

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20592950

# EVENT-CENTRED RELIGIOUS TOURISM: A STUDY OF PILGRIM PERCEPTIONS, MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES, SATISFACTION, AND SPIRITUAL FULFILMENT AT MAHAKUMBH 2025

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Received: 04/04/2026

Accepted: 20/05/2026

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the diverse experiences of pilgrims at the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj, India, one of the biggest and most sacred religious events in human history that takes place once every 144 years. This study uses a structured, survey-based quantitative methodology to provide useful insights, in contrast to earlier research that mostly concentrated on smaller Kumbh events or used qualitative interviews. A multilingual questionnaire was used to collect demographic information, opinions on the infrastructure, difficulties faced, satisfaction with religious services, lodging experiences, and experiences of spiritual fulfilment from 892 respondents during the most popular bathing days. Descriptive statistics and correlation tools were used in the analysis of the data using SPSS. Major findings show that pilgrims have high levels of spiritual satisfaction, with 88% indicating a desire to return and 83% reporting spiritual uplift. But there are still issues with infrastructure, particularly regarding mobile connectivity, crowd management, and sanitation. People's satisfaction with their accommodations varied greatly; those who stayed in hotels and ashrams reported feeling more at ease than those who stayed in open spaces or government camps. Significant relationships between overall satisfaction and sanitation quality were also found in the study. These results highlight the necessity of maintaining the event's sacredness while simultaneously enhancing digital engagement and infrastructure planning. To maximise future mega-pilgrimages by integrating faith-based experiences with contemporary logistics and infrastructure, this study provides policymakers, urban planners, and tourism authorities with useful insights.*

**KEYWORDS:** India, infrastructure issues, pilgrimage satisfaction, spiritual fulfilment, religious tourism, Maha Kumbh Mela.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For millions of people around the globe, religious tourism offers a powerful avenue to seek spiritual growth, healing, community bonds, and sacred connection. This form of travel has become a major and deeply meaningful aspect of international journeys. At its core, religious tourism involves travel motivated primarily by faith, encompassing pilgrimages, attending significant religious gatherings, and visits to sacred sites. It forms a substantial segment of the worldwide travel economy.

Studies indicate that over 330 million people undertake religious tourism journeys each year (Verma & Sarangi, 2019). This vast movement significantly supports both the preservation of cultural heritage and economic growth in communities around the world. Unlike standard leisure tourism, religious travel is fundamentally rooted in personal belief, cultural identity, and long-held traditions, often involving ancient ritual practices.

Within this domain, pilgrimage tourism holds a distinct and highly respected place. Pilgrimage is defined by travel to sacred locations specifically for religious devotion or acts of penance. Crucially, these journeys transcend physical movement; they represent profound experiences of inner change, ethical reflection, and spiritual deepening. Research by Maheshwari and Singh (2009) demonstrates that the psychological and spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage often cultivate a strong sense of belonging, personal renewal, and profound fulfilment among participants.

This powerful transformative potential is key to understanding why major pilgrimage sites, such as Mecca, Lourdes, Bodh Gaya, and Varanasi, continue to draw immense numbers of visitors annually. Ultimately, it is the unique interplay of deep devotion, shared community experience, participation in meaningful rituals, and the pursuit of transcendence that sets pilgrimage tourism apart. This combination grants it a significance distinct from other forms of tourism.

Mishra (2007) says India holds a unique position in global religious tourism, due to its diverse faith traditions and historically rooted pilgrimage networks. Travelers encounter profound religious experiences across the subcontinent, from the Himalayan Char Dham circuit and the Tirupati Balaji Temple in the south, to the Buddhist heritage trails in Bihar and the Sufi shrines (dargahs) of Rajasthan. Among these, the Kumbh Mela stands unparalleled. Recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural

Heritage of Humanity, this gathering holds the distinction of being the largest religious event on earth. Occurring every 12 years and rotating between four sacred cities, Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik, it draws tens of millions of pilgrims seeking purification and spiritual liberation (moksha) through ritual bathing in holy rivers.

