

# SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN INDIA: NARRATIVES OF PILGRIMS

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## ABSTRACT

India has become one of the prominent destinations for spiritual tourism with several international tourists visiting multiple spiritual tourist sites for their spiritual or religious fulfilment. Limited research exists that investigate in depth what really motivates an individual to take on a spiritual journey. Literature also demands enrichment in terms of challenges or barriers to a spiritual tourism. Feedback from the pilgrims can help shrine administration to effectively utilise the donor money in improving the facilities during the journey and experience of the spiritual tourist. Through this paper, we make an effort to address this gap by conducting in-depth interviews of pilgrims of two most prominent spiritual tourism sites in North India, analysing their narratives using interpretative methods. We present pilgrim's feedback on the motivational aspects of their spiritual tourism as well as challenges encountered during the journey. Feedback from them is reported for enhanced experience.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Tourism, India, Narratives, Pilgrims, Experience

## INTRODUCTION

India has been attracting foreign tourists striving to quench their spiritual thirsts by visiting spiritual sites across India. Limited research exists that investigate in depth what really motivates an individual to take on a spiritual journey. On the other hand, challenges or barriers to such a decision also needs researchers' attention. The donor money goes into the accounts of shrine administration that has to be applied to the facilities improving the journey and experience of the spiritual tourist. However, there has been little discussion about role of administration in enhancing the experience of pilgrims. The very nature of research concerning spiritual tourism, being exploratory, demands understanding of several behavioural aspects of pilgrims. Thus, a qualitative study is more appropriate. Most of the prior work is of discussion nature while an empirical and qualitative research highlighting actual experiences of the pilgrims will prove fruitful to providing practical solutions to the stated under-studied aspects. The research problem that we address through this paper is, *"How the understanding of donor money into improving the pilgrims' experiences of shrines can*

*be achieved so as to increase the spiritual tourism in India, overcoming the existing challenges faced by pilgrims*". The data on which the discussion is based comprises of responses recorded during in-depth interviews. Our paper presents an innovative view of spiritual tourism in context of India, taking into account, two most visited spiritual sites in India: Sri Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar ( Punjab) and Mata Vaishno Devi, Katra (J&K). The originality of our research lies in the fact that the actual experiences and views of the pilgrims are analysed using interpretative methodologies. This paper also discusses in detail several aspects of pilgrims' preferences concerning their journey, e.g. accommodation, mode of transport, preference of stay for accommodation, and preference for places providing meals. The aim of this study is to clarify several aspects of spiritual tourism and what pilgrims expect when they visit spiritual sites in India.

We present a brief overview of religion and spirituality; pilgrimage, religious and spiritual tourism. Second, spiritual tourism with respect to India is discussed. Third, spiritual sites undertaken for this study are introduced. Fourth, methodology used for this research is discussed. Fifth, discussion includes narrative analysis of responses. Sixth, conclusion gives critique of the findings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Pilgrimage, Religious Tourism and Spiritual tourism**

Barber, 1991 defined pilgrimage as "a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding" (p. 1). Wiltshier,

2011 mentions that "religious tourism may be conceived as the ways in which religious sites relate to visitors' needs" (p. 251). Norman, 2011 defined spiritual tourism "As tourism characterized by a self-conscious project of spiritual betterment" (p. 20). Jutla, 2002 in their research examined the role of pilgrimage in Sikh community. He refers, "pilgrimage to a journey that is motivated by religion or spirituality and plays a significant role in almost all world religions" (p. 65). (Gupta, 1999) finds that every year, presumably a large number of devotees (approx. 9.3 million) visit Haridwar and Rishikesh situated in hilly areas of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh respectively. Devereux & Carnegie, 2006 explored how the posterior sustained remoulding of individual and happiness of the community can be benefitted by the experience of pilgrimage. They highlighted that individuals having religious experiences compared to the individuals having no experience, indicated that the journey is tough sometimes but it has a positive effect on their health, happiness and also, they renew themselves, learn new things which they can implement in their daily lives. Pandya, 2015 focused on how the contribution can be made to the happiness and mental well-being by worshipping Mata Vaishno Devi and taking effortful pilgrimage on a regular basis. The findings indicated that adhesion to Mata Vaishno Devi and by engaging in pilgrimage on annual basis, devotees are blessed with good health and happiness. Okumus et al., 2015 explored the ways in which religious tolerance is fostered by religious tourism in India. Findings indicated that degree of tolerance is increased when the individuals travel from

