

ENHANCING PILGRIMAGE FACILITIES FOR SENIOR CITIZENS: ACCESSIBILITY, COMFORT, AND WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex dynamics of pilgrimage in India, specifically focusing on the difficulties and experiences faced by pilgrims, especially senior citizens. Pilgrimage, which is long rooted in spiritual, cultural, and religious life, remains an important practice among millions of people around the world. However, the material and economic effort involved in going on these journeys pose serious hindrances, particularly to older pilgrims who suffer from mobility ailments, health difficulties, and poverty.

The research uses a quantitative methodology, incorporating survey information for an analysis of the multi-layered phenomenon of pilgrimage tourism. The data indicates that even though religious experience is a predominant factor for completing pilgrimages, cultural discovery and spiritual recovery equally influence the journey. One of the major issues brought to light by the study is the accessibility of pilgrimage destinations for elderly citizens. Older pilgrims often face physical mobility issues, poor infrastructure, and exorbitant travel expenses, which prevent them from fully engaging in these spiritually rewarding pilgrimages. The study underscores the imperative for sustainable development policies and policy interventions to bridge these gaps. By placing greater emphasis on the needs of senior citizens and promoting a more accessible atmosphere, pilgrimage destinations can serve their varied populations more effectively, making these vibrant traditions available to everyone, young or old, rich or poor.

Keywords – Pilgrimage, Religious, Spiritual, Senior Citizen.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Pilgrimage has been an integral part of human civilization, deeply rooted in religious, cultural, and spiritual traditions. Whether it is the Hajj for Muslims, the Kumbh Mela for Hindus, and the Camino de Santiago for Christians, or Buddhist pilgrimages to Lumbini and Bodhi Gaya, millions undertake these journeys as a means of fulfilling religious duties, seeking spiritual enlightenment, or purifying the soul. However, the physical and financial demands of pilgrimage pose significant challenges, especially for senior citizens who may face mobility issues, health concerns, and economic constraints.

The Need to Prioritize Senior Citizens

With the global rise in the population, there is an increasing focus on policies that enhance the well-being of the elderly. While governments and religious organizations have introduced programs to assist pilgrims, accessibility remains a critical issue for older individuals. Given their limited earning potential, physical frailty, and deep-rooted spiritual aspirations, it becomes essential to consider prioritizing senior citizens for pilgrimage support.

Several countries have already implemented special pilgrimage schemes for the elderly. For example, India's "Mukhyamantri Tirth Yatra Yojana" offers free pilgrimages to senior citizens. Despite these initiatives, many elderly individuals still struggle to access pilgrimage opportunities due to financial limitations, lack of proper infrastructure, and bureaucratic hurdles.

Prioritizing senior citizens for pilgrimage aligns with the broader goals of social welfare, cultural preservation, and human dignity. This study highlights how pilgrimage programs can be restructured to accommodate the elderly more effectively, ensuring that religious and cultural traditions remain accessible to all, regardless of age or financial status.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Collins-Kreiner's (2019) research looks at the earliest roots, present trends, and possible future developments of pilgrimage tourism. The study focuses on how globalization and technology have changed pilgrimage experiences,

making it harder to discern between religious and secular goals. A viewpoint on how flexible strategies and sustainable management could boost pilgrimage tourism in the future is presented in the article.

Joseph et al. (2019) evaluate important elements like infrastructure, crowd control, and spiritual fulfillment in order to investigate pilgrim happiness at Sabarimala, a significant religious event in Kerala. Their results demonstrate how important effective infrastructure, security protocols, and high-quality services are to improving the pilgrimage experience as a whole. The study offers suggestions for enhancing the administration of pilgrimage sites to strike a balance between logistical effectiveness and spiritual devotion.

The amenities offered to pilgrims at the Velankanni pilgrimage center in Tamil Nadu are examined by **Guldeokar (2021)**, who evaluates their sufficiency and effect on the pilgrim experience. In order to increase tourist happiness, the study draws attention to deficiencies in lodging, sanitation, and infrastructure. To blend religious significance with improved service provisions, the research offers useful suggestions for the development of pilgrimage destinations.

With an emphasis on branding, infrastructure, and tourist experiences, **Gupta and Nair (2021)** investigate how Vrindavan, Mathura, has changed as a pilgrimage site. Their research emphasizes the difficulties in striking a balance between modernity and commercialization and religious holiness. The study provides information on tactical measures to change the perception of Indian pilgrimage sites to draw a variety of tourists while maintaining cultural authenticity.

