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Opportunities, challenges, and sustainable development of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Religious tourism has been widespread across the globe since ancient times. In a country like India, which boasts a rich diversity of religions and cultures, religious tourism plays a crucial role in the socio-economic development and the preservation of cultural heritage. India is home to numerous religious sites and destinations belonging to different faiths. These sites are spread across various states, with Himachal Pradesh being one of them. Religious tourism significantly influences the socio-economic and cultural fabric of this hilly state, nestled in the Western Himalayas. Owing to its abundance of religious sites, Himachal Pradesh accounts for a substantial share of religious tourism in India. This descriptive study explores religious tourism and its impacts, focusing on various sacred sites within this mountainous region. It examines how religious tourism has shaped local communities, its growth, and the challenges involved in maintaining and developing religious tourism. Through a comprehensive analysis, this study highlights the opportunities and risks associated with religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh. Furthermore, it offers suggestions and recommendations to promote religious tourism in a sustainable manner, considering the ecological and environmental aspects of this hill state.

Keywords: Religious tourism, Himachal Pradesh, economic impacts, cultural heritage and challenges

Introduction

The tourism sector is progressing daily, comprising various segments, one of which is religious tourism. Religious tourism refers to the segment where individuals or groups travel to sacred places for spiritual significance. It is known by different names such as faith tourism, sacred tourism, or pilgrimage tourism. Religious tourism is vital for preserving shared heritage and often overlaps with educational tourism (Nolan & Nolan, 1992) ^[22], where visitors learn about the history of different religions through visits to religious sites and monuments. Activities within religious tourism include pilgrimage (a journey to a significant religious site, such as Amarnath Yatra, Mansarovar Yatra, Shri Khand Mahadev Yatra, and Manimahesh Yatra for Hindus), missionaries (individuals promoting their religion in a specific area), and religious sightseeing (visiting religious locations for knowledge and connection, regardless of personal faith). Historically, religious tourism has been widespread globally since ancient times (Sahrpley & Sundaram, 2005; Turner & Turener, 1978) ^[28, 38]. Today, it is often intertwined with leisure and cultural tourism (Canoves *et al.*). People frequently organise pilgrimage trips within their local regions during leisure days. Religious tourism is closely linked with social and group tourism. Its study is multidisciplinary, attracting researchers from various fields (Turner & Turner, 1978) ^[38]. It has socio-economic and cultural impacts, affecting global trade and health. Its spatial significance is reflected in the number of pilgrims visiting religious sites annually; for example, 28 million Hindus travel to the holy river Ganga in India (Kreiner, 2010) ^[15]. The primary aim of this research article is to offer an understanding of religious tourism within the context of Himachal Pradesh.

Literature Review

Sites for pilgrimages are frequently regarded as "landscapes of hope," drawing tourists even

in times of global crisis and rarely experiencing a sustained drop in visitors (K. A. Shinde & Olsen, 2022) ^[30]. Religious tourism is not confined to a nation, but allows movement from one nation to another. It involves people from different nationalities and religions and is an international phenomenon. UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) has estimated that about 600 million people travel annually on religious pilgrimages, with 300-330 million of those people going to the world's most renowned spiritual sites ("Tourism can protect and promote religious heritage | UN Tourism", n.d.). Smith (1992) ^[33] pointed out that religious tourism and tourism have different focuses because the former involves travelling to religious places while the latter involves vacation journeys. However, in the universal view, travellers, both pilgrims and tourists, generally share the same infrastructure and facilities. Spirituality, peace, and religious devotion are the main motivations for visitors; however, architectural and cultural interests also play a big role (Talukdar & Malakar, 2025) ^[34]. Sacred places have evolved into multifunctional sites, simultaneously developing various recreational activities that combine nature and culture (Canoves *et al.*). The famous pilgrimage sites encourage the development of infrastructure, income and employment generation in the rural areas besides them (D. H. Sharma & Jain, 2023) ^[26]. Beyond their religious significance, temples serve as important economic hubs, bringing in large sums of money from donations, tourism, and cultural events. These funds boost local economies by empowering communities, creating jobs, and developing infrastructure (S. Sharma & Behera, 2025) ^[27]. Nonreligious economic activities, including shops selling religious goods, play a significant role in both the pilgrimage economy and the expression of religiousness (K. Shinde, 2022) ^[30].

