

Transformation of Religious Tourism in India: A Secondary Data-Based Comparative Analysis of Multi-Faith Pilgrimage Destinations

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Abstract

Religious tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of global tourism, reflecting the increasingly dynamic relationship between spirituality, culture, heritage, and travel. Contemporary scholarship suggests that the traditional distinction between pilgrims and tourists has become increasingly fluid, resulting in the evolution of religious tourism into a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing pilgrimage, heritage appreciation, cultural experiences, and destination development (Collins-Kreiner, 2020; Iliev, 2020). India, with its rich multi-faith heritage, hosts some of the world's most significant pilgrimage destinations and has witnessed substantial transformation in religious tourism through infrastructure development, heritage conservation, and destination revitalisation initiatives during recent years. Despite this growing importance, comparative evidence on the transformation of pilgrimage destinations across multiple faith traditions remains limited. This study addresses this gap by comparatively analysing nine pilgrimage destinations representing Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh traditions in India. The study is entirely based on authentic secondary data for the period 2018-2023 collected from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, *India Tourism Statistics*, PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan scheme documents, state tourism departments, and peer-reviewed academic literature. Using descriptive, comparative, and documentary analysis, the study evaluates destination transformation across infrastructure, accessibility, visitor amenities, governance, digital initiatives, and sustainability. The findings indicate that while government-led interventions have significantly improved pilgrimage infrastructure and destination management, the scale and nature of transformation vary across destinations because of differences in governance, geographical context, institutional capacity, and heritage characteristics. The study contributes to religious tourism literature by providing an evidence-based multi-faith comparative assessment and offers policy recommendations for promoting sustainable and inclusive pilgrimage destination development in India.

Keywords: Religious Tourism; Pilgrimage Tourism; Multi-Faith Pilgrimage Destinations; Destination Transformation; Tourism Infrastructure; PRASHAD Scheme; Sustainable Tourism; India.

1. Introduction

Religious tourism is one of the oldest forms of human mobility and remains an important segment of the global tourism industry. While travel to sacred places has traditionally been motivated by faith and religious obligations, contemporary pilgrimage increasingly combines spiritual, cultural, historical, and recreational experiences. As a result, the distinction between pilgrims and tourists has become less defined, giving rise to the concept of the pilgrimage-tourism nexus (Collins-Kreiner, 2018, 2020; Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Recent studies also recognise religious tourism as one of the fastest-growing tourism segments, requiring integrated approaches to tourism planning, heritage management, destination governance, and sustainability.

Religious tourism has transformed pilgrimage destinations into integrated tourism spaces where spiritual experiences coexist with heritage conservation, infrastructure development, and regional economic growth. Iliev (2020) highlights the conceptual evolution of religious tourism through changing visitor motivations and destination identities, while Collins-Kreiner (2020) emphasises the expanding and multidisciplinary nature of religion and tourism research. These developments position religious tourism as an important driver of sustainable destination development.

India occupies a unique position in the global religious tourism landscape because of its rich multi-faith heritage and internationally renowned pilgrimage destinations. Religious tourism extends beyond individual places of worship to include pilgrimage circuits, sacred landscapes, festivals, and living cultural traditions that attract millions of domestic and international visitors. Shinde (2020) argues that Indian pilgrimage destinations should be understood from a destination perspective, where pilgrimage practices interact with urban development, governance, and tourism infrastructure. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the ongoing transformation of India's pilgrimage destinations.

2. Review of Literature

Religious tourism has evolved into a multidisciplinary field encompassing geography, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, cultural heritage, and tourism management. Earlier studies primarily distinguished pilgrims from tourists based on travel motivations; however, contemporary scholarship recognises that religious travel exists along a continuum in which spiritual, cultural, recreational, and heritage motivations frequently overlap. Collins-Kreiner (2020), in a comprehensive review of religion and tourism research, argues that the field has become increasingly diverse and fragmented, requiring holistic approaches that integrate religious practices, destination management, heritage conservation, and tourism planning rather than focusing solely on behavioural or motivational aspects of pilgrimage. Similarly, Iliev (2020) explains that religious tourism has undergone continuous conceptual evolution, characterised by changing visitor expectations, market segmentation, and the emergence of new destination identities shaped by modern tourism development. Together, these studies demonstrate that religious tourism has expanded beyond traditional pilgrimage into a broader framework of destination transformation and sustainable tourism development.

