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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ON DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING RAMAYANA TRAIL TOURISM IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This study has been conducted related to the Ramayana tourism concept in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau has launched the 'Ramayanaya Trail' with the private sector to target the top-ranked Indian market over to Sri Lanka for religious reasons and other travel purposes. With the literature shreds of evidence by Ramayana epic Sri Lanka has significant cultural value on Ramayana trail with more than 50 relevant sites. With the findings of previous studies related to the Ramayana trail in the Sri Lankan context and surveys by local travel agents, there is no considerable popularity for the Ramayana trail's sites among Indian tourists who visited Sri Lanka. Thus, the study has focused on developing and promoting issues of Ramayana tourism in the Sri Lankan context. The study was conducted under the qualitative approach to achieve the research objective; to identify the issues and challenges of developing and promoting Ramayana trail as a cultural tourism product in Sri Lanka under the case study research design by considering Ramayana tourism in Sri Lanka as a case. The qualitative interview method was conducted by the snowball sampling method among Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau and 20 local tour operators and filed observations in 11 Ramayana sites in Sri Lanka were done as the primary data collection. Core issues and challenges have been identified under two categories as site-based and organizational-based.

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Introduction:-

Culture and tourism are interdependent two components emphasized by the World Tourism Organization. Visiting to get different cultural experiences such as lifestyles, social events, cuisine, architecture, folk performances, modern cultures, subcultures, customs, and rituals is happening under cultural tourism. According to the Tourism and Culture Survey of UNWTO Member States (2016), a total of 69 countries responded to the survey question; to specify which areas of culture and heritage as; national and world heritage sites, monuments, historic places and buildings, cultural routes, and others under tangible culture and included crafts, gastronomy, traditional festivals, music, oral traditions and religious/spiritual tourism in the given definition to cultural tourism.

When cultural tourism is considered as a mass-market the religious tourism, spiritual tourism, or pilgrimages can be considered as a niche market. Religious tourism depends on the religion of a specific region, country, or in the

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global context. People in the world will engage with religious tourism by traveling to significant attractions in their religions. Ramayana Yathra is a concept among Hindu people especially residence in India. Visiting and worshipping the historical and religious sites related to Valmiki's Ramayana epic are the major activities on this travel concept. Lord Rama or the Ramachandran the noble son of the King Dasharatha of Ayodhya, defeated the evil king Ravana and ensured the protection of Hindus as per the Hindu myths. Valmiki, the poetry of Ramayana praises the victory of Lord Rama and motivates devotees to worship Rama as divinity. In this scenario, Ramayana has high religious and cultural values in India. Ramayana legend and the holy characters in Ramayana are considered as divinities by Hindus and worship them and visit the places related to them. In this scenario, Ramayana has a significant value in pilgrimages in the Indian context. India has a variety of related to Ramayana and beyond India, there are outside locations which consider as Lankapuram (Sri Lanka) or the land of king Ravana who has kidnapped princess Seetha the wife of Lord Rama.

Ramayana Tourism, Ramayana Yathra, or Ramayana trail is a special interest tourism segment under the cultural and religious tourism which is promoting in Sri Lankan tourism to target the Indian tourists market. According to Tourism Statistical records of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka has reported India as the highest market of top ten markets since past 10 years back history of tourist arrivals of Sri Lanka. As the highest of the top ten source markets; in 2019 it has recorded 355,002 Indian tourist arrivals and in 2018 and 2017, it was 424,887 and 384,628. In this background, Sri Lanka has a wide range of Ramayana sites with the significance of Valmiki's Ramayana and local Ramayana folklores as the advantage of tourism products and the advantage of the existing emerging tourist market.

