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A SYSTEMATIC ANALYTICAL STUDY OF PILGRIMAGE TOURISM IN MAHARASHTRA

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Introduction:

Tourism involves people traveling outside their usual surroundings for personal, business, or professional reasons. These visitors, which include tourists and excursionists, participate in a variety of activities that frequently require financial outlays. Tourism effects the economy, the environment, local communities, and the visitors themselves. Tourism necessitates a comprehensive approach for its development, management, and oversight because it impacts various sectors and involves a large number of stakeholders. Effective national, local, and international tourist policy require this kind of approach. India is a secular nation where every citizen is free to follow the religion of their choosing.

There are many temples, mosques, churches, and other sites of religion in the nation that draw tourists. In India, religious tourism is one of the most popular types of travel since many people think that going to specific holy locations can help them achieve their goals or find solutions to their personal issues. Popular locations include the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Vaishno Devi, the Char Dham shrines, and Mathura–Vrindavan.

These sacred places draw both domestic and international travelers throughout the year. Tourism as a “export” is a fairly new idea in international trade, but now it is one of the major sources of foreign currency for many countries. As a social, cultural, and economic activity, tourism is crucial to the growth of a country. By utilizing resources like labor, capital, and land, well-planned tourism may boost output, improve living standards, enhance public welfare, and generate jobs. In terms of revenue, tourism is currently the largest service sector in the world, and its expansion has significant positive social and economic effects (Anupama, Anjana & Sumita, 2012).

Many countries have increased their focus on tourism because of the economic benefits it

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brings. According to UNWTO data, global tourism earnings were only \$2.1 billion in 1950, but by 2018 they had risen to \$1,643.2 billion (Mandeep & Nitasha, 2012). In 2019, international tourist arrivals were expected to reach 1.485 billion, a 4% increase. By 2029, global tourist arrivals are projected to reach 2.196 billion, with spending estimated at \$2,483.9 billion—an expected growth rate of 3.8% (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019).

Religious tourism can be best explained through the example of Banaras. This city, situated along the Ganga River, is home to nearly 4,000 temples, 3,000 heritage sites, and 84 ghats. People from across India and abroad believe that bathing in the Ganga helps them wash away their sins, which draws large numbers of visitors to the city.

This research article portrays the overall scenario of tourism policies / schemes and explores the unleashed potential of the tourism sector. Various development options for sustainable development of the region are explored and a case is made for promoting tourism as a viable alternative. The article describes the present status of tourism in Maharashtra including tourist / pilgrims' arrivals, facilities, and amenities, available destinations, etc.

Maharashtra Tourism Policies and Implementation Agency

The project proposal can be initiated by the District Collector who will develop the project proposal and submit to Directorate of Tourism (DoT) through the Deputy Director at regional level. The Directorate of Tourism while taking up implementation will:

- i. To sanction the projects assurance of technical, financial and administrative compliance of the guidelines and conditions of the project is mandatory.
- ii. Ensure complete compliance with all codal requirements pertaining to the project's finances and accounting when awarding contracts for work or purchasing products and services for the project.
- iii. Secure complete transparency in its transaction and compulsorily follow E-tendering for all tenders.
- iv. Maintaining the required documentation and the projects' ongoing financial and physical progress on the program's portal is mandatory².

²<https://maharashtratourism.gov.in/wp->(Last seen on 21/11/2025)

Selection of destinations based on District Perspective Plan

Project concepts will be developed using a destination - centric approach, wherein interventions will be proposed with consideration for the destination's overall expansion in terms of tourism and related municipal facilities.

After carefully examining the tourism potential using the following criteria, the Implementation Agency can choose locations for development under the Program:

- (i) Principal tourist destinations, products, and themes
- (ii) Air, rail, and road connectivity, including local travel
- (iii) Accessibility to any tourist route
- (iv) The destination's current tourism ecosystem
- (v) its potential for future tourism
- (vi) State and district support for the destination

Mukhyamantri Teerth Darshan Yojana: Launched in July 2024, this flagship program helps senior citizens from all religious backgrounds undertake pilgrimages. Senior adults (over 60) are eligible for free pilgrimage trips under this program to specific religious locations both inside and outside the state.