In their study of pilgrimages in the context of modern tourism, **Polus et al. (2022)** highlight the blurring of the boundaries between religious, cultural, and recreational travel, examining how pilgrimage experiences in the modern era have been impacted by globalization, commercialization, and personal motives. The study provides a conceptual basis for understanding pilgrimage as a dynamic and complex phenomenon in the modern world.

In this journal of **Shewale et al. (2023)**, the study of the sociocultural dynamics of Nashik as a pilgrimage town emphasizes the interplay of historical preservation, urban development, and community involvement. According to their research, continuous improvements are essential to enhancing the pilgrim experience while preserving cultural authenticity. The study provides valuable insights into managing socioeconomic growth and religious tourism in culturally rich towns.

By looking at modern motives and experiences, **Andrade Suárez et al. (2024)** challenge conventional classifications and investigate the changing link between pilgrimage and tourism. Their research reshapes the conversation on religious tourism by demonstrating how contemporary pilgrims frequently exhibit traits of both leisure travelers and spiritual seekers.

Objectives

- To examine the present state of Indian pilgrim destinations.
- To investigate sustainable development strategies that enhance pilgrimage sites while preserving their heritage and cultural significance.
- To assess the challenges faced by senior citizens during pilgrimages and suggest improvements in accessibility, comfort, and support systems.

Research Gap

The research gap identified in this paper highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving relationship between pilgrimage and tourism, which has traditionally been studied through rigid dichotomies that separate pilgrims from tourists. Existing literature has largely focused on religious and economic aspects, overlooking the fluid interplay of secular, spiritual, and cultural experiences in contemporary pilgrimage. There is also a lack of emphasis on the built environment and sustainability strategies for Indian pilgrimage sites, despite challenges such as urban sprawl, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental degradation. Additionally, while previous research has explored motivations for pilgrimage, there is limited empirical analysis on how modern travelers self-identify along the pilgrim-tourist spectrum. The study further identifies the absence of a cohesive conceptual framework that integrates emerging forms of pilgrimage tourism, including dark tourism, volunteer tourism, and secular pilgrimages. Moreover, in the Indian context, there is a scarcity of studies evaluating pilgrim satisfaction in mass religious gatherings. This paper aims to bridge these gaps by examining the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism, assessing infrastructure challenges, and proposing strategies for sustainable development, conservation, and improved visitor experience.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research approach, utilizing primary data collected through a Google Survey to analyze the experiences and challenges faced by pilgrims, particularly senior citizens, at religious pilgrimage sites.

The research aims to assess the accessibility, infrastructure, motivations, and perceptions of pilgrimage tourism while identifying areas for sustainable development and policy improvement.

Data Collection Method

Primary data was gathered through an online Google Survey, distributed to individuals with prior pilgrimage experience. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions, divided into four key sections:

- **Demographic Information** – Age, gender, location, occupation, and income level to understand the respondent profile.
- **Pilgrimage Experience** – Frequency of pilgrimage visits, motivations for travel, and sites visited.
- **Accessibility & Challenges for Senior Citizens** – Issues related to mobility, infrastructure, medical support, financial aid, and policy effectiveness.
- **Perceptions on Pilgrimage Tourism** – Respondents' views on balancing religious significance with tourism development and suggestions for improvement.

The survey was designed to ensure ease of access and widespread participation, allowing responses from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Sampling Strategy

The study employed a convenience sampling method, targeting individuals who have undertaken pilgrimages, particularly senior citizens. The survey link was shared through social media, religious community groups, and online forums related to pilgrimage tourism.

4. DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

- **Descriptive Analysis** – Quantitative data from multiple-choice responses was analyzed using statistical tools to identify patterns and trends in pilgrimage motivations, challenges, and experiences.
- **Categorical Analysis** – Responses on challenges faced by senior citizens were categorized to identify recurring issues, such as lack of infrastructure, financial difficulties, and overcrowding.
- **Sentiment & Thematic Analysis** – Open-ended responses regarding suggested improvements were thematically coded to extract key recommendations.
- **Comparative Evaluation** – Differences in pilgrimage experiences based on demographic factors (age, gender, income group) were examined.

