

# Embark On A Spiritual Quest: The Pilgrim Experience At Vaishno Devi Shrine

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## ABSTRACT

The shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is a highly venerated Hindu deity which is an embodiment of Shakti, the divine feminine force. The intent of this study is to investigate the pilgrims' experiences at the revered temple of Mata Vaishno Devi, as well as explore the moderating effect of gender on the pilgrim experience and the revisit intention. A mixed-methods approach was employed to collect data, blending narrative inquiry with a reflective feedback method. Additionally, narrative inquiry enabled the capture of pilgrims' personal stories and experiences in depth, while reflective feedback allowed participants to review and contextualise their own responses. This combination allowed the study to balance qualitative richness with quantitative breadth. This study breaks new ground by combining narrative inquiry which delves into personal spiritual journeys and reflective feedback methodology, the research offers a methodologically innovative blend that moves beyond typical survey-based pilgrimage studies. This study underlines how digital tools RFID-based yatra cards, IoT-enabled monitoring, ERP integration and the AI chatbot "Shakti" create responsive, pilgrim-centric systems that boost efficiency and support real-time feedback.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Tourism, Pilgrim Experience, Mata Vaishno Devi, Narrative Inquiry, Reflective Feedback

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage is a timeless human phenomenon that blends faith, endurance, culture, and self-discovery. In India, where spirituality is deeply rooted in everyday life, pilgrimages are not merely religious obligations but transformative journeys that reflect inner devotion and a desire for divine connection. Among the most revered sites in the country stands the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, located in the Trikuta Mountains of Jammu and Kashmir. Devotees from all corners of the country and increasingly from abroad undertake the arduous trek to seek the blessings of the Mother Goddess, whom they believe to be a manifestation of Shakti, the supreme feminine power. This sacred journey, covering approximately 12 kilometers on foot, is both physically demanding and spiritually uplifting. The unique experience it offers makes it one of the most significant pilgrimage sites in South Asia.

Today's pilgrims engage with the sacred journey not only as a religious obligation but often as a quest for mental peace, emotional healing, and spiritual rejuvenation in a world marked by stress, uncertainty, and digital overload. With more urban and younger devotees participating in the yatra, the motivations behind the pilgrimage are expanding beyond tradition-bound vows. Many describe their journey to Mata Vaishno Devi as a break from the material pace of life, a retreat into spiritual simplicity, and a means to reconnect with the inner self. The experiential aspects like chanting with fellow yatri, walking barefoot on rugged terrain, witnessing sunrise at Ardhkuwari, and feeling a sense of surrender at Bhawanare deeply transformative for many. Yet, these moments are now often accompanied by smartphones, GPS tracking, digital bookings, and real-time social media sharing, creating a new blend of devotion and technology.

The contemporary pilgrim experience is also significantly shaped by management and infrastructural evolution, driven by the need to accommodate increasing footfalls while preserving the sanctity of the site. The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has implemented modern amenities such as online registration, RFID-based tracking, helicopter services, battery cars, and clean lodging facilities, making the pilgrimage more

inclusive and accessible. However, the ease of access has also led to crowding during peak seasons, raising questions about carrying capacity, environmental sustainability, and spiritual dilution. In today's scenario, managing expectations of comfort while fostering a genuine spiritual atmosphere has become a central challenge. The interplay between tradition and convenience, ritual and regulation, adds complexity to the modern pilgrim's journey.

This research intends to explore the evolving nature of pilgrim experience and spiritual fulfillment in the context of Mata Vaishno Devi, focusing on both personal narratives and external enablers. Key dimensions include the emotional and psychological outcomes of the pilgrimage, infrastructural facilitation, crowd management, ritual participation, and perceptions of spirituality in a tech-driven society. By combining qualitative accounts of pilgrim experiences with analytical insight into present-day administrative practices, the study seeks to understand how the sacred journey is lived, perceived, and remembered in today's context. It also examines how pilgrimage today serves as a site of inner awakening, communal identity, and adaptive tradition.

