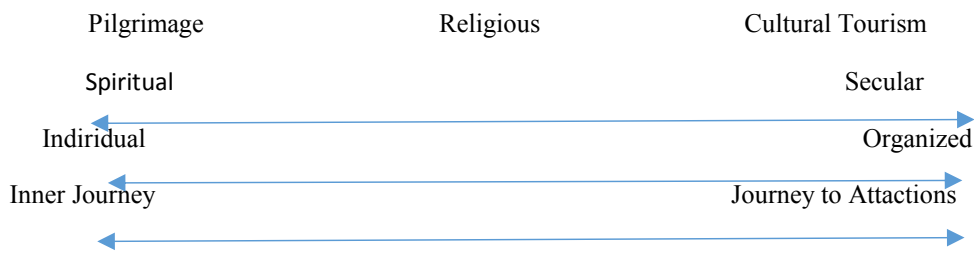


Fig. 3. Religious Tourism Purposes, Source: Nieminen, 2012.

reshape the characteristics of religious tourism in the future. It is estimated that for example, if tourists took four short breaks a year, religion and spirituality will be one of the main reasons for their travel for one of those holidays. Volunteer activities are seen as a way of self-actualization by putting something good back into the community that is visited by doing well for the society. Authenticity and authentic experience among faith are one of the key push factors for religious tourism. Religion manifests itself in all aspects of like like birth, marriage and funerals; then, it is very likely that it will stay in tourism though new forms of religious tourism will probably be created.

The ongoing change from religious motives to spiritual and also toward individuality in tourism indicate that the needs of an individual traveler must be considered more carefully and that there is also more interest for authenticity and custom-made tours along with the mass forms of religious tourism. In the case of religious attractions, this implies that visitors want to know more about the background of the site or event, and they also want to engage actively involved in the religious or spiritual life of the place they are visiting. Even though some say religious tourism is turning into a booming business, the traditional role of religious tourism should remain the same and

should be guarded to be about promoting spiritual healing and piety. The excitement of making a profit in this field should be kept under control so that the religious tourism can be survived as the past (Nieminen, 2012: 30).

Result & Conclusion

Generally speaking, religious tourism is conducted around the tendency towards the sacred and veneration of religious symbols and it is always associated with visiting or participation in religious rituals, religious gatherings, and ceremonies of a special religion by the pilgrims and tourists and is organized in the form of gathering around a sacred site. In fact, religious tourism can be considered to be a type of tourism in which participants have only religious motives or a combination of religious motives with other motives and pay a visit to sacred sites like churches, mosques, tombs, etc. In religious tourism, not only such actions as visiting the sacred sites and participation in other rituals and programs within the normative framework of the sacred site are done, also taking part in religious conferences and other cultural and religious events including such products as art, culture, traditions and religious architecture are taken into account. Thus, drawing a clear line between “religious tourism” and “pilgrimage” is a true challenge for the scholars.

In other words, pilgrimage has been defined as visiting a place with religious significance for doing religious rituals or for fulfilling a spiritual need based on spirituality or religious belief; a journey which is determined by by religious sacraments; while the religious actions of the tourists are similar both to the behaviors of pilgrims and tourists. It can be said that the aim of a pilgrim concerning traveling is just doing religious affairs, but religious tourist besides pilgrimage and participation in religious ceremonies visits other places including

the sacred and secular place (Firuzjanian; Yusefi & Mirmohammadtabar, 2014: 146). Therefore, religious tourism can be regarded as a journey that lies somewhere between pilgrimage on the one hand, and tourism on the other hand.

In some religious events related to various religions, some tourists from various cultures and nations and generally with religious goals gather together in a sacred time and space. Such cultural diversity can be seen among the participants in Arba'een ceremony. The considerable increase of the number of pilgrims who take part in Arba'een even is a phenomenon that has emerged lately because the number of people who took part in this gathering in past years is not comparable with recent years. Expansion of this ceremony in various aspects and turning into a religious mega event have led to the formation and development of the structures, each playing a role in a specific area. And it did not take a long time for different structures and organizations to be in line with this event.

With regard to event tourism, it is said that events have essentially a social structure and occur in the context of international, national, regional, organizational and even tribal cultures. Many of these events are related to rituals, ceremonies and symbols that bear very deep cultural meanings and Arba'een event is not an exception to this rule. Events are unique in their ability with regard to changing spaces into evidential (understandable) regions. Moreover, they do also have unique norms, values, and rules of their own. Every event comes to existence with a set of defined expectations as well as the symbolic interactions of its audience (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014: 65).