Reliability & Validity Measures

- **Pilot Testing** – The survey was tested on a small group before final distribution to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness.
- **Anonymity & Ethical Considerations** – Respondents participated voluntarily, and no personal identifying data was collected.
- **Cross-Verification** – The survey findings were compared with existing literature to ensure consistency and validity.

By leveraging first-hand responses, this methodology provides empirical insights into the modern-day pilgrimage experience, focusing on accessibility, sustainability, and senior citizen support within pilgrimage tourism.

Challenges

- **Limited Reach of Survey** – The Google Survey was primarily shared online, limiting participation from elderly individuals who may not be tech-savvy or have internet access.
- **Self-Reported Data Bias** – Responses are based on personal experiences and perceptions, which may be subjective and influenced by recall bias.
- **Language Barrier** – The survey was conducted in English, potentially excluding non-English-speaking respondents who might have valuable insights.
- **Low Response Rate from Specific Demographics** – Senior citizens and individuals from rural areas may be underrepresented due to digital literacy gaps.
- **Potential Non-Serious Responses** – Some respondents may not have provided accurate or thoughtful answers, especially in open-ended questions.
- **Limitations**
 - **Non-Random Sampling** – The convenience sampling method may not be fully representative of all pilgrimage travelers, particularly those without internet access.
 - **Lack of In-Depth Qualitative Data** – While open-ended questions provide some qualitative insights, a more detailed qualitative approach (e.g., interviews or focus groups) would offer deeper understanding.

- **Focus on Indian Pilgrimage Sites** – The study primarily assesses Indian pilgrimage destinations, limiting its applicability to global pilgrimage tourism trends.
- **Time Constraints** – The survey was conducted over a limited period, which may not fully capture seasonal variations in pilgrimage experiences.
- **Lack of Government and Policy Insights** – The study focuses on traveler perspectives and does not include direct insights from government or religious tourism authorities regarding policy decisions and infrastructure plans.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable empirical insights into the challenges and experiences of pilgrims, particularly senior citizens, helping shape recommendations for sustainable pilgrimage tourism and infrastructure development.

Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent** – Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw at any time.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality** – No personally identifiable information was collected. All responses were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.
- **Non-Coercion** – Participants were not pressured or incentivized to respond. They could skip any question they were uncomfortable answering.
- **Data Protection and Security** – The collected data was securely stored and accessible only to the research team to prevent unauthorized access or misuse.
- **Honest Representation of Data** – Responses were analyzed and reported accurately without manipulation or misinterpretation to fit preconceived conclusions.
- **Avoidance of Harm** – The survey avoided sensitive or offensive questions that could cause emotional distress to participants.
- **Fair and Inclusive Research** – The survey aimed to represent diverse demographics and experiences, ensuring that different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds were considered.
- **Proper Citation and Acknowledgment** – Any secondary sources or existing studies referenced in the research were appropriately cited to maintain academic integrity.

By adhering to these ethical considerations, the study ensures transparency, fairness, and respect for participants, upholding the integrity of the research process.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This research is based on the data collected from 50 people using the survey containing various questions. The data analysis and Interpretation of the collected data is categorized below.

Age:

Age Range	Count of Votes	Percentage of Votes (%)
Under 18	2	4
18 – 25	33	66
25 – 35	7	14
35 – 45	3	6
45 and Above	5	10

Gender

Gender	Count	Percentage (%)
Female	23	46
Male	27	54

City:

The respondents gave various cities as their response that were Assam, Bangalore, Chennai, Karnataka, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, India.

Occupation:

The respondents belong from various occupation that were Assistant Manager, HR, Corporate, Engineer, Intern, Private Sector, Self Employed, Still working, Teaching, Student, NA.

Monthly Income:

Income Range (In Rs.)	Count of People	Percentage of People (%)
Below 20,000	28	56
20,000 – 35,000	10	20
35,000 – 50,000	2	4
50,000 – 60,000	2	4
Above 60,000	8	16

Have you ever been on a religious pilgrimage?

Response	Count	Percentage (%)
Yes	28	56
No	22	44

If yes, name the pilgrimage site(s) visited:

The respondents gave various cities as their response that were Dharmshala, Kashi, Hampi, Gokarna, Mahakal Ujjain, Rameshwaram, Tirumala Tirupati Devashram, Haridwar, None and NA.

