Digitalization Shaping Religious Tourism in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract- In the heart of Himachal Pradesh, amidst the towering peaks and whispering pines, lies a tapestry of sacred sites that beckon pilgrims from far and wide. With the advent of digitalization, these ancient pathways have been augmented by virtual guides, mobile applications, and online forums, enriching the pilgrimage experience and deepening cultural understanding. From virtual tours that transcend physical boundaries to social media platforms that foster community engagement, digital technology has become an indispensable companion for modern-day pilgrims in Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords: *Religious tourism, E-Connect, Digitalization, Technology, Sustainable Pilgrimage Management.*

Introduction: A crossroads of history and technology may be found in the tranquil valleys of Himachal Pradesh, where the digital highways of the modern day meet the traditional pilgrimage routes. This study sets out to investigate how religious tourism is changing in Himachal Pradesh, as seen through the prism of digitalization's revolutionary potential.

Renowned for its hallowed locations and magnificent scenery, Himachal Pradesh is positioned at the nexus between customs and advancement. Travellers to its temples, monasteries, and shrines on spiritual odysseys are joined on their journey by an unseen companion: digital technology. This study examines the complex interactions between digitization and religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh, focusing on how technology affects pilgrim experiences, tourist perception, tourism operations, and preservation of cultural property. Beyond enhancing the pilgrim experience, digitalization has also revolutionized the management of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh. Real-time monitoring systems, online booking platforms, and data analytics tools have ushered in an era of more efficient and sustainable pilgrimage management practices. However, amidst the promise of progress lie challenges such as digital divides, data privacy concerns, and the need for a robust infrastructure to support the digital pilgrimage ecosystem.

As Himachal Pradesh embraces the digital age, it is crucial to navigate the intersection of tradition and technology with care and foresight. By harnessing the potential of digitalization while preserving the sanctity and authenticity of religious sites, stakeholders can ensure sustainable tourism development that benefits both pilgrims and local communities.

Thousands of devotees travel from all over the country to Himachal Pradesh to visit its Shakti Peeths, making the state a popular destination for pilgrims. However, the state government has recently launched a ground-breaking initiative to e-connect its major temples, providing convenience for those who cannot visit in person. To facilitate online bookings for Havan, Bhandara, and Jagran rituals in these temples and Shakti Peethas, the government has started a trial initiative with the well-known Mata Chintpurni temple in Una district. Software is already being developed for this purpose. Other notable temples throughout the state will receive the e-connectivity service when the pilot project is completed successfully. With its magnificent mountains, lakes, rivers, and spectacular natural panoramas, Himachal Pradesh—also known as Devbhoomi—has become a popular tourist destination. Acknowledging the enormous potential for adventure, religious, natural, and medical tourism, the state administration has implemented creative strategies to encourage travel and meet the demands of enthusiasts. Officials from the state government claim that followers would be able to schedule times for ceremonies, communicate with temple priests, and make online payments using this digital platform. Additionally, the programme would improve devotee's spiritual experiences by giving them the best times to perform special rituals or pujas. The state government's dedication to using information technology across all industries is seen in this technical achievement. The state government has set aside Rs 65 crore for the Baba Balaknath Temple's infrastructure and amenities improvement and making the area more accessible for tourists. These funds, approved by the Asian Development Bank, will be used to fix the roads and walkways leading to the temple as well as install solar street lights inside the temple's grounds. In addition, roadside facilities including restrooms, rain shelters, and toilets will be built to offer pilgrims and travellers basic comforts. The government is promoting religious tourism with these programmes. The state is expected to draw even more tourists, reaffirming its role as Devbhoomi and a popular travel destination for everyone, with improved infrastructure guaranteeing visitor comfort and e-connectivity bringing temples closer to devotees.

Literature Review

Patrick Maxwell(2002) The statement "Imagination, visualisation, magic and metaphor can be interwoven in the experience of today's cyberspace traveller, and all of them are relevant to religious possibilities online" is made about the religious opportunities that exist online.