This study based on the findings, based on several previous studies have done in the Sri Lankan context. In 2015, Ravikumar and Sarat have investigated perspectives of Ramayana trail tours in Sri Lanka of Indian tourists. According to the authors, Ramayana Trail sites' historical importance is not promoted so far in the Sri Lankan context even they have significant attractiveness of Indian tourists. Fernando and Sarangi (2017) have implemented their study on a new paradigm for destination marketing for Ramayana tourism as a cultural tourism product and lack of awareness of Ramayana sites was identified as a core issue. Hence, the researcher has implemented this study to investigate core reasons for developing and promotional issues of Ramayana tourism in Sri Lanka. The scope of this study focuses on Hindu religious tourism, can be considered as a case identified as a narrow end of cultural tourism. The scope of this study is not addressed to evaluate the credibility of the Ramayana epic but, may address the significance of the Ramayana trail as a cultural tourism product of Sri Lanka.

Literature Review:-

The world Tourism organization (2020) has defined cultural tourism as a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. According to Raj and Griffin, religious tourism can be defined as tourists' visiting a site with specific historical or religious significance with a specific interest-based on religious beliefs or devotions. "The journey towards the destination of religious interest may thus be seen as a form of tourism that express the abiding memory of history" (Griffin & Raj, 2015).

Sharma (2014) explains the uniqueness of Hinduism in India. Hinduism is one of the unique religions for India with the signing of its own cultural and religious value that a tourist may be able to feel a unique travel experience. What Jerusalem is for Jews and Mecca is for Muslims and Rome for Catholics; India is exactly that for Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. Unlike Christianity, Islam and Judaism; Hinduism is a unique religion with its strange customs and many Gods and Goddesses.

According to Srinivasan's explanation (n.d); the Hindu religion is populated with myriad gods and goddesses who personify aspects of the one true God, allowing individuals an infinite number of ways to worship based on the family tradition, community and regional practices, and other considerations.

Among the great trinity gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the Lord Vishnu is considered as the "Preserver" of the world and Vishnu is worshipped in several forms and ten avatars. The literal meaning of the word avatar is 'descent,' and it's usually understood to mean divine descent. Avatars are savior forms of a god that descend to earth to intervene whenever help is needed to restore dharma (moral order) and peace. Two of Vishnu's ten avatars are Rama and Krishna (Srinivasan, n.d)

Ramayana epic by sage Valmiki eulogizes the character of Lord Rama as the epic hero. Rama's wife Seetha; younger brother Lakshmana; the monkey devotee Hanuman and King Ravana of Sri Lanka are the main characters of Ramayana epic. Wight (2014) has very briefly summarized the Ramayana epic as; an ancient Sanskrit epic which follows Prince Rama's quest to rescue his beloved wife Seetha from the clutches of Ravana with the help of an army of monkeys. According to Krishnaswami (2017), the concept of 'Ramayana trail' can be defined as the places on the land (India and Sri Lanka) that walked Rama and Seetha (Krishnaswami, 2017).

"Sri Lanka has a special significance on the Ramayana Traditions. It was the land of two principal characters; Ravana and Vibishana" (Ravikumar&Sarat, 2015). According to Ravikumar and Sarat, Sri Lanka has a high significance value related with Valmiki Ramayana with a variety of related with Ramayana trail. Chinthaka and Senarathne have explained the significance of Ramayana for Hindu tourists from Andhra and Gujarat of India and the authors have highlighted the significance of Ramayana tourism under the spiritual or religious tourism view (Chinthaka and Senarathne, 2012). According to Jayatilleke and Dulshan, even historical or archaeological evidence not available, plenty of folklores; legends and myths prevailing around the King Ravana in Sri Lanka (Jayatilleke&Dulshan, 2018). This can be considered as another opportunity for Ramayana tourism as a cultural tourism product in Sri Lanka. According to Sanyal (2011), folklore is considered as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) or living heritage built over the triple conjunction of the conceptual framework: folk, nations and traditions.