The recent Maha Kumbh event (2025) was the rarest of the rare. It occurred once only in the last 144 years, at Prayagraj, and is considered the most spiritually potent of these events. According to Mehta (2025), the 2025 Prayagraj Maha Kumbh event concluded with a record-breaking number of pilgrims/devotees of more than 663/ million (66 crore) over its 45-day duration. This includes not only Indian devotees but also international spiritual seekers, tourists, media, and researchers. Such immense scale inevitably raises critical questions about logistics, safety, and crucially, whether the profound spiritual aims of attendees are met amidst the chaos. Despite advances in planning and technology, persistent challenges like sanitation, crowd control, transportation bottlenecks, and misinformation remain significant hurdles for mega-events like this (Verma et al., 2021).

This research tackles a central question: How do pilgrims at the 2025 Maha Kumbh perceive their experience, and how significantly do the practical realities of infrastructure impact their spiritual satisfaction and overall sense of fulfilment? While the economic and cultural dimensions of the Kumbh are well-documented, there's a noticeable gap in rigorous empirical studies focusing directly on the pilgrim's inner journey, particularly concerning their spiritual contentment, psychological well-being, and feelings of transcendence in such a vast setting (Buzinde et al., 2014). Research suggests spiritual tourism experiences, though deeply personal, are profoundly shaped by the surrounding socio-cultural environment. Key practices at the Kumbh, such as the sacred bath (Snan), seeking blessings from saints (darshan), participating in spiritual discourses (satsangs), and witnessing the processions of ascetic orders (akharas), play vital roles in shaping pilgrims' emotional and spiritual paths (Divya & Murthy, 2020). The very atmosphere, saturated with devotional chanting and collective faith, powerfully reinforces feelings of transcendence and shared identity among participants. Studies like Sharma's (2021) on pilgrims in Prayagraj and Varanasi report significant feelings of peace, emotional fulfilment, and renewal. Yet these same pilgrims also voiced concerns about overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate communication, factors demonstrably

capable of detracting from the spiritual core of the experience. These logistical tensions become especially acute at the Kumbh Mela, where ancient notions of sacredness must interface with modern demands of urban management and safety. Understanding pilgrimage satisfaction requires a nuanced framework. It must account for religious motivations, the performance of rituals, emotional responses, perceived crowding, safety, and the lasting sense of spiritual fulfilment after the event. Verma and Sarangi (2019) proposed a valuable model mapping satisfaction across dimensions including tangible facilities, assurance of safety, responsiveness of services, and depth of spiritual connection. Their work highlighted a direct link: satisfaction experienced during one pilgrimage strongly influences decisions to return and positive recommendations to others. Ultimately, evaluating the Maha Kumbh's success extends beyond physical infrastructure. The subjective well-being of pilgrims, measurable through their reported happiness, inner peace, spiritual elevation, and overall life satisfaction is a crucial lens. Maheshwari and Singh's (2009) study of Kalpvasis (pilgrims residing for the entire month at the Ardh-Kumbh) revealed a strong link between the intensity of their religious engagement and their reported happiness. This finding resonates with Kamath et al. (2023), who identified a pilgrim's depth of faith, emotional connection to rituals, and the meaningfulness of their experiences as key drivers of loyalty to such spiritual festivals.

At its core, this research aims to explore a complex yet pivotal question, how do pilgrims at the Maha Kumbh 2025 perceive their experience, and to what extent do infrastructural realities affect their spiritual satisfaction and overall fulfilment? While many reports highlight the economic and cultural aspects of the Kumbh Mela, there exists a conspicuous lack of empirical studies delving into the subjective pilgrim experience, especially regarding spiritual contentment, psychological well-being, and emotional transcendence at such large-scale religious events (Buzinde et al., 2014).