Khare and Khare (2011) With more people utilising the internet to conduct financial transactions and make independent goods purchases, the search habits of visitors are evolving. Important requirements for Indian visitors using the internet include trusting third parties and online financial data security.

Dr. Benek (2015) According to his article "Virtual Reality is the Future of Religion," the worldwide church stands to gain much from this technological advancement since virtual reality has the potential to transform how Christians celebrate Christmas. Virtual reality will primarily affect the global church by making it easier for Christians to get together virtually even when they are not in the same physical area. This will allow those who are unwell, homebound, caretakers, without a means of transportation, on vacation, or seriously incapacitated to join in worship with the greater religious community without having to move from their current place of residence.

Desmond Okocha (2016) Investigating the effects of the tourism industry's growth and development is the aim of this article. Because of its strategic location within Asia, rich cultural diversity, and historic sites, India's tourism industry has the potential to significantly boost the nation's GDP with appropriate management and enhanced media relations. For that reason, this article highlights how important it is for the media and tourism sectors to collaborate in a well-thought-out and goal-oriented manner to support and strengthen the latter.

Dhwani Gambhir (2018) A case is made for the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh in northern India, known as "DevBhoomi" or the "Abode of the Gods." In India, a sizable portion of religious and spiritual travel occurs in these states. This study examines how this niche market affects sustainability factors in these states using a qualitative and descriptive analysis of primary and secondary sources. Additionally, recommendations are made about how to advance religious tourism in such challenging environments while preserving the ecological and socioeconomic balance.

Kapoor,(2018) Religious tourism, which continues to be the most common kind of travel in India, is broadly defined as travel when tourists visit places of worship, religious festivals, or congregations to satisfy their religious and recreational demands. All social classes find it appealing; not only do the wealthier segments of society find it appealing, but even the less fortunate ones make an effort to visit places of religious significance.

Bhonsale,(2019) India's tourism industry is expanding, and in recent years, the government has made significant efforts to promote it. A nation's ability to convey its soft power and image is enhanced by the growth and expansion of its tourist industry.

Shwetasaibal Samanta and Mukunda Bg (2020) With the increasing use of the Internet and other information communication technologies, the tourism sector has entered a new era.

Martucci, Acampora, Arcese, and Poponi(2020) Define smart destinations that are characterised by the ability to use ICT, enhancing the pleasure and experience of the tourist

Anu Chaudhary (2021) The tourist industry in Himachal Pradesh is significant, and the state of Himachal Pradesh cannot undervalue the significance of religious tourism. The state is home to several religiously significant tourism destinations; as a result, every visitor to these locations must receive the appropriate attention; otherwise, there will

be a shortage in visitor numbers. Giving these tourists the attention they need would result in good feedback, which would encourage them to return and increase their intention to do so.

Khan, Md Yusuf & Abir, Tanvir (2022) Social networking is a suite of Web 2.0-based applications that have arisen to connect, communicate, and share ideas, opinions, viewpoints, information, and relationships among internet users worldwide. It is an important player in the digital tourism sector, being a trusted and often used source for tourists looking for local information.

A great number of holy sites provide virtual tours of their locations to everyone around the globe. The website of the national Tamil daily "Dinamalar" provides a 360-degree view (a virtual tour) of the majority of the temples located in Tamil Nadu, including the Parthsarthy Temple in Chennai, the Viyakulaannai Church in Madurai, the Kazimar Big Mosque in Madurai, the Jummah Palli Vasal Pasal Pillam, the Ayyappa Temple in Sabrimala, and others. These temples are showcased under the heading "V-Darshana" and offer stunning examples of South India's most advanced architectural designs while also fostering, fulfilling, and, to some extent, energising a sense of religious participation.

