



Policy, Planning, and Management of Kedarnath: Addressing Tourist and Management Challenges

Vaishali Singh* and Anjan Bhuyan*

Abstract

Kedarnath Dham is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, which is a very important religious place in India. The study examines how the pilgrimage site is managed and also explores the problems that tourists have while they visit these sites. This study employs a mixed methodology using secondary data and tourist interviews. It further uses systematic thematic analysis to categorise the challenges in Kedarnath. The study finds that the problems include inadequate services, safety issues, etc. This study would help understand the tourists' challenges in Kedarnath. It also shows how important it is to find a balance between meeting the needs of tourists and protecting the spiritual and cultural heritage of these sites.

Keywords: Religious tourism policy. Pilgrimage management, Pilgrimage sites, Kedarnath, India, Jyotirlinga

1. Introduction

Pilgrimage sites have been the focus of significant scholarly and practical discussions concerning the challenges that they face in management. Efficient management is necessary to maintain a balance between the influx of tourists and the upkeep of cultural integrity.

The importance of addressing various challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, environmental sustainability (Shinde, 2007), economic pressures (Shinde, 2012), socio-cultural impacts (Timothy, 2021), and comprehensive policy frameworks (Shackley, 2001) is emphasized in the literature on pilgrimage site management. Effective administration is crucial not only to enrich the pilgrimage experience but also for safeguarding the sanctity of these holy sites. Kedarnath, as described by Howley (1996) is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, which are self-manifest symbols of creation

* Department of Business Administration, Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam, India; vaishali.july7@gmail.com, bap21003@tezu.ac.in

and power in Hinduism. (Shastri, 1991) Situated in the Himalayas, this site is geographically isolated and challenging to reach, characteristics that contribute to its sacred importance in the context of Hindu philosophy (Bhardwaj, 1983). Kedarnath is referred to as “*Dham’s*” (home) of Shiva in literature (Bharati, 1963).

According to legend, the Pandavas built the Kedarnath Temple, a significant Shiva temple in India, as atonement for the wrongdoings they committed during the Kurukshetra War. After the Mahabharata war, the Pandavas sought purification and approached Shiva at Kedarnath (Nair, 2010). Shiva, taking the form of a bull, dove into the earth, and the portion visible at Kedarnath is just one of five parts of Shiva, with the other parts located at Tunganath, Madhyameshvar, Rudranath, and Kalpeshvar (Eck, 1998). Adi Shankaracharya reconstructed the current temple during the 8th century; an atypical linga with three faces adorns the temple, symbolizing the rump of Lord Shiva in his lion form. Approximately 9 feet in length, 3 feet in width, and 4 feet in height, this linga is accessible to devotees for the performance of a variety of rituals (Howley, 1996). Kedarnath stands out for its south-facing orientation and the temple priests’ custom of continuing to worship at Okhimath all year. The temple’s operational season spans from the initial week of May to the final week of October or the first week of November. During this time, the temple experiences its highest level of activity (Howley, 1996). The study of Kedarnath is of the greatest significance owing to its religious import, difficult terrain, and distinct managerial issues that it involves (Singh, 2002). Due to its isolated location in the Himalayas, the establishment and upkeep of infrastructure present significant obstacles (Sati, 2018). Annually, the location receives millions of pilgrims, which highlights the need for efficient management approaches to accommodate the increase and safeguard the temple and its surrounding area. The 2013 floods that caused severe damage to Kedarnath highlight the vulnerability of the site to natural disasters and underscore the importance of disaster management and resilient infrastructure.

The dual implications of the study are: first, it conducts a discussion related to challenges concerning the maintenance of the sanctity of the pilgrimage sites; second, it includes interviews in order to explore the specific conditions related to Kedarnath Dham.

This study attempts to understand both the historical and contemporary aspects of elements of management inside pilgrimage places for promoting the large public discussion relating to the sustainability of heritage management in India by critically examining some distinctive issues and opportunities found at Kedarnath—a highly significant pilgrimage site in among Hindus. The findings are meant to guide effective management frameworks that can keep balance in preserving spiritual and cultural values

while ensuring the practical accommodation needs of millions of pilgrims visiting the sites every year.

These interviews with the tourists provided a better understanding of their problems to relate to their demands and experiences. In the later stage, an analysis of the secondary data about running Shri Badarinath Kedarnath Temple Committee (BKTC) provides insights into the management practices of existing practices at Kedarnath to explain the practical aspects of site administration.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

2.1. Challenges in the Management of Pilgrimage Sites

The management of pilgrimage sites poses numerous challenges, given the unique nature of religious tourism that blends spiritual, cultural, and economic elements. These sites are not only places of worship but also significant cultural heritage sites attracting millions of visitors annually. Effective management of these sites requires addressing a range of issues from infrastructure and environmental sustainability to economic impacts and sociocultural dynamics. The present study examines pilgrimage site management issues using significant literature and case studies.

2.1. Overcrowding and Infrastructure: Inadequate Facilities

The inadequate infrastructure to accommodate large pilgrim influxes is one of the most serious challenges to maintaining pilgrimage sites. Many pilgrimage sites—particularly those with historical significance—do not have the infrastructure needed to meet the expectations of contemporary tourism. This includes inadequate transportation, inadequate sanitary facilities, and inadequate hotel options. Shinde (2007) points out that because of the overwhelming number of visitors compared to the local population, places like Tirupati have problems with waste management and water supply. (Shinde, 2007) Similar to this, during big celebrations in Vrindavan, the infrastructure gets overloaded, resulting in unhygienic conditions and strained resources (Shinde, 2012).