Studies have shown that spiritual tourism experiences are deeply personal yet influenced by broader socio-cultural arrangements. For instance, the role of rituals like Snan (ritual bathing), the darshan of saints, participation in satsangs (spiritual discourses), and the visual spectacle of akharas (ascetic orders) significantly shape the emotional and spiritual trajectory of pilgrims (Divya & Murthy, 2020). The immersive environment, marked by chanting, devotion, and collective faith, reinforces pilgrims' sense of transcendence and collective

identity.

According to Sharma (2021), pilgrims visiting Prayagraj and Varanasi reported a significant sense of peace, emotional satisfaction, and rejuvenation. Yet the same study also highlighted concerns related to overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and insufficient communication mechanisms, factors that often diminish the overall spiritual experience. These logistical challenges are especially salient in an event like the Kumbh Mela, where sacredness must coexist with modern urban planning and crisis management.

A nuanced framework for understanding pilgrimage satisfaction should encompass religious motivations, ritual performance, emotional responses, perceived crowding, safety, and post-visit spiritual fulfilment. In their seminal study, Verma and Sarangi (2019) proposed a model that maps satisfaction across dimensions of tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, and spiritual connectivity. Their work emphasized that repeat pilgrimages and word-of-mouth promotion are directly linked to satisfaction levels experienced during prior visits.

Beyond tangible challenges, the subjective well-being of pilgrims, defined through metrics like happiness, peace, spiritual elevation, and life satisfaction is a key lens through which the Maha Kumbh must be evaluated. Maheshwari and Singh (2009) studied Kalpvasis, ascetic pilgrims who stay for an entire month at the ArdhKumbh and found a strong positive correlation between religiosity and happiness. These findings are echoed by Kamath et al. (2023), who identified that a pilgrim's religious faith, emotional resonance with rituals, and meaningful experiences are key determinants of their loyalty to spiritual festivals.

Moreover, Maclean (2008) noted the socio-political dynamics of the Kumbh, illustrating how power structures both religious and administrative, shape pilgrims' access to rituals, sacred spaces, and resources. For marginalized groups, the spiritual experience may be tempered by institutional gatekeeping, inequitable facilities, and spatial hierarchies. These layers of social complexity must be understood to enhance inclusivity and equitable spiritual engagement.

Thus, the significance of this study lies in filling the gap between macro-event planning and micro-level pilgrim perception. By focusing on the Maha Kumbh 2025, this research seeks to answer three critical questions: How do pilgrims evaluate their overall experience? What challenges do they encounter in navigating the sacred terrain? And most importantly, does participation in the Maha Kumbh

culminate in the spiritual satisfaction and fulfilment that they seek? This research will serve not only academic interests but also offer policy implications for urban planners, religious administrators, and tourism boards. By capturing first-hand voices of pilgrims, this study contributes to developing evidence-based frameworks for mass religious tourism management that honour both the sacredness of the event and the well-being of its participants.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly field of religious tourism, particularly within the context of Indian mega-pilgrimages like the Kumbh Mela, has seen an increasing volume of research over the last two decades. These studies have explored various dimensions of pilgrimage, including satisfaction, spiritual transformation, event management, and psycho-social outcomes.

In a foundational study, Maheshwari and Singh (2009) examined the psychological well-being of pilgrims participating in the ArdhKumbh Mela in Prayagraj, focusing on Kalpvasis, devotees who stay the full duration of the fair. Through psychometric surveys, they found a strong positive correlation between religiosity, happiness, and life satisfaction, indicating that the spiritual environment of the Kumbh Mela significantly contributes to emotional and existential well-being (Maheshwari & Singh, 2009).

Joseph et al. (2020) conducted an empirical study on pilgrim satisfaction at the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala, a mass religious gathering comparable to the Kumbh Mela. They utilized structured questionnaires and factor analysis to measure service attributes. Their findings identified cleanliness, crowd management, medical facilities, and spiritual ambiance as key contributors to overall satisfaction. This study emphasized the importance of integrating logistical efficiency with spiritual immersion to optimize pilgrim experiences (Joseph et al., 2020).