Fernando and Sarangi's study (2017) is one of an important study done in Sri Lankan context on destination marketing of Ramayana tourism as a cultural tourism product. Findings demonstrate that the low awareness of foreign tourists is a critical issue of the concept but here researchers have not specified the market or region of foreign tourists. Ravikumar and Sarat (2015), have highlighted the requirement of adequate promotional campaigns for existing Ramayana tourism sites in Sri Lanka. According to authors, Sri Lanka has plenty of cultural resources to promote Ramayana tourism and with the facts of the findings, majority of Indian tourists have reasonably satisfied with Ramayana tourism but, Sri Lanka has not ensured the emergence of the Ramayana sites as an important contributor to the development of its cultural tourism.

Methodology:-

The study has adopted the qualitative research approach to investigate the two research objectives. The first objective was to understand the significance of Ramayana for Sri Lankan tourism' and the second objective was to understand issues & challenges on developing and promoting Ramayanatourism in Sri Lanka'. The case study research design was adopted for the study by considering Ramayana tourism in the Sri Lankan context as a single case. The primary data were collected through structured interviews and field observations. The sample population of this study was limited to Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, and tour operator sector in Sri Lanka who are involving in Ramayana tourism. Frank and Snijder (1994) have explained the importance of the snowball sampling method as a method to identify and estimate the hidden population of qualitative research. Therefore, the snowball sampling method was adopted to recognize the most relevant hidden respondents among tour operators who are involved in Ramayana tourism in Sri Lanka. 20 structured interviews were conducted and with the recommendations of interviews and previous studies, 11 Ramayana sites were selected for the field observations as; Munneswaram temple-Chilaw, Manaweri temple- Chilaw, Thirukoneshwaram temple-Trincomalee, Kanniya Hot water spring- Trinkomalee, Ussangoda National Park- Hambantota, Ravana cave- Ella, Divurumpola temple- Welimada, Seetha Amman temple- Seethaeliya, GayathreePeedam- Hawaeliya, Sri Bhakta Hanuman temple – Ramboda and Vibhishana Shrine- Kelaniya temple. The field observations have been done under the 'participant observation method' which was supportive to understand particular issues of Ramayana sites.

Findings and Discussions:-

Significance and uniqueness of Ramayana trail as a tourism product in Sri Lanka

19 respondents out of 20 respondents of the interviews believe that the Ramayana trail applies to Sri Lankan tourism due to two significant reasons. The first reason is; the cultural value received from the Indian Ramayana epic by Valmiki and its specific chapters which explain Lord Rama's arrival to Sri Lanka. The Rama Sethu (link of Ramayana trail between South India and Sri Lanka located in Mannar and battlefields of Rama and Ravana are the main attractions under this segment. According to the respondents, those places are well-known sites of Indian Hindu pilgrims due to the poems of Valmiki's Ramayana epic. The second reason is; existing local Ramayana folklores in Sri Lanka with the value of king Ravana and his life-related factors. Sri Lanka has several folklores related to Ravana the myth emperor, who was abducted by Indian prince Rama's wife Seetha by the aircraft called

‘Dandumonara or pushpakavimana’. Jayatilleke and Dulshan (2018) explain the popularity of King Ravana’s folklore in the regions in Sri Lanka including Uva, Sabaragamuwa, Western, Eastern, Southern and Northern provinces. Even historical or archaeological evidence not available, plenty of folklores; legends, and myths prevailing around the King Ravana in Sri Lanka (Jayatilleke&Dulshan, 2018). There are several sites in Sri Lanka with the value of local folklores which are considered as captive places of Seetha and places related to Ravana, his family, and life.