The relationship between pilgrimage and tourism has been widely explored in the literature. Timothy and Olsen (2006) conceptualised religious tourism as an intersection between sacred travel and tourism experiences, suggesting that many contemporary travellers simultaneously exhibit characteristics of both pilgrims and tourists. Expanding this perspective, Collins-Kreiner (2020) notes that modern pilgrimage destinations increasingly cater to diverse visitor groups whose motivations range from religious devotion to cultural curiosity and heritage appreciation. Consequently, effective destination management requires balancing the preservation of sacred values with the provision of tourism infrastructure, visitor services, and sustainable management practices. This perspective is particularly relevant in India, where pilgrimage destinations function simultaneously as centres of worship, cultural heritage sites, and major tourism attractions.

Within the Indian context, Kiran Shinde has made significant contributions by examining religious tourism from a destination planning perspective. Rather than viewing pilgrimage simply as the movement of visitors to sacred places, Shinde (2020) argues that pilgrimage destinations should be analysed as socio-spatial systems where religious practices, urban form, governance, commercial activities, and visitor movement collectively shape the tourism experience. Drawing upon Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice and the Sacred Complex framework, Shinde demonstrates that the transformation of pilgrimage destinations depends upon interactions among religious institutions, governments, local communities, and tourism stakeholders. Recent literature further highlights challenges associated with rapid growth in pilgrim numbers, including congestion, environmental degradation, carrying capacity, heritage conservation, and visitor safety. Accordingly, scholars advocate integrated destination planning that strengthens accessibility, infrastructure, visitor amenities, and sustainability while preserving the sacred character of religious sites.

Although research on religious tourism has expanded considerably, important gaps remain. Most studies focus on individual pilgrimage destinations or specific religious traditions, while comparative analyses of multi-faith pilgrimage destinations in India remain limited. This study addresses this gap by providing a comparative assessment of nine selected Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh pilgrimage destinations during 2018-2023 using authentic secondary evidence, thereby contributing to the literature on destination transformation and religious tourism management.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the transformation of religious tourism in India during the period 2018-2023.
2. To compare the tourism development of selected Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh pilgrimage destinations across key dimensions of destination transformation.
3. To evaluate the role of government initiatives, particularly the PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan schemes, in promoting pilgrimage destination development.
4. To identify the major challenges and opportunities for the sustainable development of multi-faith pilgrimage destinations in India.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and comparative research design based exclusively on secondary data to examine the transformation of religious tourism in India during the period 2018-2023. Nine pilgrimage destinations were purposively selected to represent the country's major faith traditions: Ayodhya, Kashi Vishwanath Dham, and Kainchi Dham (Hindu); Ajmer Sharif Dargah, Piran Kaliyar Sharif, and Aala Hazrat Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Dargah (Muslim); and Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple), Hemkund Sahib, and Gurudwara Sri Nanakmatta Sahib (Sikh). Secondary data were collected from authentic sources, including *India Tourism Statistics*, publications of the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Culture, PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan scheme documents, state tourism department reports, and peer-reviewed journal articles. The collected information was analysed using descriptive, comparative, documentary, and thematic content analysis techniques to evaluate destination transformation in terms of infrastructure development, accessibility, visitor amenities, government interventions, heritage conservation, digital initiatives, and sustainability practices. Only verified official publications and scholarly sources were used to ensure the reliability, transparency, and academic integrity of the study.

5. Transformation of Religious Tourism in India (2018 to 2023)

Religious tourism in India witnessed significant transformation during the period 2018 to 2023 through improved infrastructure, enhanced connectivity, heritage conservation, and destination redevelopment. Recognising pilgrimage tourism as an important driver of regional development, the Ministry of Tourism adopted an integrated destination development approach under flagship initiatives such as the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD) Scheme and the Swadesh Darshan Scheme. These programmes focused on improving visitor amenities, public infrastructure, sanitation, signage, interpretation centres, and last-mile connectivity at major pilgrimage destinations while promoting sustainable tourism development. Official policy documents also emphasise destination planning, heritage preservation, and visitor experience as key priorities.