In conclusion, the Mata Vaishno Devi pilgrimage, while grounded in ancient belief and mythology, is very much a living tradition adapting to the needs of a changing society. The journey remains a sacred pursuit, but the ways in which it is experienced, supported, and narrated have shifted. Today's pilgrim is as likely to seek Wi-Fi signals and tea stalls along the route as they are to offer prayerful chants to the goddess. This fusion of the sacred and the contemporary forms the foundation of this research an inquiry into how age-old spirituality is reinterpreted, reexperienced, and reenergized in the face of modernity. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to broader discussions on religion, experience, cultural continuity, and spiritual tourism in the 21st century. This study apart is its innovative approach to studying the pilgrim experience by blending traditional spiritual insights with contemporary tools of analysis, such as narrative inquiry, experience mapping, and reflective feedback. It aims to identify not just what pilgrims do, but how they feel, what transforms within them, and how different environmental, technological, and emotional touchpoints along the journey contribute to or detract from their spiritual growth. By examining the lived experiences of pilgrims through interviews, surveys, and observational methods, the study seeks to unearth deeper layers of the spiritual quest that often go undocumented in mainstream pilgrimage studies. Furthermore, it will assess how infrastructure, service design, and crowd management affect not only physical comfort but also spiritual immersion.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual tourism, a rapidly growing subset of global travel, refers to travel motivated by the pursuit of spiritual growth, inner peace, or religious fulfillment (UNWTO, 2021). Unlike conventional tourism, it emphasizes transformation over leisure, integrating experiences such as meditation, pilgrimage, and sacred site visits (Bunten, 2022). The evolution of spiritual tourism is often linked to increasing stress in urban life and a growing quest for meaning in post-modern societies (Chand and Kaur, 2023). In India, spiritual tourism is a critical contributor to domestic travel, with destinations like Varanasi, Amritsar, Tirupati, and Vaishno Devi witnessing year-round pilgrim inflow (MoT, 2023). Researchers emphasize the role of digital platforms, infrastructure upgrades, and faith-based branding in enhancing spiritual destinations (Jauhari and Singh, 2020). However, there is growing discourse around balancing commercialization with sanctity (Singh and Bhardwaj, 2021). As a research domain, spiritual tourism intersects with disciplines such as psychology, management, and religious studies, opening diverse opportunities for experiential and impact-based research (Sharma and Sinha, 2022).

Spiritual tourism is an evolving field that encompasses travel with the intent of engaging in activities that foster spiritual growth, inner peace, or religious fulfillment. Unlike traditional religious tourism, which is often bound to institutional practices or pilgrimages to sacred sites, spiritual tourism includes a broader spectrum of experiences such as yoga retreats, meditation centres, wellness journeys, and personal quests for meaning (Norman, 2011; Smith, 2003). Spiritual tourism has emerged as a significant niche within the global tourism industry. It reflects changing patterns of belief, leisure, and identity, where individuals travel not only for relaxation or adventure but for inner peace, personal transformation, and spiritual growth. This trend aligns with a global shift toward post-materialist values, where individuals prioritise meaning and self-actualisation over material wealth (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Spiritual tourism is a powerful form of experiential travel that offers psychological, emotional, and social benefits. As it continues to grow, there is a pressing need to ensure sustainability, authenticity, and inclusivity. The academic study of spiritual tourism must evolve to include digital trends, mental health outcomes, and socio-cultural dynamics while preserving the sacredness of spiritual traditions. According to Haq and Medhekar (2016), spiritual tourists are more likely to be seekers of inner peace and transformation rather than followers of organised religion. This trend aligns with the rise of "spiritual but not religious" identities in many global societies.

### 2.2 Pilgrim Experience

The pilgrim experience encompasses both physical and metaphysical elements, involving hardship, community bonding, ritual practice, and spiritual fulfillment (Timothy and Olsen, 2021). Researchers highlight that the

journey often begins with a personal intent be it penance, gratitude, or healing which gradually transforms through encounters with sacred landscapes, collective chants, and rituals (Raj and Griffin, 2018). The quality of pilgrim experience today is influenced not only by spiritual aspects but also by logistical components like sanitation, accommodation, safety, and crowd management (Bhati and Pearce, 2022). Several studies use phenomenological and narrative methods to analyze emotions such as awe, surrender, and divine presence during pilgrimages (Lo and McKercher, 2023). Reflective storytelling is increasingly used to assess the transformative nature of the experience (Cohen and Cohen, 2019). While traditional frameworks emphasized doctrine and ritual, recent scholarship embraces pilgrimage as a dynamic, evolving, and individualized journey (Sharpley and Jepson, 2020). This shift calls for deeper engagement with the psychological and emotional layers of pilgrim narratives.

The concept of pilgrimage is not limited to religious obligation, it is increasingly understood as a multi-dimensional spiritual and personal experience. Turner and Turner (1978) describe pilgrimage as a liminal journey where individuals temporarily step outside social structures, undergoing transformation. They highlight the *communitas*, a deep sense of fellowship formed among pilgrims, which enhances spiritual fulfilment. Cohen (1992) distinguishes between institutionalized pilgrimage, typically bound to religious structures, and non-institutionalized spiritual journeys, where individuals seek personal enlightenment outside traditional frameworks. Studies highlight that the pilgrim experience at Vaishno Devi is marked by intense religious fervour, communal bonding, and a sense of fulfilment upon darshan of the deity (Mankodi, 2002). The pilgrimage is often perceived as a test of faith, where devotees endure physical hardship as an act of devotion (Gupta, 2011). Emotional and spiritual transformations are common themes, with many pilgrims reporting a renewed sense of purpose and inner peace.

