ABSTRACT

Introduction

Religious travel, one of the oldest movements of human kind (Swatos & Tomasi, 2002), has evolved beyond pilgrimage to include different motivations, like salvation (moksha), health, and cultural exploration (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Higgins & Hamilton, 2016). While pilgrimage tourism is a subset of religious tourism (Rinschede, 1992), even non-religious travelers visit sacred sites. The academic focus on pilgrimage tourism surged in the 1990s (Smith, 1992; Rinschede, 1992), leading to interdisciplinary research in anthropology, sociology, geography, religious studies, and tourism (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Cohen, 1992; Collins-Kreiner, 2010). India, a prominent pilgrimage destination, witnessed 1,433 million domestic and 6.64 million foreign religious tourists in 2022, a sharp rise from 2021 (Kaur, 2023). While tourism benefits local economies (Stoykova, 2008; Nouri Kouchi et al., 2018), empirical assessments of service quality at Indian pilgrimage sites are rare (Gassiot Melian et al., 2016). The Jyotirlingas, twelve major Hindu pilgrimage sites, offer a prime case for service quality assessment (Debasish Batabyal et al., 2023). Despite research on pilgrimage motivations, sustainability, and tourism impacts (Shinde, 2010; Verma & Sarangi, 2019; Singh et al., 2023), empirical service quality evaluations remain scarce. This study bridges this gap, analyzing service quality at Jyotirlingas to enhance visitor experience and promote sustainable pilgrimage tourism.

Background of the study

Religious travel has long been an integral part of human civilization, evolving into a significant sector within tourism (Swatos & Tomasi, 2002). Pilgrimage, a form of religious travel, involves journeys undertaken for spiritual purposes, often centered around sacred sites (Turner, 1973). While religious tourism includes a broader spectrum of travel for religious and cultural motivations, pilgrimage tourism specifically involves ritualistic and faith-driven visits (Rinschede, 1992; Shackley, 2001). Over time, the lines between pilgrimage and tourism have blurred, leading scholars to position them along a continuum rather than as distinct categories (Smith, 1992; Badone & Roseman, 2004).

India, with its deep-rooted religious traditions, has been a key global hub for pilgrimage tourism (Bhardwaj, 1989). The concept of '*Teertha Yatra*' in Hinduism signifies spiritual journeys aimed at purification and salvation (Kaur, 1979). Sacred sites such as Varanasi, Kedarnath, and the twelve Jyotirlingas hold immense religious and cultural significance (Debasish Batabyal et al., 2023; Nair, 2010).

Despite its importance, pilgrimage tourism in India faces several challenges, including overcrowding, environmental degradation, and inadequate infrastructure (Shinde, 2007). The influx of pilgrims strains local resources, leading to water shortages, waste management issues, and traffic congestion, particularly in Himalayan pilgrimage sites like Kedarnath (Sati, 2018). Service quality is a crucial yet underexplored aspect of pilgrimage tourism in India. The satisfaction of pilgrims depends on various factors, including accommodation, accessibility, safety, food, hygiene, and temple management

(Tripathi et al., 2010; Verma & Sarangi, 2019). While global studies have assessed service quality in pilgrimage contexts—such as Medjugorje (Krešić et al., 2012) and Hajj (Eid, 2012)—Indian pilgrimage sites lack comprehensive empirical evaluations (Gassiot Melian et al., 2016). Existing service quality models like SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) do not fully capture the unique religious and spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage experiences (Fick & Ritchie, 1991).

Given the increasing prominence of pilgrimage tourism in India and the critical role of service quality in shaping pilgrim experiences, this study aims to assess and enhance service quality at Jyotirlinga pilgrimage sites. By addressing service gaps, the study seeks to contribute to sustainable pilgrimage tourism while preserving the spiritual integrity of these sacred destinations.

