



Protection of environment through green pilgrimage: A review article

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Abstract

A pilgrimage is a divine experience. In Hinduism, pilgrimage is the practice of journeying to the sites of religious powers and knowledge. The word 'pilgrim' denotes a person who is on a religious travel. The word pilgrim is derived from a Latin word 'peregrinus' which means traveller, globetrotter or a person belonging to other country. In today's world, pilgrimages have become corrupted by consumerism. Pilgrimage sites are often located in spots of natural beauty. In earlier days, a pilgrimage was considered as a holy journey which was full of odds. Increased and improved transportation had enhanced the accessibility of the tough religious sites which had led to multifold dumping of filth and waste. Natural forests had also been affected due to religious observances. Thus, there is an urgent need to shift from the concept of just a "pilgrimage" to "green pilgrimage".

This paper highlights the significance of green pilgrimage and its beneficial effects on the environment of the present day. Green pilgrimage is need of an hour. The sustainable behaviour of green pilgrimage surely shows the way to protect the environment by changing the mindset of the pilgrims.

Keywords: pilgrimage; consumerism; accessibility; dumping; religious observances; green pilgrimage

1. Introduction

Spiritual or divine pilgrimage is a significant element of all the religions worldwide, especially Hindu pilgrimage which is rooted in ancient scriptures. The earliest reference to Hindu pilgrimage is in Rig Veda (500 BCE) in which the wanderer is praised. Later texts like Mahabharata and several Puranas explain about the regime of these holy sites to great benevolence of god in the form of boons ^[1]. Pilgrimage is a journey that takes the individual internally or within self-realization and connects an individual to the external world. Everyday innumerable people worldwide are on pilgrimages irrespective of their caste and creed. People have deep faith and go on pilgrimage for a few hours, weeks, or months.

Visiting sacred places to work out, pray, and nurturing is growing, and thus most of the pilgrimage roads are contaminated with garbage, which even increases the contamination of local areas, the threat to wildlife, and other sorts of environmental damage ^[2]. For these reasons, we started talking loudly about the green pilgrimage and its benefits. Green pilgrimage increasingly emphasized the need to chop back the impact of pilgrimage on the environment. This suggests that energy resources, water, non-segregated waste, and also the release of carbon dioxide into the environment should be more appreciated, as pilgrim tourists contribute to the protection of our planet ^[3].

Gladstone (2013) in his study defined pilgrimage as a travel to a sacred place may be a temple or any other place. Each pilgrimage is sacred and of utmost importance within the pilgrim's own credence and religion. Gladstone also called it as religious tourism ^[4]. Dhar, (2015) studied the spiritual importance of pilgrimage and concluded that pilgrimage falls under religious tourism ^[5]. MacCannell (2013) studied the significance of religious tourism in India and found that pilgrimage tourism is relatively high in India as compared to other countries, as the

people of India are more religionist and bonded to their culture even today. India earns many revenues from the pilgrimage ^[6].

Journey to the pilgrimage sites has become recurrent due to the easily accessible transportation facilities because of increased accessibility of transport ^[7,8]. Shinde (2019) during a study found that the immensity of pilgrims to the pilgrimage sites had become more frequent in India due to the improved road network and increased accessibility to the strenuous sites. ^[9] As a result, in India pilgrimage as an establishment of faith has changed its conventional form ^[10]. The effect of pilgrimage on the environment becomes drastic when people give their least concern to the natural resources of the realm. Urban people leave their filth and waste brought from cities to the pilgrimage sites. This creates the menace. Thus, the sole idea of constructing pilgrimage sustainable for the environment is its shift to green pilgrimage.

2. Impact of uncontrolled pilgrimage on Environment

The visitor's impact on the destination may be positive or negative. Mair and Whitford (2013) stated that India has more possibilities of religious tourism because of its distinctive cultural heritage ^[11]. Adverse environmental impacts include overcrowding, overdevelopment; pollution, etc. Positive impacts include cooperation between locals and visitors for environmental conservation and the flow of economic resources and political and economic support for conservation and management ^[12]. It is a well-known fact that as the increased number of people visit an ecologically weak landscape, the chances of adverse impact increase. Vijay (2016) conducted a study and found that the pilgrims during pilgrimage have the least concern towards the environment ^[13]. Dadakalandar and Sujatha (2018) found in their study that with the increase in pilgrims there

has been an increase in overcrowding, overloaded Infrastructure, pollution, and environmental degradation, etc.^[14].