What was your primary motivation for the pilgrimage? (Select all that apply)

Primary Motivation	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
Religious Fulfillment	21	42
Cultural Exploration	38	76
Spiritual Healing	24	48
Social/Family Tradition	24	48

How often do you undertake religious pilgrimages?

Options	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
Once in a lifetime	12	24
Once every few year	24	48
Annually	10	20
Multiple times a year	4	8

Did you face any of the following challenges while on pilgrimage? (Select all that apply)

Challenges	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
Physical mobility issues	26	52
High travel costs	30	60
Lack of medical facilities	21	42
Poor infrastructure (roads, transport, accommodation)	29	58
Long queues & overcrowding	38	76
Lack of senior citizen-friendly policies	24	48

Did you receive any financial or logistical support for your pilgrimage?

Options	No of Votes	Percentage (%)
Yes, from religious organizations	10	20
No, I had to fund it myself	40	80

Were there adequate facilities for elderly pilgrims (ramps, wheelchairs, resting areas, medical support)?

Availability of Support	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
Yes	11	22
No	20	40
Partially	19	38

Would you support prioritizing senior citizens for government-sponsored pilgrimage programs? (Rating)

Rating	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
1	25	50
2	7	14
3	8	16
4	6	12
5	4	8

Do you believe pilgrimage sites should balance religious significance with tourism development?

Believe	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
sYes	40	80
No	5	10
Not Sure	5	10

How would you rate your overall pilgrimage experience?

Experience	No. of Votes	Percentage (%)
Excellent	5	10
Good	21	42
Average	24	48

What improvements would you suggest enhancing pilgrimage experiences for senior citizens?

- Availability of different kinds of quality and comfort foods
- Medical support, financial aid, pre booked passes with special aids, free food package for elderly, etc.
- I'm answering from the perspective of someone traveling with an older spouse who has walking difficulty. Not a wheelchair user, but we need airport assistance and no stairs. I suppose I am technically a senior citizen but trying not to admit to it.
- Enhancing the cultural root instead of turning it into a modern cultural site. Cleanliness should also be maintained around the temple.
- Separate queue should be there along with some other facilities like water bottles and food to be provided. Also, there should be some shelter to avoid rain and scorching heat. Transportation should also be there inside the premises so that there can be easy movement
- The Foundations should be aware of the overcrowdings for everyone mostly the senior citizens.
- Providing all facilities to them which they need in low cost or for free
- Providing pocket friendly packages for pilgrimage tourism.
- support from the pilgrimage centers for senior citizens
- Nil
- Assistants, facilities like ramps, wheelchairs

6. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the challenges, motivations, and experiences of pilgrims, particularly senior citizens, in Indian pilgrimage tourism. The survey results reveal that while religious fulfillment remains a core motivation for pilgrimage, cultural exploration and spiritual healing also play substantial roles in influencing participation. This underscores the evolving nature of pilgrimage, where spiritual and secular aspects intersect, aligning with contemporary literature on the subject.

One of the most pressing concerns identified in the study is the accessibility of pilgrimage sites for senior citizens. Despite their deep-rooted spiritual aspirations, elderly pilgrims frequently face physical mobility challenges, inadequate infrastructure, and high travel costs. A substantial proportion of respondents (52%) reported mobility issues, while 60% cited high travel expenses as a barrier. The lack of senior citizen-friendly policies, medical support, and logistical assistance further exacerbates the difficulties faced by this vulnerable demographic. These findings indicate an urgent need for policymakers and religious organizations to implement targeted measures that enhance accessibility and affordability for elderly pilgrims.

The study also highlights the infrastructural deficiencies at pilgrimage sites, with 58% of respondents citing poor infrastructure as a major concern. Overcrowding (76%) and long queues further contribute to a suboptimal pilgrimage experience, particularly for older individuals. While some respondents received financial or logistical support

from religious organizations (20%), the majority (80%) had to bear the costs themselves, highlighting the limited reach of existing assistance programs.

Despite these challenges, there is widespread support for balancing religious significance with tourism development, as indicated by 80% of respondents. This reflects a broader trend in modern pilgrimage tourism, where commercial and spiritual elements coexist. However, the qualitative responses suggest that while modernization and infrastructural improvements are welcomed, preserving the cultural and spiritual essence of pilgrimage sites is equally important.