their own choice, their purpose is to search for meaning and to discover new possibilities from other ethnicities and faith. In the context of North India, (Shinde, 2007) found that participants had a very strong motivation to get a glimpse of all the places in Braj but in a very short period of time. According to Cheer et al., 2017 spiritual tourism have many meanings attached to it and includes many different categories enveloping practices like music festivals, meditation, yoga and such related activities. Kujawa, 2017 emphasized the relevance of placing of pilgrimage within the constraints of accepted religions, in which case the spiritual tourism is effectuated more when individuals wish to have spiritual experiences and self-development rather than focusing on conventional religious outlook. Robledo, 2015 finds that the first and the prime categorization of spiritual tourism must be based on 'religious' and 'secular' attributes. In religious tourism, tourists believe a specific religion and motive of their journey is basically of a 'religious' nature and modern form is secular spiritual tourism that has appeared as an outcome of the requirement of sceptics for addressing the innately one's necessity of spirituality.

## **INDIA: A PROMINENT DESTINATION FOR SPIRITUAL TOURISM / SPIRITUAL TOURISM IN INDIA**

As per (Warrier, 2003), motivations of devotees for seeking out gurus can be depicted by their want of fulfilling wish or their expectations for spiritual growth. Focusing on the spiritual tourism in India, (Medhekar & Haq, 2012)

concluded that India has a considerable prospective for marketing spiritual tourism for both the domestic and foreign travellers. And also, there is a need to market spiritual tourism circuit as a national asset but not as a religious travel product and it should be a universal faith based product. According to Norman, 2011 numerous western tourists visit India for practicing yoga, attending meditation courses, retreating or for listening to various gurus and spiritual masters teach on subjects related to the body, the mind, the spirit and the nature of being. Jauhari, 2010 in their work reviewed the question related to the spiritual tourism for enhancing the experience of pilgrims in India. Their findings indicated that infrastructure needs to be handled properly, connectivity and transportation problems should be resolved. Some more problems were found related to 'traffic handling, hygiene, sanitation, queues in the main shrines and place of worship' and also there is a need for educated guides.

Taking this research question further, in this paper, we explored the pilgrims' attitude towards pilgrimage experience, identified problem areas which can then be translated into some improvements that could be implemented by shrine administration, as suggested by pilgrims.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study requires deep understanding of the psychological and devotional feelings of the pilgrims visiting the religious or spiritual sites undertaken for the study. As the subject is still evolving, current exploratory study will seek to bridge this gap by providing perceptual analysis of pilgrims regarding the motivational aspects of visiting, challenges faced and measures taken by

shrine administration for improving the tourists experience. For this purpose, a qualitative underpinning of their emotions was considered relevant by the researchers so we analysed the collected responses qualitatively and presented them in interpretative and narrative manner. We chose two such sites from North India attracting spiritual tourists all-round the year. First of them is, Sri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar (Punjab) and the other one is also very popular among spiritual tourists, i.e. Mata Vaishno Devi, Katra (J&K). Sixty eight (68) respondents participated in the study enthusiastically about Sri Darbar Sahib however, responses of sixty seven (67) participants were recorded for Mata Vaishno Devi. The in-depth interviews were administered by the researchers themselves and prior visit to the said places were a pre-requisite for the interviews. The interviews were administered personally or over the phone call after receiving the consent of the participants over the email. Several probing questions were asked out of a check list prepared by researchers to the respondents for in depth discussion of the subject.

### **The narratives are mainly interpreted and categorized into three main themes**

1. Motivational aspects of pilgrims,
2. Challenges faced during the pilgrimage, and
3. Administration's role in enhancing tourists' overall experience of pilgrimage. These narratives and interpretations will help in developing these places into more organised spiritual tourist places for their enhanced overall pilgrimage experience. This paper will also present some strategies for the administration to reduce the tourists hassles and enhance their quality of pilgrimage.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Narratives : Pilgrims of Golden temple, Amritsar**

#### ***Background***

Out of the 68 respondents, 47 were Sikhs, 20 Hindus and one respondent did not specify the religion. All the participants travel to Golden Temple to acquaint themselves with the sanctified aura of the temple. Majority of the respondents visit Golden Temple once in a year and plan their trip for at least two days. Reportedly participants liked to visit Golden temple all through the year especially during Gurupurabs (Sikh festivals). The most preferred mode of travelling from native place was Train or personal car while for accommodation they stayed in the Gurudwara inn's or hotels. Other attractions around Amritsar include- hall bazar, Jallianwala Bagh, a place associated with Amritsar Massacre(1919) and Wagah Border where tourists gather to experience beating retreat ceremony by the Indian Army.