2.3. Overcrowding

One major issue that worsens the already existing infrastructural issues is overcrowding. Large-scale gatherings at locations like the Batu Caves during Thaipusam or the Kumbh Mela in India cause traffic jams and a strain on the available resources (Kasim, 2011). In addition to removing focus from the pilgrimage experience, crowding poses a safety risk, as evidenced by the regular stampedes that occur during important holidays. Griffiths (2011) points out that the physical impacts of crowding might ruin the serene and quiet ambiances that are necessary for places of worship (Griffiths, 2011).

2.4. Issues with Traffic and Transportation

Effective transportation management is important but difficult. Extreme traffic congestion is a common problem at pilgrimage destinations, particularly during the busiest times of the year. Many pilgrims are forced to rely on private vehicles due to the absence of effective public transportation choices, which exacerbates traffic problems and pollution. According to Shinde (2007), Tirumala's daily tourist population places a great deal of strain on the region's transportation system, which causes severe traffic congestion. In certain places, the use of automated queuing systems has aided in the management of visitor flows; nonetheless, more comprehensive solutions are required.

3. Pollution of the Environment

3.1. Handling of Waste

The ongoing problem is managing the garbage generated by a large number of tourists. Solid garbage management is a common problem at pilgrimage sites. For instance, there is a serious sanitation crisis in Vrindavan as a result of clogged sewer systems and open drains (Shinde, 2012). The issue is made more difficult to manage by the increased garbage production that occurs during the busiest times of the year for pilgrimages.

3.2. Air and Water pollution

Pollution of the air and water is a prevalent issue at pilgrimage locations. Air quality is negatively impacted by the rise in vehicle emissions and littering caused by the large number of visitors. The inappropriate dumping of waste and insufficient sewage treatment systems frequently cause contamination of water bodies in the vicinity of pilgrimage sites. A good example is the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela when locals and pilgrims alike pollute the river (Shinde, 2007). These activities harm the environment and worsen the continued deterioration of these sites' natural resources.

3.3. Habitat destruction and deforestation

Deforestation and habitat degradation are frequent consequences of the fast development surrounding pilgrimage sites. Singh (2002) has drawn attention to the fact that the commercialization and infrastructure development in the Himalayas have resulted in serious damage to the environment, such as habitat destruction and deforestation.

4. Pressures from the Economy and Commerce

4.1. Commercialization of Sacred Sites

Unquestionably, pilgrimage tourism has a positive economic impact, but over-commercialization can compromise the sacredness of religious locations. The monetization of religious experiences frequently results from the conversion of pilgrimage sites into tourist attractions. Shackley (2001) notes that the commercialization of places of worship has the potential to diminish their spiritual significance and reduce them to the status of tourist attractions.

4.2. Economic Inequality

Local communities frequently experience economic imbalances as a result of the flood of tourism revenue. While tourism-related businesses may prosper, locals may have to pay higher costs for goods and services. While pilgrimage tourism can contribute to better living circumstances, Vukonić (1996) points out that it can also result in increased pricing, making daily living more costly for residents. As a result of the unequal distribution of tourism advantages, tensions may arise between the local population and the tourism sector.

4.3. Overdependence on Tourism

Destinations for pilgrimages that depend too much on tourism income are subject to changes in the economy. Events like pandemics, natural disasters, or unstable political environments can have a significant negative effect on tourism statistics, which can cause financial instability for those who depend on it. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major global impact on pilgrimage tourism, underscoring the importance of economic diversification. Timothy (2021) highlights the necessity for varied economic strategies by pointing out that an over-reliance on tourism might leave regions prone to economic shocks.

5. Management and Policy Gaps

5.1. Lack of Coordinated Management

A deficiency in well-organized management befalls numerous places of worship. Diverse and ineffective management practices may result from the engagement of several stakeholders, such as private companies, local governments, and religious entities. According to Shinde (2012), overlapping roles and inefficient management are frequently the outcome of the lack of a single management organization. For site management to be effective, roles and duties among stakeholders must be clearly defined.

5.2. Regulatory and Policy Difficulties

It is difficult to create and execute efficient policies for the management of pilgrimage sites. A wide range of challenges, including social equality, economic development, and environmental sustainability, must be addressed by policies. Nevertheless, a lot of holy places don't have all-encompassing rules that incorporate these many factors. As Shinde (2012) points out, there is an institutional vacuum in the management of religious tourism, which emphasizes the need for stronger policy frameworks.

5.3. Engagement and Involvement with the Community

Although often neglected, involving local populations in the administration of pilgrimage sites is essential. Participation from the community guarantees that the advantages of tourism are shared fairly and that local viewpoints are taken into account when making decisions. The development of tourism can be made more inclusive and sustainable by effective community involvement.

6. Research methodology

6.1. Data Collection

The research study adopted a qualitative research design to dig deeper into the nitty-gritty of the problems and management issues at Kedarnath. Exploratory research is apt for the given objective of extracting in-depth, subjective information from the tourists regarding their experiences appropriately. Qualitative research uses small, non-representative samples and non-statistical methods for analysis (Malhotra & Peterson, 2006). This study used in-depth interviews to acquire qualitative data because they are flexible and allow the researcher to examine each respondent's appropriateness for participation (Silverman, 2001).

The interviews took place in the Kedarnath Temple's relaxation areas. There were 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with tourists who had visited Kedarnath, each lasting around 30 minutes. To ensure ethical considerations, participants were promised anonymity and informed that their data would only be used for the objectives of this study.

Using random selection, the researchers concentrated on tourists who had visited Kedarnath to find out the difficulties they faced. Tourists were fully informed of the interview's objective and implications, and their anonymity was guaranteed. Open-ended interview questions allowed respondents to freely express their thoughts and experiences, yielding richer qualitative data.

Given that some participants were hesitant to have their interviews recorded, researchers collected summary field notes of the interactions and added more details after each interview to capture as much information as possible (Huang & Pearce, 2019).