As per the above 2 scenarios, the respondents of interviews believe Sri Lanka has more than 40 Ramayana legend-related sites which can be considered as the main uniqueness of the Ramayana trail in Sri Lanka. The religious significance of the Ramayana trail is the uniqueness of the Sri Lankan Ramayana trail for Hindus all around the world with special attention on India (K. Selvam, personal communication, December 4, 2019). Nature and the scenic beauty is a more important unique experience of the Ramayana trail in the Sri Lankan context with the variety of Ramayana sites located in different geographical locations with the diversity of environmental sources such as beaches, mountains, waterfalls, caves, and national parks. Local Ramayana folklore and Ramayana epic with hidden beautiful locations provide a unique experience for tourists and them able to evaluate the legend themselves is it true or not at particular sites (R. Rathnayake, personal communication, April 11, 2020).

The most recommended Ramayana sites for Sri Lankan Ramayana trail

The respondents have mentioned total of 39 Ramayana sites in Sri Lanka including major Ramayana sites and other Ramayana sites which are included in their tour packages. The major Ramayana sites are directly linked with core Ramayana characters and considered as captive places of Seetha and places related to Rama-Ravana battles. The Seetha Amman Temple in Seetha Eliya (nearby NuwaraEliya) which believed as Asoka Vatika, where Hanuman found Seetha at the first when he visited Sri Lanka and Sri Bhakta Hanuman Temple in Ramboda, one of the popular Hanuman shrine in Sri Lanka are the most recommended two Ramayana sites in Sri Lanka by the respondents.

Other main sites can be listed with the significance as follow; Divurumpola-where Seetha has done ‘Agni pariksha’ to prove her chastity; Ravana cave- believes as an entrance of underground palace complex of Ravana. ThiruKoneshwaram temple in Trincomalee- Where Ravana has prayed Lord Shiva for his mother Pushpothkatha to receive a Shiva lingam. Manaweri temple in Chilaw- where Rama build a Shiva lingam by sand and worship to heal from the Brahmahathyadosa. Munneshwaram temple in Chilaw- Where Rama has built the first Shiva shrine for Brahmahathyadosa. GayathriPeedam in NuwaraEliya- Where Ravana’s son Meghanathan has prayed Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva and the Trimurti was visible. Seetha fort in Hasalaka- the first captive place of Seetha at the palace of Ravana’s queen Mandodari. Ussangoda National park-a placed with brick-red burned soil where believed set on fire by Hanuman, the monkey god. Horton plains national park- another area believed to set on fire by Hanuman. Sigiriya- The UNESCO world heritage site and the rock fortress which belief as to the location of the palace of Kuvera, the former king, and later the palace of Ravana. PanchamugaAnjanair temple in Wellawatta-famous Hanuman shrine nearby Colombo the capital. Kelaniya temple- the temple with the main shrine for Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana who was loyal to Rama. Sri Pada (Adam’s peak), Mini Adam’s peak in Ella and Lakgala - The places considered as where king Ravana has worshipped the Sun and meditated to gain ‘VishwaShakthi’ (The great spiritual powers). Yahangala- where Ravana’s body was kept after his death upon this rock; Danigala (Aliens’ rock)- ancient folklores states that it was once the Royal Airfield of King Ravana. Nildiyapokuna (The pond with crystal clear water)- as an underground tunnel complex with the underground pond of Ravana’s period. Hakgala Botanical garden (nearby Seetha Amman temple)- as the AshokaVatika, the royal pleasure garden of Ravana. Chariot path in Pussellawa- this is believed to be the route, which King Ravana took Seetha from his capital. Seetha cave in Avissawella and Seetha tear pond- considered as two captive places of Seetha.

Existing and potential Markets for Ramayana Tourism in Sri Lanka

When it considered the existing geographic segmentation of tourist markets for Sri Lanka Ramayana tourism; the majority of tour operators highly prioritize India as the top-ranked source market of Sri Lanka with the relevancy of Ramayana epic for Indian culture. Malaysia and Singapore are the other two existing geographic markets for Ramayana tourism. As the prime source markets, the tour operators target several regional areas of India including; Bangalore, New Delhi, Agra, Chennai, Pune, Mumbai, Kerala, Kolkata, and Gujarat. From the 1960s onwards Indians have moved to the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. In these countries, Hindu shrines were opened and above people have started to practice Hindu traditions. In recent years, numbers of Americans and Europeans who are not descended from Indians have turned to follow Hinduism (Self,

2010). With this advantage and the views of the respondents of the study, the potential geographical markets for Ramayana tourism have been identified as; South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Germany, and France. The high-end Hindu market in the above countries and the young market are the other potential markets identified by the respondents.