Gupta and Basak (2018) explored pilgrim satisfaction during the Ratha Yatra in Puri, Odisha. Their methodology included quantitative Likert-scale-based surveys to evaluate facilities and perceptions. While most pilgrims expressed satisfaction with spiritual aspects, there was dissatisfaction regarding transportation, accommodation, and toilet facilities. The authors highlighted a disconnect between event scale and infrastructure preparedness, an issue echoed in other mass gatherings (Gupta & Basak, 2018).

Vembu, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan (2017)

examined spiritual tourism through the lens of satisfaction, conducting surveys across major pilgrimage destinations. Their study revealed that pilgrims perceived ritualistic participation and divine proximity as paramount to their satisfaction, and that these overshadowed infrastructural flaws. This aligns with theories that intrinsic motivation and religious intent buffer pilgrims from external inconveniences (Vembu et al., 2017).

Sharma (2021) focused on pilgrimage tourism in Prayagraj and Varanasi, cities central to Hindu religious consciousness. Employing field surveys, Sharma found that despite infrastructural shortcomings, pilgrims overwhelmingly reported spiritual rejuvenation and emotional peace. However, issues such as overcrowding and water availability were cited as detractors. The research affirmed the need for synchronizing faith-based environments with modern planning (Sharma, 2021).

In another notable study, Bhandari and Mittal (2020) adopted a naturalistic qualitative approach to investigate pilgrims' experiences at a Shaktipitha site. Their interviews revealed that spatial design, sacred symbolism, and interactive rituals significantly shaped spiritual satisfaction. The authors proposed a model where ritual intensity, environment perception, and emotional involvement co-create spiritual experiences (Bhandari & Mittal, 2020).

Jyotsna and Sai (2023) extended this line of inquiry through an interactive qualitative analysis of Hindu pilgrimage destinations. Their model identified six dimensions influencing satisfaction: emotional involvement, sacred ambiance, collective identity, logistics, security, and sensory triggers (music, chants, architecture). They proposed that spiritual satisfaction is not linear but emergent from the interplay between internal and external stimuli (Jyotsna & Sai, 2023).

In their ethnographic work, Buzinde, Kalavar, and Kohli (2014) investigated emic perspectives of Kumbh Mela pilgrims. Their qualitative interviews brought forth the emotional and metaphysical language used by devotees to describe the experience. Phrases like "eternal peace," "union with the divine," and "transcendental state" surfaced frequently, suggesting that the Kumbh serves as a liminal zone between the mundane and the sacred (Buzinde et al., 2014).

Kumar and Singh (2015) looked at pilgrim expectations and satisfaction at the Naina Devi shrine in North India. Their research employed SERVQUAL models and regression analysis to assess satisfaction predictors. Their findings emphasized the gap between perceived and expected service

quality, stressing the importance of real-time feedback loops and digital integration in religious tourism planning (Kumar & Singh, 2015).

Lastly, Singh and Adityam (2024) explored the intersection of conscience, ritual, and satisfaction among Hindu pilgrims, focusing on the intangible emotional shifts experienced during pilgrimage. Their study offered a philosophical angle, situating pilgrimage as a reconstitution of the sacred self through collective immersion and narrative continuity (Singh & Adityam, 2024).

Together, these studies illustrate a multi-dimensional understanding of pilgrim experiences, emphasizing that while logistical challenges persist, the core spiritual objectives often remain fulfilled. However, they also point to an emerging awareness of the need to quantify spiritual satisfaction, create more pilgrim-centric planning models, and assess experience quality at scale.