6.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis began by skimming through interview transcripts through repeated readings to gain an initial familiarity with the data. Open coding was done when ideas and dimensions were dictated by careful re-viewing of the line-by-line transcripts. Most primary codes needed categorization based on similarities and the relationships of the codes they were placed into, which Strauss (1990) has identified as axial coding. Over time, different themes emerged from the axial codes. Following the systematic coding procedure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the authors assessed the sets of codes and discussed the most significant ones until they reached an agreement. Interviews were transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet, and the information was carefully examined several times to ensure familiarity. The interview responses were then coded, and reoccurring themes were detected and classified as related topics. The methodology by (Naeem et al., 2023) was finally employed for the systematic thematic analysis. The study's strict methodological approach guaranteed the acquisition of rich, detailed qualitative data, providing significant insights into the challenges and experiences faced by tourists visiting Kedarnath. Respondents have been marked as R followed by the number in the entire paper.

Further, the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (trial version 24) was also used to generate a word cloud of the problems faced by tourists in Kedarnath. A total of 90 codes were generated by the software which was out through the word cloud to discover visual insights. MAXQDA trial version 24 was employed for a structured coding approach and thematic analysis and further facilitated the generating of visual presentations of key insights in the form of word clouds. This helped to unearth, therefore, the underlying pattern and trends that guide in systematic identification of core issues. The combination of in-depth interviews, systematic coding, and qualitative software ensured that it had a robust methodological framework supporting the study to generate actionable insights about the challenges faced by pilgrims and management practices at Kedarnath.

7. Findings and discussion

7.1. The U.P. Shri Badrinath and Shri Kedarnath Temples Act, 1939

In the majestic heights of the Garhwal Himalayas, two of India's most respected temples, Shri Badrinath and Shri Kedarnath, are devoted to Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva, respectively. These places attract millions

of devotees every year. However, it is a challenge to handle the influx of tourists increasing every year.

7.2. Historical Management Issues

The administration of these temples was a long-drawn-out problem in the late nineteenth century. Some sort of supervisory powers were exercised by the Tehri Darbar over the Rawal, the head priest who administered the temples. It was this dual authority that led to conflicts and mismanagement to the extent that the resources of the temples were wasted and no care was given to the welfare of the pilgrims. This demanded an increased and strong setup of management.

7.3. Formation of the BKTC

In 1939, the Shri Badarinath and Kedarnath Temples Act was passed. This eventually led to the formation of the Shri Badarinath Kedarnath Temple Committee—a self-financed government body entrusted to look after all these holy places taken together. Setting up this committee was an important landmark to redress some of the grievances of old times, in that it brought more accountability and order into the management of the temples.

7.4. Enactment and repeal of the Char Dham Devasthanam Management Act

The government of Uttarakhand passed the 'Uttarakhand Char Dham Shrine Management Bill, 2019' in December 2019, which aimed at development through governance in the Char Dham pilgrimages. The act created a uniform authority to manage these four sites and 49 other temples that come under it, increasing accountability while also preserving the legacy of and improving facilities for pilgrims. Thus, the Uttarakhand Char Dham Devasthanam Board came into being on January 15, 2020, with the Chief Minister as its chairman. It comprises the key stakeholders. The Board has to undertake policy formulation, financial management as well as operational control. But the Act was later annulled due to much backlash by the panda committee of Gangotri-Yamunotri temples which emphasized that management should be done in a cautious way keeping in view the religious sentiments and issues of the stakeholders.

7.5. Responsibilities of BKTC

Every task undertaken by the BKTC ensures that the temples run smoothly and the pilgrim experience is positive.

1. Maintenance and Renovation: The committee from time to time maintains and renovates the temple structures, keeping in view the historical and architectural importance of the temple. This would mean natural damage

restoration and that the temples are always in perfect shape to welcome the pilgrims.

2. Financial management: The BKTC has to manage its financial activities accordingly. In that view, the committee organizes a collection of gifts and controls expenditures so that it openly uses the money for the maintenance of the temple and its further development.

3. Pilgrimage Management: In an attempt to balance the influx of devotees, BKTC provides basic amenities such as accommodation and boarding; medical assistance; and sanitation facilities; and collaborates with the local authorities in the handling of huge crowds, especially during peak seasons, assuring safety and convenience for all visitors.

4. Religious Services: The BKTC ensures the running of religious services and rituals in order and tradition. It provides for close coordination with the priests of the temples and other religious personnel to keep up the holy nature and spiritual atmosphere within temples.

5. Community Engagement: Involving all stakeholders actively by taking care of their issues and making them part of temple activities so that they feel a part of the community and own it; it's the underlying thing in how to generally run temples.

6. Disaster Management: Considering the height and isolated location, the management of BKTC is prepared for any form of natural calamity. The committee has put in place measures to respond to emergencies such as landslides, floods, and others to safeguard both temples and pilgrims.

7.6. Upkeep of Subordinate Temples and Dharamshalas

The BKTC looks after 45 subordinate temples and about 20 Dharamshalas along the Shri Badrinath and Shri Kedarnath routes. Furthermore, a facility of rest and recreation for the pilgrims is provided so that their Darshan and visit are worthwhile. Given that Kedarnath is a mountain temple, managing infrastructure here comes with its share of tremendous management problems in aspects of sustainability and disaster preparedness. A large number of devotees arriving here burdens the resources and heightens this problem.

The government supports and aids BKTC in its smooth operation. The collaboration with the government enables the BKTC to quickly address urgent issues so that Kedarnath can be effectively managed towards its sustainability. Despite the many hurdles, the BKTC has made tremendous progress in improving temple management and infrastructure. The committee's ongoing efforts aim to improve the pilgrim experience while ensuring the temple's survival for future generations.