Issues and Challenges on Developing Ramayana Tourism in Sri Lanka

Issues and challenges on developing Ramayana tourism products can be divided into two categories as site-based issues and organizational issues and challenges. Those issues are summarized in table no.1. Even Sri Lanka has more than 40 Ramayana sites on the island wide, the tour operators utilize a minimum number of recommended Ramayana sites due to the core issues related to sites. The field observations proved that even in main Ramayana sites mentioned by the respondents of the interviews have several issues as follow;

Table 1:- Issues and Challenges on Developing Ramayana Tourism.

Issues & challenges related to sites	Issues & challenges related to organizations and service providers
Accessibilities to the major sites and other sites	Lack of information to package development
Lack of accommodation and facilities as per the clients' requirements (Cultural and financial)	Less awareness of new employees on Ramayana tourism
Lack of infrastructure in sites	Lack commitment of key stakeholders on Ramayana tourism
Lack of tourist activities in attractions	Uncontrolled involvement of new internal travel agents and tour operators
Transportation issues	Inadequate service quality standard and quality Management system for service providers
Availability of food & beverage services	Insufficient practical involvement of service providers
	Inadequate performances of particular tourist guides

Narrow and damaged roads to main Ramayana sites (Ravana cave- Ella, Ussngoda, Gayathripeedam) is a core issue of Ramayana site which is limited the accessibility of large scale of tourist vehicles. Poor accessibility to Ramayana sites in remote areas (Gurulupotha) is an issue influence on ignoring by tour operators when they develop tour packages. Inadequate parking facilities (Ravana Cave-Ella, Seetha Amman Temple-Seetha Eliya) and Lack of alternative transport modes (Sri Bhakta Hanuman temple- Ramboda) are two issues related to transportation in Ramayana sites that discourage tour operators when they introduce such places for middle-aged Indian tourists who are not feasible to walk too far. When there are narrow and damaged roads to the attractions, tour operators have to arrange additional alternative transport modes to the sites from the parking area or accommodation. It is an issue related to the costing of packages mentioned by several respondents. Inadequate road signs and the existing less attractive faded road signs and directions have decreased the attractiveness of sites.

Infrastructural issues of Ramayana sites are the next core issues identified during the field observations. Unavailability of drinking water is a basic issue in some Ramayana sites such as ThiruKoneshwaram and Ussangoda. ThiruKoneshwaram temple premises had drinking water facilities but, during the observational period, there was no water for the consumption of the visitors. Inadequate washroom facilities with hygiene factors another issue identified in several Ramayana sites. Lack of site information sources (information centers, museums, site guiding services, etc.) is limited the opportunities to the interpretation of the value related to the Ramayana epic hence, tourists cannot gain sufficient knowledge and experience about sites. Insufficient relaxation places and cafeterias, Safety and security issues, Waste management, and hygiene issues are the other issues in Ramayana sites.