#### **Motivational aspects of pilgrims**

Majority of participants are motivated to find solace, inner peace and devotion as they are touched by the peaceful atmosphere of the temple. Learning gurbani and relaxation stands as another major reason to visit Golden Temple because individuals come to this place by disconnecting themselves from their busy lives, feeling relaxed by listening to the Kirtan and letting their souls purified by sitting in a positive environment. Golden Temple is also visited to find purpose and meaning in life as this is the place where pilgrims can connect themselves spiritually and can understand what they are living for and what is their actual purpose of living this life. Teachings of the Sikh

Gurus is said to add meaning to the life of the pilgrims. Another reason to visit Golden Temple as reported by respondents is family bonding over the trip where the members of the family come together to connect themselves spiritually, keeping themselves away from their day to day worries and stress. Majority of the respondents feel divine energy inside the Golden Temple by praying to Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Some of the respondents also mentioned that even the lost souls find a way back to their path after listening to gurbani while sitting inside the temple. The Kirtan played inside the temple gives peace and happiness as it brings positive vibes through which the souls get purified and pilgrims dive into the ocean of higher spirituality.

When asked about what brings people from all the religions to visit the Golden Temple the respondents mentioned about the inclusive nature of Sikhism as pilgrims from other religions also look for bringing in positive change in their lives by following teachings of the Sikh gurus. Secondly, beauty of the temple also attracts people from other religions to visit as the temple is embraced by the lake and the grand top of the temple is built by pure gold. "The serenity and calmness of this place lets you discover all over again" – a number of respondents were quoted saying. A set of respondents also mentioned that visiting this place, one discovers inner purity and peace of mind by the calm and serene environment of the temple. Golden temple is not only for Sikhs but for entire human race, as represented by the four entrances of the shrine which are always open to pilgrims from all religions. Majority of the respondents bath in sacred water and also they were found to be fond of the langar offered in Guru's kitchen.

**Many a respondents believed that the Amritsar Sarovar has the healing powers because it is the sacred holy water which is blessed to cure the diseases of the patients, especially skin diseases. Challenges faced during the pilgrimage**

Some of the respondents who did not know Gurmukhi language found it a bit difficult to understand the meaning of gurbani being recited. Some respondents were not sure whether they like the strict rules inside, e.g. remaining head covered all through the gurudwara visit, wearing decent clothes and maintaining sanctity of the place by keeping mobile phones on silent. Most of the respondents appreciated the natives for guiding the pilgrims properly while some reported discomfort in interacting with natives due to language problem as all of them mostly spoke in Punjabi.

Some of the respondents mentioned that during peak season (e.g. summer vacations or gurupurabs) the enhanced wait time in the entry queue is very demotivating. One of the respondent was quoted saying, *"As an old fellow, It is very difficult for me to keep standing in the entry queue for 2-3 hours. On the other hand, I do not feel like bypassing the queue as it would make me feel guilty of not having done enough to do darshan. If something could be done to systemize the queue, it would be of great help. Though the queue is much more organised now as lots of sevadars operate it fairly"*.

Usually very few pilgrims get to sit inside the temple due to paucity of space so pilgrims who visit from outside the state or even country may feel a little disappointed for not having seated inside the premises. The respondents who found a place to sit inside the premises, could enjoy kirtan and gurbani, felt immensely blissful.

### **Administration role in enhancing tourists overall experience of pilgrimage**

The Golden Temple also has the largest community kitchen which provides food to more than 70,000 visitors per day. A small number of participants indicated that there is wastage of food during langar seva and administration can look after it. Although a proper system of cleaning of the floors after each pangat is really remarkable, there are still some people who tend to waste food served in langar. Administration can put stricter controls on such people so as to maintain sanctity of the place. Increased safety for the pilgrims during night will also encourage more pilgrims to enjoy the beauty of the place during night. The administration can devise some mechanism into inside seating so that every pilgrim gets a fair chance to enjoy inside beauty and serenity of the shrine.

### **Narratives: Pilgrims of Vaishno Devi, Katra Background**

The in-depth interviews with the visitors of Mata Vaishno-devi gave several insights on the travelling behaviour of the pilgrims for the holy place. Majority of the respondents travelled to Katra (where sacred shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is located) through train as direct trains from Delhi to Katra are accessible while others preferred travelling through car, bus or airplane. Most of the respondents travelled with their family as the purpose behind travel mostly is religious and spiritual attainment.