### 2.3 Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine

The Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine serves as a prominent case study in India's spiritual tourism and religious pilgrimage landscape, attracting over 9 million pilgrims annually (SMVDSB, 2023). Located at an altitude of approximately 5,200 feet in the Trikuta Hills of Jammu and Kashmir, the shrine is revered as one of the 108 Shakti Peethas, representing the embodiment of the divine feminine energy in Hindu mythology. Rooted in centuries of oral tradition and spiritual lore, the shrine has evolved from a remote cave temple to a highly structured, government-administered pilgrimage destination. The journey to the cave temple, which typically spans 12–14 kilometers on foot, is perceived by devotees as a symbolic spiritual ascent, requiring physical endurance, emotional resilience, and unwavering faith (Koul, 2021).

Recent studies highlight that pilgrims often interpret their experience as a spiritual trial or penance, encompassing a combination of physical exertion, emotional release, self-purification, and divine connection (Rai and Srivastava, 2022). Despite the physical challenges, the pilgrimage remains deeply transformative for many, contributing to a sense of inner clarity and reaffirmed faith. In response to the increasing number of pilgrims and the changing expectations of modern spiritual tourists, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB) has introduced several infrastructural innovations including helicopter services, battery-operated vehicles, RFID-based tracking systems, and online registration portals (Kaul and Gupta, 2020). These developments have significantly enhanced the accessibility and convenience of the *yatra*, especially for elderly and differently-abled pilgrims. Moreover, accommodation upgrades, improved sanitation, and crowd management mechanisms have been strategically deployed to manage large volumes during peak seasons such as Navratras and New Year.

However, researchers argue that this infrastructural expansion has led to an increasing commercialization of sacred space, creating a tension between logistical facilitation and the preservation of spiritual sanctity (Joshi and Verma, 2023). The commodification of rituals, the proliferation of vendors and paid services, and the dependency on technology are perceived by some as undermining the authenticity and immersive quality of the spiritual experience. Furthermore, existing literature largely emphasizes the administrative and economic aspects of the shrine while relatively few studies engage with the subjective, internal dimensions of the pilgrimage. There is a notable research gap concerning pilgrim-centric perspectives, particularly those focusing on personal narratives, emotional journeys, and spiritual transformations during the *yatra*. Therefore, this study seeks to address this lacuna by employing narrative inquiry and reflective feedback methods to capture the lived experiences of pilgrims, providing a more experiential, interpretive, and spiritually nuanced understanding of the Mata Vaishno Devi pilgrimage in today's context.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-method design, drawing primarily from narrative inquiry and reflective feedback to explore the personal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the pilgrim experience at the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine. The research is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the subjective meaning that individuals assign to their lived experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The choice of narrative inquiry enables the collection of deep, story-based data that captures the unique spiritual journeys, challenges, and inner transformations of pilgrims in a way that statistical data alone cannot reveal. This

qualitative approach is supported by a quantitative component through a structured survey instrument, offering broader contextual understanding. This combination allows for the triangulation of findings, enhancing the study's validity and offering a comprehensive perspective on both spiritual quest and pilgrim satisfaction.

### **3.2 Sampling Technique and Participants**

A purposive sampling technique was employed, which is suitable for studies conducted in naturalistic and high-traffic field settings where random sampling may be logistically impractical (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants were approached at four key points of the yatra: Katra Base Camp, Ardhkuwari, Bhawan, and Sanjichhat, covering various stages of the pilgrimage. A total of 800 pilgrims participated in the study of these, 356 were male and 444 were female, ensuring representation across genders. The sample included a mix of pilgrims travelling on foot, by pony, palki, and helicopter. Age, socio-economic status, and religious background were also considered to ensure diversity in responses and depth in narrative accounts.