Statement of the Problem

Pilgrimage tourism plays a crucial role in India's tourism industry, contributing significantly to economic growth, job creation, and cultural preservation. Despite this, disparities exist in the distribution of pilgrimage tourists across different regions of India. North Indian pilgrimage sites receive fewer domestic tourists compared to South Indian sites, indicating potential service quality issues that impact visitor experience and satisfaction. While existing studies have explored various pilgrimage destinations in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Uttarakhand, a comprehensive evaluation of the Jyotirlingas—key Hindu pilgrimage sites—has not been conducted. This study aims to bridge this gap by assessing service quality at Jyotirlingas and examining factors influencing tourist preferences.

One of the major gaps in existing research is the lack of empirical studies on service quality at pilgrimage sites. While religious tourism generates substantial revenue, there has been no serious attempt to evaluate the quality of services provided to pilgrims. Prior studies have primarily focused on tourist expectations and experiences, neglecting the supply side of service provision, including infrastructure, temple management, and operational challenges. This study takes a dual approach, analysing both tourist experiences and the issues faced by service providers at Jyotirlingas to offer a holistic perspective.

Additionally, temple management issues such as financial constraints, operational inefficiencies, and inadequate facilities have not been adequately studied. Given the increasing influx of pilgrims and the role of pilgrimage sites in India's religious and economic landscape, understanding and improving service quality at these sites is essential. By addressing both demand- and supply-side concerns, this research seeks to enhance the overall pilgrimage experience, inform policy decisions, and contribute to the sustainable management of pilgrimage tourism in India.

Scope of the study

The study examines the Jyotirlingas, twelve sacred manifestations of Lord Shiva that hold immense religious, cultural, and historical significance in Hinduism (Fleming, 2009;

Feldhaus, 2003). While spread across India, this research focuses on seven Jyotirlingas in North India—Kedarnath, Kashi Vishwanath, Omkareshwar, Mahakaleshwar, Baidyanath Dham, Nageshwar, and Somnath. These sites, revered for centuries, are described in the Shiva Purana as divine representations of Shiva's radiant energy (Shastri, 2002). The study accesses the experience of the demand and supply sides in regards to accommodation, food, water, transportation, safety, access to information, and temple services. It applies a mixed-method approach involving tourist surveys and stakeholder interviews to measure expectations, perceptions, and service gaps. The study identifies mismatches in service delivery, managerial problems, and fiscal constraints affecting temple management and tourism. This study aims to enhance the pilgrimage experience and operational efficiency in these pilgrimage sites.

Research objectives

The main objectives of the study are

Objective 1: To measure the tourist expectation and perception towards the service quality variables at the selected pilgrimage sites of north India.

Objective 2: To assess the problems surrounding the selected pilgrimage sites of north India.

      2(a) To determine the problems of supply side of the tourism sector at the the selected pilgrimage sites.

      2(b)To determine the problems of demand side of the tourism sector at the the selected pilgrimage sites.

Objective 3: To identify the issues in the management of selected pilgrimage sites.

Significance of the study

The significance of this research is therefore threefold. First, it offers a thorough assessment of tourist expectations and perceptions regarding service quality variables at specific pilgrimage sites in North India, providing valuable insights for both academic and practical use in tourism studies. Secondly, it conducts a critical evaluation of the challenges that surround these pilgrimage sites, addressing both the supply and demand sides of the tourism sector. This dual analysis contributes to a more thorough understanding of the difficulties faced by stakeholders in the tourism industry. Third, it contributes to the broader body of knowledge in tourism management and policy-making by identifying the important issues in the management of these pilgrimage sites.