7.7. Challenges faced by pilgrims at Kedarnath

7.7.1. Accommodation challenges

The many accommodation issues tourists encounter in Kedarnath have an enormous impact on their whole experience. One major problem is that accommodation is so expensive; many respondents said it was “costly” (R1), “exceeded my budget” (R1), and “charged a heavy price” (R5). These expenses are frequently not limited to accommodation prices; extra fees for services like hot water put more pressure on pilgrims’ budgets (e.g., “a single bucket of hot water is expensive,” R8). With accommodations open for just six months, seasonal pricing makes this problem worse (R7). Another big problem is booking; a lot of pilgrims have trouble because they didn’t make reservations ahead. As seen by remarks like “hadn’t booked in advance” (R8, R5, R6) and “unplanned trip” (R13), this frequently leads to increased expenses or an inability to find accommodation at all. Fewer issues were reported by individuals who made reservations in advance through the Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam (GMVN) (e.g., “GMVN pre-booking is not a problem” R1, “booking a hotel through GMVN, didn’t pose a problem” R4), although not making reservations usually results in major hassles. Concerning staff service quality, there are also reports of unpleasant and dubious behaviour from both hotel owners and employees (e.g., “staff are rude enough” (R7), “very rude hotel owners” (R10), and “questionable behaviour by hotel owners” (R5). This is in contrast to certain pleasant encounters, especially those in which GMVN employees were praised for being kind and helpful (e.g., “staff were good, arranged a cab from the airport” R3). The inconsistent quality of the service heightens the uncertainty of the accommodation experience. Another serious problem is hotel availability; many pilgrims have reported that there is congestion because there are more people than there are rooms (R7). Some pilgrims are forced to choose less pleasant options, such as tents, which are frequently “insanely chilly at night” (R13). A big issue is hygiene; public restrooms are often referred to as dirty, which compromises comfort and hygiene (e.g., “public toilets were filthy” R4). Though some have made good comments regarding features like geysers in GMVN cottages (e.g., “geysers are available in GMVN cottages” R3), they are more of an exception than a rule. All things considered, pilgrims to Kedarnath find it challenging and frequently frustrating to navigate the high fees, booking issues, inconsistent personnel service quality, limited choices for accommodation, and inadequate cleanliness. To address these problems, comprehensive solutions—better staff training, more affordable lodging, effective booking systems, and better sanitary facilities—are necessary.

7.7.2. Food and water challenges

The numerous challenges pilgrims in Kedarnath have got food and water affect their experience of the journey. A major problem is the scarcity of food options; respondents reported “fewer alternatives” (R1), “very less options” (R9), and “alternatives available are few” (R14). Another major worry is the expense; many pilgrims say that food and water are “expensive” (R1, R12) and “basic food is costly” (R3). Furthermore, alleged to be excessively expensive – nearly twice the market rate – is packaged water (R8).

A crucial problem is nutritional quality; pilgrims’ health is impacted by the “unavailability of nutritious food and fruits” (R2). There isn’t much variation in the meals; some pilgrims can’t eat staples like “maggie or aloo paratha all day” (R3), while others—including the elderly or those with diabetes and hypertension – find the food inappropriate for their diets (R4). While some people are happy with the meal offered – “very satisfied” (R5) and “not complaining about food” (R13), others describe it as “basic yet expensive” (R10) and “very basic” (R12).

The experience with water quality is uneven; although some people enjoy the “clear, delicious, and sparkling natural water” (R2), others find packaged water to be too costly (R8). Pilgrims see that people are putting up a lot of effort to return the region to its pre-flood condition, and this is acknowledged.

All things considered, limited options, expensive food, and inadequate nourishment define Kedarnath’s food and water problems. To address these problems, more food options must be made available and more reasonably priced, wholesome meals must be guaranteed, the cost of necessities like packaged water must be regulated, and food and water quality must be kept to high standards.

7.7.3. Travel challenges

Travellers to Kedarnath face several difficulties, including the presence of horses on the trek, the insufficient supply of public buses, the unregulated fees charged by private bus operators, the risky trekking routes, and the high cost of transportation. The scarcity of government buses forces pilgrims to use costly private buses that “charge anything they wish to,” and R1 mentioned that private travel options are “too costly.” The private alternative cars were considered as comfortable yet expensive (R4). The entire travel experience is worsened by the traffic jams, especially in the Rudraprayag area, where the respondents claimed to be struck for ‘hours’ (R8, R15). Further, the journey from Gaurikund to Kedarnath is regarded as risky (R6), dangerous (R1) and painful (R2). This is because the trek trail is half broken, lacks maintenance, and is slippery (R1, R9, R13). The physical challenge is pre-dominant in all

these 'risks' stated by the respondents (R14). The presence of mules and horses worsens the entire travel experience. Accidents are common during the trek due to these animals (R2, R14). R2 was a firsthand witness to a woman falling off a horse, whereas R4's wife fell as the horse she was sitting on died due to exhaustion. The congestion caused due to horses coming from both sides of the trek was highlighted by R1, R3 and R8. The unregulated horse industry was the cause of the exhaustion of horses and their overwork (R4). The respondents proposed a separate trail for trekkers and horse riders (R5, R13) while also bringing strict regulations for the horse business (R11).

7.7.4. Detailed Analysis of Tourist Dissatisfaction in Kedarnath

Respondents raised some serious problems in Kedarnath. High pricing and overpriced services are major concerns for many tourists. This covers the cost of meals, lodging, and other necessities such as Prasad and packed water. Many respondents stated that everything, from meals to accommodations, is extremely expensive, making it difficult to stay on budget. For example, R1 stated that the location is "very costly" and that they have an "exceeded budget" due to the high expenditures on food, lodgings, and Prasad. R2 described the situation as "hell expensive," with everything "overpriced," while R6 agreed that "everything is overpriced" and should be affordable to individuals of all income levels. The commercialization of Kedarnath has also turned the sacred site into a commercial hub, separating it from its spiritual aura. R3 voiced dissatisfaction with the "commercialization of a religious place," believing that the site has grown increasingly commercialised over time. Similarly, R5 stated that the location has evolved into an "influencer hub" rather than a religious site, claiming that this behaviour damages the site's sacredness.

