



SACRED JOURNEY: UTTARAKHAND AN EMERGING HUB FOR RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL NICHE TOURISM IN INDIA

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Abstract: Uttarakhand is famously known as the land of Gods and has numerous religious destinations and spiritual centers. Although the State has unique distinctiveness regarding aesthetic beauty and natural therapeutic landscapes, it has yet to promote itself as a hub for religious and spiritual niche tourism. The study is qualitative based on secondary data. The study is explanatory in nature that explains the causes and consequences of the emergence of spiritual and religious tourism in Uttarakhand. It aims to analyze its potential to creation of hub and evaluate the motivations of pilgrims. It undertakes Swoc analysis and assess the socio-economic and environmental impact.

Keywords: Niche Tourism, Spiritual Tourism, Religious tourism, Uttarakhand Tourism, Tourism in India.

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Introduction

Tourists world-wide are now looking for distinctive and specialized experiences. Tourism globally is facing a paradigm shift from mass tourism to niche tourism. Where mass tourism catered to the general needs of the tourists, niche tourism or special-interest tourism basically adheres to specific needs of the traveler. Hutchinson broadly introduced the concept of niche as “a region in a multidimensional space characterized by environmental factors affecting the welfare of the species” (Hutchinson, 1957). From this ecological concept evolved niche marketing which further led to the development of niche tourism.

Niche tourism is a specific product designed to meet the special needs of a specific market segment or a particular audience (Robinson & Novelli, 2005). It focuses on the specific interest of travelers like nature lovers, sports enthusiasts, foodies, heritage tourists, movie fans, trekkers, spiritual wanderers (Campbell, 2024). Niche tourism is subdivided into macro-niches (i.e. spiritual tourism, adventure tourism, rural tourism, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, etc) which can be further segmented to micro-niches (i.e. photography tourism, dark tourism, gastronomic tourism, tribal tourism, heritage tourism, cycling tourism, etc.).

India is a country where “culture echoes, tradition speaks, beauty enthalls, and diversity delights” (Sharma, 2022). To propagate tourism and attract Indian and foreign travelers, the Central Government has launched various programs, campaigns and

schemes from time to time. Incredible India (2002), Atithi Devo Bhava (2005) and Incredible India 2.0 (2017) where campaigns launched to promote tourism in India. In 2014-15, GOI launched PRASAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive) Scheme 2015 under the Ministry of Tourism to focus on the identification and development of pilgrimage sites across India to enrich religious and spiritual tourism. It aims at holistic development of religious and spiritual destinations in a prioritized, planned and sustainable manner to provide a complete religious tourism experience (PRASHAD Scheme, 2025).

Religious tourism is tourism motivated partly or exclusively by religious reasons (Rinschede, 1992). Religious tourism is defined as a journey undertaken by individuals focusing primarily on destinations linked with religious history, sacred festivals/events, places of worship, and consecrated buildings, both historical and contemporary. (Smith, 1992) (Choe, 2024). Spiritual tourism is visiting religious destinations like temples, churches, mosques and natural places such as beaches, forests, seas, tea-gardens, bird-sanctuaries, and animal wildlife parks, etc, for mental peace and spiritual upliftment and enlightenment (Pathak, 2025).

India being a diversified country entails various religions and faiths like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, etc. Religion and spirituality are regarded as the source of strength in Indian culture. There are unparalleled and immensely unique religious destinations and spiritual centers across the nation. (Pathak, 2025) Uttarakhand



being 'Devbhoomi' the Land of the Gods needs to tap on religious and spiritual tourism. Uttarakhand is the 27th state of India located in the North-west region of the country. Carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000, it is a beautiful and picturesque State located in the foot-hills of Hiamalayas. (Verma & Kavidayal, 2022) The geographical area of the state is 5348000 hectares kilometers and total recorded forest area is 3812000 hectares (India State of Forest Report (ISFR), 2021).