The ecology and environment in sacred places are currently under pressure due to the large-scale movement of the pilgrims during the pilgrimages. Most of the pilgrimage sites are in remote places where the population is comparatively low. Due to the absence of infrastructure, these small villages/towns are not able to feed the need of pilgrims visiting each year. Therefore, the local natural resources experience the steady and slow degradation. As a result, this resulted in a lot of stress on the local natural resources and there has been a steady degradation of the local environmental conditions. Ghimire (2013) in his study found that due to the negligence of the environmental issues related with the pilgrimage, had created pollution hazards in India^[15]. Du Cros and McKercher (2014), proposed that in India, that seek immediate attention at the pilgrimage sites the deterioration of the environment, water systems, sewage and sanitation, housing for people are among other crucial problems related with pilgrimage and it needs swift and instantaneous attentiveness^[16].

The mela (fair) of Maha Kumbh is a renowned festival which take place in every 144 years in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), India. In 2001, the city of Prayagraj experienced the largest gathering (60 Million approx.) of people in history till now. The gathering of many people in one place can have a substantial impact on the environment. The sites of pilgrimage can feel the pressure on their resources and infrastructure. Water, air, energy resources, sanitation, and waste disposal are reeling under high pressure.

In 2012, Hajj a well-known pilgrimage center of Muslims experienced a gathering of 3.5 million Muslims in the holy place Mecca for five days of prayers and worship. This pilgrimage is conducted annually, and it is accompanied by the threatening level of air pollution. Sharma and Raina (2014) concluded in their study that the waste disposal scenario in the places which experiences a higher influx of tourists becomes worse at the time of pilgrimage^[17]. The improper disposal of waste becomes the major threat to the air, water, land, and also for the scenic beauty of the pilgrimage sites. Mainly pilgrimage sites are located in the lap of nature. The improper waste disposal spoils the beauty of the area.

Apart from some negative impacts, some positive impacts can also be noticed in the pilgrimage centers, like the international recognition of the pilgrim center, rise in the living standard of the local population, increase in job opportunities, health facilities, and exposure of the inhabitants to the new technologies. In India, the economy of most of the states depends on religious tourism. The economic imbalance is narrowed by religious tourism or pilgrimage. The rural areas survive on holy tourism. Still, rural areas do not have standardized employment opportunities. The local people near the pilgrimage centers are highly dependent on pilgrim influx. Which gives them business opportunities and also cater to their needs^[18].

3. Uttarakhand reeling under pilgrimages pressure

Uttarakhand, also known as Devbhoomi means adobe or land of god is admired for its religious significance all around the world. Hindu devotees from the world get mesmerized and fascinated by its pilgrimage sites. This state experienced a devastating flash flood in June 2013 in a highly religious place called Kedarnath in Rudraprayag district. Uttarakhand's economy is highly dependent on tourism. Apart from recovering from the 2013 flash flood, the

state is also under the pressure of unchecked tourism and undisciplined infrastructure. The inflow of so many pilgrims into ecologically fragile ecosystem exerts the pressure on the state which is at high risk^[19].

The Kedarnath flash floods shook the entire world with innumerable people either inhabitants or the pilgrims beached and abandoned due to the floods. The National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), in its report on Kedarnath flash flood, has reported the climatic conditions and heavy downpour on 16-17 June 2013 responsible for the tragedy^[20]. The unregulated tourist influx is the major problem for the ecology of the state. After the formation of the state of Uttarakhand, the development of the tourist sites was on large scale. Due to the increased facilities of travel by roads and by air incorporated the influx of the increased number of tourists on these religious shrines which are ecologically sensitive. All the four shrines of Uttarakhand are reeling under the high pressure of tourist inflow and their unsustainable way is creating nuisance for the ecology of the state^[21].

In the last twenty-eight years, the data of two pilgrimage sites in Uttarakhand had shown a massive increase in the number of pilgrims. Badrinath temple located in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. The least number of pilgrims that visited this shrine in the last 29 years was in 2014 (1,80,000) and the year 2018 had recorded the highest number of pilgrims (10,58,490). Therefore, the average number of pilgrims reaching the shrine each year between 1990-2018 was 5,90,923^[22].



