

## Pilgrimage Tourism in Uttarakhand: An exploration of the Chardhams

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- Religious Tourism
- Pilgrimage
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### Abstract

Tourism is an engine for economic development, driving employment and GDP growth. It is true for economies that rely on the service industry, such as India. In this context, religious tourism is a unique and highly resilient niche. Past understanding of religious and pilgrimage tourism maintained a rigid dichotomy between the devout “pilgrim” and “tourist.” However, the present travel industry implies that these two entities converge in this modern era. This article examines the intersections of pilgrimage and modern tourism, taking the context of Uttarakhand often referred to as Devbhoomi (Land of Gods). This study sheds some light on how infrastructural demands of the present day religious travellers— transportation, accommodation and other ancillary services, which mirror the requirements of the leisure tourists, blurring the traditional thoughts on the dichotomy. Uttarakhand’s tourism sector is a powerhouse for the economy of the state, the rapid expansion of religious tourism and the large-scale development projects for the pilgrimage sites place ecological stress on the already fragile Himalayan environment. This article suggests that for the region’s spiritual economy to be sustainable, focus needs to be shifted towards strategic planning of the available resources. Therefore, future policy frameworks and academic exploration must prioritise an equilibrium ecological conservation and holistic tourist satisfaction for the viability and longevity of the Himalayan sacred sites.

## **Introduction**

The current global economy is reliant on the services sector, including tourism, an important segment. Leiper (1979) stated that “tourism is the systematic phenomenon comprising voluntary short-term residence and travel of individuals away from home.” It is not limited to leisure activities; it can also bring about economic change. It “is a global industry and one of the largest industries in the world” (Durgapal & Singhal, 2018). According to WTTC (2021), “The total contribution of travel and tourism to the global economy in the pre-pandemic year (i.e., 2019) was approximately 10.4% to the regional GDP, which equates to USD 9,170 billion.” It is very important to state here that the facts related to the tourism industry are not only vital to the global economy; it is a powerhouse of all segments—a lifeline to employment, supporting 334 million jobs worldwide. It is therefore important to say that tourism is not only limited to the elites but to the whole world. In developing countries, tourism plays a more important role. For a country like India, where the aim is to develop as a service-based economy, it is essential that they pay considerable attention to this sector because, as indicated by WTTC (2021), it has been able to contribute to a GDP worth 6.9% for the country. The tourism sector in India has become a significant contributor to the Indian services sector (Gill & Singh, 2013; Gupta & Gandhi, 2018). The India Brand Equity Foundation mentioned that India’s tourism sector is anticipated to create an expected figure of 53 million jobs by the end of the decade. The versatility of jobs in India’s tourism sector is extremely essential, keeping in view the demographic dividend that India enjoys. The Indian tourism sector was able to create jobs for 39 million people in 2020, constituting 8.0% of the total jobs created in India.

Overall, even though the numbers are overwhelming, the potential of the tourism industry of India remains untapped. Bhattacharya and Narayan (2005) have stated that the Indian subcontinent possesses a rich cultural, historical, and natural heritage yet lacks the proper utilisation of the same. It is established that the tourism industry is a well-known engine of economic development (Roldan 1994; Sharma et al., 2020). Furthermore, the sector is still in a developmental stage, be it the segment of pilgrimage tourism that is yet to be conducted in the proper manner despite the large number of visitors.

## **Pilgrimage vs. Tourism**

To understand the specificities, one must first unpack the theoretical relationship between “pilgrimage” and “tourism.” Historically, these concepts were viewed as distinct. Fleischer (2000) famously noted that the phenomenon of pilgrimage existed hundreds of years before the concept of modern tourism appeared in human behaviour. Travel has been integral to pilgrimages since ancient times, and in the present era, travel to sacred

sites has also taken on a secular, non-religious dimension, blurring the distinction between pilgrim and tourist.