The study's limitations, including its reliance on an online survey that may not fully capture the perspectives of less tech-savvy elderly individuals, highlight areas for future research. Expanding data collection to include in-depth interviews and on-site observations could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of pilgrims. Additionally, engaging with government officials and religious organizations would offer valuable insights into ongoing and planned initiatives aimed at improving pilgrimage accessibility.

Here are the recommendations for pilgrimage based on the results of the research:

Preparation and Planning

- ✚ Pilgrims should ensure they are physically, mentally, and spiritually prepared before embarking on their journey.
- ✚ Adequate research about the pilgrimage site, including its significance, rules, and regulations, should be conducted.

Health and Safety Measures

- ✚ Medical check-ups should be undertaken before travel, especially for elderly or physically challenged individuals.
- ✚ Proper hydration and nutrition should be maintained throughout the journey.

Spiritual Readiness

- ✚ Pilgrims should engage in prayer and reflection to cultivate the right mindset before starting their journey.
- ✚ Learning about the religious history and rituals of the pilgrimage site enhances the experience.

Logistics and Accommodation

- ✚ Advance booking of transportation and lodging is recommended to avoid last-minute inconveniences.
- ✚ Travelers should ensure they have proper documentation, including identification and necessary permits.

Respect for Local Customs

- ✚ Pilgrims should dress modestly and adhere to the cultural norms of the pilgrimage site.
- ✚ Respect for local traditions and fellow pilgrims is essential to maintain the sanctity of the experience.

Sustainable and Ethical Conduct

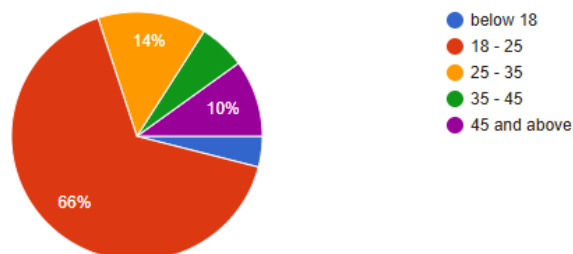
- ✚ Pilgrims should minimize waste and adopt eco-friendly practices to preserve the sanctity of the pilgrimage site.
- ✚ Contributions and donations should be made responsibly, ensuring they reach legitimate channels.



Proof of Outcome:

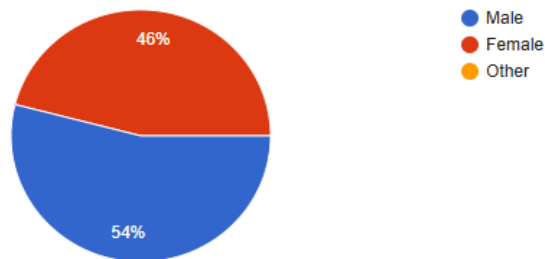
Age

50 responses



Gender

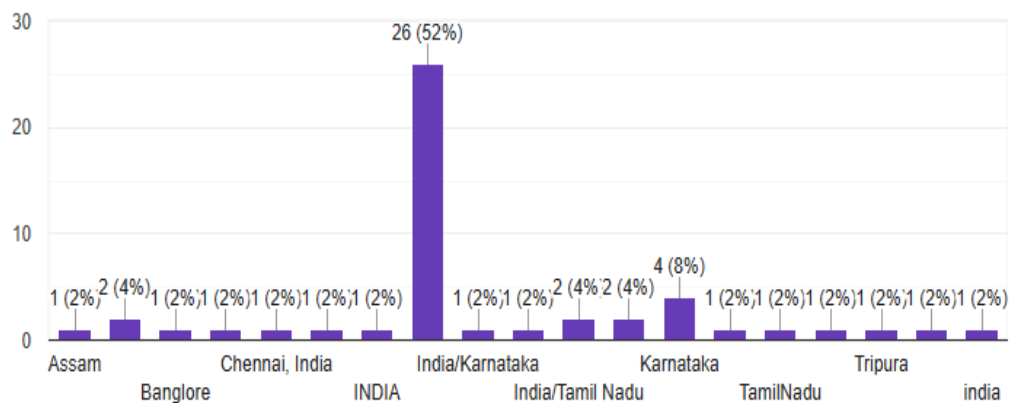
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Country/State of Residence

