

Changing Facets of Pilgrimage Through Contemporary Tourism: Continuity & Transformations (With Special Reference to Madhya Pradesh, India)

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DOI: [https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2026.v21.i01.S.I\(1\).pp648-659](https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2026.v21.i01.S.I(1).pp648-659)

KEYWORDS

Pilgrimage, Religious tourism, Commodification, Pilgrim-tourist continuum, Sustainability, Madhya Pradesh, Cultural Heritage.

Received on: 22-02-2026

Accepted on: 06-03-2026

Published on: 16-03-2026

ABSTRACT

Bharat that is India, is a nation of diverse diasporas, having varied cultures, religions, ethnicities and languages & dialect. Some of its various States are better known for their religious and pilgrimage importance – like Gaya, Jagannath Puri, Tirupati Balaji, Kedamath, Kashi Vishwanath, Mahakaal, Omkareshwar to name a few.

From the time unknown among human societies, pilgrimage/ religious tourism has been the oldest form of group mobility, and in present day is gaining popularity in generating new avenues in employment opportunities, binding people towards national integration and building up foreign exchange earnings, but simultaneously burdening the nature as well.

The aim of the present study is to highlight the role of such tourism having immense tourist potentials and rich culture heritage towards sustainable growth and developing economies.

The study relies on the qualitative primary and secondary data gathered through open ended discussions and group talks during the visit to various pilgrimages & cultural heritage sites. The study shows that these pilgrimages, Pan India contribute to the bridging of social and economic sustainability gaps of the various states. These pilgrimages indeed strengthen the bonds of building collaborative processes to open up and better managing and architecting sustainable oriented policies in favour of local people and the nation as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Pilgrimage has historically been central to Bhartiya social and cultural life, representing oldest and most enduring forms of human mobility, linking sacred geography with faith, ritual, and community. In India, pilgrimage is deeply embedded within the cultural fabric, marked by journeys to sacred rivers, temples, monasteries, and shrines across the subcontinent, as it hosts numerous religious traditions, each with canonical pilgrimage geographies: from the Char Dham and the twelve Jyotirlingas of Shaivism, to Buddhist circuits, Sufi dargahs, and Sikh gurdwaras. Pilgrimage is movement to a sacred place for religious purposes, has been a defining element of Indian civilization, binding communities across regions through shared sacred journeys. The concept of tirtha-yatra, or travel to sacred fords and sites, is described in ancient Hindu texts and continues to structure the religious life of millions. Similarly, Buddhist pilgrims seek the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, while Sufi devotees visit shrines like Ajmer Sharif, and Sikhs revere circuits leading to the Golden Temple at Amritsar and Takhts across India. These journeys transcend geography to weave a spiritual map of India.

In recent decades, however, pilgrimage has been recontextualized within a wider framework of tourism. State governments, recognizing the immense footfall and economic potential of religious travel, have invested in redeveloping temple complexes, improving infrastructure, and branding religious circuits for both pilgrims and casual tourists, heritage enthusiasts, and leisure travellers. Digital technology has further blurred the line between pilgrim and tourist: online darshan bookings, livestreamed rituals,

and mobile apps now mediate sacred experiences. Simultaneously, tourism (understood as travel for leisure, culture or experience) has expanded massively. The intersection of the two produces hybrid practices and economies: many travellers visit sacred sites both as devotees and as cultural tourists.

Scholars have long debated whether pilgrimage is being replaced or absorbed by tourism. A widely used framing is the pilgrim-tourist continuum which posits a gradient from strictly religious pilgrimage to secular heritage tourism, with many intermediate spiritual tourists. This continuum helps explain hybrid motivations and behaviours at sacred sites (e.g., devotional rituals alongside photography, retail and sightseeing). International scholarship documents shift toward postmodern pilgrimage forms (search for authenticity, spiritual consumption) while noting substantial continuities (ritual calendars, sacred topography, mythic memory).

Recent official tourism statistics and market studies indicate religious tourism constitutes a very large share of domestic travel in India – numbering in the hundreds of millions of visits annually and contributing sizeable economic receipts. This scale suggests that pilgrimage and religious tourism are major factors in national mobility and economic policy.

The state of Madhya Pradesh exemplifies this shift, often called the “Heart of India,” it holds two Jyotirlingas—Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain and Omkareshwar on the Narmada River—along with Amarkantak, the source of the Narmada, and Maihar Devi, a major Shaktipeeth. Traditionally, these sites attracted pilgrims seeking ritual purity, healing, and divine blessings. Today, however, they also attract tourists interested in heritage, culture, and spectacle. The redevelopment of Ujjain’s Mahakal Lok Corridor, inaugurated

in 2022, demonstrates the scale of contemporary transformations: once a crowded temple precinct, the site has been reshaped into a wide promenade lined with sculptures, fountains, and lighting installations designed for both pilgrims and visitors. These trends highlight MP as an important contemporary laboratory for studying pilgrimage-tourism transformations.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In recent decades, the growth of mass tourism has blurred distinctions between pilgrimage and leisure travel. Pilgrimage is increasingly managed as a form of religious tourism. This paper investigates the changing facets of pilgrimage through the lens of continuity and transformation and contemporary tourism in India, focusing on Madhya Pradesh—a state that has emerged as a major hub of religious tourism due to targeted government investments. It examines how traditional rituals endure even as tourism infrastructure reshapes experiences of sacred space. The study thus provides a comprehensive understanding of how religious journeys are being redefined in the twenty-first century.