Table 5.1: Major Government Initiatives Supporting Religious Tourism Development in India

Scheme	Year of Launch	Primary Focus
PRASHAD Scheme	2014-15	Integrated development of pilgrimage destinations through infrastructure and visitor amenities
Swadesh Darshan Scheme	2014-15	Development of thematic tourism circuits, including spiritual tourism
Swadesh Darshan 2.0	2022	Sustainable and destination-centric tourism development

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily disrupted pilgrimage tourism during 2020 and 2021; however, domestic tourism recovered rapidly following the easing of travel restrictions. According to the Ministry of Tourism, India recorded **2,509 million Domestic Tourist Visits (DTVs)** in 2023, reflecting a strong recovery in domestic travel. During the study period, pilgrimage destinations also adopted digital technologies such as online information services, surveillance systems, and cashless payment facilities to improve visitor management. Nevertheless, the pace of transformation differed across destinations because of variations in investment, governance, accessibility, and geographical conditions, highlighting the need for a comparative assessment of selected multi-faith pilgrimage destinations.

Table 5.2: Major Dimensions of Religious Tourism Transformation in India

Dimension	Major Transformation
Infrastructure	Redevelopment of pilgrimage precincts and visitor amenities
Connectivity	Improved road, rail, airport, and last-mile connectivity
Heritage Conservation	Restoration and preservation of religious heritage sites
Visitor Management	Enhanced sanitation, signage, interpretation, and crowd management
Digital Transformation	Online services, digital payments, and surveillance systems
Sustainable Tourism	Greater emphasis on responsible destination development

Source: Author's synthesis based on Schemes documents.

Table 5.3. Timeline of Major Developments in Religious Tourism in India

Year	Major Development
2018	Continued implementation of the PRASHAD Scheme and Swadesh Darshan projects for strengthening pilgrimage infrastructure and visitor amenities.
2019	Expansion of destination redevelopment initiatives, improved transport connectivity, and enhancement of tourism facilities at major pilgrimage destinations.
2020	COVID-19 pandemic resulted in nationwide travel restrictions, temporary closure of religious places, and a sharp decline in pilgrimage tourism.
2021	Gradual reopening of pilgrimage destinations with health protocols, crowd management measures, and phased revival of domestic religious tourism.
2022	Launch of Swadesh Darshan Scheme 2.0, introducing a sustainable and destination-centric approach to tourism development.
2023	Strong recovery in domestic tourism, with 2,509 million Domestic Tourist Visits (DTVs) recorded in India, reflecting renewed growth in pilgrimage and religious tourism.

Source: Compiled by the author from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, including *India Tourism Statistics 2023*, Annual Reports, PRASHAD Scheme Guidelines, Swadesh Darshan Scheme 2.0 Guidelines, and Press Information Bureau.

The timeline highlights that the transformation of religious tourism in India between 2018 and 2023 occurred in distinct phases. During 2018 and 2019, the emphasis was on strengthening pilgrimage infrastructure and destination development through the PRASHAD and Swadesh Darshan schemes. This progress was temporarily interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which severely affected pilgrimage travel across the country. The gradual reopening of religious destinations in 2021, followed by the launch of Swadesh Darshan Scheme 2.0

in 2022, shifted the focus towards sustainable and destination-centric tourism development. By 2023, the strong recovery in domestic tourist visits reflected the resilience of India's religious tourism sector and the positive impact of continued policy support and infrastructure development.

6. Comparative Analysis of Selected Multi-Faith Pilgrimage Destinations

The selected pilgrimage destinations exhibit considerable diversity in terms of religious significance, geographical setting, tourism infrastructure, accessibility, and destination management. While all nine destinations serve as important centres of faith, the scale and nature of tourism transformation during the study period have varied depending on government investment, institutional support, visitor demand, and regional development priorities. Nationally prominent destinations such as Ayodhya and Kashi Vishwanath Dham have experienced large-scale redevelopment, whereas destinations such as Kainchi Dham, Piran Kaliyar Sharif, Hemkund Sahib, and Gurudwara Sri Nanakmatta Sahib have primarily witnessed incremental improvements in visitor facilities and connectivity. These variations provide an appropriate basis for comparative analysis.

