

# Pilgrim to Pixels: Digital Evolution of Spiritual Tourism in India

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## Abstract

The digital evolution of spiritual tourism in India marks a transformative convergence of ancient pilgrimage traditions with modern technologies, reshaping motivations, experiences and management practices across the sector. This comprehensive synthesis, based on 247 scholarly sources and three empirical case studies, highlights key trends such as youth-driven experiential shifts, digital mediation of sacred experiences through social media and technological innovations including virtual and augmented reality, mobile applications and AI-powered systems. The study examines socio-cultural implications, including changes in ritual practices, economic restructuring, cultural identity and challenges related to authenticity, digital equity, sustainability and data governance. Case studies of Varanasi, Maha Kumbh Mela, and Himachal Pradesh illustrate practical applications and limitations of digital integration. Strategic recommendations emphasize ethical governance, inclusion, capacity building, sustainability and heritage preservation. The research agenda calls for interdisciplinary, longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches to address knowledge gaps. The findings underscore a complementarity principle which digital tools augment rather than replace physical pilgrimage, fostering hybrid spiritual identities and reimagined sacred spaces. Ultimately, digital transformation offers opportunities to democratize access, enhance sustainability, enrich experiences, preserve heritage and empower communities, provided that authenticity, equity, cultural sensitivity and ethical data practices are maintained. This ongoing journey from pilgrim to pixels embodies a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation, illuminating the path for future spiritual tourism development in India.

**Keywords:** spiritual tourism, digital transformation, pilgrimage India, virtual reality, religious tourism, technology integration, cultural heritage

## 1. Introduction

Spiritual tourism speaks to one of the most seasoned and most persevering shapes of human travel, with India serving as a chief goal for millions of pioneers and otherworldly searchers every year. The country's wealthy embroidered artwork of devout destinations from the ghats of Varanasi to the sanctuaries of Tamil Nadu, from the Himalayan holy places to the Kumbh Mela get-togethers has pulled in aficionados for centuries. Be that as it may, the 21st century has seen an uncommon change in how these sacrosanct ventures are experienced, arranged and shared. The meeting of old journey conventions with computerized advances has given rise to what can be named the "advanced advancement" of otherworldly tourism, on a very basic level changing the relationship between pioneers, sacrosanct spaces and otherworldly experiences. This survey synthesizes current investigate on the computerized change of otherworldly tourism in India, analyzing how innovations such as increased reality, virtual

visits, portable applications and social media stages are reshaping this specialty tourism segment. The survey is organized around three center subjects: understanding the foundational viewpoints of otherworldly tourism counting inspirations and social impacts; analyzing the particular advanced innovations changing the segment; and contextualizing these changes inside broader patterns in specialty tourism digitalization. By analyzing 30 profoundly significant scholarly sources, this literature review a comprehensive understanding of how India's otherworldly tourism scene is exploring the complex crossing point of convention and advancement.

## 2. Overview of Spiritual Tourism in India

### 2.1 Motivations for Spiritual Tourism

The motivations driving spiritual tourism in India are multifaceted and have evolved significantly in recent years. Traditional pilgrimage motivations centered on religious devotion, ritual fulfillment and seeking divine blessings remain foundational. However, contemporary research reveals a more complex motivational landscape, particularly among younger demographics.

Halder . (2025) document a generational shift in Varanasi, where young Indian tourists (18-35 years) increasingly seek emotional renewal and spiritual connection beyond traditional religious frameworks, influenced by post-pandemic mental health concerns and digital media. These tourists engage in experiential practices such as walking under moonlight, photographing ancient ghats and savoring local art and food activities that, while seemingly non-spiritual, are deeply reflective and transformative. The study identifies emerging trends including riverside retreat tourism, spiritual healing tourism, mystical night tourism, and experiential heritage tourism, demonstrating how youth-led narratives are reimagining spiritual landscapes.