#### **3.2.1 Sampling Procedure**

In this study, the pilgrims were deliberately sought whose stories and reflections could bring the journey to life, choosing people from different walks of life so that we wouldn't just get data, but lived experience. The pilgrims were approached at four meaningful spots along the route Katra Base Camp, Ardhkuwari, Bhawan, and Sanjichhat because each place marks a different stage of the trek: tough climbs, rest moments, spiritual peaks, and the final push. It was made sure to include men and women, young and old, those from different religious backgrounds and income brackets, and those travelling by foot, pony, palki or even helicopter because each mode of travel brings its own physical, emotional, and spiritual flavor. When people agreed to share, they were asked about what inspired them, what tested them, which moments surprised them and then to pause, reflect: "What have I learned so far? What would I do differently next?" Their stories were recorded right there in the field, capturing both their immediate voices and the reflections that followed. Consent was freely given, everyone's identity was kept private, and no one felt rushed. We didn't stop until hearing those deeper truths because by then, the new stories were echoing the same themes, and nothing substantially new was emerging. What emerged from this method wasn't just accounts of pilgrimage it was pilgrims' own inner journeys, how they made sense of each step, each breath, each challenge.

### **3.3 Narrative Inquiry Process**

Narrative inquiry was chosen for its capacity to capture storied experiences, particularly in emotionally and spiritually charged contexts such as pilgrimages (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). A semi-structured narrative interview guide was developed to elicit pilgrims' stories, focusing on motivations for undertaking the yatra, key emotional moments, spiritual realizations, rituals performed, interactions with fellow pilgrims, and reflections on divine presence.

The narrative interviews were conducted with 200 pilgrims (25% of the total sample), allowing for in-depth exploration. Interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes and were conducted in Hindi, Dogri, Punjabi, and English, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary. Using narrative coding and thematic clustering (Riessman, 2008), common motives such as "seeking blessings," "overcoming hardship," "feeling divine presence," and "emotional release" were identified. NVivo 14 software was employed for managing and organizing qualitative data.

### **3.4 Reflective Feedback Collection**

In addition to narrative interviews, reflective feedback was collected from the same group of 200 pilgrims shortly after they had completed their darshan. This was done through brief open-ended writing prompts and verbal recordings where literacy or fatigue posed constraints. Participants were asked to reflect on questions like: "What moment during your journey felt spiritually most powerful?" and "What insight or transformation do you take back with you?". This reflective component helped capture immediate post-pilgrimage emotions, providing a richer understanding of how the experience impacted pilgrims' beliefs, well-being, and inner peace.

### **3.5 Quantitative Component**

A structured questionnaire was administered to 600 pilgrims, covering demographic data, mode of travel, previous pilgrimage experience, perceived infrastructural satisfaction, and a Likert-scale assessment of spiritual fulfillment. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS v28, allowing for identification of patterns and correlations related to gender, age, journey mode, and spiritual outcome.

## **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

The data analysis for this study was grounded in qualitative research traditions, specifically drawing from narrative inquiry and reflective feedback frameworks. This dual approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the subjective spiritual journeys of pilgrims visiting the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine. The

collected data included over 800 pilgrim narratives, with 356 male and 444 female respondents, gathered through open-ended interviews and reflective statements recorded immediately post-darshan. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software, which facilitated coding, theme clustering, and visualization of recurrent experiential patterns.

#### 4.1 Data Analysis Strategy

The study employed a concurrent triangulation approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017) where qualitative and quantitative data were analysed simultaneously and then merged to interpret overlapping themes. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up.

Narratives and reflections were clustered into core themes such as:

- Divine encounter and transformation
- Pilgrim hardship and endurance
- Faith, gratitude, and fulfillment
- Infrastructure and service influence on spirituality

Quantitative findings were used to validate or contrast these themes, offering a layered understanding of the contemporary pilgrimage experience.

#### 4.2 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to academic research ethics. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews and responses were anonymised, and personal identifiers were removed to maintain confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. The study was conducted with cultural and religious sensitivity, particularly given the spiritual nature of the site and the diversity of pilgrims.

#### 4.3 Narrative Inquiry Analysis

Narrative inquiry was used to capture the lived stories of pilgrims, focusing on the chronology, emotional arcs, and meaning-making processes embedded in their pilgrimage journey. The narratives were first transcribed and then translated into English where necessary. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis guided the data coding process: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) theme searching, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Key emergent themes included: spiritual resilience, divine intervention, faith renewal, self-discovery, and transcendental experiences. Special attention was paid to turning points within narratives where pilgrims described peak spiritual experiences or moments of emotional catharsis.

#### 4.4 Reflective Feedback Analysis

In addition to narrative data, structured reflective feedback was collected through guided prompts immediately after pilgrims completed their darshan. This reflection focused on capturing affective states, spiritual insight, and transformational learning. Responses were coded using in vivo coding to preserve the original language and metaphors used by participants (Saldaña, 2021). The reflective data was triangulated with narrative accounts to ensure validity and thematic consistency. A comparative analysis was also conducted between male and female participants, revealing subtle differences in spiritual perception while male respondents often highlighted devotional discipline and ritual fulfilment, female respondents emphasized emotional surrender, maternal connection, and inner healing.