Using virtual reality headsets, the news piece shows people of all ages overcoming their incapacity to visit the precise location of KUMBHMELA and LORD MAHAKAAL in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, with folded palms and devout hearts. 75 million individuals who visited the pilgrimage while overcoming various challenges were the focus of attention for those creating virtual reality content. The project involved content producers who put in a lot of effort and time to create the material so that users may bypass travel and substitute the real world with the virtual. Their devotion to Lord Mahakaal and Kumbha is incomprehensible, yet they received an incredible reaction from the public even though many find it very hard to physically attend Ujjain during this Kumbha season. For those who, for various reasons, were unable to attend the location in person, Darshan and Mahakaal Bhasma Aarti, although simulated, were immensely fulfilling. India's attitude to religion would benefit from the increased job opportunities in the religious tourism sector for the VR and AR industries. By helping individuals get past the physical barriers to worshipping their gods in a more tranquil and harmonious setting, this VR environment may also bring about a lot of good changes that strengthen their beliefs. When asked what the difference was between virtual and real Darshan, some answered that although the GOD can be felt or seen with the eyes in both scenarios, it is typically not permitted or practicable because of crowding. As a result, it appears that the virtual darshan is more profitable. Virtual reality platforms are helping those who are unable to do darshan, worship, prayer, aarti, etc. physically and may eventually develop a greater number of religious and culturally adherent people.

Objective: To Investigate the Impact of Digitalization on visitor's opinion of Religious Tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

Research Methodology:

Hypothesis of the Study

H0: There will be no significant impact of digitalization on visitor's opinion of Religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

H1: There will be a significant impact of digitalization on visitor's opinion of Religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh.

Research Design: In the present research study, a survey was conducted with visitors.

Sources of Data:

Primary Data – Based on a literature review and prior studies, the current study gathered primary data from 130 participants using a systematic and structured questionnaire.

Secondary Data – Data was gathered from secondary sources that were thought to be useful to the research. The bulk of the data comes from published works and publications authored or commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism, India. Government Reports, Journals and newspaper articles were used to find previous studies on the related topic.

Data Analysis and Results:

Descriptive analysis of the demographic data revealed that 60% of the individuals were men and 40% were women. The age groups of 18 to 30 and 31 to 45 years old provided 35.4% and 34.6% of the total data, respectively. Roughly 7.7% of the sample's participants were younger than 18, while 13.8% belonged to the 41–60 age range. Merely 8.5% of the population was older than 60. Among the vast amount of data gathered, 128 Indians (98.5%) were found. Hindus made up 86.2% of the total respondents, with Sikhs (6.9%), Muslims (3.1%), Buddhists (2.3%), and Christians (1.5%) following in order. The demographic information of the sample is presented in Table 1.

PARTICULARS	CATEGORY	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Gender	Male	78	60
	Female	52	40
Age	Below 18 yrs	10	7.7
	18-30 years	45	34.6
	31-45 years	46	35.4
	46-60 years	18	13.8
	Above 60 yrs	11	8.5
Nationality	Indian	128	98.5
	Foreigner	02	1.5
Religion	Hindu	112	86.2
	Sikh	09	6.9
	Christian	02	1.5
	Muslim	04	3.1
	Buddhist	03	2.3

Table1. Demographic variable

PARTICULARS	NO	MAYBE	YES	TOTAL	MEAN	SD	Variance
Would you be interested in participating in virtual religious tourism experiences in Himachal Pradesh?	4	9	117	130	2.86	0.4185	0.1752
Have you used online platforms or apps to explore religious tourism destinations in Himachal Pradesh?	14	14	102	130	2.67	0.6588	0.4340
Do you believe that digital tools and technologies have enhanced the overall experience of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh?	4	9	117	130	2.86	0.4185	0.1752
Do you think there is a need for better promotion and marketing of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh?	4	0	126	130	2.93	0.3453	0.1192
Have you experienced any obstacles during your religious tourism visits in Himachal Pradesh?	76	0	54	130	1.83	0.9855	0.9718

Table 2. Visitors perception

The perceptions of visitors were examined in Table 2, where it was found that most of them were interested in taking part in the virtual religious tourism experience (117), and had a favourable attitude towards using the online platform to research religious tourism destinations (78.5%), and thought that digital tools and technologies had improved and would continue to improve the overall experience of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh (about 90%).

