



# The significance of pilgrimage tourism to sustainable development with special reference to the Indian context

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## Abstract

Pilgrimage tourism has gained significant popularity and attention in India due to its significant deliverables including employment, national integration as well as foreign exchange earnings. The investment of the government for developing the national infrastructure has been evident, however, the concern towards environmental impact due to pilgrimage tourism has not been explicitly considered. This generated the requirement of sustainable development for safeguarding the environment as well as man-made resources including sacred temples and shrines. The proposed study has analyzed the issues and challenges of pilgrimage tourism and offered significant solutions to attain sustainable measures towards negative impact mitigation in India. The research methodology used for the proposed study integrated an inductive design through the use of case study or journal analysis in order to attain qualitative data. The major gap that has been identified in the past studies is they primarily focused on the significance of sustainable development in tourism but did not focus on pilgrimage tourism which this study has significantly fulfilled. In addition, the information based on pilgrimage tourism is very limited in past research studies. The findings of the study revealed that increasing accommodation facilities, dumping of waste in water bodies and landfills are creating significant threats to the environment. Hence, it is recommended that both governmental bodies and local agencies must align their objectives to develop sustainable practices. In addition, sustainable policies and strategies must be developed which must be followed explicitly by each individual.

**Keywords:** Pilgrimage tourism, sustainable measures, environmental development, India, Government.

## Introduction

Tourism represents the movement of people from one destination to another destination which is an economic, social and cultural phenomenon. It is a temporary movement of people to an outside destination or place. Tourism can be divided into four categories based on purposes including special interest, leisure, business, and education. On the other hand, the types of tourism include outbound, inbound and domestic tourism. As indicated by Page and Hall (2014), the evolution of Indian tourism policy was initiated after analyzing the advancement of tourism in the world. It has significant potential in generating required employment opportunities, national integration as well as foreign exchange earnings. In relation to the varying categories of tourism in India, pilgrimage tourism has gained significant importance over the past few years.



As stated by Gladstone (2013), pilgrimage tourism is a journey to a temple, shrine or other locations that are significant in the faiths and beliefs of the tourists. It can be also linked with religious tourism. It has been recorded in the business year 2017 that the government of India earned around 51,587 INR through Foreign Exchange Earnings due to pilgrimage tourism, (Reader, 2013). In addition, the revenue of the tourism and hospitality industry had risen by 5.1% in the same 2017, (Jafari and Scott, 2014).

However, there are several significant challenges associated with pilgrimage tourism in India including poor infrastructure, unstable political conditions, hygiene issues, misguiding of tourists, poor maintenance and lack of sustainable development which affects the growth of pilgrimage tourism in India. It is significant to adopt significant measures and strategies for promoting sustainable development specifically in the field of pilgrimage tourism in India in order to more effectively yield potential opportunities and growth associated with it.

On the other hand, due to some critical reasons including increasing accommodation facilities, creating deforestation, dumping of waste in water bodies and landfills requires immediate action for developing sustainable policies in India. Furthermore, specifically in this particular field of the domain, very limited research studies have been conducted in the past focusing on pilgrimage tourism and the need for sustainable development. Therefore, these are the motivating factors we attempt to address through this study.

### **Statement of the research problem**

In relation to the scope of the study, it has been ascertained that the majority of the researchers or analysts have primarily focused on the development of infrastructure and provided a deep insight about pilgrimage tourism in India. However, the concern about the degrading environmental scenario and increases in pollution due to lack of sustainable development policies and strategies by the government, has not been analyzed in the past research studies which are a significant part to consider. In addition, the need for developing sustainable measures for pilgrimage tourism is essential in India by developing significant carefully crafted policies. Hence, this study sought to significantly provide a detailed analysis of the need for sustainable development policies for pilgrimage tourism in India along with the issues associated with pilgrimage tourism.

Furthermore, significant solutions will also be provided for the development of sustainable measures for pilgrimage tourism which would assist policymakers and the government of India to comprehend and implement strategies that are suitable for growth and sustainable development.

### **Objectives of the study**

- To analyze the issues associated with pilgrimage tourism for sustainable development;
- To explore the needs and benefits associated with sustainable development in the field of pilgrimage tourism in India;
- To offer significant solutions for the development of sustainable measures for enhancing pilgrimage tourism in India.