The study asks two main questions:

1. How has pilgrimage changed under the influence of contemporary tourism?
2. What pattern of continuities and transformations are evident in Madhya Pradesh as a case study?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, religious tourism has evolved into one of the largest sectors of contemporary travel. Scholars such as Olsen and Timothy (2006) argue that sacred mobility increasingly intersects with modern infrastructure, commodification, and governance, transforming the management and experience of pilgrimage sites like Mecca, Lourdes, and Santiago de Compostela. Similarly, Eade and Sallnow (1991) conceptualize pilgrimage as a negotiated social space, where multiple meanings—spiritual, political, and economic—intersect.

Theoretical contributions by Victor and Edith Turner (1973) remain foundational, viewing pilgrimage as a liminal process fostering *communitas* and spiritual renewal. Building on this, Cohen (1992) introduced the pilgrim-tourist continuum, suggesting that motivations in sacred travel are fluid rather than binary. Collins-Kreiner (2010) expanded this model to show how contemporary pilgrims navigate both devotion and leisure, producing hybrid forms of sacred tourism. Studies on Lourdes (Nolan & Nolan, 1992), Santiago de Compostela (Badone & Roseman, 2004), and the Hajj (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990) illustrate how state regulation, technology, and mass mobility reshape ritual practice while maintaining symbolic continuity.

In India, academic attention has grown around the socio-economic and spatial transformation of pilgrimage landscapes. Singh (2006) examined the cultural geography of Hindu pilgrimage circuits, while Shinde (2015, 2018) explored how state policies and infrastructure influence sacred centres such as Shirdi and Pandharpur. Rinschede (1992) and Nolan (1995) highlighted India's vast domestic pilgrim flows and their role in regional economies. More recent work by Raj and Morpeth (2007) and Joshi (2018) analyzed pilgrimage as a form of heritage and spiritual tourism, emphasizing the interplay of tradition and modernization.

Despite these contributions, research on Madhya Pradesh's sacred geography remains limited compared to studies on Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, or Tirupati, although the state hosts significant sites such as Mahakaleshwar, Omkareshwar, Mamlleshwar, Amarkantak, Maihar Devi, and Khajrana Ganesh. Projects like Mahakal Lok (Economic Times, 2023; Times of India, 2024) illustrate the merging of heritage redevelopment, digital promotion, and pilgrimage tourism. However, systematic studies on how infrastructural expansion coexists with ritual continuity and

cultural resilience in these Madhya Pradesh shrines remain scarce — marking a clear gap for contemporary research.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-method approach combining secondary data with primary visit observations. Secondary sources include government reports (India Tourism Statistics, Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board annual data), academic literature, and news coverage. Primary data has been derived from a ten-day visit to Madhya Pradesh, during which sites as mentioned above were visited and participant observations were done. The visit involved:

- **Observational analysis:** Recording rituals such as darshan queues, parikrama paths, river bathing, and festival preparations.
- **Visual documentation:** Capturing images of temple precincts, corridors, and facilities, including comparisons of older and redeveloped spaces.
- **Informal interviews:** Conversations with pilgrims, local priests, shopkeepers, and tourism officials to understand lived experiences.
- **Participation:** Joining rituals such as evening aarti at Ujjain and parikrama at Omkareshwar to experience the embodied aspects of pilgrimage.

This triangulation of sources allowed for a nuanced understanding of both ritual continuity and structural transformation. The inclusion of field notes enriches the analysis by grounding it in lived realities rather than abstract theorization.

ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATIONS

- **Continuities in Pilgrimage**

Table 1: Domestic Religious Tourism - India and Madhya Pradesh (2015-2023)

Year	India: Religious Tourism (millions)*	Religious Visits (millions)**	Madhya Pradesh: Religious Visits (millions)**
2015	850		60
2016	920		70
2017	970		85
2018	1050		90
2019	1100		100
2020	450		40
2021	700		65
2022	950		95
2023	1200		140

Sources: * Ministry of Tourism, India Tourism Statistics 2023. ** Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board, cited in Economic Times (2023) and Times of India (2024).

□ Despite the rapid expansion of tourism infrastructure, many core elements of pilgrimage in India, and particularly in Madhya Pradesh, remain intact. The persistence of these continuities underscores the resilience of sacred traditions, even in the face of commercialization and modernization.

□ First, ritual practices such as darshan (viewing of the deity) and parikrama (circumambulation of sacred shrines or rivers) continue to dominate the pilgrim's itinerary. In Ujjain, queues for Mahakaleshwar darshan still wind through the temple precinct, with devotees chanting hymns and offering bilva (wood apple) leaves. At Omkareshwar, pilgrims walk the island's parikrama path, tracing the form of the sacred syllable "Om," an ancient practice unchanged by the arrival of modern tourist facilities. Similarly, Amarkantak retains its centrality as the origin of the Narmada River, where pilgrims perform ritual bathing,

reflecting continuity with practices recorded in early Sanskrit texts.

□ Second, festivals maintain their traditional rhythm and scale. The Simhastha Kumbh Mela in Ujjain, held every twelve years, remains a defining event of ritual congregation, where millions gather for collective bathing and spiritual merit. Similarly, Navratri at Maihar Devi continues to attract massive numbers of devotees, who climb the hill or use the ropeway to seek the goddess's blessings. Although infrastructure has been added, the festival's devotional intensity remains unchanged.