Research Methodology

Aspect	Details
Research Type	Exploratory and Empirical Research
Research Approach	Mixed-method (Quantitative and Qualitative)
Types of Sources	**Primary Data**: Surveys and Interviews

	Secondary Data: Reports, laws, periodicals, and past research studies
Study Area	Seven Jyotirlingas in North India – **Kedarnath, Kashi Vishwanath, Omkareshwar, Mahakaleshwar, Baidyanath Dham, Nageshwar, and Somnath**
Time Frame	September 2022 – March 2023

Objective	Data Collection	Sampling Method
Objective 1: Measuring Tourist Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality	Structured questionnaire administered to tourists covering temple services, safety, accommodation, food, and transport.	Non-probability sampling (Judgment & Convenience Sampling) Survey locations: Hotels, guesthouses, and dharmshalas within a 4-km radius of temples.
Objective 2a Identifying Supply-Side Problems	Semi-structured interviews with local suppliers, vendors, and transport operators.	Purposive Sampling (based on direct involvement in pilgrimage tourism).
Objective 2b Identifying Demand-Side Problems	Semi-structured interviews with tourists to assess issues in accommodation, food, water, and safety.	Purposive Sampling (based on direct experience with service quality).
Objective 3 Identifying Issues in Pilgrimage Site Management	Case Study Approach: Secondary data review and in-depth interviews with temple management. Official records, laws, and governance reports analysed.	Purposive Sampling: One official from each temple management was requested for an interview.

Sample Size

Objective 1: In a quantitative study, a sample with fewer than 50 participants is considered a weaker sample; a sample size of 100 is weak; a sample size of 20 is adequate; a sample size of 300 is good; a sample size of 500 is very good; and a sample size of 1000 is excellent. The proposed sample size for the study was 1001 divided equally in 7 study areas (143 each). The pilot study rendered a non-response rate of 13%. Keeping that in mind, a total of 1150 questionnaires were distributed to the seven study areas. The 1150 questionnaires were then checked for completeness and non-responses. Out of the questionnaires administered to the tourists, only 1047 were completely filled out and were

considered suitable for the study. Most incomplete responses and non-responses were from Omkareshwar and Nageshwar. The overall response rate for this study was 91.04%.

List of study areas and final data

Study Area	Final Data
Kedarnath	160
Kashi Vishwanath	156
Omkareshwar	120
Mahakaleshwar	160
Baidyanath Dham	156
Nageshwar	137
Somnath	158
Total	**1047**

Objective 2 (a) and 2(b)

Data saturation or theoretical sufficiency (the point at which no new themes were emerging) and thematic saturation (the point at which no new concepts emerge from subsequent interviews) was the basis of determining the sample size. It has previously been recommended that qualitative studies require a minimum sample size of at least 12 to reach data saturation. Although this number can vary depending on the heterogeneity of respondents interviewed and complexity of the issues explored. The minimum criteria of 12 was reached in all study areas except Nageshwar, where after 10 samples, we reached thematic saturation, and Kashi Vishwanath, where we reached data saturation. However, a sample size of 10 and 11 was also deemed adequate for qualitative studies.

List of sample size for Objective 2

Study Area	Interviews Conducted	
	Objective 2 (a) Supply Side	**Objective 2 (b) Demand Side**
Kedarnath	12	15
Kashi Vishwanath	10	14
Omkareshwar	13	14
Mahakaleshwar	11	12

Baidyanath Dham	12	12
Nageshwar	10	10
Somnath	12	12

Data analysis

Objective 1: Measuring Tourist Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality at Selected Pilgrimage Sites

The first objective aimed to measure the expectations and perceptions of tourists regarding service quality at selected pilgrimage sites in North India. The analysis was conducted using exploratory factor analysis (EFA), gap analysis, and paired t-tests to evaluate differences between expectations and actual experiences.

To identify key service quality dimensions, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with principal component analysis and varimax rotation was conducted. This helped in reducing a large set of variables into meaningful factors.

First of all, to find the sample adequacy, KMO and Bartlett 's test of sphericity was used. If the value of the KMO test is > 0.5, the sample is considered good for factor analysis. The KMO value was 0.909, which is considered relevant for factor analysis. The value of Bartlett 's test of sphericity is 0.00, which is less than 0.05 and is considered significant. The significant value of Bartlett 's test of sphericity stipulates that the sampled data is normally multivariate and relevant for factor analysis.