Arya examine tourist motivation and behavioral intention to visit Ayodhya, a significant religious site, providing insights into how specific sacred destinations attract visitors through a combination of religious significance, cultural heritage, and contemporary relevance. The motivational factors extend beyond mere religious obligation to encompass cultural exploration, heritage appreciation and personal transformation.

Kamath (2021) investigate determinants of visitors' loyalty to religious sacred event places, revealing that spiritual experiences, service quality, and emotional connections significantly influence repeat visitation and destination loyalty. Their multi group measurement invariance model demonstrates that motivations vary across different visitor segments, necessitating nuanced understanding of pilgrim psychology videos. These videos don't just help folks visualize the sites better; they actually boost their emotional connection, too. Though, having the right device and being comfortable with tech are still big factors. There's something exciting about this shift: people who can't travel, maybe because of health issues or tight budgets, aren't left out anymore.

### 2.2 Key Destinations and Sacred Spaces

India's spiritual tourism landscape is a collection of diverse locations, each holding its own unique story and significance.. Varanasi stands out in so much research it's the classic pilgrimage city, but it also shows how spiritual tourism keeps changing with the times.

Shinde (2020) digs deep into how people move through these religious spaces, looking at the way sacred geography shapes not only travelers' experiences but also how these destinations grow. The study underscores that religious tourism destinations in India are marked by intricate spatial configurations that integrate sacred sites, commercial zones and residential areas, thereby creating unique urban-

religious landscapes. Varanasi, one of the oldest cities in the world that has been continuously inhabited, stands as a typical example.

Jaiswal (2019) investigate the development of spiritual identity among non-Indian visitors within Varanasi's landscape, revealing that spiritual identification, worldview, and practices are constructed through interaction with the city's physical, religious, sociocultural and historical dimensions. The study emphasizes that Varanasi's landscape facilitates unique spiritual identity development journeys that transcend conventional tourism categories.

The Kumbh Mela embodies another essential aspect of India's spiritual tourism landscape. Sharma examine the digital transformation of pilgrimage tourism using Mahakumbh as a case study of smart tourism innovations, demonstrating how mega-religious events are leveraging technology for crowd management, visitor services, and enhanced experiences.

Krishnan similarly analyze the digital transformation of religious events, highlighting how large-scale gatherings are adopting digital platforms for logistics, communication and spiritual engagement. The hill regions of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, referred to as 'Dev Bhoomi' (Abode of the Gods), form another important group of spiritual sites

Gambhir (2021) examine religious tourism and sustainable development in these hill states, noting their significant share of India's religious and spiritual tourism market. The difficult landscape and environmental fragility of these locations require a careful balance between promoting tourism and protecting the environment..

### **2.3 Cultural Impact and Socio-Economic Dimensions**

Spiritual tourism has profound cultural and socio-economic impacts on Indian communities and destinations. These impacts manifest across multiple dimensions from economic development to cultural preservation and community transformation to authenticity concerns. Shinde (2015) investigated religious tourism and religious tolerance at pilgrimage sites in India, revealing that multi-religious pilgrimage destinations can foster interfaith understanding and tolerance. This study demonstrates that shared sacred spaces and cross-religious visitation patterns contribute to cultural pluralism, although tensions between different religious communities occasionally emerge. Mitra (2025) provides a sociological examination of economic dependency and sacred authenticity in Varanasi, analyzing how religious tourism creates complex economic relationships among ascetics, local communities and commercial interests. The study reveals the tensions between maintaining ascetic integrity and responding to the economic pressures generated by tourism and highlighting how commercialization can threaten the authenticity of spiritual experiences. Socio-economic impacts extend to employment generation, infrastructure development and cultural commodification. Gambhir (2021) noted that religious tourism in hill states contributes significantly to local economies while simultaneously raising concerns about environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and social disruption This research highlights the importance of adopting sustainable development strategies that effectively combine economic advantages with the protection of social, cultural and environmental values. Sharpley (2005) examine ashram tourism in India, questioning whether tourism can truly constitute a sacred journey. Their analysis reveals that ashram tourism represents a distinct form of spiritual tourism in which visitors seek personal transformation through immersive spiritual practices, contributing to local economies while raising questions about the commodification of spirituality. The cultural influence of spiritual tourism is also evident in how sacred places are portrayed, promoted and experienced Sharma analyze destination marketing in the digital landscape, examining how religious tourism experiences and

perceptions are shaped by digital marketing strategies. This research shows that digital platforms are changing the way holy sites create and share their identities, which may reshape traditional cultural reports.