Religious sites play a significant role in social and economic sustainability by promoting collaboration among stakeholders, supporting local economies, and aiding in the preservation of cultural and natural heritage (Romanelli *et al.*, 2021) ^[25]. Religious tourism can help India's economy grow, preserve its culture, and improve its image around the world, especially as the country works to rebuild its tourism industry after COVID-19 (Bhadeshiya & Prajapati, 2024) ^[5]. Although religious tourism is a significant economic driver that increases income, employment, and infrastructure development, unrestrained growth leads to societal issues like the loss of cultural identity, pollution, overpopulation, and environmental harm (Gambhir *et al.*, 2021) ^[7]. The Himalayas, renowned for their serene natural environment and rich spiritual traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism, provide life-altering experiences that enhance both physical and mental well-being through practices like yoga, meditation, and Ayurveda. Spiritual destinations in these regions encourage sustainable practices that raise awareness of the environment and local cultures by cultivating ethical principles, mindfulness, and a strong bond with nature (Arora *et al.*, 2023) ^[2].

Research Methodology

Data for the present study was collected from past studies. The authors used keywords such as religious tourism,

pilgrimage tourism, and religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh to find articles related to religious tourism. Second, these keywords were used to find articles on the Google Scholar database. Then, the qualitative content analysis was used to study the secondary data collected from these resources.

Religious Sites and Attractions of Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh, a beautiful state in India's North and an attractive tourist destination, is situated in the Western Himalayas, with a varied range of elevations from 300 meters to 6,000 meters above sea level. Himachal Pradesh, renowned for its splendid mountains, placid lakes, and picturesque landscapes, has become a favoured tourist spot. Popularly known as "Dev Bhoomi," it has numerous religious attractions, predominantly from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Along with a serene environment, these sites offer tourists a unique cultural experience. Pilgrims and tourists from India and across the globe visit the magnificent temples to see and dive into the state's rich cultural heritage. ("Himachal Pradesh Technical Institutions Introduce New Age." n.d.).

Himachal Pradesh's religious sites include Hindu temples, Buddhist monasteries, and other spiritual locations, each contributing uniquely to the state's tourism profile. The Bajreshwari Devi Temple, located near Kangra, and the Baijnath Temple are notable Hindu pilgrimage sites that continue to attract devotees and tourists, underscoring the enduring significance of Hindu religious traditions in the region. (*Pilgrimage - Government of Himachal Pradesh, India*, n.d.-c). Additionally, the Hiramā Devi Temple in Kullu exemplifies the state's diverse religious landscape, serving as a major pilgrimage destination and reinforcing the cultural significance of religious sites in Himachal Pradesh (Bansal *et al.*, 2023) ^[3].

The Buddhist circuit in Himachal Pradesh further enhances the religious tourism offer, with monasteries that predate modern tourism and demonstrate the historical spread of Buddhism in the area. These monasteries not only serve religious purposes but also draw visitors interested in the spiritual and historical aspects of Buddhism in the Himalayas (Shinde, K. A., 2022) ^[30].

Research indicates that religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh is evolving, with a shift from purely religious to more spiritual and holistic experiences. This paradigm shift is evident in the increasing popularity of spiritual tourism, which emphasises personal growth and enlightenment alongside traditional pilgrimage activities (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2020) ^[18]. Moreover, studies highlight the importance of sustainable development in managing religious tourism, ensuring that the influx of visitors does not compromise the ecological and cultural integrity of these sites (Gambhir *et al.*, 2021) ^[7].