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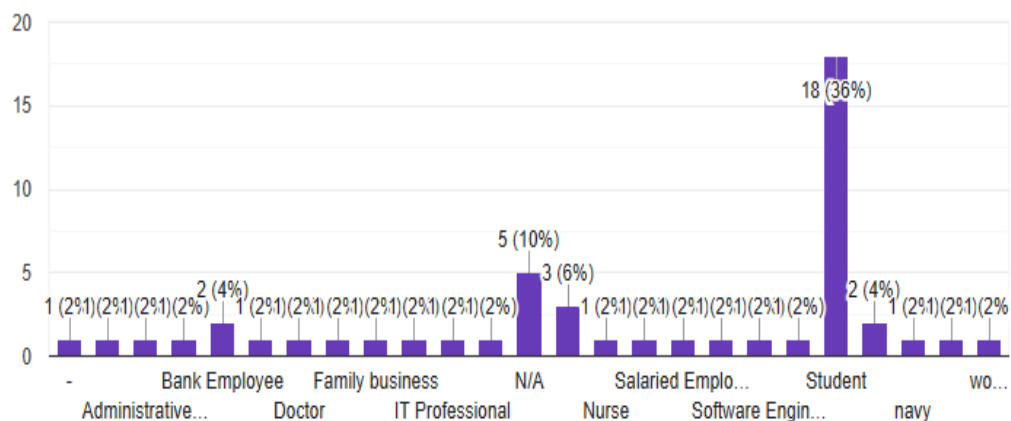
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Occupation (Before Retirement, if applicable)

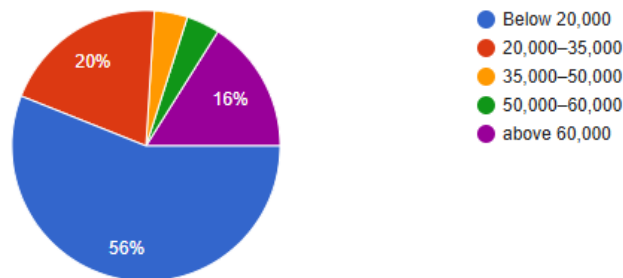
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50 responses



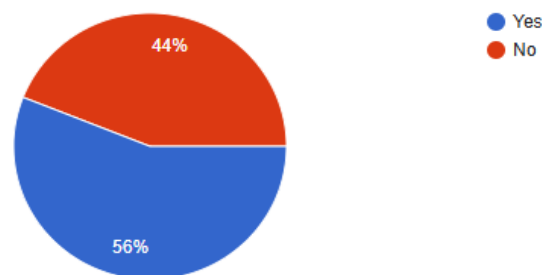
Monthly Income

50 responses



Have you ever been on a religious pilgrimage?

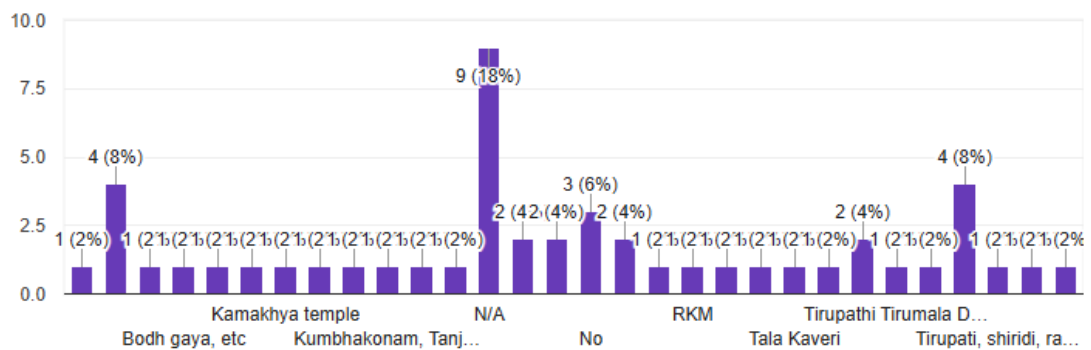
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If yes, name the pilgrimage site(s) visited