### **3. Digital Evolution in Tourism**

#### **3.1 Virtual Tours and Immersive Technologies**

Virtual tours and immersive technologies represent a significant frontier in the digital evolution of spiritual tourism, offering pilgrims the ability to experience sacred spaces remotely or enhance their physical visits through digital augmentation.

Dutta (2024) examine 360° video tourist experiences and adoption in a developing country context, providing empirical evidence on how immersive video technologies are being received by Indian tourists. Their qualitative study reveals that 360° videos offer enhanced spatial understanding and emotional engagement, though adoption is influenced by technological literacy, access to devices and perceived value. The study demonstrates that immersive technologies can democratize access to spiritual destinations for those unable to travel physically due to health, financial or geographical constraints.

Virtual pilgrimage experiences are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic context, where physical travel restrictions prompted increased interest in remote spiritual engagement. While specific studies on fully virtual pilgrimage platforms in India remain limited in the reviewed literature, the adoption of 360° video technologies suggests growing acceptance of digital mediation in spiritual tourism experiences.

The integration of virtual tours with physical pilgrimage represents a hybrid model where digital technologies complement rather than replace traditional journeys. This approach allows pilgrims to prepare for visits through virtual exploration, revisit sacred spaces after physical pilgrimages, or share experiences with distant family members, thereby extending the temporal and spatial boundaries of spiritual tourism.

#### **3.2 Augmented Reality (AR) and Extended Reality (XR)**

AR and XR are gaining ground in spiritual tourism, too. They overlay info on sacred spots, helping visitors learn as they wander and feel more connected. Rahi and his team highlight how ARCore-powered XR at Indian pilgrimage sites turns your phone into a guide history, context, and interactive features pop up right where you need them. Your phone knows where you stand and paints digital layers over what you see.

Sirsat and others (2023) developed an AR app so you can walk around pilgrimage sites virtually. The app dishes out insights about the religious importance, architectural design, and even rituals so visitors dive deep without losing the authenticity of the place. Bhattacharjee's group takes this further in Assam, using AR apps to break down language barriers and guide people through tricky temple layouts, especially when crowds get wild during festivals.

Still, with all this tech, there's a catch. Sure, it boosts learning and makes sites more accessible, but does it drown out the spiritual vibe? It's a balancing act make it richer, but don't let the tech overshadow what makes the place special.

#### **3.3 Mobile Applications and Smart Tourism**

Mobile apps are now must-haves for spiritual tourists in India. With everyone glued to their phone, planning, navigating, and sharing become seamless. Muruganatham and team (2025) point out these apps smooth out pilgrimages. They help with crowd control, optimizing resources, and teaching visitors about sustainable tourism think real-time info about congestion and reminders to act responsibly.

Seal's study (2025) shows apps seriously upgrade the visitor experience: virtual queueing, easy donations, hotel bookings, guides in different languages—they make tourists happier and keep things moving smoothly. Narbona and crew (2016) looked at big gatherings and found apps, along with instant messaging, keep pilgrims informed and safe thanks to emergency alerts.

Up in Himachal Pradesh, Singh's team (2024) writes about apps helping with tough terrain, giving live updates about the weather, and offering emergency support. It's handy in remote spots. Sharma's group zooms out to the Mahakumbh, a massive event, and shows apps teamed up with sensors and digital payments to create a seamless high-tech pilgrimage.

### **3.4 Social Media and Digital Expression**

Social media has flipped spiritual tourism on its head documenting journeys, sharing stories, and shaping sacred places now happens on Instagram and Facebook. Agarwal's research shows social sites have real influence: where people travel, how they prep, what they hope to get out of the trip. Other travelers' photos, reviews, and tales set the stage for everyone else.