The behaviour of temple employees, notably priests, and overall management practices are viewed as dysfunctional and corrupt. Many responders criticised the temple staff's management and behaviour, citing chaos within the temple as people are forced out and priests enable queue jumping for more cash. R1 stated that the management is inadequate, with priests breaking the queue by charging extra money, resulting in a "marathon inside the temple" in which people are hustled out in seconds. The conduct of the pandas was also criticised by the tourists as 'greedy' (R2). They often demand money instead of fast pooja (R10).

The medical services were also inadequate as per the respondents. R4 stated his wife just receiving first aid when she fell off the horse. He expected her to be airdropped to the airport considering she was in acute pain and her inability to walk. But she was just given painkillers. This response was condemned by R4 and is quite concerning in a high-altitude area where trekking is physically draining.

The absence of a wheelchair facility is concerning and questions the accessibility of pilgrimage sites for all. R4 further raised his wife not getting a wheelchair to have her darshan.

R5 raised concerns about the dirty mobile toilets which are breeding grounds for infections. R6 added to these concerns by stating the absence of menstrual hygiene for women.

The findings direct to several issues that need to be addressed to improve the experience in Kedarnath. The rising prices, commercialisation, poor panda conduct, inadequate medical facilities, poor hygiene and animal cruelty are areas which need immediate attention.

Word Cloud using MAXQDA



Figure 1: Word Cloud of Tourist experience in Kedarnath using MAXQDA
 Source 1: Generated by authors using MAXQDA (version 24)

The word cloud generated using MAXQDA reveals that the most frequently occurring words are ‘expensive’ and ‘costly’ as stated by the respondents regarding accommodation and food near the pilgrimage site. It also reveals the ‘trek’ and its associated problems like ‘broken’, ‘painful’ and ‘slippery’ and the presence of ‘palkis’. The use of the words ‘unhygienic’ and ‘dirty’ signifies the mobile toilets and lack of hygiene in public toilets that the tourists pointed to. This is a visual representation of the tourist experience in Kedarnath and line with the systematic thematic analysis as well.

8. Recommendations for effective management

8.1. Improved management and pricing regulations

Many respondents highlighted the necessity of better management and price regulation in promoting affordability and fairness. Implementing fair pricing strategies can make the pilgrimage more affordable for all visitors. This includes regulating prices for accommodations, food, and other

services to prevent the exploitation of pilgrims. Providing budget-friendly options ensures inclusivity and respects the traditional values of pilgrimage (Vukonić, 1996).

Fixed Prices and Transparent Pricing: Create a consistent price system for accommodation, meals, and other services to avoid overcharging and assure affordability. Respondents praised the comfortable and affordable costs of GMVN dormitories, hotels, and guest houses. Similar price rules should be implemented for private lodgings, with a quoted range to prevent hotel operators from arbitrarily raising costs depending on demand. This would assure equal treatment for all visitors while being affordable, as proposed by R1 and R11.

Management's Role: Effective management is important for enhancing the pilgrimage experience. R6 stressed the importance of active management engagement in all areas of the pilgrimage, including admission fees, accommodation, and meal costs. R12 proposed that the temple management oversee price regulation to maintain uniformity and fairness. The management can freely quote the pricing of rooms on their website, including those for private accommodations. This mechanism, similar to how GMVN bookings are handled online with receipts generated, should be introduced in all hotels in Kedarnath or Sonprayag, whether private or government-run. This transparency would assist in ensuring fair and consistent pricing across all accommodations.

8.2. Regulation of Priest Behaviour

Several respondents voiced concerns about priests charging extra for ceremonies and acting unprofessionally. The temple management should take strong action against any soliciting of additional funds for special poojas. However, according to the temple officials interviewed, priests are paid a salary, and contrary to common belief, pandas are the ones who collect money on the pretext of breaking the queue. The temple management strongly opposed people paying these pandas, underlining the importance of preserving the sacredness and integrity of the pilgrimage experience. R2 and R3 also highlighted the necessity of fair methods and professional conduct in maintaining the site's integrity.

8.3. Carrying Capacity and Crowd Management

Managing the number of visitors is crucial for maintaining the site's infrastructure and providing a favourable experience for all pilgrims. Insufficient information regarding the volume, flows and characteristics of religious tourism constitutes one of the major barriers to the development of religious tourism strategies (Kartal et al., 2015). Even Kedarnath temple management does not maintain accurate data on tourists visiting the site.

Adopting a system akin to Hajj or Tirupati, in which pilgrims are issued wristbands, might provide an accurate count of visitors, which is essential in places prone to natural disasters.

Limiting Daily Visitors: Using a pass system to regulate the number of visitors each day will help you manage the crowd better. R7 and R8 stressed the importance of such a system in reducing resource demands and improving visitor management. The mountain's carrying capacity is a crucial issue, and it is currently being exceeded in Kedarnath. To preserve the site's sustainability and safety, the number of daily visitors must be limited. Controlling the number of visitors through quotas or ticketing systems can help manage overcrowding and reduce environmental degradation. For example, introducing quotas and reducing the number of visits to sensitive areas, as suggested for Saudi Arabia's pilgrimage sites (Tabash et al., 2023), can alleviate pressure on local ecosystems.

Enhancing safety Through Effective Pre-Booking: Furthermore, pre-booking accommodations can significantly improve the comfort and convenience of the pilgrimage experience. Respondents stated that pre-booking allowed them to secure a comfortable stay. Tourists will feel more at ease if the website displays the number of available lodgings, lodges, guest houses, and tents, as well as allows for online booking. Transparency concerning room availability in Kedarnath will provide travellers with advance notice of whether accommodations are available. Helicopter pilgrims typically do not stay overnight, instead departing the same day. However, trek pilgrims should be required to secure accommodations before hiking. If there are no accommodations available, guides ought to halt tourists at Gaurikund to avoid overcrowding and maintain safety.