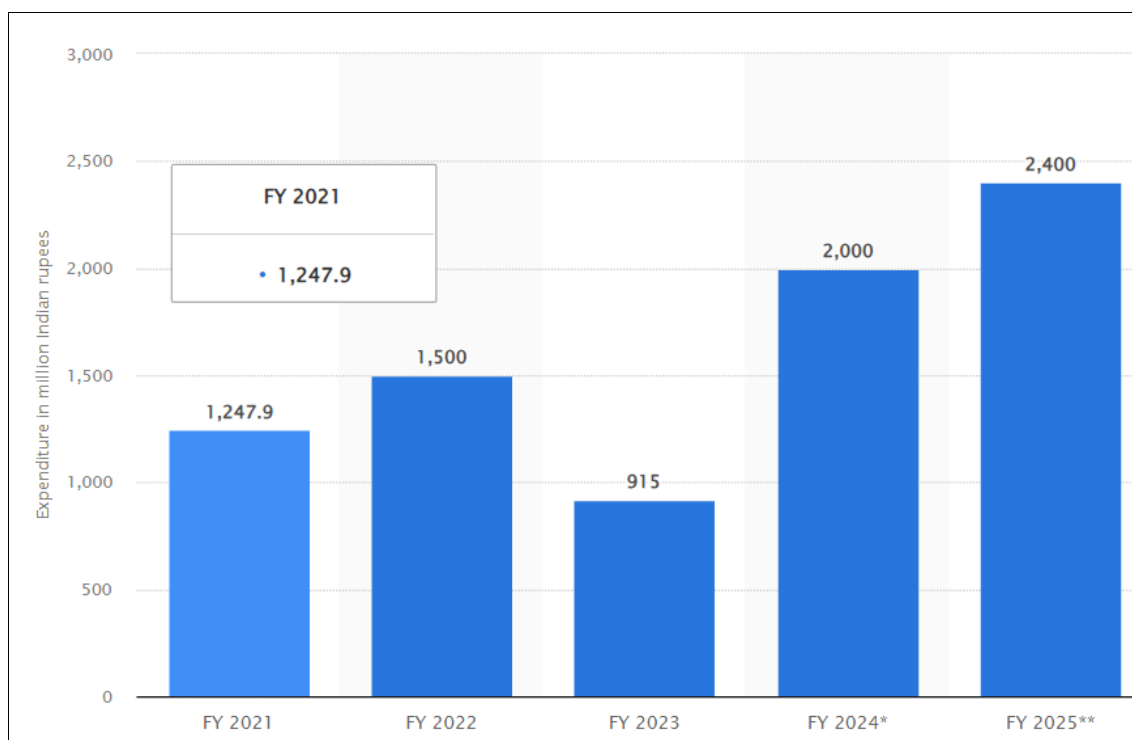
Surveys and inquiries into pilgrims' experiences reveal that religious sites in Himachal Pradesh are integral to the state's tourism identity, offering both spiritual solace and cultural engagement. The 2011-2012 tourism survey underscores the significance of these sites in attracting domestic and international visitors, contributing to the local economy and cultural preservation (Bhandari & Mittal, 2020) ^[6].

Table 1: Showing Classification of Religious Sites

A Classification of Religious Sites In Himachal Pradesh	
Religious Shrines and Religious Tourist Attractions	Hidimaba Devi Temple (Manali), Raghunath Temple (Kullu), Naina Devi Temple (Bilaspur), Baijnath Temple (Baijnath), Jwalamukhi Temple (Kangra), Chamunda Devi Temple (Kangra), Masrur Rock Cut Temple (Kangra), Brejeshwari (Kangra), Bhimakali (Sarhan, Shimla), Jakhu Temple (Shimla), Tara Devi (Shimla) Chintpurni Temple (Una), Manikaran Sahib (Manikaran), Rewalsar Lake (Mandi) Tsuglakhang Complex (Dharmshal), Tabo Monastery (Spiti Valley), Kee Monastery (Spiti Valley), Christ Church (Shimla), St John Church (Dharmashala), Baba Balak Nath Temple (Deotsidh, Hamirpur)
Sites of Religious Fairs	Mandi for Shivratri, Kullu for Dusshera and Doongri Fair, Lahaul Spiti for Halda and Losar, Chamba for Minjar, Rampur for Lavi Fair
Shakti Peethas	Naina Devi (Bilaspur) Jwalaji, Chamunda, Brajeshwari (Kangra), Chintpurni (Una)