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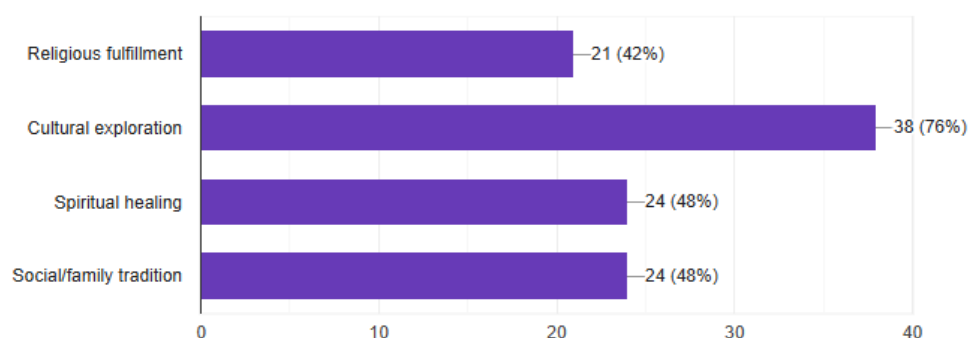
50 responses



What was your primary motivation for the pilgrimage? (Select all that apply)

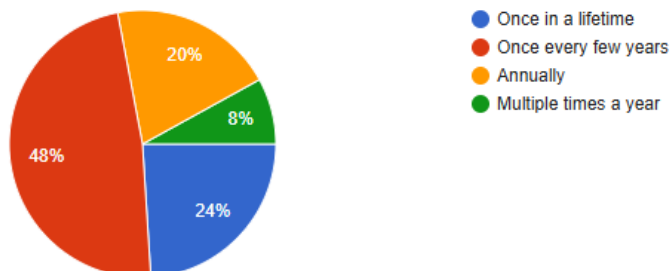
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50 responses



How often do you undertake religious pilgrimages?

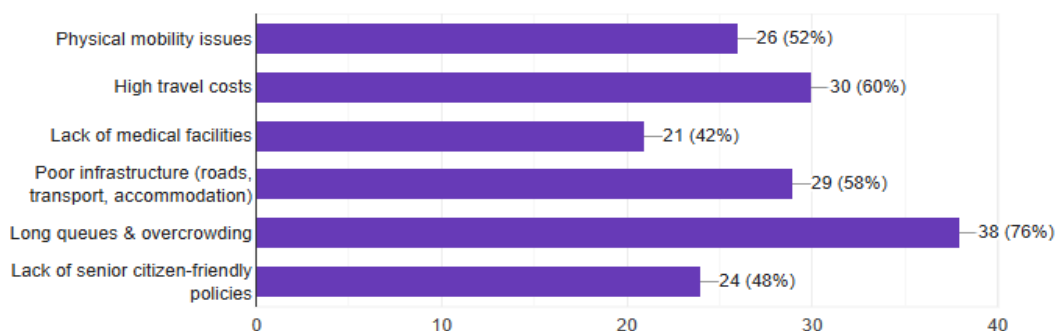
50 responses



Did you face any of the following challenges while on pilgrimage? (Select all that apply)

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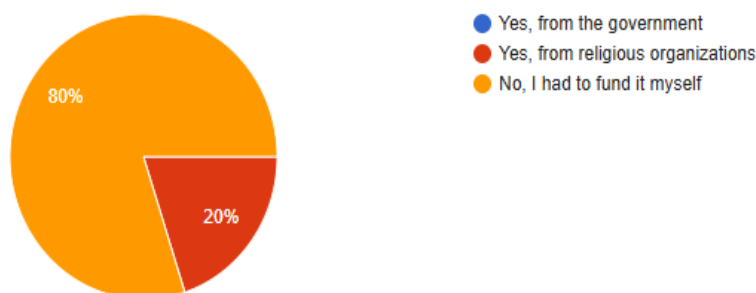
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Did you receive any financial or logistical support for your pilgrimage?

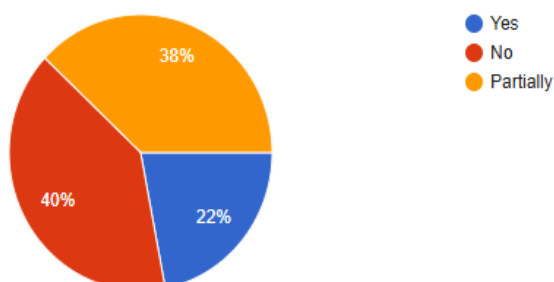
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50 responses



Were there adequate facilities for elderly pilgrims (ramps, wheelchairs, resting areas, medical support)?