8.4. Guides for the Pilgrimage Site

Providing knowledgeable guides can considerably improve the pilgrimage experience by discussing the site's history and significance, as well as providing vital gear advice and safety checks.

Gear Guidance and Checklist: Providing pilgrims with a checklist and instructions on the essential items required for the trek can help them prepare more successfully and safely. R13 underlined the need for dedicated professionals to give advice and support.

Guidance and Information: Keeping a help desk or guide service open at all times helps provide pilgrims with ongoing information and assistance. R13 recommended that ongoing direction and support are required for a better pilgrimage experience. Guides can also help tourists who face language barriers. Therefore, setting up a tourist help desk in Sonprayag can contribute to controlling the number of people arriving in Kedarnath.

These help desks can check for proper gear before the tourist sets off for the trek. Those who have no accommodation should be stopped from further movement to Kedarnath for safety purposes.

8.5. Accessibility to Emergency Medical Facilities

Ensuring accessibility for all pilgrims, especially those with mobility issues, is essential as is providing emergency medical care to ensure their safety and well-being.

Wheelchair-Friendly Facilities: Wheelchair accessibility facilities at the temple can be made available by constructing wheelchair-friendly steps to make a pilgrimage journey accessible to all. Access to everyone to participate in pilgrimage activities can greatly enhance the tourist experience.

Medical Assistance and Facilities: Medical facilities well-stocked with supplies along with the presence of medical personnel are a necessity in such an isolated site. An Airbus facility should be provided for twenty-four hours as cardiac arrest, and other such adverse health conditions can take place at any point in time. Adequate medical assistance, ease of accessibility, and infrastructure would increase the level of safety and comfort for all pilgrims performing their rituals.

8.6. Regulations of the Horse Business

To protect the welfare of the horses and the safety of pilgrims, the horse business in Kedarnath must be regulated.

Prevent Horse Overwork: Strict restrictions should be developed to prevent horses from being worked excessively. This includes limiting the number of journeys each horse can make every day and requiring rest times in between trips. Inspections should be undertaken on a regular basis to ensure that these criteria are followed.

Mule Owner Licensing: All mule owners should be obliged to obtain the necessary licenses before operating. This will help to ensure that only qualified personnel are able to give horses services. Regular inspections should be made to ensure the validity of these licenses.

Regulated Pricing: Horse ride rates should be regulated to avoid charging excessively and ensure fair pricing for all pilgrims. A uniform price structure should be created and prominently posted at key places along the pilgrimage route.

Maintenance and Health Checks: Horses should be subjected to regular health checks and upkeep. Veterinarians should undertake regular health checks on the horses to ensure they are fit for service. In addition, sufficient stabling facilities and access to food and water should be provided to ensure the horses' health.

Separate Horse paths: To avoid accidents and blockages, separate paths for horses and hikers should be built. This will make the journey safer and more comfortable for all pilgrims.

Implementing these laws will allow the horse business in Kedarnath to be managed more effectively, assuring the well-being of the horses as well as the safety and contentment of the pilgrims.

8.7. Enhancing Transportation Systems

Improving transportation infrastructure is critical to manage the surge of people to Kedarnath. This includes creating effective public transit options to reduce traffic congestion and environmental pollution.

Increase Public Bus Supply: There is a scarcity of government buses, forcing pilgrims to rely on expensive private buses. The government should expand the number of public buses so that pilgrims have affordable and accessible transportation options. R1 and R4 stressed that, while cars are comfortable, they are costly. Increasing the availability of inexpensive public transportation choices and controlling private transportation rates can help all pilgrims travel more easily.

Regulate Private Bus Fees: Many pilgrims face high travel costs due to unregulated fees charged by private bus operators. Implementing a regulatory framework to oversee the prices charged by private bus operators will ensure that all travellers pay fair and reasonable fares.

Dedicated Shuttle Services: Establishing dedicated shuttle services from significant locations, such as Rudraprayag and Sonprayag, will help manage pilgrim traffic and alleviate congestion. The shuttles should be regular, dependable, and fairly priced.

Traffic Management: Traffic congestion, particularly at Rudraprayag, is a major problem, with stories of tourists being stranded for hours. Improved traffic management measures, such as designated lanes for pilgrim vehicles and real-time traffic monitoring systems, can help reduce congestion.

Pathway Maintenance: The trekking pathways are usually described as “half-destroyed” and “slippery and broken,” making the trip especially dangerous during bad weather. Regular maintenance and upgrading of the trekking pathways are necessary to ensure the safety of all pilgrims.

8.8. Hygiene and Sanitation

Respondents regularly highlighted poor hygiene and sanitation conditions, particularly the state of the toilets. Addressing sanitation issues is critical for maintaining the health and well-being of pilgrims.

Waste management: Investing in proper waste disposal systems and increasing the number of public toilets can mitigate the problems of open defecation and waste accumulation, as highlighted in Vrindavan (Shinde, 2012).

Improving Sanitation Facilities: R5 voiced unhappiness with the mobile toilets, which pose a high risk of infection. This is particularly concerning for individuals with medical conditions that require frequent use of toilet facilities. R6 echoed this concern, highlighting the lack of menstrual hygiene facilities for women. Mobile toilets should be inspected and cleaned on a regular basis to ensure they are hygienic and safe to use. This involves keeping the toilets stocked with supplies and well-cleaned to avoid unpleasant odours and lower the chance of infection.

Menstrual Hygiene Facilities: Menstrual hygiene facilities, such as pad machines, must be provided at regular intervals along the pilgrimage path. This will guarantee that women have access to the supplies they require to maintain their hygiene throughout their journey.