Table 6.1: Comparative Profile of Selected Multi-Faith Pilgrimage Destinations

Destination	Religion	State	Geographical Setting	Major Tourism Characteristics
Ayodhya	Hindu	Uttar Pradesh	Urban	Large-scale pilgrimage destination with extensive infrastructure redevelopment
Kashi Vishwanath Dham	Hindu	Uttar Pradesh	Urban	Integrated heritage and pilgrimage corridor with improved visitor facilities
Kainchi Dham	Hindu	Uttarakhand	Hill	Seasonal pilgrimage destination known for spiritual tourism
Ajmer Sharif Dargah	Muslim	Rajasthan	Urban	Internationally renowned Sufi pilgrimage centre
Piran Kaliyar Sharif	Muslim	Uttarakhand	Semi-urban	Important Sufi pilgrimage destination with international significance
Aala Hazrat Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Dargah	Muslim	Uttar Pradesh	Urban	Major Islamic pilgrimage centre attracting national and international devotees
Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple)	Sikh	Punjab	Urban	Premier Sikh pilgrimage destination with comprehensive visitor services
Hemkund Sahib	Sikh	Uttarakhand	High-altitude	Seasonal pilgrimage destination with challenging terrain
Gurudwara Sri	Sikh	Uttarakhand	Semi-urban	Historic Sikh pilgrimage destination with growing religious tourism

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Source: Author's compilation based on the Ministry of Tourism, State Tourism Departments, and official destination information.

A comparison of the selected destinations indicates that infrastructure development has been most pronounced at destinations receiving sustained central and state government support through large-scale redevelopment projects. Conversely, pilgrimage centres located in mountainous terrain continue to face constraints related to seasonal accessibility, environmental sensitivity, and carrying capacity despite ongoing infrastructure improvements. Across all destinations, recent development initiatives have increasingly focused on improving visitor amenities, transport connectivity, cleanliness, safety, and destination management while preserving the religious and cultural significance of the sites.

Table 6.2. Comparative Evidence of Destination Transformation across Selected Multi-Faith Pilgrimage Destinations

Destination	Infrastructure Redevelopment	Connectivity Improvement	Visitor Facilities	Digital and Management Initiatives	Overall Evidence of Transformation
Ayodhya	Extensive	Significant	Extensive	Advanced	Very High
Kashi Vishwanath Dham	Extensive	Significant	Extensive	Advanced	Very High
Kainchi Dham	Improved	Improved	Improved	Emerging	Moderate
Ajmer Sharif Dargah	Improved	Significant	Improved	Improved	High
Piran Kaliyar Sharif	Limited	Limited	Improved	Emerging	Moderate
Aala Hazrat Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Dargah	Limited	Limited	Improved	Emerging	Moderate
Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple)	Extensive	Significant	Extensive	Advanced	Very High
Hemkund Sahib	Improved	Limited (Seasonal Terrain)	Improved	Emerging	Moderate
Gurudwara Sri	Improved	Improved	Improved	Emerging	Moderate

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Source: Author's synthesis based on Ministry of Tourism publications, *India Tourism Statistics*, PRASHAD Scheme Guidelines, Swadesh Darshan Scheme 2.0 Guidelines, State Tourism Department reports, and available literature.

Note: The assessment is qualitative and is based on evidence from official government publications and peer-reviewed literature for the period 2018-2023. The overall level of transformation represents a holistic assessment of infrastructure redevelopment, accessibility, visitor facilities, and destination management rather than a numerical score.

The comparative assessment demonstrates considerable variation in the extent of destination transformation across the selected pilgrimage sites. Ayodhya, Kashi Vishwanath Dham, and Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) exhibit the highest level of transformation, reflecting extensive infrastructure redevelopment, improved accessibility, enhanced visitor facilities, and advanced management initiatives. Ajmer Sharif Dargah has also experienced substantial improvements, although the scale of government intervention has been comparatively lower. In contrast, Kainchi Dham, Piran Kaliyar Sharif, Aala Hazrat Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Dargah, Hemkund Sahib, and Gurudwara Sri Nanakmatta Sahib have undergone moderate transformation, primarily through incremental improvements in infrastructure, visitor amenities, and connectivity. The findings suggest that the pace and scale of transformation are influenced by factors such as government investment, geographical conditions, institutional capacity, visitor demand, and destination-specific development priorities.

7. Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrate that religious tourism in India experienced substantial transformation during the period 2018 to 2023, supported by government initiatives, infrastructure development, improved connectivity, heritage conservation, and enhanced visitor management. The implementation of the PRASHAD Scheme and the Swadesh Darshan Scheme has contributed to strengthening tourism infrastructure at several pilgrimage destinations while promoting destination planning and improving the overall visitor experience. These initiatives reflect a broader shift towards integrating religious heritage with sustainable tourism development.