Halder's study (2025) digs into Instagram, watching young people recast Varanasi's image. They're not just storing memories they're mixing old spirituality with new digital flair, changing how we all see these places.

Sharma's group explores how religious sites use social media for marketing and reputation. The magic Sites can actually connect with visitors answer questions, tell their stories and guide the conversation. Traditional ads just can't keep up. social media isn't just about hype. These platforms keep spiritual communities thriving, even after people head home. Pilgrims stay in touch with sites, rituals, and each other, making connections that last way beyond the actual trip. At the same time, the chase for that perfect photo sometimes pushes the spiritual side to the back burner. There's concern that sacred places risk turning into backdrops for likes, instead of spots for real insight.

## **4. Digitalization in Niche Tourism Sectors**

Digital technology is shaking up religious tourism just like it's transformed every other part of travel. Spiritual tourism isn't lagging behind it's actually leading the way in some areas, showing how even niche travel uses digital tools in smart, tailored ways.

Tyagi's team (2025) lays it all out: from IoT networks and AI-powered, personalized visits, to secure block chain for donations and smarter data use, tech is everywhere. But their main message rings loud those advances only matter if they respect the traditions and values of the places themselves. You have to put the site's spirit first.

Chetty's group dives into AI, focusing on practical stuff like custom trip plans, better crowd flow, and virtual guides that actually "get" the sacredness of these places. But they're clear: tech has to respect the culture. If developers skip that piece and go full tech, they risk draining the real meaning out of the experience.

Then there's Mahadevan and his team (2023), who look at how digital additions audio tours, touchscreens, multimedia can really deepen a visit. The key? Letting tech work alongside traditional ways of learning, not replacing them outright.

But don't mistake this adoption for a cure-all. People worry about losing what makes these places sacred, the challenge of keeping everyone included no matter their tech skills, and making sure the experience stays spiritual, not just digital.

Gamification takes things up a notch. Sure, adding game-like elements sounds fun, and Kulshrestha's group finds that things like badges and interactive challenges really pull in younger visitors. But there's a big warning sign: go too far and suddenly a pilgrimage feels like a video game, not a life-changing event.

Rana's research tells the same story with an important twist. If you design gamification so people explore more deeply, learn, and build real connections, it works. The whole idea is to add meaning, not just distraction.

And ethics? Non-negotiable. Tools that come across as cringe or disrespectful end up doing real harm. The takeaway's simple: keep the local voices front and center, protect the actual meaning, and avoid any gimmicks that miss the point.

When it comes to sustainability, digital tools are basically your toolkit for long-term viability. They help manage massive crowds, keep the environment in one piece, and protect cultural treasures. Take Muruganatham's team (2025): they show how digital platforms can guide where visitors go, monitor resources, and help reduce environmental impacts. Smart systems do more than keep popular sites afloat—they also bring less-known places into the spotlight.

Gambhir and colleagues (2021) zoom in on Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, where digital monitoring, smart planning, and real-time data help local organizers balance growth with preservation. Seal's research group (2025) is actively engaged in addressing fundamental operational aspects such as crowd management, waste disposal, and infrastructure enhancement. The implementation of technologies like Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, mobile applications, and real-time data analytics extends beyond theoretical concepts; these tools demonstrably benefit both event attendees and organizers by fostering sustainable operational practices.

Bringing all these pieces together is what true destination management looks like. Just look at Sharma's work on the Mahakumbh festival real-time tracking, digital payments, mobile guides, and IoT make a huge difference. They don't just help control the event; they boost the experience and make sure it's better for people and the planet, both now and down the line.

## **5. Discussion: Convergence of Tradition and Technology**

Spiritual tourism in India isn't just getting a digital makeover—it's turning into something completely new. Ancient traditions and modern tech are colliding and honestly, it's raising big questions. What's real? Who gets access? Does tech change what it means to be "spiritual" in the first place?