The term pilgrimage comes from the ancient Hindu term *Tirtha*, which means “ford” or “crossing”, referring to a physical and spiritual shift from the human to the transhuman plane (Goswami, 2016), closer to the divine. Pilgrimage is a religious act of devotion that involves an arduous journey to a shrine or sacred place. According to Nair (2014), travel is innate to human evolution, developing from nomadic necessity to a search for joy, amusement, and spiritual fulfilment. However, the academic distinction between a “pilgrim” and a “tourist” is increasingly blurred. Stausberg (2014) posits that religion is both a resource for tourism and a source of tourism. Religious tourism has emerged as a specific market niche, although the infrastructure required for a pilgrim–transport, accommodation, food, and safety—is identical to that required by a leisure tourist. The key difference between a pilgrim and a tourist lies only in the degree of sacredness and in visitors’ religious beliefs toward the destination (Kim & Chen, 2021).

Rinschede (1992) has offered the most seminal piece of writing by identifying pilgrimage as a multifunctional journey. In developed countries, the experience is almost indistinguishable from a vacation/holiday, while in developing countries, the motivations for such pilgrimages are primarily religious. Vijayanand (2014) has also identified pilgrimage tourism as “travel undertaken motivated by the fulfilment of one’s or others’ religious obligation in whole or in part.” UNWTO (1995) has offered the most technical definition of the subject by indicating that “Religious tourism is travel outside the usual environment for religious purposes, excluding professional activities.” The difference is significant: a priest would be classified as a professional traveller, whereas a family going for darshan to Badrinath would be classified as a religious tourist. Mintel (2005) has further classified it into four types of pilgrimages or religious travellers. “Pilgrimage - the traditional often arduous journey to a sacred site,” “Religious Tourism - Visiting a site for its religious significance,” “Religious Event Travel - travel undertaken specifically for attending a festival,” “Church Temple Tourism - visiting the site for its architectural/historical interest rather than its spiritual value.” Such a theoretical approach is vital in analysing the state of Uttarakhand, wherein the distinction between the devout pilgrim (driven by his religious convictions and who seeks attainment of Moksha) and the modern tourist (who is secular and aims to visit the place to witness nature and sightseeing as well, along with a visit to a temple) becomes blurred.

## **The Indian Context**

What makes religious tourism unique in India is the fact that it is the birthplace of four major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. According to Muthulakshmi (2017), religion in India is not merely a relic of history; it is a force that has driven humans to move since the beginning of time. As Tomer (2011) says, India is visited by tourists to visit numerous pilgrimage centres where people go to attain merits.

These include Shakti Peethas, Jyotirlingas, Dams, and Maths of Hinduism; Dargahs of Islam; Gurdwaras of Sikhism; and numerous sacred places of other religions, too. According to Hole et al. (2019), when it comes to India, special emphasis is placed on pilgrimage tourism not merely due to its sacred nature but because of the output delivery. This point is important because in such places, people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds can mix and interact with one another. Not to forget the economic activities generated by religious tourism in the region, both directly and indirectly. Besides this, the economic impact of this type of tourism is enormous. In a country where leisure travel has typically proved susceptible to declines in national and international economic fortunes, religious travel has proven surprisingly resilient. The facility rarely cancels pilgrimages due to any short-term economic fluctuations, therefore guaranteeing this niche to become a steady source of economic circulation and local employment.

### **Uttarakhand: The *Devbhoomi***

The state of Uttarakhand is an example of a 'spiritual economy.' The Indian Himalayan Region has been considered a 'sacred space' since time immemorial (NITI Aayog, 2018). However, the concentration of this 'sacred space' is limited to the state of Uttarakhand. Fitting perfectly into the geography of Hindu religious beliefs is the state of Uttarakhand, known for its beauty as the 'Dev Bhoomi' or the Land of the Gods. The ancient literature offers the geographical depiction of the region as comprising two areas: Kedarkhand, referring to the region of Garhwal presently, and Manaskhand, referring to the Kumaon region. From a geographical perspective, the state of Uttarakhand is characterised by the existence of a range of different geographical features, such as rivers, valleys, highlands, and mountainous regions with snowfall. According to Phatak et al. (2017), this diverse flora and fauna provide the potential for all major types of tourism, including adventure and nature tourism. However, the religious aspect dominates. Domestic and international tourists alike reckon the state primarily as a place of temples and pilgrimages (Melkani & Kumar, 2021).