□ Third, sacred geographies retain their symbolic importance. Pilgrims still associate the Narmada with purification and healing, the Jyotirlingas with Shiva's cosmic presence, and Devi shrines with protective motherly power. These associations provide continuity in meaning, ensuring that even new forms of access and commercialization do not diminish the underlying spiritual rationale for pilgrimage.

□ Finally, the role of oral traditions and local priestly authority remains significant. Despite digital apps and official tourism boards, pilgrims often still rely on local guides, temple priests, and oral narratives to understand the spiritual value of their journey. The coexistence of these elements highlights the durability of sacred tradition.

• **Transformations under Contemporary Tourism**

Table 2: Continuity vs Transformation Framework

Dimension	Continuity	Transformation
Ritual Practice	Darshan, Parikrama, Bathing	VIP darshan, Online booking, Paid puja
Sacred Geography	Jyotirlingas, Narmada, Devi temples	Redeveloped corridors, Branding as "circuits"
Mobility	Seasonal yatras, on foot journeys	Expressways, airports, ropeways
Economy	Local priest services, charity	Hotels, tour packages, commercial souvenir shops
Mediation	Oral traditions, local guides	Digital platforms, live-streamed rituals

• Sources: Collins-Kreiner (2010); Shinde (2012); MP Tourism reports (2023).

□ Alongside these continuities, pilgrimage in India and Madhya Pradesh has been dramatically reshaped by tourism-driven transformations. These changes are most visible in infrastructure, commodification, and technological mediation.

□ One of the most striking transformations is infrastructural redevelopment. The Mahakal Lok Corridor in Ujjain exemplifies this trend. Opened in 2022, it transformed the congested surroundings of Mahakaleshwar temple into a wide pedestrian promenade adorned with 108 sculpted pillars, murals, and gardens. State-of-the-art lighting, fountains, and soundscapes have turned the space into a spectacle, appealing not only to pilgrims but also to tourists seeking heritage experiences. This redevelopment also reflects broader state efforts to rebrand Madhya Pradesh as a spiritual tourism hub.

□ At Omkareshwar, new facilities such as boat rides, improved ghats, and guided heritage trails have been introduced. While the traditional parikrama route remains central, these tourist-oriented features offer alternative modes of experiencing the sacred landscape. Amarkantak, meanwhile, has been marketed as an eco-tourism destination, with emphasis on natural beauty and environmental conservation alongside ritual worship.

□ Commodification has also reshaped the pilgrimage economy. Practices such as paid VIP darshan, special puja packages, and online bookings have created a tiered system of access to the divine. This transformation, while increasing efficiency, raises ethical concerns about inequality and authenticity. Souvenir shops, hotels, and packaged tours further commercialize the sacred, blurring the line between spiritual merit and consumerism.

□ Technological mediation adds another layer of transformation. Livestreamed aartis from Ujjain and Omkareshwar allow virtual participation, while apps enable pilgrims to pre-book rituals. For some, this enhances accessibility; for others, it diminishes the embodied nature of pilgrimage.

□ These transformations reflect a shift from pilgrimage as a purely devotional act to pilgrimage as both devotion and spectacle. They embody the pilgrim-tourist continuum, where sacred intention and leisure converge in complex ways.

CASE STUDIES FROM MADHYA PRADESH

Table 3: Case Study Highlights

Site	Continuity	Transformation	Issues/Challenges
Ujjain (Mahakaleshwar)	Jyotirlinga devotion, Simhastha	Mahakal Lok redevelopment	Over-commercialization, crowd management
Khandwa (Omkareshwar & Mamleshwar)	Narmada parikrama, Jyotirlinga worship	Boat rides, improved tourism facilities	Ecological pressure
Amarkantak	River origin worship	Eco-tourism branding	Waste management, tribal displacement
Khajuraho (Matangeswar)	Only Hindu temple of Khajuraho premises widely	Preservation and restoration by Archaeological Survey of	Negotiating the coexistence of living worship with heritage conservation

	active for Shiv Bhagwan worship.	India since 1952. Dekho Apna Desh program to promote tourism	
Orchha (Raja Ram Mandir)	Daily ceremonies modelled with royal rituals and courtly protocols.	Expanded into a regional pilgrimage center, incorporating both devotional practices and heritage tourism.	Preservation & conservation of Bundela-era murals, architecture. Regulation of mass pilgrim gatherings during festivals
Indore (Khajrana Mandir)	Community-based devotional hub	Planned expansion and ecofriendly initiative.	Crowd management .
Datia (Pitambara Devi Shakti Peeth)	Vibrant living centre of devotion, spirituality, and cultural tradition.	Centre of religious learning and community service along with tantric legacy.	Crowd management
(Maihar Devi)	Navratri rituals	Ropeway, festival economy	Congestion, local vendor displacement

Sources: Ministry of Tourism (2023); Madhya Pradesh Tourism (2023); Times of India (2024)

Mahakaleshwar Temple, Ujjain

The Mahakaleshwar Temple in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva and a vital centre of Shaiva faith. Situated on the banks of the Shipra River, it has been revered since ancient times as the cosmic abode of Mahakaal – the Lord of Time and Death. The temple finds mention in early Puranic and classical Sanskrit texts, affirming its uninterrupted sacred presence from the early historic period to the present.