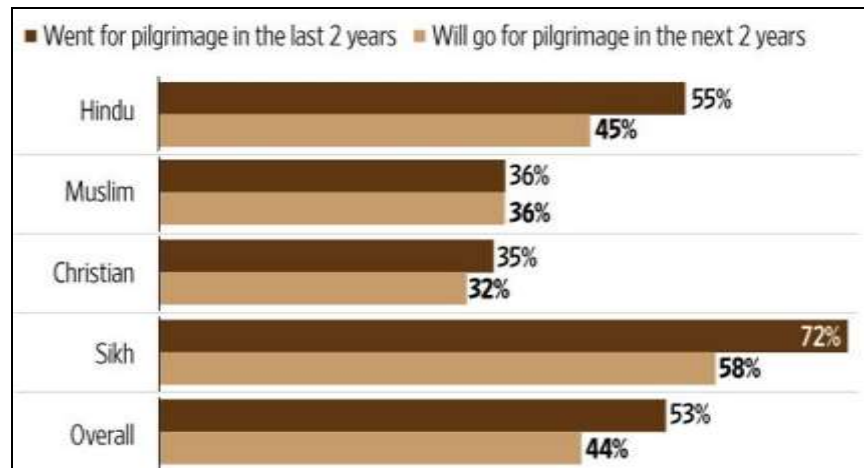
## Literature Review

### Pilgrimage Tourism

A pilgrimage is a ritual journey for visiting heritage sites in order to attain peace and *mukthi*. It is a place where transformation takes place and each step associated with it has significant meaning. In addition, Dhar, (2015) stated pilgrimage tourism has spiritual importance and falls under religious tourism. In India, socio-economic status and nationality play a major role in comprehending the purpose of pilgrim's behavior and tourist's behavior. It is understood that a high social income group is represented as tourists and low social income groups are represented as pilgrims. On the other hand, Sharpley and Telfer (2015) stated that the tourism department of India focuses primarily on recreational and business categories and has less focus aimed towards the development of pilgrimage tourism.

Nicolaides (2016) tells us that if there are deficits in marketing communication, poor infrastructure and other areas, this could deter the development of pilgrimage and religious tourism which is an enormous sector and niche market. Changes will consistently arise from the need to meet and exceed the requirements of travellers to holy sites as valued consumers (Raj, 2007).

Furthermore, the concern towards pilgrimage tourism for development in a sustainable way is greatly needed. As stated by MacCannell (2013), the importance of pilgrimage tourism in India is relatively high because the people of India are highly religious and cultural in nature. Hence, it is significant to maintain such infrastructure and safeguard the place as well. Fig. 1 depicts visitors who went for pilgrimage in the last 2 years i.e 2017 and 2018 and will go for pilgrimage in the next 2 years i.e. 2019 and 2020.



**Figure 1:** Flow of visits to pilgrimage in India  
Source: [www.insightsonindia.com](http://www.insightsonindia.com), 2019

### Tourism planning and development

As stated by Jamal and Camargo (2014), it is significant to develop strategies that would enhance the quality of service in tourism. In addition, the researchers stated that tourism

organizations, transportation, physical environment, services and information, and promotional activities need to be integrated for effective planning and development of tourism in any particular region. On the other hand, Smith, (2015) argued that a sustainable development plan is also required for managing the environmental issues associated with tourism. It has also been considered that there is a significant need for safeguarding cultural and historical places due to their heritage uniqueness and efforts need to be taken to prevent any physical destruction in order to facilitate effective maintenance of the various sites. Hence, it is imperative to preserve the cultural heritage along with environmental protection.

### Issues and concerns in pilgrimage tourism in India

As put forwarded by Ghimire (2013), a lack of concentration towards the environmental issues associated with pilgrimage tourism has created both air and water pollution in India. In addition, it has been also identified that the concern of government towards the development of infrastructure and physical environment of pilgrimage due to increasing numbers of foreign tourists is not well maintained, which affects the sustainability and viability of the places visited by tourists, depicted in Fig: 2. Based on the article proposed by Du Cros and McKercher (2014), ecological degradation, accommodation, tariffs, catering, water supply, sewage, and sanitation are also other major problems associated with pilgrimage tourism in India that seek immediate attention.