A thorough review of the existing literature reveals that while several empirical and qualitative studies have been conducted on previous iterations of the Kumbh Mela, such as the ArdhKumbh, Nashik Kumbh, and Prayagraj Kumbh, there exists a distinct gap in scholarly attention toward the Maha Kumbh 2025, the largest and most significant spiritual gathering, occurring only once every 144 years. Unlike prior studies which often focused on smaller-scale events or relied heavily on interviews and ethnographic methods, this study is unique in its use of a structured, large-scale survey-based methodology, designed to capture statistically significant insights from a wide cross-section of pilgrims. The Maha Kumbh 2025 is a historic and once-in-a-three-generations event, drawing a significantly larger and more diverse demographic than any previous Kumbh, thereby necessitating a fresh, context-specific examination. Previous research (Shankar et al., 2023), while informative, does not reflect the logistical scale, technological interventions, demographic shifts, or post-pandemic realities of this year's event. By exclusively using surveys, this study provides quantifiable, generalizable data on pilgrims' perceptions, challenges, satisfaction, and spiritual fulfilment, filling the gap in current academic discourse. It also responds to the need for real-time, respondent-driven feedback that can be used to shape future policies for managing mega-religious events in India and globally.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based methodology to gather data

from pilgrims participating in the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. The primary objective of this methodological approach was to collect structured and statistically analysable data on pilgrims' perceptions, challenges faced, satisfaction levels, and spiritual fulfilment during the event.

Unlike previous studies that largely utilized interviews or ethnographic immersion, this study relied solely on pre-tested structured questionnaires administered physically and digitally at designated points of congregation. The source of data was the pilgrims themselves, specifically those attending the major bathing days (Shahi Snan) at the Triveni Sangam between January 14 and February 10, 2025.

#### 3.1 Sampling and Scope

The research adopted a purposive sampling technique targeting adult pilgrims (aged 18 and above) present at the event. The survey was conducted in three major sectors (Sector 4, Sector 6, and Sector 10) of the Kumbh Mela grounds, identified by the Uttar Pradesh Mela Authority as having the highest footfall. Respondents were approached between 8:00 AM and 6:00 PM on peak bathing days. A total of 892 valid responses were recorded from an initial outreach of approximately 1050 pilgrims, yielding a response rate of 85%, which is acceptable for large-scale field studies.

To ensure inclusivity, questionnaires were made available in Hindi, English, and Awadhi dialect, and were administered both via hand-held tablets using Google Forms and paper-based forms where digital access was constrained.

#### 3.2 Data Source and Collection Overview.

Component	Details
Event	Maha Kumbh Mela 2025
Location	Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India
Data Source	Primary data from pilgrims
Sampling Method	Purposive sampling
Sample Size	892 respondents
Survey Tool	Structured questionnaire (Likert scale + close-ended questions)
Languages Offered	Hindi, English
Data Collection Dates	January 14 – February 10, 2025
Survey Locations	Sector 4, Sector 6, Sector 10 (Designated high-footfall zones)
Respondent Criteria	Pilgrims aged 18+, present on bathing days, willing to respond

#### 3.3 Instrument Design

The questionnaire was developed based on previous scholarly works on religious tourism (e.g.,

Maheshwari & Singh, 2009; Joseph et al., 2020) and modified through expert consultation with faculty from tourism and sociology departments. It contained six sections:

1. Demographic Information
2. Perception of Mela Infrastructure and Facilities
3. Challenges Encountered (transport, sanitation, crowding, security)
4. Level of Satisfaction with Facilities and Religious Activities
5. Self-reported Spiritual Fulfilment
6. Accommodation

Most questions used a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), alongside a few Yes/No and ranking options.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Method

After data cleaning and validation, the dataset was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 27. The study applied Descriptive Statistical Analysis, including:

- Frequency Distribution
- Mean and Standard Deviation
- Cross-tabulation by Demographic Groups
- Correlation Analysis between satisfaction and perception variables

These analyses allowed for a clear, numerical insight into pilgrim responses, helping identify patterns, satisfaction gradients, and challenge clusters. Only statistical tools suitable for ordinal and nominal data (non-parametric tests) were used.

### 3.5 Limitations of Methodology

This methodology is limited to survey-based insights; no interviews or observational ethnography were included. Thus, while broad patterns and satisfaction levels were measured effectively, nuanced personal narratives were not captured. However, this was intentional to maintain consistency in data and ensure comparability across the entire sample. Additionally, responses might have social desirability bias, particularly in spiritual questions. Nonetheless, anonymity and confidentiality were assured during data collection to reduce this risk.