Himachal Pradesh, with its soaring peaks, verdant valleys, pristine rivers, and diverse religious harmony, is marked by temples, gurudwaras, monasteries, and churches. Popularly known as “Dev Bhoomi” (Land of Gods), it is a place where spirituality permeates the air. These divine places are imbued with different architectural styles and attract global

tourists. Some places represent a blend of different religions. These places are Rewalsar (Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism) and Manikaran Sahib (Hinduism and Sikhism). Most religious destinations attract devotees during Navratri, Shivratri and other religious festivals.

**Fig 1:** Showing Expenditure Detail

In the financial year 2023, approximately 915 million Indian rupees were allocated to the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD) within India's tourism sector. The expenditure was projected to exceed 2.4 billion Indian rupees in 2025. In 2022, during the official Manimahesh Yatra, 2.5 lakh devotees took a

holy bath in Manimahesh Lake from August 19 to September 3. More than 60,000 devotees undertook the pilgrimage before the official start of the yatra, totalling more than 3 lakh pilgrims (Thakur, 2022) ^[37].

Challenges of Religious Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

Table 2: Showing Challenges to Religious Tourism

Challenge	Paper/s
Overcrowding and Infrastructure Starin	Parmar (2013)
Environmental Degradation	Kumar and Rana (2017) ^[16]
Seasonal Accessibility Issues	Moutinho <i>et al.</i> (2013) ^[17]
Safety Risks	Yadav (2014) ^[39]
Cultural and Religious Sensitivity	Khalid <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[7]
Inadequate Facilities	Gupta (2015) ^[13]
Economic Exploitation	Nag (2017)
Unregulated development and overtourism led to severe environmental and economic damage.	Nag <i>et al.</i> (2024) ^[20]

Specific challenges exist in religious tourism. A lack of infrastructure facilities, such as road connectivity, accommodation, and sanitation, leads to congestion and reduced visitor satisfaction. Tourists' littering accumulates waste, and a lack of proper disposal systems threatens the Himalayan environment. The application of sustainable tourism methods is necessary to combine economic gains with the preservation of the region's fragile ecosystems and rich cultural heritage (Gambhir *et al.*, 2021) ^[7]. Some high-altitude visiting places are accessible during the summer, but visitors cannot visit them in winter due to snow or landslides. Overreliance on religious tourism leads to price gouging and unregulated development that erodes the authenticity of the experience and alienates devotees.

Economic Impact and Sustainability

Tourism is considered an engine of growth. This sector contributes about 10% of global GDP and 9.4% of global employment. According to the World Economic Forum, India is the top South Asian performer. The tourism industry contributes 7% of GDP and 5% of employment in India. It also significantly contributes to the GDP of Himachal Pradesh. It contributes 7% to GDP and 14.42% of direct and indirect employment in Himachal Pradesh (Economic Survey - Economics & Statistics Department, HP, India, n.d.). Socio-cultural impacts of tourism can be viewed positively and negatively. Positively, it generates income and employment opportunities, improves infrastructure, and negatively brings migration and cultural degradation (Farooquee *et al.*, 2008) ^[11]. Tourism faces sustainability challenges due to seasonality and overtourism, impacting economies, environments, and communities. The study suggests integrated solutions like smart technologies, policy reforms, and community-based approaches for long-term resilience.