In addition, it has been also suggested by the researchers that it is significant to educate the visitors and prohibit any physical degradation to a place as well as creating effective travel regulations for mitigating negative impacts of tourism. Given that it is apparent from the marketing drives of travel agencies and tour operators as evidenced in the media that there is a large growth in what is termed the spirituality and religious market segment, pilgrimage tourism must be effectively conducted, wheter in India or elsewhere A useful description of a spiritual tourist, is that it refers to one who visits a specific place out of their usual environment, with the intention of increasing their level of spiritual meaning and thus spiritual growth (Nicolaides & Grobler, 2017), and India is an ideal place to do this given the abundance of shrines and temples, for example, in Haridwar and Rishikesh (Karar, 2010).

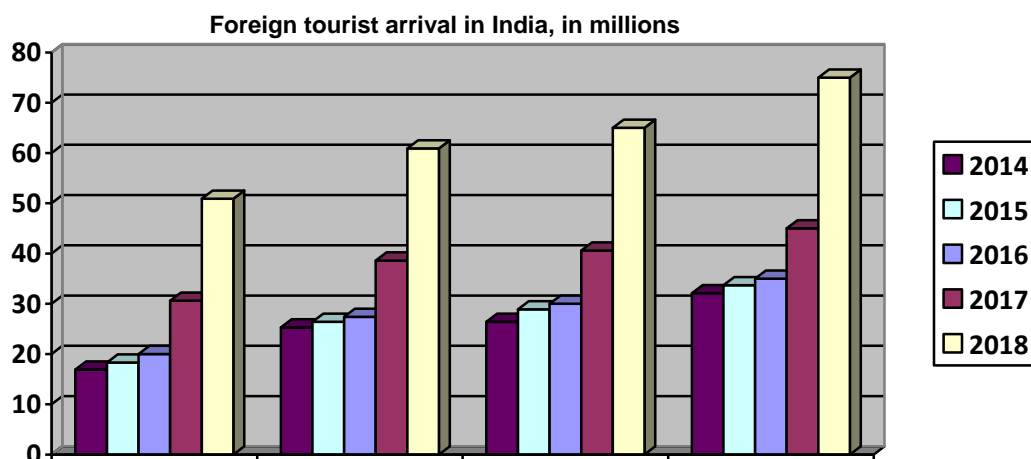
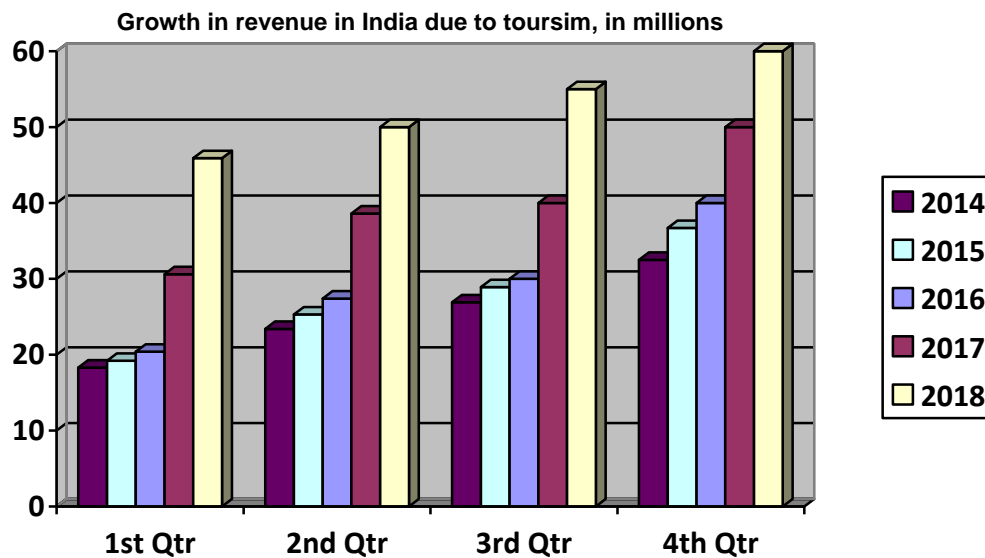