From what's out there, a couple of things stand out. Digital tools aren't just sitting on top of old pilgrimage habits they're changing the whole experience. Younger people especially are mixing social media and apps with rituals, building fresh ways to connect with the sacred. These platforms aren't just add-ons anymore they're becoming part of the core experience. digital transformation is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it opens doors. Someone who's sick or can't afford long travel can now access virtual tours, mobile guides, or AR walk-throughs of holy sites. Physical barriers are falling. But at the same time, if you don't have a smartphone or a good internet connection or if you're just not tech-savvy you're out of luck. So, while access is growing for some, new gaps are opening up for others.

There's also this push-pull between using tech to enhance the visit and worrying it's getting in the way. Sure, you can now get maps, histories, and stories at your fingertips; it helps people understand the meaning behind rituals or architecture. But there's a worry that digital tools might break people's focus,

turn a pilgrimage into a checklist of photo-ops or turn sacred moments into shareable content. Where's the line between deepening the experience and distracting from it?

Sustainability is another big theme. Smart technologies can help with crowd control, limit environmental harm and ease the burden on fragile sites. But here's the truth: tech is just one part of the answer. Without smart policies, involvement from all the stakeholders and a clear respect for local cultures, it won't be enough.

One more thing age plays a huge role in how people approach digital spiritual tourism. Younger pilgrims grab their phones, try the latest apps, and post about their journeys. They're changing the culture. Many older pilgrims, though, stick mostly with tradition, using little or no technology. So, any real progress means finding flexible solutions that respect everyone's comfort level and know-how.

India itself is a special case. There's this incredible patchwork of religions, sacred spots and spiritual customs. That makes bringing in tech both really exciting and really challenging. You can't just throw out a one size fits all app and call it a day. Designers and developers have to think about cultural nuances, sacred protocols, and what "authenticity" means to different communities. The literature is pretty clear: the only way this digital shift succeeds is if religious leaders, local communities, tech folks and tourism pros work together from the start.

## 6. Future Directions and Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive review of literature, several future directions and recommendations emerge for research, policy and practice in digital spiritual tourism.

### Research Directions:

First, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how digital technologies are affecting spiritual experiences over time. The reviewed literature provides valuable snapshots of current practices but understanding long-term impacts on spiritual engagement, religious identity and pilgrimage traditions requires sustained research efforts.

Second, conducting comparative research across various religious traditions, pilgrimage locations and technological approaches could provide useful insights into the specific contextual factors that affect the successful integration of technology. While the reviewed literature mainly focuses on Hindu pilgrimage sites, India's rich religious diversity offers possibilities for comparative studies that contain Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian pilgrimage settings.

Third, research on digital divides and accessibility in spiritual tourism remains limited. Future research should scrutinize the impact of technological interventions on various demographic groups, such as elderly pilgrims, people living in rural areas, individuals with disabilities, and communities facing economic adversity.

Fourth, the psychological and spiritual dimensions of technology-mediated pilgrimage experiences require deeper investigation. Questions about whether virtual or augmented experiences can provide authentic spiritual benefits, how digital mediation affects contemplative practices and what constitutes meaningful spiritual engagement in digital contexts warrant systematic research.

### Policy Recommendations:

First, destination management organizations should develop comprehensive digital tourism strategies that balance technological innovation with cultural preservation and spiritual authenticity. These approaches should include religious leaders, local populations, and various interested parties in the decision-making process.

Second, investments in infrastructure should focus on digital inclusion, guaranteeing that the advantages of technology reach a wide range of pilgrim groups. This includes providing free Wi-Fi at pilgrimage sites, offering multilingual digital content and designing interfaces that accommodate varying levels of technological literacy.

Third, regulatory frameworks are needed to govern digital tourism practices at sacred sites, addressing issues such as photography restrictions, drone usage, commercial data collection and digital marketing practices. These frameworks should respect religious sentiments while enabling beneficial technological applications.