Routine Cleaning of GMVN Toilets: The GMVN toilets, particularly those shared with the helipad, require regular cleaning. Considering that these facilities are well-maintained, they would considerably improve pilgrims' overall sanitation.

By resolving these hygiene and sanitation issues, the safety and well-being of all Kedarnath tourists can be significantly improved, resulting in a more comfortable and health-conscious pilgrimage.

8.9. Innovation and Technology

Utilizing technology can improve the way pilgrimage sites are managed. By providing virtual tours of holy places, for instance, the use of Virtual Reality (VR) technology can assist control visitor numbers by minimizing physical crowding (Raj et al., 2023). For example, virtual tours can recreate the experience of Kedarnath Temple during peak pilgrimage seasons without over-burdening local resources but yet can provide spiritual satisfaction to the pilgrims who cannot physically visit. In addition, using social media (SM) as a marketing and communication tool can assist control visitor expectations and enhance the experience in general (Caber et al., 2021). To support data analysis and collection for management decision-making, technology can also be used. One can make use, for example, of Instagram and Facebook to create awareness regarding weather conditions, the time of the pilgrimage or rituals so that all the pilgrims are well prepared and well prepared for the visit. Also, using GIS, one can monitor the change in environmental conditions around Kedarnath and crowd management software can furnish real-time details of footfalls to help optimize visitor flow and thereby ensure safety.

A comprehensive and well-coordinated strategy that takes into account the requirements of pilgrims, visitors, local communities, and the environment is needed to address these issues. To guarantee the enduring viability and integrity of these hallowed locations, proficient administration strategies must incorporate contemporary advancements with customary customs. Pilgrimage sites can maintain their spiritual value and cultural legacy while fostering sustainable tourism development by understanding and solving these complex issues.

8.10. Coordinated Management and Comprehensive Policies

The BKTC solely owns and controls the temple premises. The roads come under the Public Works Department (PWD) and the rest houses, government rest houses like dormitories, and hotels are maintained by GMVN. The private hotels have no common management umbrella. Hence coordination amongst all these agencies is required in respectively managing the destinations as it ensures concurrence and integration. Stressing upon policies that will address environmental sustainability, economic development, and social equity is necessary so that pilgrimage sites are managed holistically. Moreover, they need to be flexible and expert-driven taking into consideration all the stakeholder responses, for relevance and effectiveness.

8.11. Upgrade accommodation facilities

Theme hotels and experiential lodging may be developed in pilgrimage sites as per the suggestions by Hung et al. (2013) to upgrade the experience of the pilgrims while also providing necessary facilities. Besides, traditional local *ashrams* and *dharamshalas* should also be retained and upgraded further to provide pilgrims with a unique and natural environment. Modernization of such traditional facilities with basic amenities would ensure comfort without erasing the cultural touch. There should be enough lodging facilities that reflect the diversified needs of the pilgrims. This includes budget accommodations for low-income pilgrims and higher-end options for those who can afford them. Furthermore, seasonal accommodation solutions, such as temporary camps, can be set up during peak periods to handle the surge in visitors.

8.12. Foster Hospitality

Promoting a friendly attitude among service providers can significantly improve the pilgrimage experience. Staff at pilgrimage locations should be trained to be modest, altruistic, and sensitive to pilgrims' specific religious needs (Pande & Shi, 2023). This creates a pleasant atmosphere and gives guests a sense of belonging.

Emphasizing traditional values of hospitality will provide a spiritual dimension to the tourist experience. While the themes of cultural sensitivity, customer service, and the need to preserve sanctity in the pilgrimage destination can be communicated in employee training programs, rewarding good service and positively reinforcing them shall also motivate employees to provide quality service. Since there were instances of harsh and impolite behaviour from hoteliers and staff of private accommodations (R7, R10, R5), there is an immediate need for these private lodgings to inculcate traditional hospitable values. On the contrary, the hospitable and warm behaviour of the GMVN staff was applauded by guests. (R3). There is hence a need to address these inconsistencies in personnel behavior through training and incentives.

9. Conclusion

The study provides a detailed analysis of the tourist experience in the Kedarnath pilgrimage site. It stresses several characteristics related to managing a remote and sacred site like Kedarnath. Tourists face numerous problems; such as an increase in the number of devotees during temple season ranging from limited amenities to transport difficulties and security issues. BKTC has a key role in maintaining Kedarnath's operational efficiency and holiness. The study also unveils what BKTC has done about infrastructure upgrades among other activities towards preparedness for disasters. However, there are still major difficulties that management faces such as social and cultural impacts as well as demands for sustainable practices.

By incorporating inputs from visitors, we can further understand the problems in these pilgrimage sites. This paper aims to address the broader discourse on pilgrimage site management and offer some recommendations that can help improve Kedarnath temple management practices. In summary, this study brings out how vital effective policies; planning and management are when it comes to handling challenges faced by both temple management and pilgrims in Kedarnath. An extensive plan designed to accommodate the different demands of stakeholders would promote the tourism experience at times while keeping this revered place's sanctity and sustainability. It therefore informs future researchers about best practices for running pilgrimage sites around the world.

10. Future research areas

Exploration of Emerging Technologies

The long-term impacts of technologies, in particular, Virtual Reality and Geographic Information Systems, in pilgrimage tourism.

Reflecting the Role of Crowd Management Software in the Optimization of Visitor Experience with regards to Environmental Sustainability.

Community Engagement

Analyzing the role of local communities in managing Kedarnath and similar sites, with a special emphasis on inclusive policies and practices.

Describing the ways through which community-managed hospitality services enhance the experience of pilgrim's tourists.

Environmental Sustainability

Analyzing for the long term the effect of rising tourism on the local environment, including waste management and carrying capacity.