Figure 2: Growth of Foreign Tourist arrival in India for last five years  
Source: [www.tourism.gov.in](http://www.tourism.gov.in), 2019

## Measures towards sustainable development in tourism

As stated by Mair and Whitford (2013), the potential of tourism in India is significant due to its wide range of unique natural and cultural attractions. Specifically, it has been observed that the government of India is highly concerned about other environmental issues regarding pollution but has a very limited concern for the development of tourism, although tourism contributes to the major portion of revenue and economic growth, depicted in Fig: 3. It has been suggested by Rao and Suresh (2013), that appropriate policies and strategies need to be framed in order to attain sustainable development in tourism with the integration of both the tourism department and citizens. In addition, safeguarding the environment including infrastructure, water, air, and land, is highly relevant for the tourism department in India in order to manage masses of tourists and attract them to perhaps return for future trips and promote India by word of mouth.



**Figure 3:** Growth in revenue due to the tourism industry in India for last five years  
Source: [www.tourism.gov.in](http://www.tourism.gov.in), 2019

## Significance of pilgrimage tourism in India

As stated by Shinde (2019), the magnitude of visitation to pilgrimage centers in India has increased due to their enhanced accessibility as well as the availability of motorized transport.

## Spirituality, Wellness Tourism and Quality of Life

The increase in the number of visitors to India has led to an increase in volume as well as qualitative changes which are evident in modern pilgrimage travel requests to various organizations in the industry by prospective visitors. It has been identified by the researchers that the key elements including motivation and destination in contemporary pilgrimage travel depict the presence of recreational and religious features. In addition, meaningful policies must be incorporated for developing sustainable measures to mitigate the possible and likely negative impacts of such tourism.



## **Current gap in the literature**

In relation to the literature, it has been identified that most of the research studies have highlighted the significance of sustainable development in tourism. However, none of them highlighted the need for such development specifically in pilgrimage tourism, except for Nicolaidis (2016) which the present study intends to increase upon. On the other hand, very limited information has been analyzed in the literature depicting the issues associated with pilgrimage tourism specifically towards environmental concerns. Based on such a context, the present study analyzed the issues associated with pilgrimage tourism and offered significant strategies to integrate sustainable development measures. In addition, the link between pilgrimage tourism and sustainable development has not been considered in past research studies in a detailed manner specifically in India which is also a potential gap identified in the literature.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Philosophy**

As put forwarded by Tuckman and Harper (2012), research philosophy can be categorized into Interpretive, Positivistic or Realism paradigms.

### **The justification for the use of a positivistic approach**

In relation to the scope of the study, the use of positivism as a philosophy has been utilized by the researcher. The use of this approach assisted in the gathering of potential information from past studies and has helped to develop significant measures to attain the overall objective of the study. In addition, it assisted the researcher to comprehend the causal relationship between theories and observable instances while analyzing data in the present study.

### **Research design**

As stated by Kolb (2012), research design can be segregated into Descriptive, Exploratory and Explanatory designs.

### **The justification for the use of an exploratory research design**

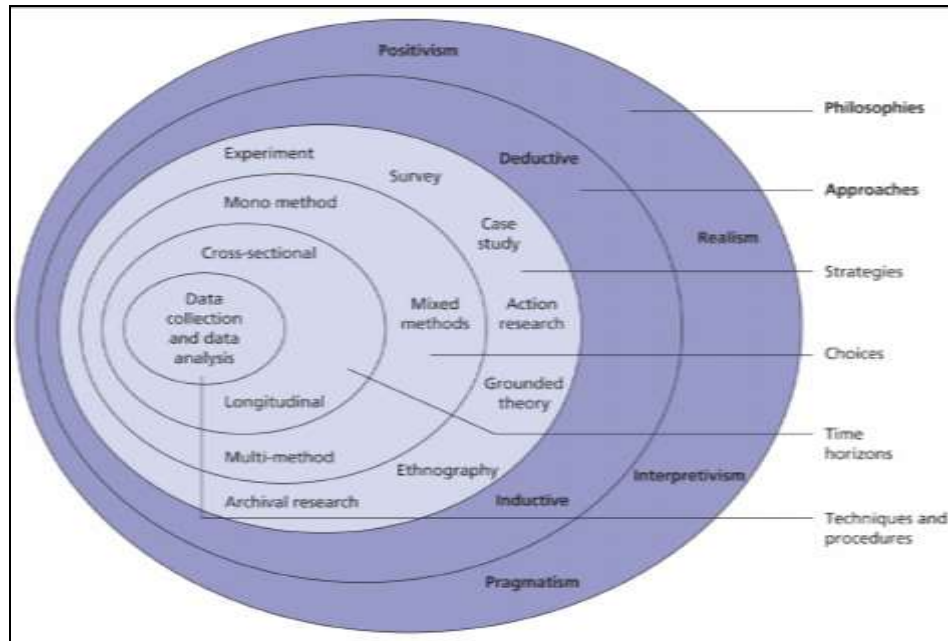
Based on the scope of the present study, the use of an exploratory design was selected by the researcher. It has assisted the researcher to analyze the secondary resources through a case study analysis based on articles, suitable websites and academic journals. The researcher thus formulated a qualitative analysis of the study.