Hindus prefer to get experiences from sacred geography including rivers, trees, and ponds marked by shrines for particular deities, sanctified artifacts and objects, and temples; sacred specialists such as priests, religious gurus, monks, and ascetics in the site and sacred performances like temple rituals (daily and seasonal), processions, festivals, feasts, religious sermons and religious conferences (Shinde, 2018). With the religious perspective explained by Shinde (2018), the availability of visitor experiences of 11 Ramayana sites observed during the field observation, can be described as follow;

According to the findings of field observations, Sri Bhakta Hanuman Temple in Ramboda and the Vibhishana Shrine in Kelaniya Buddhist temple have recorded the highest rank with the availability of physical and

metaphysical experience of the visitors including places of worship, sacred geography, availability of sacred specialists, daily religious performances and nearby tourist activities. The Chinmaya Mission Sri Lanka and the authority of the Kelaniya Buddhist temple have facilitated opportunities to visitors by fulfilling the above requirements. Munneshwaram and Manawari sites located in Chilaw have the DaduruOya river and its mouth of the sea located between the two sites. Personal communications of the field observation emphasized the significance of this geography;

“DeduruOya mouth with the sea is a holy theertham with a healing power which was supportive to Lord Rama to get well from the Brahmahathyadosham when he was killed Ravana one of a Shiva devotee. Lord Rama had bath form DeduruOya and visited Manawerito create a shiva lingam by sand so, Manaweri, DeduruOya, and Munneshwaram are highly sacred to us as Hindus” (Shanmugan, personal communication, February 29, 2020).

According to the above statement, the DeduruOya river mouth has a significant value in Hinduism with Lord Rama but, such advantage has not creatively utilized to attract Ramayana tourists. The same issue was identified in Ussangoda National Park and Ravana cave. It has not observed any physical and metaphysical experience of the visitors in Ussangoda and Ravana cave but, both sites are rich with geographical values including caves and mountain cliffs. As a wildlife park, Ussangoda National Park has no developed religious attractions, places to worship, and religious specialists but, the field observations proved that Indian Ramayana tourists prefer to do religious activities such as Bhajan chanting and meditation in the natural environment of Ussangoda National Park.

Lack of basic facilities (shrines, etc.) for religious activities (Ravana cave, Ussangoda, Kanniya Hot water springs) is a site-based issue that influences visitors’ experience of religious tourists. Lack of opportunities to buy souvenirs and other shopping activities and lack of specific site-based tourist activities (Nature trails, Ecotourism, etc.) are another two issues for any type of tourists in Ramayana sites. When there are no sufficient varieties of tourist activities in the site or nearby locations, tour operators hesitate to include those sites for tour packages.

The other category of Ramayana tourism product development is, issues and challenges related to organizations and service providers. Lack of information to tour package development and less awareness of new employees on Ramayana tourism are two common issues faced by tour operators when they develop Ramayana tourism products. Lack of information sources of the significance of Ramayana sites with sufficient evidence has limited the opportunities to include new Ramayana sites into tour packages to fulfill the requirement of tourists. The majority of tour operators involve in Ramayana tour package development with existing Ramayana sites and the commonly established route due to limited existing information sources of Ramayana sites. Very minimum number of inventors involves in exploring Ramayana sites, gather information, and develop new packages. These inventors develop new tour packages by new knowledge gained by their studies and explorations.

The majority of respondents mentioned that the new employees who are handling package development do not have awareness of Ramayana epic, folklores in Sri Lanka, and their cultural value thus, they are not capable to handle those tasks properly. Even there are such situations, with the advantages of emerging Indian tourist arrivals, new booming tour operators and travel agencies link with Ramayana tourism to cover their profit margins without affiliation with Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. This uncontrolled involvement of new internal travel agents and tour operators creates issues by creating low-quality tour packages with lower prices than other rivals and false information of sites.

Respondents mentioned that they need to support of several service providers in the business sector, governmental bodies, and local stakeholders to implement Ramayana tours. Figure 1 demonstrates the involvement of stakeholders in Ramayana tourism in Sri Lanka;

Figure 1:- Stakeholders' involvement on Ramayana tourism.

Due to the unmatching policies with each other's of governmental bodies and site owners including the Department of Archaeology, Central Cultural Fund, the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Coastal Conservation Authority, the Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, the temple authorities, private landowners, etc. tour operators have to face critical issues and challenges develop Ramayana tour packages by fulfilling requirements of above parties. Unavailability of food and beverage services fit with the religious needs of Hindu tourists including vegetarian foods and Jain foods (non-root vegetables) in many Ramayana sites; unavailability of accommodation units are two other critical issues of tour operators during tour package development.