Uttarakhand is a hub of religious and scenic destinations. It is a home to some of the most famous pilgrimages namely Chota Char-dham Yatra (Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath), Panch Kedar (Kedarnath, Rudranath, Tungnath, Madhyamaheshwar and Kalpeshwar), Adi Kailash, Om Parvat, Kainchi Dham, Jageshwar Dham, Golu Devta Temple, Patal Bhuvaneshwar, Purnagiri Temple, Neelkanth Mahadev Temple, Gurdwara Hemkund Sahib, Gurudwara Reetha Sahib, Gurudwara Sri Nanakmatta Sahib and other religious places. It has famous religious cities like Kasar Devi, Haridwar, Uttarkashi, Nainital, Mussoorie, yoga-capital Rishikesh, etc. The gap arises in limited attention and development of religious and spiritual tourism in Uttarakhand.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative based on secondary data. Secondary data is collected through published and unpublished data, journals, books, government reports and websites. The study is explanatory in nature that explains the causes and consequences of the emergence of spiritual and religious tourism in Uttarakhand.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the potential of Uttarakhand as an emerging hub for religious and spiritual niche tourism.
- To evaluate the motivations and preferences of tourists seeking religious and spiritual experiences in the region.
- To assess the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts on local communities and natural ecosystems of religious and spiritual tourism.
- To evaluate the role of local stakeholders in promoting and managing religious and spiritual tourism.
- To conduct a SWOT analysis of Uttarakhand in the context of religious and spiritual niche tourism.

Literature Review

KPMG India Report (2024) states that the spiritual and religious tourism forms a tremendous share of domestic trips, lists almost 45,000 religious sites and also enlists connectivity, infrastructural development, PRASHAD Scheme, e-darshan among various others as growth drivers. Kaur gives a conceptual clarification of religious tourism vs. pilgrimage vs. spiritual tourism. She exerts that though these terms are intertwined but analytically distinct based on their motivations, practices, commodification (Kaur, 2024). Raut & Singh (2025) concentrate on stampede risks at popular shrines and thereby recommends real-time monitoring and culturally sensitive crowd management.

Various studies and reports state the duality - profound spiritual significance vs. high-altitude risks. They emphasize on various issues and challenges associated with char-dham yatra in Uttarakhand like weather volatility, elderly pilgrims' vulnerability.

They also argue for registration as well as medical screening of travelers, staged acclimatization and emergency infrastructure as reforms for better travel practices (Sharma & Nautiyal (2025), Thapliyal& Joshi (2025)).

In 2025, Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun, began carrying-capacity studies for Char Dham & Hemkund Sahib year-round following the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directives. The assessment aims at mitigating the environmental as well as the infrastructural challenges caused by escalating footfall during the pilgrimage season in Uttarakhand. As part of the evaluation the scientists will thereby record, monitor, and analyze various factors impacting these towns during different months of the yatra, primarily across summer, monsoon, and winter seasons. (WII, 2025)

Joshi & Saxena highlight Uttarakhand's rich cultural and spiritual heritage which attracts both domestic and international tourists. They estimate that religious tourism in the State contribute its economy significantly, accounting to almost 27% of its Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP). They identified the key concerns of religious tourism namely overburdened infrastructure, waste management issues, air pollution and the commercialization of religion. And also state the need for better connectivity, infrastructure, and environmental conservation to improve the religious tourism experience(Joshi & Saxena, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997) has three pillars namely People, Planet and Profit.

In context of Uttarakhand's religious and spiritual Tourism, its implication are as follows:

- *People*: Constituting of the local communities, the travelers, the pilgrims and the seekers.
- *Planet*: Constitutes of the Himalayan ecology, biodiversity, sacred rivers, temples, gurudwaras, mosques, churches, and other religious and spiritual centres.
- *Profit*: Comprising of sustainable livelihood generation for locals, conservation of the cultural and religious practices.

Religious and spiritual tourism adds *cultural-spiritual capital* to the triple bottom line, expanding it beyond economics and environment. It thereby focuses on providing a spiritual experience to the seeker while conserving the religious, cultural and ecological value of the place. This will lead to sustainable livelihood, commercialization of culture and reduce carbon foot-prints for the locals. This will also lead to more consumer satisfaction and spiritually enhanced experience for the seeker.

Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (Butler, 1980)

The TALC Stages are as following:

Exploration → *Development* → *Consolidation* → *Stagnation* → *Rejuvenation/Decline*.

The Uttarakhand's religious-spiritual destinations like Jageshwar, Adi-Kailash Om Parvat Yatra, Kailash-Mansarovar route, Chota Char Dham, Panch Kedar, etc can be mapped to TALC stages. This will help in forecasting sustainability challenges and develop remedial reforms.

Himalayas as a holistic healing hub

Himalayas are not just scenic majestic mountains but a place to unwind oneself. Physical activities like trekking and yoga in these areas add-on to one's spiritual experiences. Visiting the temples on these mountains is not just an act of travel/trekking but a journey of connecting to the divine. The long journeys on road and by foot are basically done to contemplate on the life so far. It is not just a journey to the temple but a journey within to one's soul. Mental activities like meditation further heal an individual. Himalayas act a healer. Uttarakhand needs to cash on these ideas and develop spiritual trails, tea-garden therapy, yoga-healing centers, etc. It needs to commercialize its religious and spiritual centres and create hubs for holistic healing and mental unwinding.

Transformational Experience

Uttarakhand needs to transform its religious and spiritual tourism through staged experiences. It needs to focus on its niche aspect through Transformational Experience.

- Entertainment: It needs severe commercialization of its local religious festivals and fairs to enhance entertainment and increased participation. It needs to highlight its cultural and aesthetic products to ensure increased productivity and profitability.
- Educational: Uttarakhand also needs to educate about its religious and cultural practices. The local culture is deeply rooted to nature and linked to Gods. It is associated with love and respect for nature and other human beings. It needs to bring out and highlight its advantages in natural healing.
- Escapist: Uttarakhand needs to build more meditation/yoga centers and spiritual retreats. It needs to cash on its esthetics and healing virtues.

Reasons for religious and spiritual tourism

Uttarakhand being the land of Gods houses innumerable famous temples and places. Many foreign and domestic travelers visit these places because their religious or mythological importance.

Travellers seeking peace and tranquility often travel to remote areas of Uttarakhand.

Enthusiasts seeking adventure, seeking divinity, seeking themselves and answers of life also visit numerous destinations in the State.

Many Hindus travel to Haridwar and Badrinath to perform final or funeral or cremation rites.

Many travel in search of truth and Nirvana.

Role of local stakeholders in promoting and managing religious and spiritual tourism

1. The Local Communities

- The locals are the custodians and propagators of culture and tradition. They need to preserve and safeguard folklore & folk-tales, sacred rituals, rites & customs as well as the temple & religious practices.
- The locals need to act as hospitality providers in the interiors where hotels, resorts and restaurants are absent.

They need to offer homestays, local cuisines/products and authentic local-rural cultural experience.

- The locals need to protect and conserve sacred rivers, forests, groves, naulas, etc. This is vital for sustainable tourism.
- The locals should encash employment opportunities which will lead to decreased migration and even reverse migration.

2. Religious Institutions & Spiritual Leaders

- Maintain the sanctity and authenticity of pilgrimage sites, festivals, and spiritual discourses.
- They should provide accommodation and food for those in need. Organize community kitchens like bhandaras and langars for the seekers.
- They should focus on improving religious awareness, respect for local traditions/rites/rituals and promote eco-friendly practices.
- **Promote meditation, yoga and other spiritual practices**

3. Government & Local Administration

- The Government should focus on improving infrastructure and law & order.
- They should make strict policies regarding registration of pilgrims, waste-management, carrying capacity, eco-certification of facilities, registration of homestays, over-pricing of accommodation & travelling facilities and certification of guides.
- Geo-tagging the niche products
- Disaster management and emergency medical support

4. Entrepreneurs & Businessmen

- They need to boost the economy to stop migration of locals especially the youths
- To meet the demands of spiritual and religious travelers create eco-lodges, organic cafes, meditation centers, detox retreats, yoga centers, etc.
- The need to create souvenirs of local importance and religious value.
- Also need to commercialize niche and geo-tagged products
- They need to foster partnerships with Government, local authorities and NGOs to ensure profitability and sustainable development.