Mahakaal’s uniqueness lies in its self-manifested (Swayambhu) lingam, believed to draw divine energy directly from within the earth, unlike other Jyotirlingas installed ritually. The daily Bhasma Aarti, where sacred ash from a cremation is offered to the deity at dawn, symbolizes the cycle of creation and dissolution – a ritual continuity maintained for centuries.

Over time, the temple has undergone multiple reconstructions—from its medieval stone structure to Maratha-era restorations and modern expansions under state patronage—reflecting cultural adaptation without loss of sanctity. Today, Mahakaal stands as a dynamic blend of ancient spirituality, regional artistry, and evolving ritual practice, embodying the continuity and transformation of India’s Shaiva tradition in living form.

Historically, pilgrims navigated narrow lanes, temple courtyards, and crowded ghats. The inauguration of Mahakal Lok Corridor, however, has redefined the pilgrim experience. Wide pathways, aesthetic sculptures depicting Shiva’s legends, and modern illumination have transformed the temple precinct into a curated heritage space. During my 2023 visit, I observed how pilgrims were simultaneously enchanted by the grandeur and critical of commercialization, particularly the rise of VIP queues. The site now embodies both ritual continuity and tourism spectacle.

Omkareshwar and Mamleshwar

The twin temples of Omkareshwar and Mamleshwar, situated on opposite banks of the Narmada River in Khandwa district, Madhya Pradesh, together form one of the twelve Jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva. The island of Mandhata (Omkareshwar), shaped like the sacred syllable ‘Om’, gives the shrine its distinctive spiritual identity. Since ancient times, this geography has been revered as a natural symbol of divine resonance and cosmic harmony.

The uniqueness of the site lies in its dual sanctity – Omkareshwar representing the manifested cosmic energy, and Mamleshwar embodying the eternal spiritual essence. Devotees visit both shrines to complete their pilgrimage, symbolizing the union of physical and metaphysical worship.

Throughout history, Omkareshwar has remained a centre of Shaiva devotion and Advaita philosophy, with links to Adi Shankaracharya, who is believed to have meditated here. Despite centuries of change, temple rituals such as daily aarti, Narmada parikrama, and annual festivals continue to preserve its cultural continuity. Modern restorations, improved accessibility, and organized pilgrimage facilities have transformed the temple complex, yet its ancient sanctity and ritual rhythm endure, making Omkareshwar-

Mamleshwar a timeless embodiment of India’s living spiritual heritage. However, the availability of boat rides, guided tours, and improved infrastructure demonstrates how tourism reshapes accessibility. My visit revealed how local boatmen have become key mediators, offering both transport and storytelling services. The blending of ritual movement and leisure tourism is especially visible here.

Matangeshwar Temple, Khajuraho

The Matangeshwar Temple at Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, occupies a distinctive position among the celebrated Chandela monuments. Constructed around the early 11th century, it is the only temple in the Khajuraho complex that has remained in continuous ritual use since its foundation. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, the temple enshrines a massive 2.5mt. long lingam & 1.1mts. in diameter, set on a high base, continues to be the focal point of daily worship. This continuity distinguishes Matangeshwar from the other Khajuraho temples, which are now preserved as archaeological monuments under state protection. The uniqueness of this lingam is that it grows every year by an inch in bidirectional expansion . The temple’s significance is more devotional & historical than sculptural spectacle.

Architecturally, the temple represents the Nagara style typical of central India but is comparatively austere. It lacks the elaborate erotic and mythological carvings that adorn Khajuraho’s more famous shrines, suggesting that it functioned primarily as a sacred

rather than ornamental site. The temple's ritual economy has long been centered on major Shaiva festivals, particularly Maha Shivaratri, which continues to draw large congregations of devotees who perform elaborate rites of bathing, anointing, and offering.

The principal challenge today lies in negotiating the coexistence of living worship with heritage conservation. Unlike other monuments in the Khajuraho group, the Matangeshwar Temple is simultaneously a protected heritage site and a vibrant religious center. Its enduring vitality underscores the cultural continuity of Shaiva devotion across nearly a millennium.

Raja Ram Mandir, Orchha

The Raja Ram Mandir of Orchha, Madhya Pradesh, constitutes a unique case of sacral kingship with distinctive fusion of kingship and divinity within the North Indian religious landscape. Established in the late sixteenth century under Queen Ganesh Kunwari, the temple emerged when an idol of Ram, brought from Ayodhya, became immovable within the queen's palace. This episode transformed the royal residence into a sanctified space and inaugurated the tradition of worshipping Ram not only as a deity but also as the sovereign ruler of Orchha. The temple's ritual economy reflects this dual status, with daily ceremonies modelled with royal rituals and courtly protocols, where police guards salute Raja Ram.

Only temple in India, where Ram is ritually treated like a monarch: the shrine receives formal honours (a kind of guard/honour tradition), and offerings are presented as royal repast rather than simple prasada. The daily routine and festivals emphasise Rama's status as "Raja."

The temple is actively visited year-round; daily aartis and special events (Ram Navami, Ram Vivah, Kartik and other festivals) draw large crowds. On ordinary days expect several thousand visitors in peak seasons; on festival days the numbers rise dramatically.

Over subsequent centuries, the temple underwent significant transformations. It expanded into a regional pilgrimage center, incorporating both devotional practices and heritage tourism. Contemporary challenges include preservation of Bundela-era murals, conservation of fragile palace architecture, and the regulation of mass pilgrim gatherings during festivals such as Ram Navami. These issues highlight the tensions between living ritual practice and heritage management. Balancing religious fervor with heritage conservation is an ongoing concern.