The first six factors of service quality together explained 67.259 percent of the total variance in the study. In social sciences, if the total variance explained by the sample data is more than 60 %, then the sample can be considered good and can be used for further analysis.

Next, factor loadings were generated using the rotated component matrix. This matrix is the main output of principle component analysis because it shows the estimates of correlation among each of the variable and the estimated components. The value of factor loading lies between 0 to 1; a value which is near to 1 shows the high factor loading, while value near to 0 shows low factor loading. Six factors were extracted from rotated component matrix. The normality and validity of the data was also checked after the Exploratory Factor Analysis.

Once the factors were identified, a Gap Analysis was performed to compare tourist expectations with their actual experiences. To statistically validate these differences, a Paired t-Test was conducted, revealing significant service quality gaps across most pilgrimage sites.

Objective 2: Identifying Problems in the Pilgrimage Tourism Sector

A qualitative research approach was used to analyse the problems on both the supply and demand sides of the tourism sector at the seven pilgrimage sites.

1. **Supply-Side Challenges (Objective 2a)**

In-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with local suppliers providing lodging, food, and other amenities. Respondents were informed about the study's objectives, and consent was obtained to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Each interview lasted 10-20 minutes on average. The interviews were then transcribed into descriptive words and phrases, systematically coded as S1-S80 for supply-side respondents, and analysed using systematic thematic analysis, following Naeem et al. (2023).

Naeem et al. (2023) gave a systematic process of coding and thematically analysing the interview data in the following steps.

Statement > Keywords > Codes > Themes

2. **Demand-Side Challenges (Objective 2b)**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pilgrims and tourists to identify issues related to accommodation, food, water, transportation, and safety. The sample size was determined based on thematic saturation, ensuring that no new themes emerged after a certain number of interviews. The responses were systematically coded as R1-R89 for demand-side respondents and analysed using systematic thematic analysis, as applied in previous objective.

Objective 3: Identifying Issues in Pilgrimage Site Management

A case study approach was used to analyse management issues at the seven pilgrimage sites. Data collection involved reviewing secondary sources such as reports, laws, and periodicals to understand governance and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with temple management officials, where one representative from each management body was requested to participate. However, Mahakaleshwar and Somnath temple managements refused to cooperate, and Nageshwar lacked an official management body.

Major Findings Objective 1:

Pilgrimage Site	Key Negative Service Gaps (Tourists' Expectations > Perceptions)	Key Positive Service Gaps (Tourists' Perceptions > Expectations)
Kedarnath	Lack of wheelchair facilities No footwear storage Absence of locker facilities Poor queue management Ineffective grievance redressal	Strong security presence Availability of accommodation near the site Clean drinking water availability

Kashi Vishwanath	None (Service exceeded expectations across all categories)	Strong security presence First aid availability Proper disaster prevention measures Affordable accommodations Wheelchair and footwear facilities available
Omkareshwar	Poor safety measures, Risk of stampedes Lack of first aid services Queue mismanagement	Fair transportation services Reasonable food and accommodation costs
Mahakaleshwar	Overcharging by auto-rickshaws Lack of grievance redressal	Strong security presence Well-maintained transport and roads
Baidyanath Dham	Poor crowd management, risk of stampedes Limited first aid outside peak seasons Overpriced accommodation	Food availability Affordable public transport
Nageshwar	Lack of security personnel No first aid or medical shops nearby Limited food options No accommodation nearby	Efficient and affordable transport services
Somnath	None (Service exceeded expectations across all categories)	Affordable and well-managed transport Food variety and taste Well-maintained accommodations

These findings indicate a need for infrastructure development and better crowd management at certain sites, while others serve as best practices for service quality improvements.