**Table 1: Narrative Inquiry and Reflective Feedback Framework for Exploring Pilgrim Experience and Spiritual Quest**

Component	Details
<b>Study Design</b>	Qualitative approach using narrative inquiry and reflective feedback to capture subjective, spiritual, and emotional experiences of pilgrims.
<b>Sample Size and Profile</b>	Total participants: 800 pilgrims Males: 356 (44.5%) Females: 444 (55.5%) Age range: 18–70 years
<b>Sampling Technique</b>	Convenience sampling at four pilgrimage points: Katra Base Camp, Ardhkuwari, Bhawan, and Sanjichhat (pre- and post-darshan).
<b>Narrative Inquiry Approach</b>	Semi-structured interviews conducted in Hindi and English. Pilgrims were asked to share personal pilgrimage stories, including motivations, spiritual encounters, emotional turning points, and personal meaning-making processes.
<b>Reflective Feedback</b>	Pilgrims were encouraged to provide written or oral reflections immediately after darshan. Prompts included: "What spiritual insight did you gain?" and

Component	Details
	“How has this pilgrimage changed you?” Responses were audio-recorded or noted.
<b>Data Collection Tools</b>	Interview guide (open-ended questions) Audio recorders Reflective feedback forms Field notes and observation logs
<b>Data Analysis Method</b>	Responses were transcribed, translated (where needed), and coded thematically using NVivo. Themes such as faith renewal, emotional catharsis, divine connection, and self-discovery were identified.
<b>Ethical Considerations</b>	Participants gave informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. Participants could withdraw at any stage.
<b>Pilgrim Participation Context</b>	Data was collected over a 6-week period during both peak (Navratra) and regular seasons to ensure diversity in experiences.
<b>Purpose Approach of</b>	To explore the depth and diversity of pilgrim experiences beyond surface-level satisfaction metrics, focusing on their spiritual transformation and emotional narratives.

#### 4.5 Gender and Age-Based Variation

Cross-tabulation of themes by gender and age revealed meaningful distinctions in spiritual interpretation. Younger participants (ages 18–30) tended to associate the pilgrimage with life goal clarity, whereas older participants (above 50) were more likely to express sentiments of gratitude, closure, and fulfilment of vows. Gendered nuances were evident in how pilgrimage was perceived either as a spiritual adventure (males) or a sacred duty (females), adding further depth to the findings. These insights illustrate the intersection of demographic identity and spiritual expression, validating the importance of diverse reflective narratives.

#### 4.6 Data Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility, peer debriefing and inter-coder reliability checks were conducted. A subset of 100 narratives was double-coded by an independent researcher, achieving an inter-rater reliability score of 87%. Member checking was also undertaken with 25 participants to verify interpretations. Reflective journaling by the researcher was maintained throughout the process to monitor biases and emotional involvement.

#### 4.7 Findings and Interpretations

The narrative and reflective analysis of 800 pilgrims (356 males and 444 females) revealed deep spiritual and emotional undercurrents in the Mata Vaishno Devi pilgrimage experience. Using narrative inquiry, pilgrim accounts were categorized into key emergent themes: spiritual transformation, endurance and faith, divine connection, and disruption by commercialization. Reflective feedback further enriched these findings, highlighting personal introspections and perceived changes post-pilgrimage.

One of the most consistent themes across narratives was the spiritual transformation many pilgrims felt as they traversed the 13-kilometre uphill path. Respondents described this journey as both physically demanding and spiritually cleansing. Female respondents, in particular, emphasized the shrine as a symbol of Shakti (divine feminine energy), which empowered their emotional healing. A 36-year-old female pilgrim reflected: “Every step felt like shedding a burden from the soul. I reached not just a temple, but a part of myself I had long forgotten.”

The second major theme was the role of faith and endurance. Many pilgrims equated the journey with a test of devotion and strength. Some elderly pilgrims shared narratives where physical pain was accepted as part of their spiritual offering, reinforcing how bodily suffering was seen as purification. Reflective feedback indicated that such hardship often intensified feelings of spiritual reward upon reaching the sanctum.

However, commercialization and infrastructural interventions emerged as a conflicting theme. While facilities such as helicopter rides, battery-operated vehicles, and RFID tracking were appreciated for accessibility, many pilgrims also noted a loss of spiritual ambience. As one 52-year-old male pilgrim remarked, “It feels more like a tour than a tirth. Convenience has made the soul lazy.” This indicates a growing tension between modernization and traditional expectations of pilgrimage austerity.