Discussing the effectiveness of seasonal accommodation solutions in reducing pressure on the environment during peak periods.

Policy and management coordination

Researching the effectiveness of coordinated management strategies through stakeholders such as BKTC, GMVN, PWD, and private operators. Many researchers also argue that flexible policies on environmental sustainability, economic development, and social equity may be designed and implemented effectively.

Cultural and Spiritual Impacts

Comparing and contrasting how modernization and technological interventions affect the spiritual and cultural significance of pilgrimage sites.

Discussing how the management of the site balances traditional values with modern demands.

11. Practical Implications of the Study

Such findings have important implications for active policies, site managers, and other agents within the tourism sector. The interviews carried out at Kedarnath bring out some realistic examples of issues relating to tourist demand, and also the effectiveness of present management strategies where lessons can be well applied to other pilgrimage destinations. They would, therefore, seek to simplify such an understanding of the processes in a manner that would accord further growth in pilgrimage tourism. It is this that will ensure that the sites remain great places of immense spiritual and cultural worth for years to come.

References

- Bharati, A. (1963). Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition. *History of Religions*, 3(1), 135–167. <https://doi.org/10.1086/462476>
- Bhardwaj, S. M. (1983). *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*. Univ of California Press.
- Caber, M., Drori, N., Albayrak, T., & Herstein, R. (2021). Social media usage behaviours of religious tourists: The cases of the Vatican, Mecca, and Jerusalem. *International Journal of Tourism Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2444>
- Eck, D. L. (1998). The imagined landscape: Patterns in the construction of Hindu sacred geography. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32(2), 165–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996679803200202>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Routledge.
- Griffiths, M. (2011). Those who come to pray and those who come to look: interactions between visitors and congregations. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 6(1), 63–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873x.2010.536234>
- Howley, J. (1996). *Holy Places and Temples in India*. Torchlight Publications.
- Huang, K., & Pearce, P. (2019). Visitors' perceptions of religious tourism destinations. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 14, 100371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2019.100371>
- Hung, K., Yang, X., Wassler, P., Wang, D., Lin, P., & Liu, Z. (2016). Contesting the Commercialization and Sanctity of Religious Tourism in the Shaolin Monastery, China. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 19(2), 145–159. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2093>
- Jackowski, A., & Smith, V. L. (1992). Polish pilgrim-tourists. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 19(1), 92–106. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90109-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90109-3)
- Kartal, B., Tepeci, M., & Atli, H. (2015). Examining the religious tourism potential of Manisa, Turkey with a marketing perspective. *Tourism Review*, 70(3), 214–231. <https://doi.org/10.1108/tr-09-2013-0048>
- Kasim, A. (2011). Balancing Tourism and Religious Experience: Understanding Devotees' Perspectives on Thaipusam in Batu Caves, Selangor, Malaysia. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 20(3-4), 441–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2011.562437>
- Malhotra, N. K., Peterson, M., & Uslay, C. (2006). Helping marketing research earn a seat at the table for decision-making. *European Business Review*, 18(4), 294–306. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09555340610677507>
- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K. E., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22(1), 1–18. Sagepub. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Nair, S. N. (2010). *The Lord Shiva, his 12 jyotirlingams and 5 bhoota lingams*. Hindology Books.

- Pande, K., & Shi, F. (2023). Managing visitor experience at religious heritage sites. *Journal of Destination Marketing and Management*, 29, 100800–100800. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2023.100800>
- Rahimizhian, S., Oztüren, A., & Ilkan, M. (2020). Emerging realm of 360-degree technology to promote tourism destination. *Technology in Society*, 63, 101411. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2020.101411>
- Sati, V. P. (2018). Carrying capacity analysis and destination development: a case study of Gangotri tourists/pilgrims' circuit in the Himalaya. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 23(3), 312–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2018.1433220>
- Shackley, M. L. (2001). *Managing Sacred Sites*. Continuum.
- Shastri, J. L. (2002). *Siva Purana* (11th ed., Vol. 3). Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology. (Original work published 1991)
- Shinde, K. (2007). Pilgrimage and the Environment: Challenges in a Pilgrimage Centre. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 10(4), 343–365. <https://doi.org/10.2167/cit259.0>
- Shinde, K. (2012). Policy, planning, and management for religious tourism in Indian pilgrimage sites. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 4(3), 277–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2012.726107>
- Shinde, K. (2020). The spatial practice of religious tourism in India: a destinations perspective. *Tourism Geographies*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1819400>
- Silverman, D. (2001). *Interpreting qualitative research : methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. Sage.
- Singh, S. (2002). Managing the impacts of Tourist and Pilgrim Mobility in the Indian Himalayas / Nouvelles pratiques de tourisme et de pèlerinage dans l'Himalaya indien : impacts et modes de gestion. *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, 90(1), 25–36. <https://doi.org/10.3406/rga.2002.3070>
- Strauss, A. L. (1990). Systematic Coding in Qualitative Research. *BMS: Bulletin of Sociological Methodology / Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 27, 52–62. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24358658>
- Tabash, M. I., Farooq, U., El Refae, G. A., Al-Faryan, M. A. S., & Athamena, B. (2023). Impact of religious tourism on the economic development, energy consumption and environmental degradation: evidence from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Tourism Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/tr-07-2022-0347>
- Timothy, D. J. (2021). Sociopolitical and economic implications of religious and spiritual tourism. *Routledge EBooks*, 301–314. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201011-26>
- Timothy, D. J., & Olsen, D. H. (2006). *Tourism, Religion, and Spiritual Journeys*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203001073>
- Triantafillidou, A., Koritos, C., Chatzipanagiotou, K., & Vassilikopoulou, A. (2010). Pilgrimages: the “promised land” for travel agents?. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 22(3), 382–398. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596111011035963>
- VukonićB. (1996). *Tourism and religion*. Pergamon.