Less awareness about the value of Ramayana legend in the Sri Lankan context to interpretation and language proficiency in required languages including Hindi and another sub-regional Indian language (Telugu and Tamil) are specified issues of tourist guides mentioned by the respondents. Cultural issues of tourist guide lecturers (Christian and Islam) influence negatively less awareness of Ramayana epics' value under the Hindu culture. According to the respondents of interviews, the physical fitness of existing tourist guides is a considerable issue when developing new tour packages for other tourist markets. The majority of existing guides are in their middle age and prefer to travel with tourist groups in the same age level. Thus, when developing new tour packages for other tourist markets (young, European, etc.) including new travel experiences (adventures and nature tourism), supportive knowledgeable young tourist guides are needed in the future.

Local communities and their positive involvement with tourism activities have observed around 8 sites including Munneshvaram, Thirukonshvaram, Kanniya, Ussangoda, Ravana cave, Seetha Amman Temple, Hanuman Bhakta temple, and Kelaniya temple. Local people of these sites engage with tourism activities by selling fruits, flowers/garlands, souvenirs, spices, food, and beverage. During the observation, two issues related to local communities' involvement were identified. Local vendors in Munneshvaram do not get much more opportunity to interact with tourists due to the behaviors of tourist guides. Due to this situation, the local vendors in Munneshvaram temple premises not satisfy with tourist guides. Representatives of the local community in Ussangoda site expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the less contribution of responsible authorities and site owners when maintaining the site. According to the view of local vendors in Ussangoda, they need proper directions from responsible authorities to keep the site properly.

Issues and Challenges on Promoting Ramayana Tourism in Sri Lanka

The respondents have mentioned the second category of issues and challenges of Ramayana tourism in Sri Lanka during promotional activities as per the discussion below;

The low purchasing power of existing markets is a highly mentioned issue by the respondents. This is linked with the demotivation of employees of tour operators due to low profit gained after the effort and cost of promotion which is a challenge to engage future Ramayana product selling. This reason does not encourage tour operators and the supportive staff members for hard work during promotional campaigns of Ramayana tourism. Tour operators

have to face and settle several challenges and particular issues during the promotion of Ramayana tourism with tailor-made tour itineraries due to the reasons mentioned below;

Time management is a core issue when preparing tour itineraries. Matching tourists' demand with available limited resources is a challenge for tour operators within an average of 7 days of the tour package. Many respondents skip down south, Mannar, Jaffna, Hasalaka area (Gurulupotha and Seetha fort) and other rural attractions due to the long travel duration, unavailability of accommodation with food services, and high costing issues to cater to the bargaining of tourists due to the low purchasing power of them. Even Sri Lanka has more than 40 Ramayana sites, tour operators can not extend package duration beyond 7 days without including more sites due to above mentioned financial issues. This situation influence to limited Ramayana trail in Sri Lanka into few popular sites (Sri Bhakta Hanuman temple, Seetha Amman Temple, Divurumpola temple, Munneshwaram temple, and Manaweri temple) in a short period. Respondents have given suggestions to increase the duration of tour packages including more Ramayana sites and activities as; attract new tourist markets beyond the Indian Hindu tourist market with good purchasing power, establish food & beverage services with convenience pricing around Ramayana sites located in remote areas and develop attractive promotional strategies.