Yet, despite such pressures, the temple continues to embody cultural continuity. Daily rituals follow age-old traditions where Lord Ram is revered both as God and monarch. Songs, processions, and community participation ensure that Raja Ram's legacy remains alive, blending faith, oral traditions & folklore, and history in a living cultural heritage. The Raja Ram Mandir thus exemplifies the dynamic interplay of devotion, kingship, and cultural heritage in central India

Khajrana Ganesh Temple, Indore

The Khajrana Ganesh Temple stands as both a historic monument and a living centre of devotion, uniting myth, history, and everyday spirituality. It symbolizes the continuity of Indore's cultural life from the Holkar period to the present, where faith and community converge in the heart of the city.

It is one of Indore's most revered spiritual landmarks, deeply rooted in the city's cultural and historical identity. Traditionally associated with the Holkar dynasty, the temple's origins trace back to the 18th century, when, according to local accounts, a sacred idol of Lord Ganesha was discovered in a well and subsequently enshrined under the patronage of Maharani Ahilyabai Holkar. This event marked the revival and formal establishment of the temple, which soon became an enduring symbol of faith and protection for the people of Indore.

Uniqueness and Cultural Highlights

- Unlike distant pilgrimage sites, Khajrana is embedded within the urban fabric of Indore. It functions not only as a major place of worship but also as a community-based devotional hub, where locals visit daily for darshan, prayer, and to make vows. The temple's accessibility and welcoming environment make it a spiritual anchor for residents across generations.

- The temple's enduring significance is enhanced by local lore that tells of the idol being concealed during times of political unrest to safeguard it from desecration. Later, under the Holkar reign, it was re-installed and venerated publicly. This legend, coupled with the temple's royal patronage, weaves Khajrana into the broader narrative of Indore's regional and cultural heritage, reflecting both devotion and resilience.

- The temple experiences heavy footfall during festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi, as well as on Tuesdays and other auspicious days associated with Lord Ganesha. During these periods, devotees gather in large numbers, creating an atmosphere of vibrant spiritual energy. Visitors seeking a more peaceful darshan are advised to come early in the morning, when the surroundings are quieter and less crowded.

- Basic facilities for devotees are available around the temple complex, although they remain simple and functional in keeping with its traditional character. Updated information regarding temple timings, special events, and management can be found through official temple resources,

Pitambara Devi Shakti Peeth, Datia

The Pitambara Devi Shakti Peeth in Datia is not only a pilgrimage site but also a testament to India's enduring spiritual and cultural evolution. It bridges the ancient tantric legacy of Shaktism with modern patterns of devotion, maintaining a sacred rhythm that continues to inspire millions. Through its rituals, architecture, and inclusive ethos, Pitambara Peeth stands as a living expression of continuity amid change—a reminder that sacred traditions can transform yet remain timeless.

It is among the most significant Shakti Peeths of Central India. The temple is not merely a sacred structure but a vibrant living centre of devotion, spirituality, and cultural tradition. It stands as a powerful symbol of the continuity of Shakta worship and the dynamic transformation of sacred spaces through time. Oral histories and temple chronicles suggest that Datia was already a site of spiritual importance, known for older Shaiva shrines such as Vankhadeshwar Mahadev, believed to date to the epic era.

The establishment of the Peeth brought together the tantric traditions of the Mahavidyas, with Bagalamukhi as the presiding deity, and the bhakti-based devotional practices common to popular Hinduism. Over time, the temple evolved into both an ashram and a pilgrimage destination — an embodiment of ancient faith reinterpreted for the modern age.

Cultural Continuity & Transformations

Pitambara Peeth has preserved the unbroken thread of Shakta devotion across generations. Rituals performed here—such as havan, mantra japa, and specialized Bagalamukhi pujas—reflect continuity with the classical tantric system, while also adapting to contemporary religious expectations. Her yellow or 'pitambara' symbolism, associated with strength, clarity, and protection, is seen in temple décor, offerings, and ritual attire. This enduring emphasis on the protective and victorious aspect of the Goddess maintains a living continuity between ancient tantric ideals and modern devotional life.

While rooted in ancient spiritual practices, the Peeth has undergone notable transformations in response to changing social and cultural contexts:

- The Peeth evolved from a secluded ashram into a structured religious institution.

- Over decades, the temple complex expanded to accommodate growing numbers of pilgrims. The architecture combines traditional North Indian temple elements — domes,

shikharas, and mandapas – with modern amenities, creating a sacred yet accessible environment.

- Rituals once limited to initiated practitioners are now open to the broader public, marking a shift from esoteric exclusivity to inclusive devotion. Festivals such as Navratri, Basant Panchami, and Pitambara Jayanti have become large-scale events attracting devotees from across India.
- The ashram also contributes to social welfare, religious education, and cultural preservation, reflecting the transformation of the Peeth from a purely spiritual retreat into a centre of religious learning and community service.
- Despite modernization and the influx of tourism, the Peeth retains its spiritual essence, a balance between tradition and adaptation demonstrates cultural resilience – the ability of sacred institutions to evolve without losing their original sanctity.
- In contemporary times, Pitambara Peeth represents a model of “living heritage” – a sacred centre that continues to nurture faith, identity, and collective memory. It links Datia’s past with its present, symbolizing how religious institutions serve as enduring carriers of India’s cultural continuity.