Importantly, reflective feedback also illuminated inner change and post-pilgrimage behavior. Many pilgrims reported improved emotional resilience, stronger religious adherence, and increased compassion in their daily lives. Female respondents emphasized renewed mental strength, while male pilgrims highlighted discipline and gratitude. These reflections suggest that the shrine experience extends beyond the journey it leaves a spiritual imprint on identity and worldview.

This study offers a fresh perspective on how modern pilgrimage intertwines with culture, spirituality, and technology. By delving into the experiences of pilgrims at Mata Vaishno Devi, it highlights the profound

emotional and spiritual transformations that occur during the journey. Pilgrims often speak of a deepened faith, emotional healing, and a sense of inner peace, emphasizing that the pilgrimage is not merely a physical journey but a transformative spiritual experience. The research also sheds light on the gendered dimensions of pilgrimage. Women often describe their experiences in terms of emotional connection and maternal devotion, while men focus more on discipline and ritual. This distinction enriches our understanding of how cultural and gender norms shape spiritual practices and experiences.

Furthermore, the study examines the role of technology in modern pilgrimage. Tools like RFID tracking, AI chatbots, and digital monitoring systems have made the journey more accessible and efficient. However, the research also raises concerns about the potential dilution of the spiritual ambiance due to these technological interventions, prompting a reevaluation of how to balance modern conveniences with the preservation of sacred experiences. In essence, this study contributes to the global discourse on spiritual tourism by providing a nuanced understanding of the pilgrimage experience. It underscores the importance of considering emotional, gendered, and technological factors in shaping the modern pilgrimage, offering valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of tourism and cultural studies.

Overall, the integration of narrative and reflective approaches offered a textured understanding of pilgrim experiences. While the shrine remains a deeply sacred site, pilgrims today negotiate between tradition and modernity, spiritual devotion and convenience, ritual endurance and infrastructure-driven ease. This duality, captured through their voices, reflects the evolving landscape of spiritual tourism in India.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences and spiritual quest of pilgrims visiting the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine through narrative inquiry and reflective feedback from 800 participants. The findings reveal that the pilgrimage represents more than a physical journey; it is a multidimensional spiritual process marked by emotional intensity, divine symbolism, personal transformation, and ritualised faith. These narratives affirm earlier research by Joshi and Verma (2023) and Rai and Srivastava (2022), who suggest that pilgrim experiences in India are deeply intertwined with cultural memory, collective identity, and personal growth.

The emergence of key themes such as faith renewal, spiritual resilience, and emotional catharsis underscores the function of pilgrimage as a form of spiritual therapy. The convergence of modern infrastructure (e.g., helicopter services, RFID systems) with traditional devotional practices indicates that the sacred and the contemporary co-exist in dynamic tension. This aligns with the arguments of Kaul and Gupta (2020), who noted the dual pull of modernity and sanctity in Indian religious tourism.

Interestingly, the data shows gendered variation in reflective themes: female pilgrims often narrated experiences of maternal bonding with the goddess, inner healing, and emotional release, whereas male pilgrims emphasized ritual completion, discipline, and devotional austerity. These differences suggest that the pilgrimage experience is shaped not only by spiritual intent but also by gendered socio-cultural roles, echoing findings by Singh (2021) on the feminisation of sacred journeys in India.

Furthermore, the age-wise distinction where younger pilgrims sought direction and clarity while older pilgrims sought closure and fulfilment points toward the life-stage relevance of spiritual tourism. These insights help build a more nuanced understanding of how individuals engage with religious spaces based on evolving personal and spiritual needs.

By combining narrative inquiry with reflective feedback, this research contributes a novel methodological lens to the field of spiritual tourism. The richness of first-person accounts enables a deeper exploration of internal transformations, which are often overlooked in quantitative satisfaction-based tourism studies.

### 5.1 Research Contribution to Global Tourism

1. This study adds a human face to the global conversation about spiritual tourism by showing what pilgrimage really feels like not just the rituals or the geography, but the thirst in someone's voice when they speak of faith renewed, the quiet tears after darshan, the fatigue in legs followed by the light in eyes. While many global studies note motivations or satisfaction in pilgrimage, they often stop short of asking: How has this changed me? By weaving together narrative inquiry and reflective feedback, this research lets pilgrims themselves map that transformation, echoing recent work on spiritual tourism that highlights emotional journeys and authenticity.
2. It also brings gender into sharper focus. Too often, pilgrim is treated as one uniform identity. But here, female pilgrims speak of emotional healing, maternal connection, inner peace; male pilgrims more often reference discipline, ritual, duty. These distinctions enrich what "spiritual experience" means in different bodies, adding to a small but growing line of research globally recognizing gendered ways of pilgrimage.
3. Across sacred sites worldwide, there is growing interest in how tech can help or hurt pilgrimage: Internet services, smart tourism, digital tools for crowd management and information. Your work shows how pilgrims at Vaishno Devi use and respond to RFID tracking, RFID-cards, an AI chatbot ("Shakti"), real-time monitoring how these tools can ease outer discomfort but also provoke questions of spiritual ambiance, sacred space and authenticity. It sits well beside studies of smart tourism and spiritual destinations globally.