## 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings derived from the survey data collected from 892 pilgrims at Maha Kumbh 2025. The responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis through SPSS. The results are presented in tabular form, followed by a detailed interpretation of each. These insights correspond to the six major questionnaire

sections: demographics, perception of infrastructure, challenges faced, satisfaction with facilities, spiritual fulfilment & accommodation.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 892).**

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	484	54.3
	Female	392	43.9
	Other/Prefer not to say	16	1.8
Age	18-30	214	24.0
	31-50	356	39.9
	51-70	263	29.5
	Above 70	59	6.6
Education	No Formal Education	174	19.5
	Up to 10th Grade	318	35.6
	Undergraduate	261	29.3
	Postgraduate & above	139	15.6

#### Interpretation:

The demographic data highlights a well-distributed respondent base. Most participants were middle-aged (31-50), indicating a mature demographic actively participating in religious events. Women constituted nearly 44%, reflecting inclusive participation. A significant portion (35.6%) had basic education, while over 29% were graduates, contradicting earlier assumptions that only the uneducated partake in mass pilgrimages. This demographic diversity offers a robust base for analysis across experience and perception dimensions.

**Table 2: Pilgrim Perceptions of Infrastructure and Facilities (Mean Scores on 5-Point Scale).**

Facility/Service	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Cleanliness of Bathing Ghats	3.88	0.96
Drinking Water Availability	3.22	1.18
Public Toilets and Sanitation	2.91	1.27
Medical and Emergency Services	3.79	0.88
Public Transport Accessibility	3.47	1.02
Crowd Management & Security Presence	3.65	0.91
Mobile Connectivity/Network Access	3.04	1.11

#### Interpretation:

Respondents reported high satisfaction with cleanliness at ghats and medical services, with average scores close to 4. However, toilets and

sanitation received the lowest satisfaction, indicating a key area for improvement. Drinking water and mobile connectivity also received middling scores, suggesting infrastructural limitations affecting the pilgrim experience. The results reflect that while core ritual zones were well-managed, support services need targeted intervention.

**Table 3: Major Challenges Faced by Pilgrims.**

Challenge	Faced (Yes)	Not Faced (No)	Percentage Reporting Challenge (%)
Overcrowding	654	238	73.3
Long Walking Distances	587	305	65.8
Lack of Drinking Water	379	513	42.5
Inadequate Toilets	472	420	52.9
Navigation/Signage Confusion	331	561	37.1
Mobile Network Issues	398	494	44.6

**Interpretation:**

Overcrowding was the most reported issue, faced by nearly three-quarters of pilgrims. Long walking distances and inadequate toilets were also notable concerns. These reflect the strain such large gatherings place on temporary urban setups. Interestingly, despite improved digital infrastructure nationwide, mobile network issues affected nearly 45% of respondents, signalling a gap in communication accessibility during the Mela.

**Table 4: Satisfaction with Religious Activities and Ritual Arrangements.**

Activity/Ritual Zone	Mean Satisfaction (1-5)	Standard Deviation
Ritual Bathing (Snan)	4.42	0.74
Spiritual Discourses (Satsangs)	3.96	0.91
Saint-Darshan and Processions	4.07	0.81
Temple Accessibility	4.13	0.86
Religious Stalls and Literature	3.72	0.94

**Interpretation:**

Pilgrims expressed very high satisfaction with core religious rituals—especially ritual bathing and darshan of saints—indicating that spiritual aspects were well maintained despite logistical issues. The high average for temple access reflects good coordination by religious institutions. However, moderate satisfaction with spiritual discourses and literature stalls suggests scope for enhancing religious education components in future Melas.

**Table 5: Overall Spiritual Fulfilment.**

Fulfilment Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt spiritually uplifted during the Mela	392	352	89	36	23
I would return to future Kumbh Melas	434	312	80	38	28
I was able to fulfil my religious vows (mannat)	301	346	123	91	31
The spiritual environment helped me find mental peace	377	318	106	54	37

**Interpretation:**

Spiritual satisfaction was one of the strongest aspects of the pilgrimage. Over 83% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed they were spiritually uplifted. Return intent was high, validating the power of the event to inspire loyalty. While most felt they fulfilled religious vows, a smaller proportion remained neutral or disagreed, likely due to incomplete rituals or personal constraints. These responses reinforce the Maha Kumbh's role as a deep spiritual anchor for millions.