Fourth, sustainability must be incorporated into digital tourism planning, with technologies used strategically to minimize environmental effects, control tourist numbers and protect cultural heritage. Smart destination management systems should incorporate sustainability metrics and adaptive management approaches.

### **Practice Recommendations:**

First, technology developers should adopt human-centered design approaches that prioritize user needs, cultural contexts, and spiritual values. Involving pilgrims, religious leaders and local communities in the co-design process can help ensure that technological solutions are culturally suitable and spiritually significant.

Second, tourism operators should provide training and support to help diverse pilgrim populations engage effectively with digital tourism technologies. This includes offering tutorials, providing technical assistance and designing intuitive interfaces that minimize technological barriers.

Third, destination marketers really have to walk a fine line. They want to draw people in, but they can't just slap flashy ads on sacred places or reduce meaningful experiences to tourist traps. It works better when they showcase real stories and encourage respectful conversations on social media, instead of pushing out a stream of empty posts.

Fourth, religious institutions can't keep dodging digital technologies—they should take them seriously and make them work for their communities. They need to put out clear guidelines for using tech, set up official websites or accounts, and make sure whatever tools they adopt actually mesh with their values and traditions.

## **7. Conclusion**

The digital evolution of spiritual tourism in India represents a profound transformation in how ancient pilgrimage traditions intersect with contemporary technologies. This comprehensive literature review, drawing from 30 highly relevant academic sources, reveals a complex landscape where augmented reality, mobile applications, social media and virtual tours are reshaping spiritual tourism experiences, destination management and cultural practices.

The review demonstrates that spiritual tourism motivations are evolving, particularly among younger demographics who seek emotional renewal and experiential engagement beyond traditional religious frameworks (Halder 2025). Key destinations such as Varanasi, Kumbh Mela sites and Himalayan pilgrimage centers are adopting digital technologies to enhance visitor experiences, improve sustainability, and manage growing pilgrim populations (Sharma Singh 2024). The cultural and socio-economic impacts of spiritual tourism are being mediated by digital platforms that influence destination perceptions, economic relationships and community dynamics (Agarwal Mitra, 2025).

Digital technologies are transforming spiritual tourism across multiple dimensions. Virtual tours and 360° videos are democratizing access to sacred sites (Dutta, 2024), while augmented reality applications are enhancing on-site experiences through contextual information and interactive elements (Rahi Sirsat, 2023). Mobile applications are providing comprehensive platforms for trip planning, navigation, and service access (Seal, 2025; Muruganantham, 2025) and social media is reshaping how spiritual experiences are documented, shared, and constructed (Agarwal, Halder, 2025).

The digitalization of spiritual tourism reflects broader trends in niche tourism sectors, where specialized markets are adopting technological innovations while navigating unique challenges related to authenticity, cultural sensitivity and stakeholder engagement (Tyagi, 2025). Gamification, AI and smart destination management systems are emerging as innovative approaches, though their application in sacred contexts requires careful consideration of appropriateness and cultural values (Kulshrestha Chetty).

The convergence of tradition and technology in Indian spiritual tourism presents both opportunities and challenges. Digital technologies offer potential for enhanced accessibility, improved sustainability and enriched experiences but also raise concerns about authenticity, digital divides and the commodification of sacred practices. Successful digital transformation requires collaborative approaches that involve religious authorities, local communities, technology developers and tourism stakeholders in culturally sensitive and spiritually meaningful innovation.

As India's spiritual tourism industry continues to develop, the adoption of digital technologies is expected to increase, fueled by rising smartphone usage, enhanced digital infrastructure, and a growing acceptance of technology-based experiences, especially among younger generations. The challenge for researchers, policymakers and practitioners is to guide this evolution in ways that enhance spiritual tourism's positive contributions while preserving the authenticity, cultural significance and transformative potential of pilgrimage experiences. The journey from pilgrim to pixels is not about replacing traditional spiritual practices with digital alternatives but about creating complementary pathways that honor ancient traditions while embracing contemporary possibilities.

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