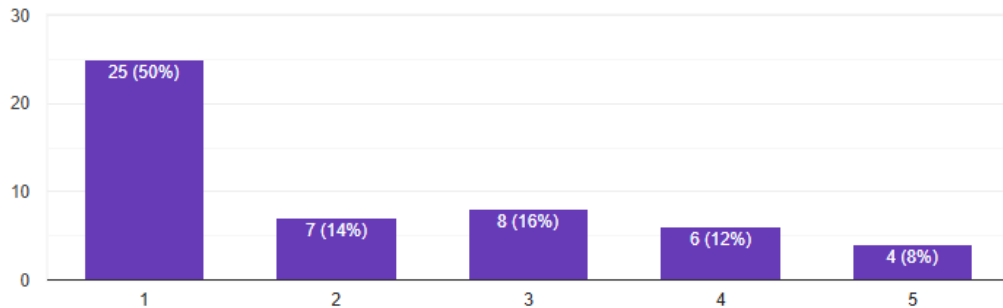
50 responses



Would you support prioritizing senior citizens for government-sponsored pilgrimage programs?

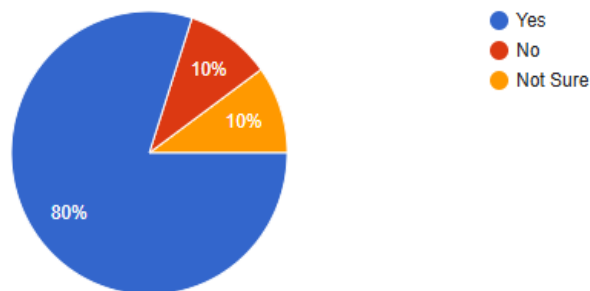
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50 responses



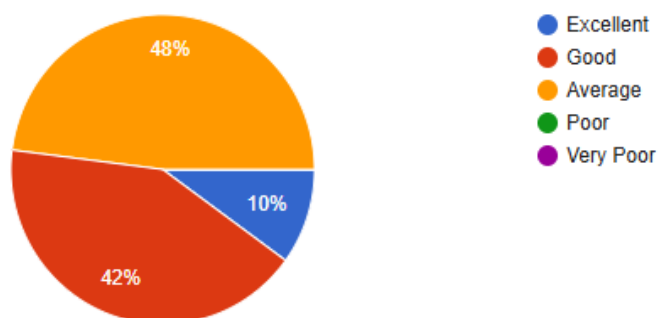
Do you believe pilgrimage sites should balance religious significance with tourism development?

50 responses



How would you rate your overall pilgrimage experience?

50 responses



What improvements would you suggest enhancing pilgrimage experiences for senior citizens?

14 responses

-

Availability of different kinds of quality and comfort foods

Medical support, financial aid, pre booked Passes with special aids, free food package for elderly, etc

I'm answering from the perspective of someone traveling with an older spouse who has walking difficulty. Not a wheelchair user, but we need airport assistance and no stairs. I suppose I am technically a senior citizen but trying not to admit to it.

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Separate queue should be there along with some other facilities like water bottles and food to be provided. Also, there should be some shelter to avoid rain and scorching heat. Transportation should also be there inside the premises so that there can be easy movement

The Foundations should be aware of the overcrowding for everyone mostly the senior citizens.

7. CONCLUSION

This research underscores the importance of developing sustainable pilgrimage tourism strategies that prioritize senior citizens, ensuring their spiritual aspirations can be fulfilled without undue hardship. The study identifies key challenges, including mobility restrictions, high travel costs, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of policy support, all of which hinder the pilgrimage experience for elderly travelers. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach involving government intervention, infrastructural improvements, and community engagement.

To enhance pilgrimage experiences, targeted measures such as dedicated senior citizen support programs, improved medical facilities, financial subsidies, and streamlined logistical arrangements should be prioritized. Infrastructure upgrades, including ramps, wheelchairs, and designated resting areas, would significantly improve accessibility, making pilgrimage sites more inclusive. Furthermore, the introduction of separate queues, better crowd management, and transportation facilities within pilgrimage complexes can alleviate the strain of overcrowding and long waiting times.

The findings also contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that maintains the sanctity of religious sites while embracing necessary modernizations. Future research should focus on a more detailed analysis of governmental policies, the role of private sector investments, and international best practices to create a holistic framework for sustainable pilgrimage tourism. By implementing these recommendations, pilgrimage sites can be transformed into more accessible, inclusive, and culturally preserved destinations, allowing all devotees, regardless of age or financial status, to embark on their spiritual journeys with dignity and ease.

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