Fig 1: Number of pilgrims visited Badrinath each year since 1990-2018

Similarly, the Kedarnath shrine devoted to Lord Shiva is in the small district called Rudraprayag in Uttarakhand. Kedarnath town experienced substantial demolition during June 2013 from flash floods caused by heavy downpour in Uttarakhand. The fragile ecosystem of the Kedarnath town and the natural beauty attracts pilgrims all over the world. The data of the pilgrims visiting the shrine depicts the high influx of tourists to this small village. The least number of the pilgrims



Fig 2: Number of pilgrims visited Kedarnath each year since 1990-2018

visiting the shrine was recorded in 2013 at 3,12,201 and the highest number of pilgrims were recorded last year in 2018 at 6,94,934. Thus, the average number of pilgrims reaching the shrine each year between 1990-2018 is 2,72,515 ^[23].

Millions of people on pilgrimage are destroying the villages, cities and towns by their filth and waste. The natural forests are experiencing depletion due to our religious observances. It is ironic and tragic that we pray to Mother Ganga and throw plastic bags and food waste into the river, polluting the water. Each footstep on the pathway of a religious journey should be regarded as sacred. Pilgrimage sites should not be regarded as a mere destination, but the true soul of pilgrimage is to pay tribute to god in every form. Nearly, 1.3 million pilgrims go on a religious journey of sacred shrines in a month but assessment of adverse impact due to the religious observances and carrying capacity of the land is lacking much behind, which is a pertinent aspect of eco-tourism and protection of the ecological spots ^[24].

4. Solutions

Pilgrimage is an act of human to get satisfaction and peace. A pilgrimage is considered as the spiritual practice for all the religions and faiths present in the world. Whenever anybody consider oneself to be a pilgrim, the heavy luggage should be omitted. Essentials must be carried in a bag, enjoy the beauty of nature by walking and eat simple food. Discover the environment in own way. One will find a deep relation with the environment ^[25].

Developing an ecological awareness, before and during the pilgrimage experience, can serve as a tool for accepting and reducing the impact we have on ecosystems and natural resources. Developing ecological habits of mind such as establishing personal connections to the land can help us conserve energy and water, appreciate traditional agriculture and see the benefits of good land stewardship ^[26]. Having an eye for scale and history allows the pilgrim to draw deeper meaning about nature and thus a greater affinity with the natural world.

Hence, it has been well suggested by the Hole et.al., (2019) that investment in strengthening the quality of environment, sustainable development and utilization of the local as well as man-made resources must be taken up by policymakers and the tourism department ^[27]. It should not only the responsibility of government for conserving and preserving the temples, shrines etc in a sustainable way but NGO's and the private sector must also come forward for conservation and preservation of these pilgrimages sites. When these sites will be well conserved and preserved it can provide greater benefits to residents of the area and also preserve sites for future generations to enjoy ^[28].

4.1. A shift from a just pilgrimage to green pilgrimage

Green pilgrimage is a key to commence the changes in the behaviour of the people on pilgrimage. For the environmental adverse impact's human have to take responsibility for creating the nuisance like climate change, global warming, pollution, heaps of solid waste etc. If human being is behind the deterioration of the natural resources, then the solution for sustaining the natural resources and reversing the adverse impacts on environment also lies on the shoulder of human. Sustainable use of natural resources, improved sanitation, proper management of waste, implementation of laws and policies and use of eco-friendly techniques are some of the answers to the question of degradation of environment. By including certain points for the pilgrims, the thrust on the environment can be decreased, and the adverse impacts on the environment can be reversed. Pilgrims can follow some ideas to make their pilgrimage fruitful which may include and not limited to-

- Prepare mindfully for the pilgrimage. Do not make it a mere recreational activity.
- Walking with light bag packs and enjoy the soul of nature during pilgrimage.
- Ethics and spirit of sustainability must be followed in eating and drinking.
- Use of required amount of water minimize the waste.
- Do not litter; avoid disposal items; all the rubbish should be picked up.
- Make your mind filled with green ideas so that whenever you return home from pilgrimage the green ideas can help in improving your own surroundings.

Every religion of the world preaches to protect the environment. Following the teachings within the boundaries of one's beliefs and religion, environment can be protected from being degraded. Thus, the green pilgrimage supports the local products, food, crafts, art and also helps in reducing carbon emissions. It supports the better livelihood for the people who are dependent upon the pilgrimage.