The comparative analysis reveals that the nature and extent of transformation vary across destinations depending on factors such as visitor volume, government investment, geographical location, institutional capacity, and destination-specific development priorities. Destinations such as Ayodhya and Kashi Vishwanath Dham have undergone extensive physical redevelopment through large-scale public investment. At the same time, internationally significant pilgrimage centres such as Ajmer Sharif Dargah, Piran Kaliyar Sharif, Aala Hazrat Imam Ahmad Raza Khan Dargah, and Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) continue to attract devotees from India and abroad while witnessing continuous improvements in visitor facilities, accessibility, and destination management. Similarly, Kainchi Dham, Hemkund Sahib, and Gurudwara Sri Nanakmatta Sahib remain important pilgrimage destinations whose development is influenced by their geographical setting and seasonal visitation patterns.

The study further indicates that digital technologies have become an integral component of religious tourism management. The adoption of online information services, digital payment systems, surveillance infrastructure, and improved crowd management has enhanced operational efficiency and visitor convenience at many destinations. Nevertheless, challenges such as congestion during peak pilgrimage periods, environmental sustainability, heritage conservation, and effective visitor management continue to require policy attention. Addressing these challenges through destination-specific planning, community participation, and sustainable tourism practices will be essential for ensuring the long-term development of India's diverse multi-faith pilgrimage destinations.

8. Policy Implications

The findings of the study suggest that religious tourism policies in India should adopt a balanced and destination-specific approach to ensure sustainable and inclusive development across diverse pilgrimage destinations. Based on the comparative analysis, the following policy implications are proposed:

1. Government agencies should continue strengthening pilgrimage infrastructure through integrated planning that includes transport connectivity, sanitation, accommodation, parking, signage, and visitor facilitation while preserving the religious and cultural identity of each destination.
2. Greater emphasis should be placed on sustainable destination management by addressing issues related to crowd management, environmental conservation, waste management, and carrying capacity, particularly at destinations experiencing high visitor volumes and those located in ecologically sensitive regions.
3. Digital transformation should be expanded through the adoption of smart tourism technologies, including online information systems, digital ticketing where applicable, cashless payment facilities, multilingual mobile applications, and real-time visitor management systems to improve service quality and operational efficiency.
4. Stronger collaboration among the Ministry of Tourism, State Tourism Departments, local authorities, religious institutions, and community organisations should be encouraged to ensure coordinated planning, effective destination management, and long-term maintenance of tourism infrastructure.
5. Destination marketing strategies should promote India's multi-faith religious heritage by highlighting Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, and other pilgrimage traditions in an inclusive manner, thereby strengthening domestic as well as international religious tourism.
6. Future policy interventions should incorporate regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess infrastructure quality, visitor satisfaction, environmental impacts, and socio-economic benefits, enabling evidence-based planning and continuous improvement of pilgrimage destinations.

9. Conclusion

Religious tourism has emerged as one of the most significant components of India's tourism sector, contributing not only to spiritual and cultural experiences but also to regional development, employment generation, and heritage conservation. The present study examined the transformation of selected Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh pilgrimage destinations during the period 2018 to 2023 using authentic secondary data obtained from government publications and peer-reviewed literature.

The findings indicate that religious tourism in India has undergone considerable transformation through improved infrastructure, enhanced connectivity, destination redevelopment, digital innovations, and supportive government initiatives, particularly under the PRASHAD Scheme and the Swadesh Darshan Scheme. However, the extent of transformation varies across destinations due to differences in geographical conditions, investment priorities, visitor demand, and destination-specific development needs. The study also highlights the growing importance of sustainable destination management, digital technologies, and stakeholder collaboration in improving visitor experiences while preserving the religious and cultural significance of pilgrimage sites.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that India's multi-faith pilgrimage destinations collectively represent a valuable tourism asset capable of strengthening both domestic and international tourism. To ensure long-term sustainability, future development should adopt an integrated approach that balances infrastructure expansion with heritage conservation, environmental protection, community participation, and effective destination management. The findings of this study may assist policymakers, tourism planners, researchers, and destination management organisations in formulating evidence-based strategies for the sustainable development of religious tourism in India.

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