Uniqueness

- Unlike most Shakti Peethas that focus on Durga or Kali, Datia’s temple is uniquely dedicated to Bagalamukhi, one of the ten Mahavidyas, revered for her power to silence negativity and bestow victory over adversity.
- The temple harmonizes tantric sadhana with popular devotional worship, making it accessible to both spiritual aspirants and everyday devotees.
- The co-presence of Vankhadeshwar Mahadev Temple within the complex reflects the ancient Shaiva-Shakta synthesis, illustrating India’s deep-rooted cultural unity of divine forms.
- The temple remains active in music, recitation, and teaching. Regular discourses, devotional singing, and community feasts reinforce its identity as both a spiritual and cultural nucleus of Datia.

Maihar Devi (Sharda Devi Temple)

The Maihar Devi Temple, dedicated to Goddess Sharda, stands atop Trikuta Hill in Satna district, Madhya Pradesh. Revered as one of

the Shakti Peethas, it is believed that the Goddess’s necklace fell here, sanctifying the site. The temple blends ancient spiritual belief with living cultural devotion, drawing thousands of devotees who climb over 1,000 steps or take the ropeway for darshan. Once defined by a strenuous climb, the pilgrimage is now accessible to a much wider demographic. While this enhances inclusivity, it also transforms the meaning of effort and sacrifice traditionally associated with the climb.

The temple’s uniqueness lies in its serene hilltop setting and its deep association with local legend. – it is said that the immortal brothers Alha and Udal were devoted worshippers of Sharda Mata. Despite modernization and ropeway facilities, the traditional rituals, daily aarti, and Navratri celebrations maintain its spiritual rhythm and cultural continuity. During my visit, the steady chants, temple bells, and the view of the town below created a profound sense of peace and divine presence, making Maihar an unforgettable spiritual experience.

Amarkantak: Source of the Sacred Narmada

Amarkantak, nestled in the Vindhya and Satpura ranges of Madhya Pradesh, is revered as the origin of the River Narmada and a confluence of spiritual and natural sanctity. Known as “Teerthraj” (the King of Pilgrimage Sites), it houses ancient temples of Narmada Devi, Shiva, and Surya. The uniqueness of Amarkantak lies in its sacred geography – a landscape where nature and divinity merge.

Over centuries, saints and pilgrims have sustained its cultural continuity through worship, meditation, and festivals. While modern infrastructure has improved accessibility, Amarkantak retains its timeless serenity, symbolizing the eternal flow of faith and purity like the Narmada herself.

Yet, the site is now marketed as a dual spiritual and ecological destination. Eco-tourism facilities, landscaped gardens, and promotional campaigns frame Amarkantak not only as a tirtha but as a natural heritage site. During my observation, I noted that younger visitors were equally drawn to the scenic forests and waterfalls, indicating a diversification of motivation beyond spiritual merit.

PHOTO GALLERY OF THE VARIOUS SITES AT MADHYA PRADESH



The Shivlingam at Matangeswar Temple, Khajuraho. (Source: <https://share.google/images/zObPHrMgwZMbD04n3>) & The Author Herself.



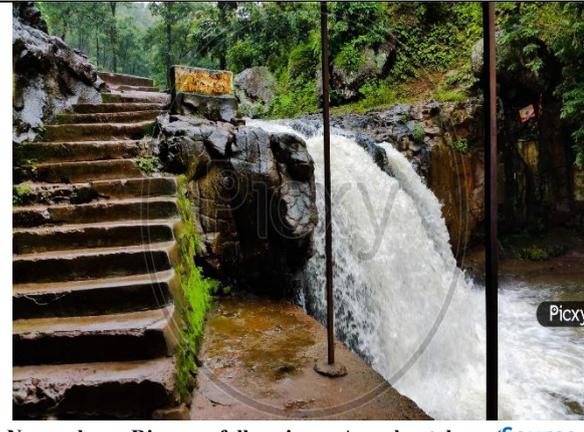
Raja Ram Mandir Orchha. (Source: <https://share.google/images/ZURkGFOXZwmtO4PsL>)



The Palatial View. Source: (<https://share.google/images/txfMTqI2OcAjpfaqc>)



Amarkantak: (Source: <https://share.google/images/6lCiiI5CqtH5WBvNP>)



Narmada River fall in Amarkantak (Source: <https://share.google/images/NLuRRvDTdaNZnoqNr>)



Mahakaal Jyotirlinga, Ujjain (Source: <https://share.google/images/hTpPemHhD0FLkkjGf>)

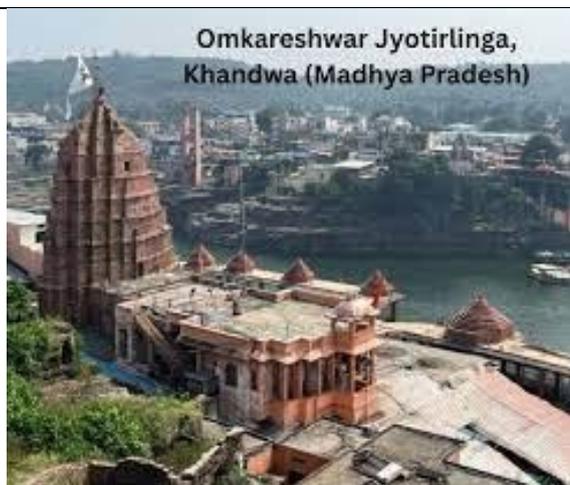




Khajrana Ganesh Temple, Indore. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Khajrana_Ganesh_Temple.jpg