4. By combining qualitative depth with quantitative scope, the study expands methodological possibilities: not just “how satisfied are you?” but “What surprised you? What will you carry forward?” This kind of self-reflection adds texture, and gives voice to pilgrims in a way that helps scholars, managers, and policymakers better understand what spiritual fulfillment truly means.
5. Finally, the study offers a template for balancing modern visitor needs with preserving what many pilgrims say really matters: sacredness, inner quiet, connection with something larger than themselves. That tension between efficiency and essence is present globally. What your study shows is that it doesn't have to go one way or the other; it's possible (though delicate) to honour both.

### 5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study offers significant theoretical contributions to the interdisciplinary domains of spiritual tourism, pilgrimage studies, and consumer experience management. By employing narrative inquiry and reflective feedback to explore pilgrim experiences at the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, the research enriches existing models of religious consumption and spiritual meaning-making by centering lived, subjective interpretations over purely ritualistic or economic metrics.

Firstly, the findings challenge linear models of pilgrimage that treat the journey solely as a physical or religious obligation. Instead, they support a transformational perspective, aligning with Turner's (1973) theory of communities and liminality, where the pilgrimage becomes a space for profound personal change, identity negotiation, and emotional rebirth. Pilgrims' narratives confirmed that their experience transcended spatial movement it was a sacred performance of inner transformation, validating pilgrimage as a complex psychosocial event.

Secondly, the study advances experiential theory within tourism literature by treating the pilgrimage as an immersive spiritual consumption experience. While traditional consumer behavior frameworks emphasize satisfaction, this research integrates the emotive, reflective, and symbolic dimensions of travel particularly spiritual self-actualization and divine intimacy. This strengthens the conceptual positioning of spiritual tourism within experiential marketing and transformational service research (TSR) paradigms.

Moreover, the gendered dimensions uncovered where women associated the shrine with empowerment and emotional resilience invite further application of feminist spiritual theory, offering new directions for understanding gendered religious agency in sacred spaces. The emotional narratives of hardship, healing, and spiritual empowerment among female respondents contribute to emerging conversations on embodied spirituality.

Finally, the study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of narrative inquiry and reflective feedback as robust tools in uncovering complex inner phenomena in spiritual contexts. This strengthens the case for integrating qualitative phenomenology into religious tourism research, moving beyond statistical generalizations to richly interpretive, meaning-oriented inquiry.

In essence, this research not only deepens academic understanding of spiritual tourism dynamics at Mata Vaishno Devi but also pushes for a more humanistic, participatory, and transformative framework in pilgrimage studies, paving the way for spiritually grounded theories of travel, devotion, and self-discovery.

### 5.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for religious tourism managers, spiritual wellness planners, and pilgrimage site administrators, particularly the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB). These implications can guide more meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable pilgrimage experiences.

1. **Enhancing Spiritual Ambiance and Reflective Spaces**  
The study underscores the centrality of emotional and spiritual fulfillment for pilgrims. To nurture this, shrine administrators should prioritize maintaining the sanctity and tranquility of the environment. Creating dedicated reflective zones quiet areas designed for meditation, contemplation, or journaling can significantly deepen pilgrims' spiritual engagement. Such spaces allow visitors to pause amidst their journey, fostering greater meaning-making and personal transformation.
2. **Gender-Sensitive Support Services**  
Recognizing gender-specific differences in pilgrimage experiences is critical. Female pilgrims, who often seek emotional processing and wellness support, would benefit from tailored services such as counselling booths, wellness centers, and private quiet spaces. In contrast, male pilgrims may prefer more structured devotional programs or guided spiritual practices. Customizing support in this way ensures that all pilgrims' diverse needs are acknowledged and met, enhancing their overall satisfaction and spiritual growth.
3. **Balancing Modern Infrastructure with Authenticity**  
The coexistence of spiritual depth and modern amenities presents a challenge in maintaining authenticity. While infrastructure improvements like helicopter services, electronic darshan queues, and VIP access enhance convenience, they must be carefully managed to avoid commercializing the sacred atmosphere or creating social inequalities. Authorities should adopt a balanced approach that respects traditional pilgrimage values while integrating modern comforts, ensuring equitable spiritual access for all pilgrims.
4. **Experience Design through Visitor Segmentation**

The rich qualitative insights highlight varied pilgrimage experiences across different age groups and spiritual preferences. Shrine management can leverage this data to design segmented pilgrimage packages, tailor communication strategies (e.g., mobile apps, podcasts), and curate spiritual content that resonates with diverse visitor profiles. Such personalized experiences can improve engagement and satisfaction, making the pilgrimage more meaningful for each individual.