Since 2004, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority and Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau have taken efforts to promote Ramayana tourism as a niche tourism product for the Indian market by using two brands as; 'Ramayana circuit' and later, 'Ramayana Yathra'. The Indian government and local tour operators and service providers are collaboratively contributing to recent promotional campaigns under the existing brand as 'Ramayana Yathra'. The official documentary for the Sri Lankan Ramayana trail was launched as 'Following the Trail of Ramayana in Sri Lanka' in 2008 by Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority covering overall Ramayana sites with sufficient information. Recently, many local tour operators utilize this for their promotions but, many respondents highlighted that the visual quality of the documentary produced in 2008 with old more than 10 years old appearance of Ramayana sites is not attractive for the promotions in 2020 and they have emphasized the importance of new documentaries with the latest information, scenes of destinations and technical facts to attract new tourist markets. As well as new documentaries should be able to capture new markets beyond the Indian Hindu tourist market.

The influence of online tour booking apps is a considerable challenge on the individual promotional campaigns of Ramayana tourism done by tour operators. According to the respondents, via these apps their potential consumers arrange their tours without the involvement of the role of tour operator so, it is a challenge when planning promotional campaigns for future potential markets. Physical evidence of the sites including the facts and information which are influencing to develop the trustworthiness of the tourist is needed to develop in Sri Lankan Ramayana sites to develop the good image as per the views of few respondents. Some Ramayana sites are raw destinations without any pieces of evidence (places of worship, sacred geography, sacred specialists, sacred daily performances, religious activities, site information sources, and other tourist facilities) as a place related to the Ramayana epic. According to the respondents, the low physical evidence of some Ramayana sites is a challenge to promote them to the existing Indian market and new tourist markets.

Considering the locations and ownerships of Ramayana sites in Sri Lanka several responsible authorities should be collaboratively joined with Ramayana tourism promotional campaigns. Many Sri Lankan Ramayana sites are located attached to Wildlife parks (Hortain plains), National parks (Ussangoda), UNESCO World Heritage sites (Sigiriya), Archaeological sites (Seetha fort-Gurulupotha, Ritigala, etc.), and other specific administrative areas under the local government. Thus, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, the Department of Archaeology, Central Cultural Fund, the Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Coastal Conservation Authority, the Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, the temple authorities, private landowners should collaboratively contribute on promotional campaigns of Ramayana tourism but, respondents have raised this as a challenge due to the un-matching policies of each party when they do promotional campaigns on above sites.

Recommendations and Conclusion:-

As per the findings of the primary data from qualitative structured interviews with Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, local tour operators, and travel agents; site based and organizational issues and challenges were identified on developing and promoting the Ramayana trail as a tourism product in Sri Lanka. Below recommendations can be given through this study;

Develop basic tourist services and infrastructure in Ramayana sites in a common standard as per the religious and cultural requirements of religious and Indian tourists is a fundamental recommendation of this study. Develop physical evidence of Ramayana sites with places of worship, sacred specialists, sacred daily performances, religious activities, site information sources, and other tourist facilities are the next essential recommendation of this study. Further, recognize the holistic religious and cultural value of Valmiki's Ramayana and the Rama-Ravana folklore in Sri Lanka and adopt them into Ramayana tourism; Recognize potential sites for Ramayana trail with the significance of both of Ramayana epic and local folklore; Recognize the most relevant contributors to implement Ramayana tourism and encourage them to involve in Ramayana tourism; Expand existing promotional campaigns in India and target other potential countries and provide training facilities for tourist guides and employees of travel agencies to enhance their specialized knowledge and skills on Ramayana tourism are can be summarized as core recommendations of this study.

'Ramayana Yathra', the tourism product promotes by Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau for the Indian market which has launched as 'Ramayana circuit' in 2004. According to the study, Sri Lanka has 16 years old experience in Ramayana tourism but the findings proved there are major issues and challenges on Ramayana tourism as a cultural tourism product. Lack of information, accessibilities, and infrastructure are the major issues and challenges that have been investigated by qualitative interviews and field observations. By implementing the given suggestions and improving consumer value, Ramayana tourism can be developed as a more profitable tourism product in Sri Lanka. There are possibilities for future studies by investigating the same case from the services sector such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, tour guiding, etc.

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