Mamleshwar Temple Omkareshwar , Source: <https://share.google/images/Y0klfIozStOY8JMM>



Omkareshwar Temple & Jyotirlinga. Source: <https://share.google/images/ZFbGmCCq48BFH0mVX> & <https://share.google/images/j5vXt4t3PU7CJi84p>



Pitambara Devi (Source: <https://share.google/images/oAIWdLuGfrbtVPi9b>)



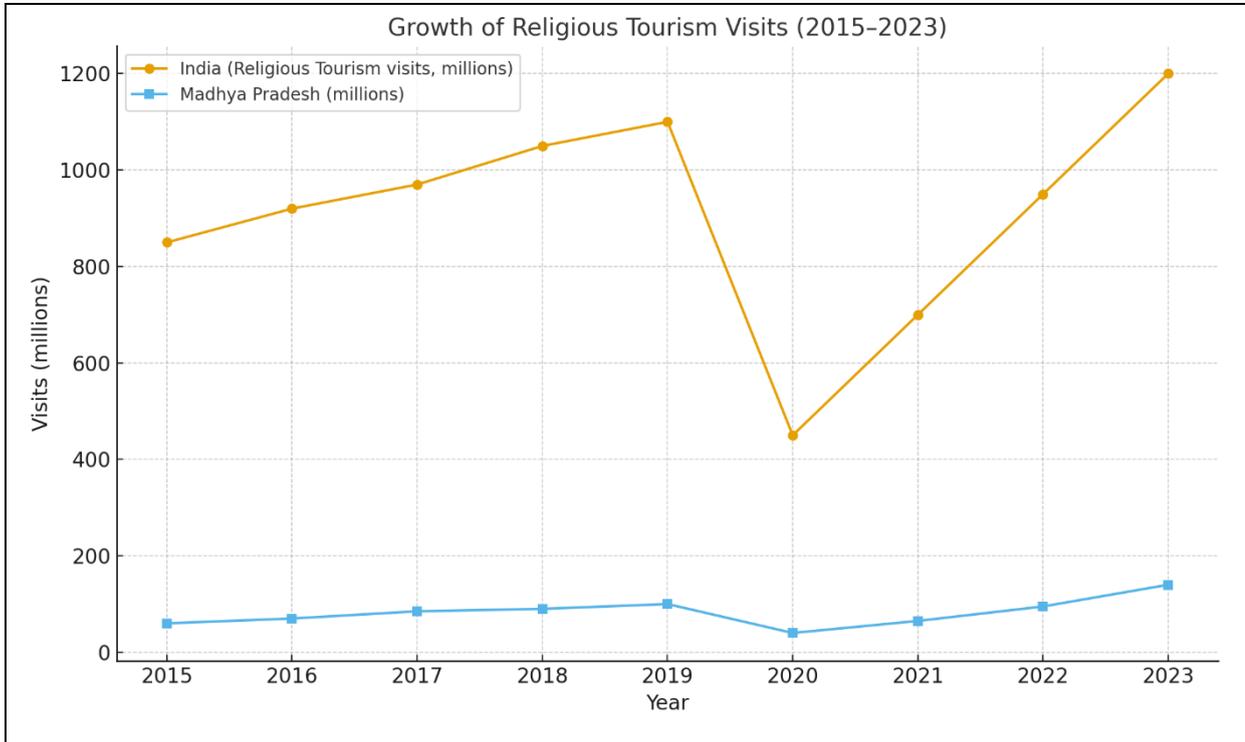
Pitambara Peeth Mandir (Source: <https://share.google/images/XIHt2hAzEAiEHC0b7>)