Many respondents visited Vaishno Devi between March and October. The respondents expressed several emotions about their feelings and experiences inside the temple- *“The atmosphere was very peaceful, positive, calm and it is a great experience to be away from the city chaos*

*around the mountains, where there are so many enthusiastic and spiritual pilgrims all around.”*

Another respondent mentioned, *“Continuously chanting “Jai Mata Di” gives positive vibes, enthusiasm for completing the difficult journey”* Some of the older pilgrims took poney or helicopter services to reach the Bhawan. Respondents indicated that the weather was cold yet pleasing at the time of their visit.

### **Motivational aspects of pilgrims**

Majority of the respondents visited the holy place for “Mata Ke Darshan”, while some also visited for mental peace. A respondent stated *“Due to poor health that respondent’s mother had asked the respondent to visit Mata Vaishno devi on her behalf as she believed that even if someone visits the shrine and prays for her on her behalf, she will get the benefit and cured from the disease”*

Another respondent visited there to fulfil his vows. It is believed by the pilgrims that every wish gets fulfilled by visiting and praying at the sacred temple of Mata Vaishno Devi. Many people visit shrine with their families as they all can spend quality time together and can also connect themselves spiritually.

Pilgrims reported that all their problems of life fade away when they visit the holy shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi. They also quoted of feeling relieved after having Darshan of Mata Vaishno Devi. Another major motivation reported by them is to seek blessings as pilgrims believe that when a devotee prays with true heart then he or she gets blessed in three different ways by three pindies inside the cave. Starting from the left, first pindi is of goddess Saraswati which gives sagacity and knowledge, second pindi is of goddess Lakshmi which glorifies one with success, good health and wealth and pindi

is of goddess Kali which grants potency and certitude.

### **Challenges faced during the pilgrimage**

The journey to the shrine is quite challenging as it is located in the hills and those walking up to the shrine may require places to rest and refreshments to eat. Some of the respondents mentioned that restrooms could be better managed and cleaned. Availability of clean drinking water and eatables at several points during the journey will make the overall experience very comfortable for the pilgrims. Respondents also mentioned that since there are a number of visitors to the holy place the temple remains crowded which also increases waiting time in the entry queue. The respondent also mentioned about special Pooja “Shradha Suman Vaishano Pooja” which is chargeable on per person basis so only limited number of pilgrims get opportunity to attend Aarti Darshan of the Goddess.

The whole procedure of Aarti takes nearly two hours during which the darshans remains suspended resulting in a lot of difficulty for pilgrims’. Navratra and summer holidays are reportedly the peak season where more than 50,000 pilgrims visit the maa vaishno devi temple, again a challenging task for shrine administration to manage such crowd while making their experience of pilgrimage a memorable one. Considering hilly terrain and challenging climatic conditions, many a pilgrims face medical issues during their pilgrimage. Provision of adequate medical assistance to all the devotees who require it becomes a challenging task for shrine administration.

### **Administration role in enhancing tourists overall experience of pilgrimage**

Administration has started the process of creating different routes for ponies and pilgrims on foot. Administration may also look for making arrangements to reduce the journey time overall. The availability of cloakrooms in the temple can be increased so as to meet the needs of the pilgrims. Although Shrine Boards has subsidised langar with no profit, no loss on every few km on the way to Mandir, it may still utilise shrine donation funds in creating more bhojnalayas and restrooms for the pilgrims so as to add more convenience to their journey. Medical facilities are also provided by shrine board from well qualified doctors at every 2-3 km enroute the temple. In case of medical emergency, the facility of Ambulance is also available at Adhkuwari. Facility of trip to temple through helicopters is also made available for pilgrims who can afford it. A new ropeway system has just been started from the Vaishno Devi Bhavan to the Bhairon Baba Mandir, which has reduced the time to just 3 minutes and carry nearly 500 people every hour. The donation amount charged for separate categories of poojan is used for creating welfare facilities for the devotees.

### **CONCLUSION**

The primary objective of this paper was to analyse the motivational aspects and challenges faced by pilgrims. It was also intended to look at the shrine administration’s role briefly to improve the overall pilgrimage experience. This paper provide deep rooted emotions of pilgrims about their spiritual tours to the holy places under study, e.g. how they find inner

peace or their beliefs about getting cured by praying inside the shrine etc. We also present some challenges faced by pilgrims during their journey for which they suggested some measures that could be taken by shrine administration. Overall this paper explores the spiritual and religious feelings of pilgrims and motivational aspects of their visits. It gives opportunity to the shrine administration to improve upon the

facilities by considering the suggestions of the pilgrims, thus contributing towards better visitor experience and enhanced spiritual tourism for the said places. Future research can closely look for the desired improvements in the pilgrimage for both these places. Future research can also attempt to generalize these findings to the other Indian shrines located at states other than North Indian states.

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