Better marketing and promotion of religious travel, or faith travel, is another issue raised by 96.9% of respondents. It was necessary to ascertain whether respondents had ever encountered any difficulties when visiting a religious

location, given the necessity for the development of infrastructure and improved management systems in any religious tourist destination and about 41.5% responded Yes.
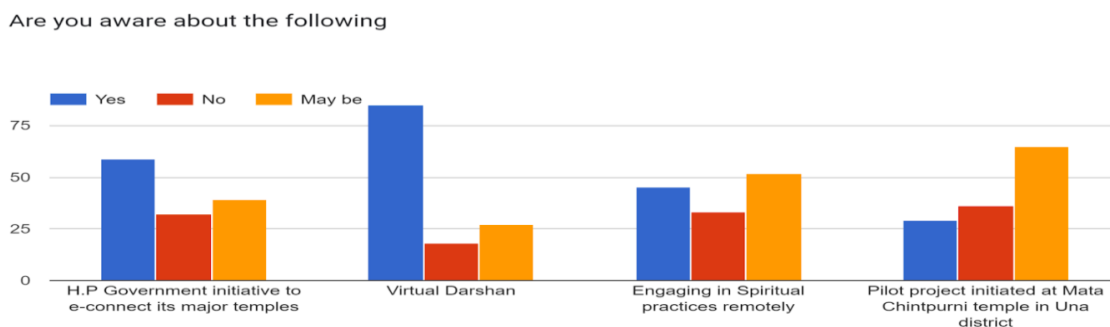

Figure: 1 Awareness

In the aforementioned Figure 1. The government of Himachal Pradesh is attempting to E-connect its important temples; about 59 respondents knew about this programme, while 39 were unsure and 32 did not know about it. Twenty-seven respondents were hesitant, and 85 respondents knew about the virtual darshan. Virtually all responses, including yes 45, no 33, and maybe 52, were in agreement with engaging in spiritual activities at a distance. The trial project, which was started in the Mata Chintpurni temple in the Una area, is obscured and uncertain to most people. Given that many of the respondents are aware of and actively involved in this programme, the government's digitization push in religious tourism is having a favourable effect on awareness of it.
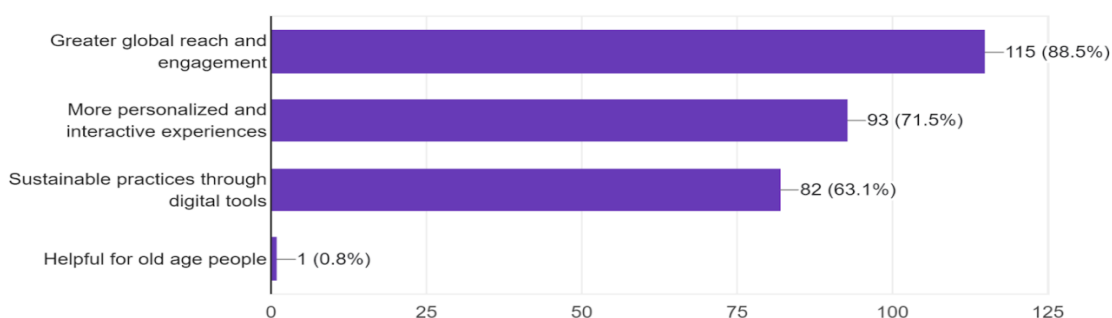

Figure: 2(a) Visitor impression

Figure 2(a) analysis visitor impressions and shows that, based on respondents, Himachal Pradesh would improve its worldwide reach and engagement by 88.5% as religious tourism becomes more digitally influenced. A total of 93