Major Findings Objective 2:

Pilgrimage Site	Supply-Side Challenges	Demand-Side Challenges
Kedarnath	Restocking delays for perishable goods during peak season. Traffic congestion hampers supply deliveries. Shortage of premium goods (e.g., almonds, cashews).	Overpriced accommodation due to high demand. Limited food variety, mainly basic meals. Difficult trekking routes, unregulated horse transport.

Kashi Vishwanath	No major supply issues reported.	Affordable accommodation and transport, but language barriers create miscommunication with cab drivers.
Omkareshwar	Vendors face issues with stocking and managing inventory.	Safety concerns due to queue mismanagement. Limited first aid availability.
Mahakaleshwar	Auto-rickshaw overpricing for tourists.	Accommodation costs are high, and public transport drivers charge unfairly.
Baidyanath Dham	Supply chain disruptions affect the availability of goods.	Overcrowding and risk of stampedes during peak seasons. Unhygienic food options outside the temple.
Nageshwar	Water quality issues, requiring vendors to buy packaged water.	Lack of basic facilities, no proper accommodation nearby. No help desks at railway stations, causing confusion for tourists.
Somnath	No major supply problems due to well-developed transport.	No major demand side problems due to efficient transport and auto-rickshaw services. Well-maintained accommodations with fair pricing also praised by tourists.

Kedarnath and Baidyanath Dham face the most supply chain and restocking challenges, while Somnath has the least supply-side issues.

Accommodation and transport costs are high in Kedarnath, Mahakaleshwar, and Baidyanath Dham.

Safety concerns are most prominent at Omkareshwar and Baidyanath Dham, due to poor queue management and risk of stampedes.

Nageshwar struggles with basic infrastructure and water quality issues, while Kashi Vishwanath and Somnath have the most tourist-friendly experiences.

Major Findings Objective 3:

Pilgrimage Site	Management Structure	Key Issues Identified
Kedarnath	Managed by Badrinath-Kedarnath Temple Committee (BKTC) under the Uttarakhand Char Dham Devasthanam Management Act, 2019	No major issues in governance. Well-managed pilgrimage sites

Kashi Vishwanath	Managed by Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board under the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple Act, 1983	Increased revenue post Kashi Vishwanath Corridor development. New management issues due to expansion of premises.
Omkareshwar	Governed by Madhya Pradesh Public Trusts Act, 1951	Government supervision ensures financial accountability. Pilgrim harassment by priests/pandas due to demand for money for fast darshan.
Mahakaleshwar	Managed under the Madhya Pradesh Shri Mahakaleshwar Mandir Adhiniyam, 1982	Well-managed temple, finances under the Mandir Kosh Fund. Temple management refused to participate in the study.
Baidyanath Dham	No specific government act mentioned; local management committee oversees operations	Lack of standardized governance policies. Issues in crowd control and cleanliness.
Nageshwar	No official management body	Absence of structured temple management. No proper security, sanitation, or crowd management.
Somnath	Managed under Aadi Jyotirlinga Shree Somnath Mahadev Trust	Temple management refused to cooperate with the study. Well-organized administration with clear financial oversight

Kedarnath and Somnath are among the best-managed sites, with minimal governance issues.

Kashi Vishwanath faces new operational challenges due to its expansion under the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor Project.

Omkareshwar and Baidyanath Dham require improved regulatory control, particularly in crowd management and financial transparency.

Nageshwar lacks a formal management system, leading to poor security, sanitation, and administrative oversight.

Mahakaleshwar and Somnath temple authorities refused to cooperate with the study, limiting insight into their governance effectiveness.

Contribution to the body of knowledge

This study enhances existing research by identifying six key variables for assessing service quality at pilgrimage sites: transportation, accommodation, safety and security, desirable facilities, and hygienic food and water. It also presents a conceptual model for measuring service quality in pilgrimage tourism.

By addressing both demand and supply-side challenges, the study offers a balanced perspective on religious tourism complexities.