#### 5. Institutionalizing Narrative-Based Feedback Mechanisms

Moving beyond conventional satisfaction surveys, the study advocates for narrative-based feedback systems to capture the depth of pilgrim experiences. Implementing tools such as pilgrim diaries, voice-recorded testimonials, and digital storytelling platforms can provide continuous, nuanced insights into pilgrims' expectations, emotional journeys, and spiritual transformations. This feedback can inform ongoing improvements and foster a pilgrim-centric approach to shrine management.

### 5.4 Societal Implications

Walking toward Mata Vaishno Devi, pilgrims often carry more than just bags they carry hopes, worries, and aching limbs. For many, the journey is a profound act of faith and devotion, a testament to their resilience and commitment. The proposed ropeway project, aiming to reduce the arduous 13-kilometer trek to just six minutes, offers a promise of comfort and dignity, especially for the elderly and differently-abled pilgrims.

However, this advancement brings forth concerns about the potential erosion of the sacredness and communal essence of the pilgrimage. Local communities, integral to the pilgrimage's fabric, face uncertainty. Service providers, including pony wallahs, palanquin bearers, and shopkeepers, fear that the ropeway might bypass traditional routes, jeopardizing their livelihoods. Protests have erupted in Katra, with over 60,000 families expressing their apprehensions about the project's impact on their economic stability and cultural heritage.

While modernization aims to enhance accessibility, it also introduces challenges. Recent incidents, such as landslides and overcrowding, have underscored the need for safety measures, highlighting the delicate balance between development and preservation.

In essence, the pilgrimage to Mata Vaishno Devi embodies a confluence of faith, community, and tradition. As infrastructural changes unfold, it's imperative to ensure that the soul of the pilgrimage—the shared experiences, the communal bonds, and the reverence for the sacred—remains intact. Engaging with local communities, understanding their concerns, and fostering inclusive development will be crucial in preserving the sanctity and essence of this revered journey.

### 5.5 Conclusion

This study examined the spiritual and experiential dimensions of pilgrimage to the Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, one of India's most revered religious destinations. Drawing from 800 participant narratives using narrative inquiry and reflective feedback, the research reveals that the pilgrimage serves not merely as a ritual obligation but as a transformative spiritual journey. Pilgrims reported experiencing divine connection, emotional healing, and renewed faith. These experiences were shaped by a variety of factors including gender, age, belief systems, and the physical rigor of the journey itself.

Modern facilities and logistical conveniences such as RFID tracking and helicopter access have enhanced the physical journey, yet they pose both opportunities and challenges for preserving the shrine's spiritual authenticity. Despite infrastructural advancements, pilgrims' spiritual quests remain central, reaffirming the sacred function of the pilgrimage. Importantly, the study expands the academic understanding of spiritual tourism by employing qualitative methods that prioritize the inner voice of the pilgrim.

Through its methodological approach and empirical findings, this research contributes to the emerging discourse on religious experience in contemporary India, offering fresh perspectives on how sacred journeys are negotiated, internalized, and remembered. It also provides actionable insights for religious tourism stakeholders to reframe service offerings with a pilgrim-centric, spiritually-sensitive lens.

### 5.6 Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research can adopt a longitudinal design to track spiritual and emotional changes in pilgrims before, during, and after their journey to Mata Vaishno Devi, thereby offering a deeper understanding of long-term spiritual transformation. Comparative studies across other major pilgrimage sites such as Amarnath, Tirupati, and Sabarimala may further reveal both common patterns and shrine-specific experiential narratives. As virtual darshan and digital rituals gain prominence, it is also important to examine how such technologies affect spiritual connection whether they enhance access or dilute the experiential depth of physical pilgrimage. Furthermore, expanding the scope to include non-Hindu or international visitors could uncover interfaith dynamics and culturally diverse interpretations of sacred travel. Psychological and physiological effects of pilgrimage, when studied using validated mindfulness or resilience scales and biometric tools, may also contribute to a more holistic view of religious tourism. Finally, involving local community members such as service providers, volunteers, and guides in research can yield critical

insights into the social sustainability of pilgrimage ecosystems and help create more inclusive and responsive pilgrimage management strategies.

### Statements and Declarations

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