5. Academicians & Research Institutions

- They need to analyze and assess issues and problems related to religious and spiritual tourism.
- They also need to find remedial measures to promote religious and spiritual tourism.

- They need to develop skills of the youth to make them employable in religious and spiritual tourism.
- They should recommend policies to government after researching at the religious and spiritual sites.

Impacts of religious and spiritual tourism

- Economic impact:** Tourism in any form is a tremendous source of revenue. It enhances employment opportunities. It leads to development of accommodation facilities (hotels, home-stays, guest houses, resorts, etc.) transport facilities (bus, taxis, rental cars/bikes), communication facilities (Tele-communication, internet) and infrastructural facilities.
- Cultural Impact:** The niche tourism leads to propagation of cultural and regional disparities. The local products, folk, cuisine, culture, traditions and rites are channelized and commercialized resulting in sustainable development. But excessive tourism may also have a negative impact on culture.
- Social Impact:** The regional imbalance and disparities reduce overtime resulting in overall development of the State. Religious and spiritual tourism increase love and harmony among individuals.
- Environmental impact:** If unchecked may lead to deterioration of environment and ecology. The waste management system needs to be updated to reduce carbon foot prints and plastic waste in these serene areas.

SWOC Analysis:

The following is the SWOC Analysis of Uttarakhand's Religious and Spiritual tourism:

1. STRENGTHS

Spiritual heritage: Presence of ancient architectural temples (e.g., Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamunotri in Garhwal; Baijnath, Jageshwar, Katarmal, in Kumaun;).

Pilgrimage circuits: Adi Kailash–Om Parvat yatra, Char Dham Yatra, Kailash–Mansarovar Yatra route, Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra etc.

Pristine natural landscapes: Sacred rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Kosi), lakes (Naini, Hemkund), and Himalayan peaks (Nanda Devi, Trishul Panchachuli and Chaukhamba) regarded as holy.

Cultural richness: Fairs (Jauljivi ka mela, Chaiti mela, Baishakhi mela, Shiyaldeh Mela, Uttaraini mela, Nanda Devi mela) festivals (Makarsankranti, Harela, Khatadwa, Basant Panchami, Birud Panchami, Saatu-aathu, Ghee sankrant, Ganga dashera), folk traditions (Jagar, Chachari, Jhoda, Choliya Nritya, Dhol- damua, Shakunakhar) and rituals (Masan devta puja) tied to spirituality.

Healing & wellness potential: Yog, Ayurved, meditation, and nature-trails, nature-based therapies linked to the Himalayas. Rishikesh is the Yoga Capital of India.

Global appeal: Attracts both domestic pilgrims as well as foreign seekers of spirituality, tranquility and peace.

2. Weaknesses

Inferior Infrastructure: Limited quality accommodation, transportation and sanitation; poor connectivity; substandard healthcare facilities.

Seasonality: Extremely harsh winters and heavy snow/rainfall decrease the influx of tourist flow to many destinations.

Environmental fragility: Overcrowding during peak pilgrimage seasons leads to plastic waste, high carbon footprint, deforestation, and pollution.

Natural-Disaster vulnerability: Landslides, river floods, flash-flood and climate change impacts (eg, Kedarnath floods 2013).

Low digital penetration: Poor internet connectivity, low online presence, limited smart tourism apps or AR/VR experiences.

Management issues: Dis-integrated coordination among government, local communities, and private stakeholders.

3. Opportunities

Religious and spiritual niche branding: Celebrating Uttarakhand as a Hub for Spirituality and Wellness.

Sustainable tourism models: Community-based homestays, eco-lodges, responsible trekking circuits.

Growth of Wellness and Mindfulness tourism: Increasing demand for yoga centres, wellness retreats, meditation retreats and detox tourism.

Global tourism markets: Escalating interest of foreign travelers in Himalayan mysticism, sustainable eco-travel and spiritual healing.

Technology integration: Virtual pilgrimages (AR/VR), GPS-enabled trekking apps, smart ticketing and Digital marketing.