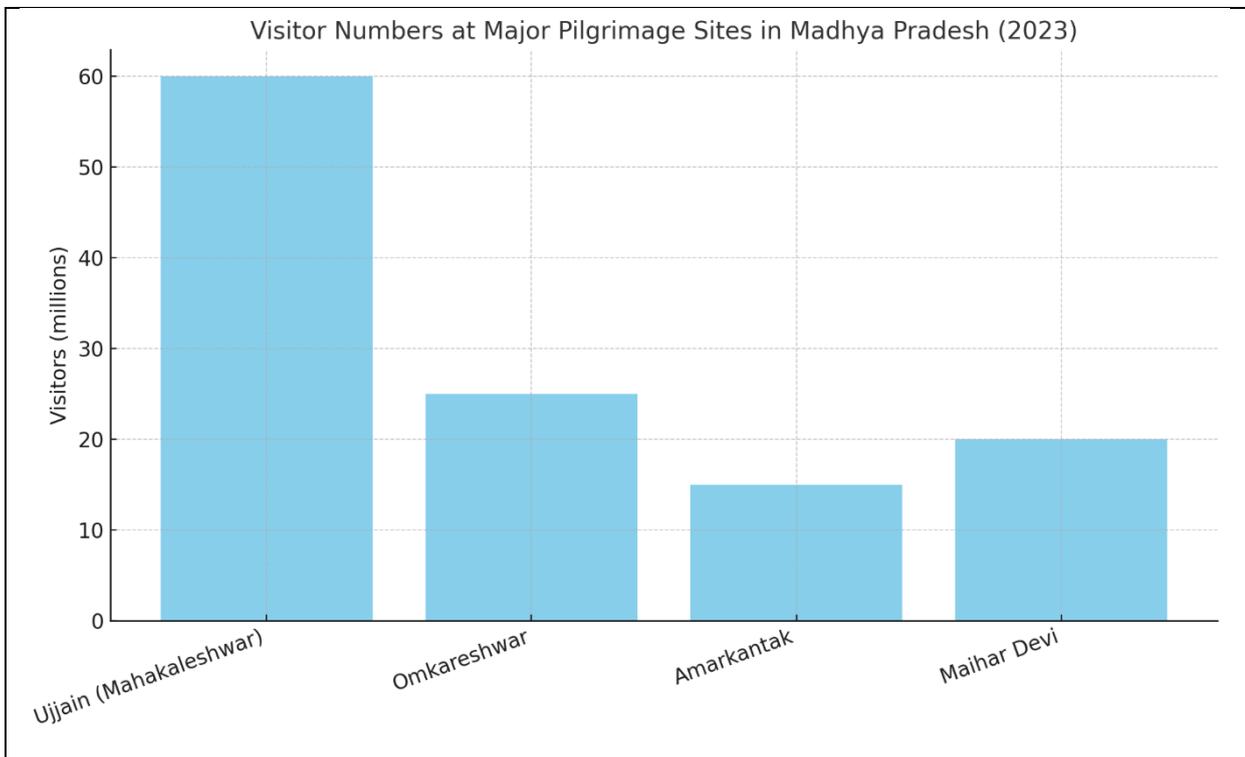
Maa Sharda, Maihar Devi Temple & Goddess. Source: <https://share.google/images/SNg4pGP1DHC6ZHnBS>



DISCUSSION



Line chart: Showing the growth of religious tourism in India & Madhya Pradesh.



Bar chart: Comparing visitor numbers at key Madhya Pradesh pilgrimage sites in 2023 (Ujjain, Omkareshwar, Amarkantak, Maihar Devi).

□ The findings of this study highlight the coexistence of ritual continuity and structural transformation in Indian pilgrimage. Madhya Pradesh's sites demonstrate that the core of pilgrimage—rituals, festivals, and sacred meanings—remains resilient. At the same time, tourism-driven interventions have fundamentally altered the spatial, economic, and experiential dimensions of pilgrimage.

□ The pilgrim-tourist continuum offers a useful framework to interpret these changes. Pilgrims increasingly adopt tourist practices such as hotel stays, sightseeing, and photography, while tourists engage in rituals like darshan or aarti. This convergence reflects the broader trend of hybrid spiritual consumption in the twenty-first century.

□ Madhya Pradesh illustrates how state-led branding of pilgrimage as tourism can simultaneously revitalize heritage and risk commodification. Projects like Mahakal Lok demonstrate the state's capacity to invest in monumental infrastructure, yet they also spark debates over authenticity. Field observations show that pilgrims themselves are divided: some welcome the convenience and aesthetics, while others lament the loss of organic spirituality.

□ Ultimately, the transformations in Madhya Pradesh are microcosms of larger national and global shifts. They illustrate how sacred geographies are not static but evolve through negotiation between devotion, commerce, and governance.

Socio-Economic Impacts

□ The transformation of pilgrimage into tourism has generated significant socio-economic impacts. On the positive side, increased footfall has stimulated the hospitality industry, with hotels, restaurants, and transportation services expanding in pilgrimage towns. Local employment opportunities have grown, especially in construction, guiding, and small-scale trade. Pilgrimage redevelopment projects, particularly Mahakal Lok, have positioned Madhya Pradesh as a major node in India's religious tourism map, contributing to state revenue.

□ However, challenges persist. Over-commercialization threatens the authenticity of sacred spaces, with critics arguing that temple complexes are becoming more like tourist parks. Local vendors often face displacement when formalized infrastructure projects favor larger contractors or branded shops. Environmental stress is another concern, particularly in Amarkantak and Omkareshwar, where waste management struggles to keep pace with visitor inflows.

□ There are also social tensions between pilgrims and tourists. Pilgrims often resent leisure-oriented visitors who treat sacred spaces casually, while tourists may feel constrained by ritual expectations. Balancing devotional sanctity with visitor diversity remains a pressing policy challenge.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has traced the changing facets of pilgrimage in India through the case of Madhya Pradesh, highlighting both continuity and transformation. Pilgrimage rituals, sacred geographies, and devotional identities remain intact, underscoring the resilience of tradition. Yet, the rise of tourism driven infrastructure, commodification, and digital mediation has significantly reshaped how pilgrims and tourists engage with sacred spaces.

Recommendations: First, sustainability must be prioritized, ensuring that ecological pressures in Amarkantak and Omkareshwar are addressed through waste management and conservation. Second, community involvement is crucial: local vendors and priests should be integrated into tourism planning to prevent displacement. Third, authenticity should be preserved by limiting excessive commercialization within temple precincts. Finally, technological mediation should complement rather than replace embodied pilgrimage experiences.

Madhya Pradesh demonstrates that pilgrimage can thrive in the twenty-first century if continuity and transformation are balanced. Its sacred landscapes are not merely relics of the past

but living traditions, dynamically reshaped by both devotion and development.

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