The research provides valuable insights into tourist expectations and perceptions, aiding both academic inquiry and practical tourism management. By identifying critical issues at North Indian pilgrimage sites, it helps develop a holistic understanding of service gaps. Additionally, it contributes to tourism management and policymaking by pinpointing underlying challenges and offering practical recommendations for improving basic services and enhancing tourist satisfaction.

Pilgrimage site managers can use these findings to systematically assess and enhance operations, leveraging tourist feedback for continuous service improvement. The study not only adds to academic literature but also provides actionable insights for better pilgrimage site management, ensuring their long-term sustainability.

Policy Implications

This study offers key policy recommendations to enhance the sustainability and management of pilgrimage sites in North India by addressing crucial service quality variables.

1. **Centralized Booking System** – Develop an online portal integrating all accommodation options near pilgrimage sites, with descriptions, reviews, and ratings. This ensures transparency, prevents overcharging, and enhances the tourist experience.

2. **Pilgrimage Site Management Committee** – Establish a regulatory body with representatives from temple management, food vendors, and lodging providers to enforce sanitation, safety, and pricing standards. Regular audits and a grievance redressal system will improve visitor experience.

3. **Regulation of Food & Lodging Prices** – Implement fair pricing policies to prevent exploitation, ensuring affordability for all pilgrims. While premium services can justify higher rates, price hikes during peak seasons should be controlled.

4. **Enhancing Safety Measures** – Deploy security personnel at all Jyotirlingas, similar to Kashi Vishwanath, to ensure safety at odd hours. Tourists should be informed of emergency medical services upon arrival.

5. **Managing Carrying Capacity** – Introduce strict crowd control measures, such as daily visitor limits, controlled access points, and timed entry slots, particularly in ecologically fragile areas, to preserve pilgrimage sites.

6. **Improving Accessibility** – Ensure inclusivity by constructing ramps, handrails, and providing wheelchairs, making sites accessible to all visitors.

These policies will enhance service quality, improve tourist satisfaction, and ensure the long-term sustainability of pilgrimage tourism.

Scope for Future Research

1. Future research should conduct a detailed analysis of accommodations and food services near pilgrimage sites to identify specific sources of tourist dissatisfaction.
2. While this study focused on service quality at Jyotirlingas in North India, a holistic comparison with South Indian Jyotirlingas is essential to understand regional differences.
3. The service quality model introduced in this study requires further validation through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to enhance its reliability and applicability across different pilgrimage sites.
4. Longitudinal studies on individual Jyotirlingas can help track service quality improvements over time and assess the impact of implemented policies. Further, research should evaluate the influence of government regulations on accommodation pricing, transport, and crowd management to ensure sustainable pilgrimage tourism.
5. Another key area for future research is accessibility and inclusivity, focusing on infrastructure improvements such as ramps, handrails, and wheelchair facilities to accommodate elderly and differently-abled pilgrims.

By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to enhancing the overall pilgrimage experience while ensuring the sustainability and effective management of these sacred sites.

Limitations of the study

1. The findings have limited generalizability due to a relatively small sample size, making it difficult to represent all tourists visiting the selected pilgrimage sites.
2. Qualitative interviews faced challenges, with thematic saturation not reached at Nageshwar and Kashi Vishwanath, potentially limiting the depth of insights.
3. Temple management authorities at Mahakaleshwar and Somnath did not cooperate, while Nageshwar lacked an official governing body, restricting governance-related findings.
4. Time and scope constraints further limited the study, as data collection was restricted to September 2022–March 2023, without accounting for seasonal variations in tourism. The reliance on self-reported data from tourists and vendors may introduce recall bias or subjectivity in service quality assessments.

5. Inconsistencies in temple management structures, ranging from formal government oversight to local trust-based management, led to variations in data availability and transparency.

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KEYWORDS

Title of the thesis: Service Quality of Pilgrimage Sites in North India: A Case Study of *Jyotirlingas*

Keywords: Jyotirlingas, Pilgrimage Sites, Service Quality, Pilgrimage site management