Many pilgrimage sites are open for short duration. Pilgrimage depends upon the weather conditions also. In India many shrines are open for short period of time as the pilgrimage depends on the favourable weather conditions. On the arrival of favourable climate, the pilgrimage centers experiences the large inflow of pilgrims, which are otherwise abandon. Thus, this short period leads to deterioration of ecology and environment of the pilgrimage center. The problems like huge amount of waste, high pollution level, plastic waste, choked highways with people and sometime stampede is also seen. Thus, these problems are termed as short-term problems but this escalates with the continuous inflow of the pilgrims.

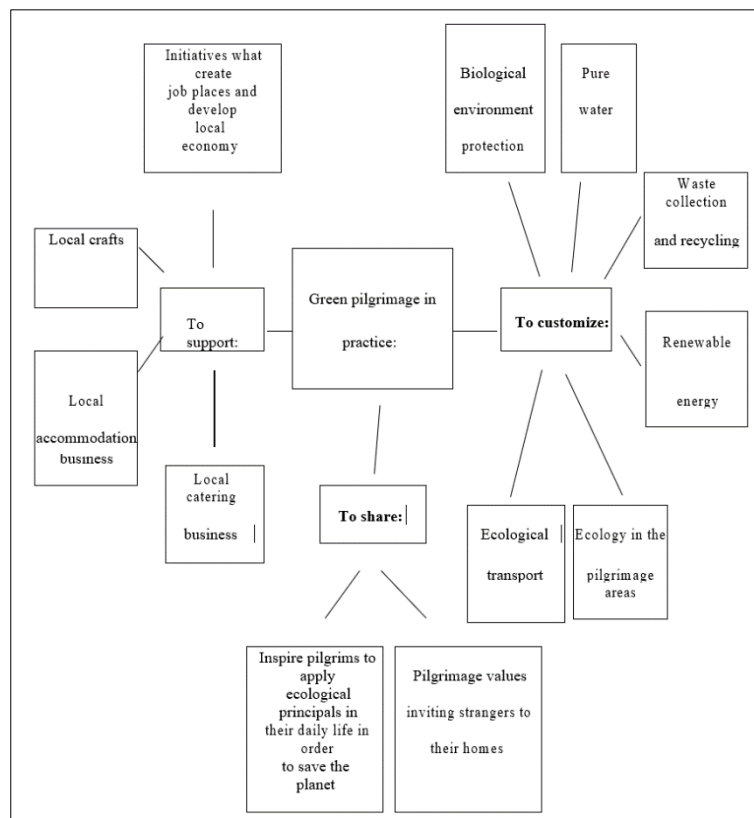


Fig 3: Practical recommendation by European Green Pilgrimage Organization (EGPN, 2018) [29].

4.2 Possible measures for converting pilgrimage sites to green pilgrimage sites

Green infrastructure: municipalities often own many buildings in pilgrimage villages, towns, and cities. Turning these buildings greener and eco-friendly would be a great initiative for green pilgrimage. The need is to only follow a sustainable management plan.

Waste management: The 3R policy i.e. reduce, reuse, and recycle should be brought into compulsory practice. Recycling saves tons of carbon dioxide per year. For the sewage problem, bio-toilets units must be installed in an adequate amount so that whatever wastes is generated it can be further used to fertilize the land or provide energy.

Ban on plastic usage: Strict checking and legal prohibition is only the solution for reducing the use of plastic. The advisory guidelines for pilgrims must guide them not to carry plastic in any form and also it should tell the pilgrims about the legal punishment, if not adhere to the guidelines.

Energy efficiency: Renewable resources should be used for generating electricity on the route of the pilgrimage. Clean energy will keep the pilgrimage sites pollution-free and energy-efficient.

Greening the land: Pilgrimage trails often pass through long stretches of land filled with ample natural resources. The recreational activities should be banned near pilgrimage sites. Efforts can be made to ask the pilgrims to plant a tree in the name of their ancestors or their beloved ones with a naturally carved nameplate attached to it which will contain the information of the family taking care of it. The nominal cost can be charged for its nurturing.

Green volunteers: The government cannot do alone do such a big task. Volunteers from different NGO's and other environmental

agencies can join this green initiative of turning pilgrimage sites to green pilgrimage sites.

5. Conclusion

Since the matter of religion is sensitive, the Governments are also afraid to interfere in these affairs. As a result, pilgrimage tourism has affected the natural environment adversely. Steps should be taken to tackle this problem in consultation with the religious heads so that it does not create tensions between various communities. Green pilgrimage encourages pilgrims to travel more responsibly, rediscover the link with nature, support the local population, and apply ecological principles in their activities every day.

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