Support of Government: Alignment with India's tourism missions, policies and schemes (e.g., Incredible India, Dekho Apna *Desh*, [PRASHAD Scheme](#), Heal in India, Swadesh Darshan 2.0, Himalaya circuits, [Paryatan Mitra](#) and [Paryatan Didi](#), [Chalo India](#) Initiative, Best Tourism Villages Competition).

Market for local and niche products: Influx of inquisitive travels provide for a large demand for local, geo-tagged and niche products (e.g., aipan, Bhatt ki dal, madua, gandhraini, pichoda, bal-mithai, malta etc)

Academic & research collaborations: Partnerships with universities, academicians and think-tanks for documenting and repurcating intangible heritage.

4. Challenges

Risk of Over-commercialization: Excessive tourism may dilute spiritual and religious sanctity.

Waste Management: Excessive plastic and other pollutants lead to difficulty in waste management.

Issues of Carrying capacity: Fragile ecosystems cannot support massive influx of travelers without proper planning and management.

Competition: Other global and national eco-spiritual and religious destinations provide a tough competition to cope up (Himanchal, Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, Bali)

Natural hazards and Climate change: Glacial retreat, erratic weather and natural calamities threaten long-term sustainability.

Ghost- villages and Outmigration of youth: Shrinking local population may reduce availability of trained tourism workforce.

Balancing tradition with modernity: Integrating spiritual authenticity with modern tourist demands without eco-cultural erosion.

Suggestions

- Mapping a route to cover all the religious and spiritual places efficiently
- Provide quality accommodation, proper sanitation, hygienic food clean drinking water and adequate medical facilities in all religious places
- Development of integrated infrastructure
- Ensure throughout the year, in all weathers, accessibility to the religious and spiritual places
- Develop climate resilient roads and bridges
- Introduce green certificates for homestays, ashrams and hotels in these religious places
- Promote zero-waste religious sites
- Train youth as regional, cultural, religious and spiritual guides
- Encourage NGOs and women entrepreneurs in niche, local, geo-tagged and religious products
- Promote local/religious fairs, cuisines, festivals, folks, traditions, myths, music, rites and rituals
- Introduction of Kumaoni/Garhwali dialects as Compulsory Subjects in the State
- Promote religious and spiritual virtual tours
- Ensure proper disaster and waste management
- Position Uttarakhand as “Eco-Spiritual Himalayas” in national as well as global tourism campaigns.
- Create Emergency fund for natural disasters
- Use of drones and RIS/GIS tracking to monitor influx of pilgrims in over-crowding areas
- Enhancing connectivity to religious and spiritual places (including roadways, railways and airways)
- Updated Uttarakhand Tourism website
- Digital Literacy: Making the locals and pilgrims aware through digital media, providing them real-time information and data
- Ensuring stable internet connectivity for using GPS and online-payment in religious locations

- Establish last-mile connectivity to pilgrimage and spiritual sites with eco-friendly transport
- Digitalization of registration of pilgrims, virtual tours, creation mobile apps and documentaries for promotion, prioritizing pilgrims feedback,
- Scrutinizing of religious trusts.
- The paper underscores the importance of balancing tourism development with ecological sustainability to ensure long-term benefits for the state and its residents.

Conclusion

Uttarakhand is the Land of the Gods and needs to create Tourism policies highlighting the same. It needs to encash the strengths and work on the weaknesses to emerge as a hub of religious and spiritual tourism. The State has numerous religious sites and spiritual centers. It needs to focus on development of its infrastructure to connect all these religious sites and create a corridor to facilitate easy accessibility to these pilgrimage sites. The stakeholders including local communities, government authorities, NGOs, entrepreneurs, guides, religious institutions, spiritual guides, researchers, academicians, etc. need to integrate their efforts to emerge Uttarakhand as a hub for religious and spiritual tourism. The State embodies a unique blend of ecological richness and spiritual sanctity, positioning them as emerging hubs for religious and spiritual niche tourism. The State positions as a religious spiritual hub requires balancing three dimensions — spiritual/religious authenticity, ecological sensitivity, and socio-economic inclusivity.

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