Future Prospects and Recommendations

Himachal Pradesh has enormous potential for religious tourism due to its rich array of sacred sites. The government has undertaken several initiatives to promote this sector. "Divya Pooja Pranali" has been launched by the state government to boost religious tourism at the three Shaktipeeth temples of Mata Bajreshwari, Chamunda, and Jawalamukhi in Kangra district, which offer online pooja services. Mata Chintpurni temple, also one of the 51 Shaktipeeths of India, has introduced the "Utsav" app that provides online pooja and highlights the spiritual and cultural heritage of Himachal Pradesh (Utsav App, n.d.). Religious fairs and festivals such as Shivratri and Dusshera, recognized internationally, need to be digitally marketed through virtual tours that showcase their history. Additionally, popular regional religious festivals should be promoted. Himachal Pradesh is also a notable destination for followers of Buddhism and Sikhism. Buddhist sites can attract visitors from neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bhutan. To draw more religious tourists, the Himachal government should focus on improving infrastructure and road connectivity to key destinations such as Dharamshala. Dev Bhumi hosts over 2000 temples, but only a few have gained significant national attention. These temples are steeped in sacred legends, which tourism stakeholders should promote to diversify the tourist influx. Such stories can serve as marketing tools for lesser-known religious sites and sacred events. Promotions can be targeted at

destinations already popular but nearing capacity. Major events like Kullu Dussehra, Mandi Shivratri, Minjar, and cricket matches in Dharamshala attract thousands of visitors and can serve as platforms to showcase lesser-known religious destinations. The traditional sustainability paradigm needs to be revised to better take into account institutional, cultural, and religious considerations because sacredness itself is intangible and crucial to these locations (K. A. Shinde & Olsen, 2022) ^[30]. Stakeholders emphasize the need for strengthened collaboration, integrated governance, and sustainable planning to achieve a balance between visitor expansion, cultural preservation, and community well-being (Andrade Suárez *et al.*, 2025) ^[1]. Bisht *et al.* (2025) ^[4] suggested integrated solutions like smart technologies, policy reforms, and community-based approaches for long-term resilience to overcome sustainability challenges due to seasonality and overtourism, impacting economies, environments, and communities.

Conclusion

The study reveals that millions of people travel to religious places and sites that add religious, moral, social, and economic value to the nation and community. The "Dev Bhoomi" has been attracting tourists worldwide for centuries because the religious places here provide unforgettable experiences. Various historical and religious sites lie within the scenic beauty of Himachal Pradesh, which remain largely unexplored. These sites are often located in rural areas and are not easily accessible to religious tourists from other states and countries due to a lack of basic amenities. Religious actors frequently face management issues and responsibilities, and they might not give formal regulations or environmental studies top priority (K. A. Shinde & Olsen, 2022) ^[30]. Despite various challenges, initiatives like online pooja platforms and digital marketing of religious fairs and festivals are moving toward sustainable tourism development. Stakeholders involved in religious tourism should develop strategies and plans to attract tourists to these untouched locations and work on making tourism more sustainable, or even regenerative. Community-based initiatives like homestays and cultural tours support conservation, empower locals, and promote balanced development (Nag *et al.*, 2025) ^[4]. These practices can boost the state's economy and enhance people's living standards, while establishing it as a prime destination for religious and eco-tourism. The state can balance economic benefits with cultural preservation through ongoing efforts to improve connectivity, infrastructure, and technology use. Himachal Pradesh is poised to become a fascinating destination for travellers seeking spirituality and peace in a natural setting, as religious tourism combines with leisure and cultural tourism.

Limitations

No study is comprehensive in all respects, and there is always a lacuna for further research. First, this study mainly relies on previously published articles and secondary sources, which may lack recent developments and emerging trends in religious tourism. Second, it also lacks primary data collection from stakeholders on religious tourism, limiting the depth of firsthand insights. Third, this study examines Himachal Pradesh in detail, and it lacks comparative analysis with other Indian states and restricts broader generalizations. Fourth, this study highlights

economic and sustainability aspects and lacks analysis on revenue generation and environmental degradation. Last, it is based on a cultural and spiritual basis, and observations vary from person to person, making the objective evaluation difficult.

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