respondents thought that digitalization would offer a more customised and interactive experience; 63.1% of respondents thought that using digital tools to practise sustainability would be beneficial; one respondent even suggested that digitalization might be useful for senior citizens.
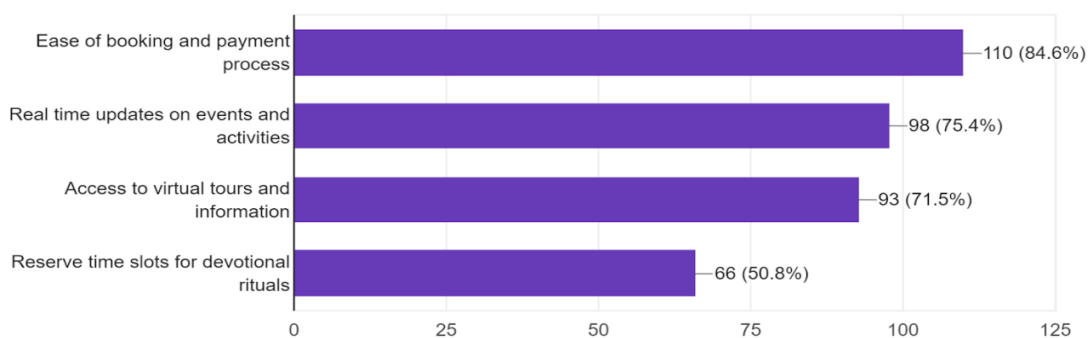

Figure: 2(b) Visitor impression

Figure 2(b) analyses visitor perceptions of digitization in Himachal Pradesh's religious tourism. Of the respondents, 84.6% said that booking and payment processes would be simple, and 75.4% said that real-time updates on events and activities would be available. Digitalization will be advantageous, according to around 93 respondents, as it will make information and virtual tours easily accessible. Another benefit of religious tourism digitalization, according to 66 respondents, is that time slots for devotional activities may be reserved.
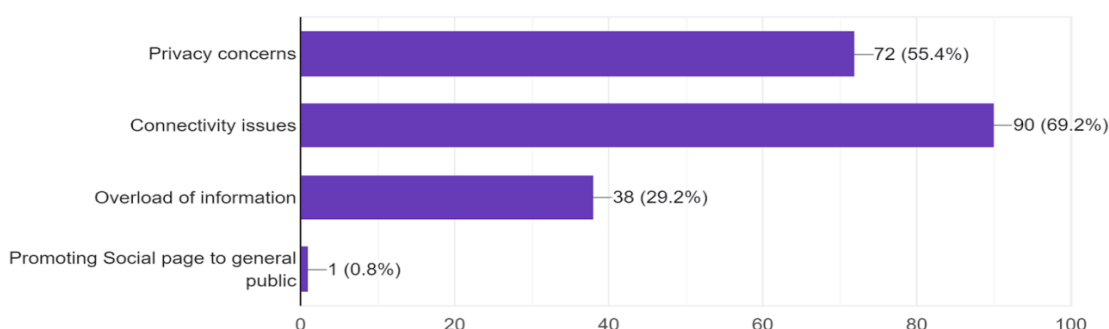

Figure: 3 Challenges

The difficulties and disadvantages associated with digitization in Himachal Pradesh's religious tourism are shown in Figure 3. Connectivity problems account for 69.2% of respondents' concerns, followed by privacy issues (55.4%), information overload (29.5%), and advertising social media pages to the general public, which is the least of the respondents' worries.

Conclusion and Suggestions

According to the government's "Digital India" project, digitalization is becoming increasingly crucial in today's globe. Many states are actively pursuing digital transformation to enhance efficiency, accessibility, and services for their citizens. Promoting itself as "Dev-Bhoomi"—Abode of the Gods—the mountainous state of Himachal Pradesh accounts for a sizeable portion of religious or faith tourism in India. Both primary and secondary data that have been used in this study reflect how digitalization has been shown to have a notable effect on visitors' perceptions of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh. Raising public knowledge of the numerous significant programmes and efforts that the government has implemented is one of the ways to encourage religious tourism. Educating various stakeholders on relevant digital skills has latent potential for promoting religious tourism even further. Additionally, it implies that tourists have several worries about digitalization, therefore the government should invest in improving digital infrastructure and maintaining a distinct and well-equipped management structure for a thriving digitalization of religious tourism. Hence Tourism, with its immense promise in terms of creating new job opportunities and empowering Himachal Pradesh in several ways should be realised and acted upon.

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