### **Research approach**

Kothari (2014), suggested two kinds of approaches- Inductive and Deductive.

### **The justification for the use of the inductive approach**

In relation to the scope of the present study, the use of the deductive approach has been significantly applied by the researcher for building an efficient qualitative framework. In addition, it has assisted the researcher to use credible resources for fulfilling the objective of the study as well as for the gap identified. Therefore, the researcher opted to this approach for this study.



**Figure 4:** Research Onion  
Source: Saunders et al. 2012

### **Data type used**

As stated by Kuada (2012), the data type can be divided into either a primary data type or a secondary data type.

### **The justification for the use of secondary resources**

As the study is based on qualitative aspects, the use of secondary resources was made by the researcher by the gathering of relevant data from past research studies and credible resources.

### **Data collection methods**

As stated by Tufford and Newman (2012), data collection methods can be categorized into experiment, case study analysis, survey, and grounded theory.

### **The justification for the use of case study analysis**

Based on the scope of the present study, the researcher utilized the case study approach. This approach has assisted the researcher to gather relevant sources of evidence to fulfill the objectives of the present study,

### **Ethical aspects**

As stated by Kumar and Phrommathed (2015), it is essential to maintain ethical aspects in attaining data for the study. In relation to such context, the researcher has significantly maintained ethical standards for gathering the data in order to deduce appropriate results and has for example, not plagiarized willfully or unintentionally. No data was reworked to suit any agenda.



## Findings

In considering Shinde (2018), it is clear that the policy framework and governance mechanisms in India for religious or pilgrimage tourism are not adequate. In addition, the complexities that have been raised due to the transformation from traditional pilgrimage practices to a modern religious tourism economy have created significant tensions. It has been identified by the researcher that at the local level, the management of the tourism department is highly conscious about its promotional and management style and processes, but they do not address the negative environmental impacts in any sense. Furthermore, the researcher has observed that there is an institutional gap in dealing with the direct and indirect impacts of religious or pilgrimage tourism in India including systematic and structural problems. In addition, it has been also evaluated that due to the increase in the number of agencies under the tourism government structures, the problems based on environmental concerns are not being considered as they should be. Challenges including congestion, huge crowds and high densities create significant pollution which is not considered by the religious actors. Hence, there is a significant need to align religious actors and government agencies to step forward from the traditional platform and attain sustainable pilgrimage tourism in India.

Based on the study conducted by Vijay (2016), it is clear that conservation of the environment is one of the major concerns of tourism regulators. It has been well depicted in the study that in pilgrimage tourism, the concern of tourists and religious actors towards the environment is relatively low. In addition, the focus on service quality is far more when compared to the environmental and infrastructural quality.

The dumping of waste extracted from the temples in water and land sites, increases pollution to inordinate levels, leads to deforestation and degrades the environment in general. Hence, it has been well suggested by the researcher in the article that the policymakers and tourist sector must invest in enhancing environmental quality in the sustainable utilization of man-made and local natural resources. In addition, the responsibility of government, voluntary organizations, and the private sector needs to be aligned for developing sustainable measures for preserving the man-made infrastructure including temples, shrine, etc. which are the major elements of pilgrimage in order to reduce the negative impacts and offer greater benefits to local residents and preserve sites for future generations to enjoy. The environmental challenges including the dumping of waste and air pollution due to rituals must be addressed for developing sustainability in pilgrimage tourism.