The economy of Uttarakhand is inextricably connected with the flow of pilgrims. The Uttarakhand Economic Survey (2020-21) gives critical data; the tourism sector accounts for 6.59% of the state's income. More importantly, it accounts for more than one-fourth (26.87%) of the state's total employment (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, 2021). In a mountainous state where large-scale industrialisation is constrained by terrain, tourism acts as the primary driver of socio-economic development (Ahmed, 2013; Rawal & Sah, 2017). It provides income for the local communities through forward and backwards linkages, from the mule owner on the Kedarnath route to the hotelier in Rishikesh (Ogra, 2014). Sati (2021) reinforces the fact that tourism is an accepted means for economic growth, leveraging the state's natural beauty and healthy climate as "pull factors."

## **The Chardham Yatra**

However, Uttarakhand's tourism focus is the Chardham Yatra. Earlier, Adi Guru Shankaracharya had established four Dhams, or abodes, in four corners of the country to promote national unity. The Northern Dham is in the town of Badrinath, located in Uttarakhand. However, over time, people began referring to the "Chota Chardham," which comprises Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath (Bhatt, 2020). The seasonality of this pilgrimage is one aspect that characterises it. On account of extreme climatic conditions in the high Himalayan terrain, the shrines remain functional only for a short period: from April/May to October/November (Taxak & Kumar, 2017). The seasonality of the pilgrimage centres ensures that the sites attract large numbers of pilgrims within a short period. Semwal and Upreti (2019) point out that the Chardhams receive the highest number of pilgrims amongst all pilgrimage sites in the Northern Indian states. According to the state's draft tourism policy (Partnership for Resilience and Preparedness, 2022), 44.2% of domestic tourists are pilgrims, while 43.6% are there for holidays and sightseeing. This indicates that the "pilgrim" and "leisure tourist" segments are equally significant.

## **Challenges and the Path Forward**

Tourism in Uttarakhand is not without its conflicts. The very environment that attracts tourists—the fragile Himalayas—is at risk from the tourism it sustains, and a majority of the pilgrimage centres are in the lap of the Himalayas. Thereby making the pilgrimages susceptible to various risks inherent in the mountainous terrain, as well as to the tourism they attract. There is a constant tension between development and conservation in the tourism landscape. Mittal et al. (2008) noted early on that tourism was in a "discovery stage" with poor infrastructure. Today, massive projects are underway. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, has included Badrinath, Kedarnath, and Gangotri under the PRASHAD scheme (National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation & Spiritual Augmentation Drive). The idea is to bridge the gap between the sacred and modern conveniences. The country is nature-conscious. Overconstruction and the large number of vehicles during the Yatra season have put huge stress on the ecosystem. The key dilemma is to improve the "pull factors" without harming the resource base itself. The current literature suggests that one of the sectors that needs emphasis is the tourism sector for development, as stated by IBEF (2021). Nevertheless, there is no way to have development in isolation; hence, there is a need to have integrated approaches with regard to disasters, treating the community as a stakeholder instead of a spectator, as stated by Rana and Kumar (2016).

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this article is to focus on the fact that pilgrimage tourism offers an intricate blend of traditional elements along with economics. This field offers employment opportunities for more than a quarter of the labour force. Chardham Yatra is the driving factor that propels pilgrimage tourism in Uttarakhand. Millions of pilgrims aspire to attain spirituality by finding the divine presence of God in Devbhoomi. However, there is a dire need to address the important shortcomings. To transform from the status of a 'pilgrim' to a 'satisfied tourist,' the need is beyond the scope of spirituality. A nurturing framework is required to attain a tourism image of infrastructure, safety, etc. When planning tourism development in Uttarakhand, there needs to be a shift from quantity to quality. Future studies should focus on satisfaction research and revisit pilgrims' intentions to inform policies that ensure the Abode of Gods remains not only spiritually powerful but also economically viable.

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