Benefits: It provides financial assistance of up to ₹30,000 to cover travel, accommodation, and food expenses for a single pilgrimage.

Destinations: As of October 2024, the scheme includes 139 religious sites, with 66 inside Maharashtra and 73 in other states. The list covers pilgrimage sites from Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Jain traditions.

Implementation: Applications are processed online and verified by a committee chaired by the District Collector.

Travel arrangements, including special trains and lodging, are made possible by the government.

139 diverse religious locations have been selected for the program.

The state's all-encompassing approach to tourist development, which places a special emphasis on spiritual tourism, is outlined in the Maharashtra tourist Policy 2024. Over the following ten years, the strategy hopes to generate 18 lakh jobs and ₹1 lakh crore in private investment. Important elements consist of:

Infrastructure development: Significant financing, including ₹893 crore in March 2025, has been allocated by the state government for the construction of important pilgrimage sites. Upgrades to current infrastructure and the construction of new road networks connecting

tourism and religious sites are among planned projects.

Pilgrimage circuit development: The policy places a strong emphasis on building circuits that link well-known pilgrimage sites in Shirdi and Pandharpur, such as the Jyotirlingas and the Ashta Vinayakas. The "Holy Jain Pilgrimage Circuit" was recently added to the circuit in order to develop and secure nine important Jain pilgrimage sites.

Sustainable and responsible tourism: The guideline emphasizes how crucial it is to keep pilgrimage places hygienic and sacred. Tourism businesses that adhere to environmental standards, such as waste minimization, water management, and energy saving, are also eligible for financial rewards.

Private sector participation: Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are encouraged by the government to build tourism facilities and infrastructure. This is intended to increase marketing for religious travel destinations and draw in private investment. Particular thrust sectors: As a "Special Thrust Sector," pilgrimage tourism is given priority for development and incentives.

Pilgrimage Circuits: In order to connect important holy sites like the Jyotirlingas, Ashta Vinayakas, Shirdi, and Pandharpur, the state wants to build and promote pilgrimage circuits. By maintaining holiness and cleanliness at these locations, the goal is to improve the pilgrim experience.

With support from the Maharashtra Tourism department, the Urban Development Department or Rural Development Department is the designated authority for the development of these locations.

PRASAD Scheme: Maharashtra participates in the national "Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive" (PRASAD) scheme, which focuses on the holistic development of identified pilgrimage destinations³. This includes infrastructural development, capacity building for service providers, and creating an online presence for these sites.⁴

Sustainable Development: The policies promote a sustainable and planned approach to developing pilgrimage sites to enrich the overall religious tourism experience. The state tourism policy emphasizes the importance of maintaining the sanctity and cleanliness of pilgrimage centers.

National PRASAD Scheme

The state participates in the national "Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD)" scheme, which is fully funded by the central government.

³ <https://tourism.gov.in/prashad> scheme(last seen on 23/11/2025)

⁴ <https://tourism.gov.in/> (last seen on 23/11/2025)

Focus: It concentrates on holistic development of selected pilgrimage sites by upgrading infrastructure and creating a complete religious tourism experience.

Application in Maharashtra: Maharashtra has actively used this scheme to fund large-scale projects at major religious sites. For example, in May 2025, the state proposed several tourism development projects in the Raigad district for consideration under the PRASAD scheme.

Policies: oversight and conservation

Sanctity and cleanliness: A core policy tenet is to maintain the sanctity and cleanliness of pilgrimage centers.

Environmental conservation: Policies also address the need for environmental protection to counteract the potential damage from uncontrolled tourism.

Coordination: The Maharashtra government coordinates with central agencies like the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Ministry of Tourism for the conservation and development of religious sites with historical significance.

Conclusion:

The present study demonstrated that since 1993, only few articles have been published on the subject of the pilgrimage tourism, hospitality, and events industry, although the search terms used in this study were as broad as possible. Even in the years following the publication of news regarding this topic, the scientific community did not respond by augmenting its research efforts on this matter. The VOS viewer analysis revealed weak bibliographic coupling, poor relatedness, and a long distance between the authors, citations, and documents, indicating that not only are there few publications on this topic, but there is also no connection between them. As a result, the pilgrimage bear the social importance for growing in economy and job opportunities. Social security, cleanliness may increase the to and fro of tourists.