Researchers classify events in view of their size and the degree of their complication and this has a direct and strong relationship with the effects of events. By the increase in the aspects and size of

the events, their effects also become greater. With regard to the expanse and scale of Arba'een event, one can consider it to be an example of mega events. In fact, in the discussion of tourism, the term mega event is a word that refers to huge events that target international great markets (Zhou, 2008: 27). Mega in this context means huge and great. The number of participants in such events is more than one million people and their fame is spread in the world media. In fact, Arba'een event is a pacifist event that is associated with huge economic, political and social effects whether in national or regional or even international levels. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that we can consider volunteerism in cultural and religious events as a type of social participation that is of extensive relations for destination management. In this concept, special and volunteer events are closer areas for research; because the number of events has grown with development in size and complication. Therefore, the number of staff and volunteers has grown very fast. Understanding the experience of volunteerism in special events (cultural, religious and sport events) is an area of interest for the target managers as well as the scholars of recreation (Gallarza & Saura, 2006).

Among other interesting cases in Arba'een event, one can refer to a specific form of tourism – contrary to other forms in which the main goal and attraction is the destination itself – the attraction of tourism as a whole is travelling and reaching the destination and in fact the form of travelling itself changes to an attraction that motivates people for this huge gathering.

Another important point is that contrary to other mega events which are held in the world, in the Arba'een mega event not only the cultural and moral harms reach the minimum rather this event paves the ground for the growth of morals, collective spirit and cultural approximation and in

the course of this huge gathering various people show different range of ideological and cultural commonalities in a homogeneous form and reach intellectual maturity and spiritual growth.

Among the prominent points of this huge gathering as compared to other similar events in the world, one can refer to the strong religious belief which exists among the participants and the staff. This belief is so strong that people despite their fear of the dangers threatening their lives still have enthusiasm for taking part in this event. However, the number of tourists across the world is dwindling due to terrorist attacks and security issues.

Among other considerable cases that one can find in the literature of tourism, one can refer to the lack of possibilities and proper infrastructures that lead to the fall of tourist demand for destination; while in this tourist event by no means, the form of accommodation and welfare possibilities are among the priorities of the tourists.

Among other considerable cases that give a special value to an event, one can refer to the principle of exception and uniqueness. As we mentioned earlier, Arba'een gathering is an exceptional and unique event not only among the Muslims rather among the world religions.

Addressing the religious mega event of Arba'een with such a huge scale whether in view of diversity or in view of social, political, cultural and strategic outcomes is necessary for analysis of this phenomenon through a systematic scientific study in order to determine the required motives of this movement and explain the process of this trip and finally determine the outcomes of this journey.

It seems that for knowing various aspects of this phenomenon, we have no way but referring to agents who are involved in this event in one way or another. It is evident that negligence in this event in such aspects will have no good consequences and it might distract this event after a while. As

a result, we should approach this event from a scientific perspective and pay full attention to its negative and pathologic consequences.

Endnote

1. For example, one can refer to the following traditions:

Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him): "There are divine bounties around the tomb of Imam Hossein Ibn Ali (peace be upon him) for ten miles" (Majlesi, 1656).

Holy Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his household): "By me, you are warned and by Ali you are guided and, by Hassan you are blessed and by Hossein you reach happiness and without him you will become wretched. You have to know that Hossein is one of the numerous doors of Paradise. Anyone who takes him to be his enemy, God will deprive him from the fragrance of paradise" (Bohrani, 1956). Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him): "Verily the time you spend for visiting the holy shrine of Imam Hossein Ibn Ali (peace be upon him) is not counted from your life time" (Hor Ameli, 1986).

Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him): "It is recommended to visit() the Shrine of Imam Hossein for rich people twice a year and for poor once a year" (Ghomi, 1978).

Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him): "Verily anyone who leaves his house for visiting the tomb of Imam Hossein Ibn Ali if he is taking a walk to the tomb every step he takes a reward is written for him and one of his sins is forgiven and if he is taking a ride the same will be the case. Thus, his name will be included among the righteous and prosperous ones" (Majlesi, 1656).

Imam Sadeq (peace be upon him) is quoted to have said: "Anyone who washes his body in Furat and then takes a walk to Hossein's shrine for every step he takes God writes the reward of a Hajj for him and all his actions will be accepted" (Majlesi, 1982).

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