On the other hand, the study conducted by Patange et al. (2013) highlighted the challenges associated with pilgrimage centers towards the environment. The researcher found that as the number of tourists in India is gradually increasing each year, it is necessary to cater more effectively and efficiently to a large number of pilgrims. This certainly put significant pressure on the local natural resources for the development of infrastructure, including accommodation for serving the pilgrims and the way this affects the physical environment.

The researcher found that the major impact on the environment due to pilgrimage tourism includes stress on basic services such as water supply, degradation of natural resources and increases in pollution specifically in peak seasons. Furthermore, the disposal of wastewater and issues of sewerage into the natural ecosystem is also a critical issue requiring urgent attention. On the other hand, solid waste including plastic, bags, food items, flowers as well as sand and silt from sweeping the streets are dumped openly at the nearby landfills or in water bodies affecting the entire environment critically and often irreparably.





## **Conclusion**

After analyzing the findings of the study, it can be stated that the pilgrimage tourism has a significant impact on the environment and the natural ecosystem in India. It has been identified that pilgrimage tourism offers growth and revenue towards the economy of a country but its adverse impact on the environment requires the stakeholders to analyze and needs to be addressed.

Challenges including increasing accommodation facilities, dumping of waste in water bodies and landfills are creating a significant threat to the environment. The growth in urbanization due to the increase in tourist inflows into pilgrimage centers has gained significant consideration from government and religious actors, but the threats associated with the environment have not been focused on enough yet (Shinde, 2008; Nicolaidis, 2016). The challenges and threats that are induced due to pilgrimage tourism need to be considered by tourists, citizens and governmental bodies and others involved, by attaining common objectives and developing sustainable measures in order to mitigate such negative aspects as discussed earlier, more critically relating to the environment. “The UNWTO have defined religious tourism as a kind of tourism that reflects itself with socially responsible actions by respecting the sacred and thorough stewardship of sacred sites (2011)” (Cited in Bayih, 2018).

Religious tourism is a very effective way to drive the notion of inclusive and sustainable development (Nicolaidis, 2016). It increases awareness of heritage, which benefits in ensuring religious and cultural preservation. Religious heritage sites are sources of public education, identity and the engender great pride in locals and create needed job opportunities (Nicolaidis & Grobler, 2017). Local communities, if involved are able to be developed and empowered, but they should be wholly involved and integrated into the tourism experience in their area. Religious tourism breaks down intolerance and bridges gaps between diverse peoples.

## **Recommendations or solutions**

It is imperative to frame significant policies and strategies for sustainable development in pilgrimage tourism which should be followed by every member of the country including external visitors. In addition, the objective to safeguard the environment and reduce pollution for sustainable development must be aligned by both government and local agencies for making such implementation possible and putting it into effect. On the other hand, education needs to be provided to the visitors and local agencies for comprehending the various issues associated with pilgrimage tourism. Furthermore, prohibition of certain materials or activities needs to be done by the government towards elimination of the prime cause of pollution including plastics, waste disposal, water disposal and air pollution created through rituals at temples. This would certainly assist to safeguard the environment as well as lead to sustainable development along with preservation of man-made objects of value and resources.

## **Limitations of the study**

The first limitation of the study was that it was based on only a qualitative study and does not integrate the quantitative aspect of the study which means one could not generalize the results. This certainly opens a scope of future research with the use of quantitative data and resources. The second limitation was the complete study was based in India. Hence, its viability for other countries and pilgrimage tourism areas is not entirely applicable. This also opens the scope for future research. Lastly, the third limitation was the limited time and budget for the study. However, such limitations did not affect the researchers in seeking to attain the overall objectives of the present study.



### Scope for future research

The viability of this research for other countries and pilgrimage tourism opens the scope for future additional research initiatives. The quantitative aspect of the study is also a scope for future research with the use of quantitative resources for attaining more generalized results. The demographic variables could be also integrated and accessed accordingly for developing accurate results based on the particular research area. It is also a significant scope for future research.

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