**Table 6: Correlation Between Infrastructure Perception and Overall Satisfaction.**

Variable Pair	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)
Sanitation Facilities & Overall Satisfaction	0.63
Drinking Water Availability & Satisfaction	0.49
Crowd Management & Satisfaction	0.57
Mobile Connectivity & Spiritual Fulfilment	0.18

**Interpretation:**

There was a strong positive correlation between sanitation quality and overall satisfaction ( $r = 0.63$ ), followed by crowd control effectiveness. The relatively weak correlation between mobile connectivity and spiritual fulfilment indicates that while communication access matters for convenience, it does not significantly shape spiritual outcomes. These insights validate infrastructure as a major determinant of holistic satisfaction.

**Table 7: Satisfaction Score Distribution Across Age Groups.**

Age Group	Avg. Infrastructure Score	Avg. Ritual Satisfaction	Spiritual Fulfilment Index
18-30	3.41	4.01	4.07
31-50	3.68	4.22	4.31
51-70	3.77	4.29	4.46
70+	3.59	4.11	4.18

**Interpretation:**

Older pilgrims (51-70 years) reported the highest spiritual fulfilment, possibly due to deeper religious investment or prolonged rituals like Kalpvas. Meanwhile, younger age groups showed lower infrastructure satisfaction, possibly due to higher expectations for digital or logistical facilities. These variations emphasize the importance of segment-specific planning for future religious events.

**Table 8: Information Sources About Maha Kumbh 2025.**

Source of Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Television News	238	26.7

**Table 9: Pilgrim Suggestions for Improvement (Multiple Responses Allowed).**

Suggestion	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
More Toilets and Sanitation Units	478	53.6
Better Signage and Navigation Maps	356	39.9
Improved Crowd Management on Bathing Days	412	46.2
Drinking Water Supply at Entry Points	309	34.6
Free Public Wi-Fi or Better Network Access	198	22.2
Mobile App with Live Updates & Safety Alerts	143	16.0

**Interpretation:**

Over half of the surveyed pilgrims requested improved toilet and sanitation infrastructure, reinforcing previous findings about dissatisfaction in this area. Nearly 40% recommended clearer navigation aids, highlighting confusion in locating ritual spots or facilities. Crowd management and hydration were also common concerns. A smaller but notable segment demanded digital enhancements like Wi-Fi and safety alerts, particularly younger respondents. These responses emphasize a need for balanced improvements, both physical and digital infrastructure, to serve all demographics effectively.

**Table 10: Duration of Stay and Average Spending by Pilgrims.**

Duration of Stay (in Days)	No. of Respondents	Average Spending (INR)	Total Percentage (%)
1 Day	173	790	19.4
2-3 Days	306	1,570	34.3
4-7 Days	271	2,360	30.4
More than 7 Days	142	3,430	15.9

**Interpretation:**

The majority of respondents stayed between 2-3

Social media (WhatsApp/Facebook)	191	21.4
Family/Friends Recommendations	247	27.7
Religious Organizations & Temples	106	11.9
Government Websites/Apps	51	5.7
Newspapers	59	6.6

**Interpretation:**

Family and community networks played a central role in disseminating information about the Maha Kumbh 2025, accounting for 27.7% of awareness. Television remained the dominant mass media source, while social media platforms were nearly as influential (21.4%). Interestingly, only 5.7% accessed government portals or apps, indicating the need for stronger digital outreach from official sources. The data suggests that interpersonal trust and traditional media still outweigh digital platforms in pilgrimage planning, especially in semi-urban and rural populations.

days (34.3%) and 4-7 days (30.4%), which aligns with the key ritual periods of the Kumbh. Interestingly, longer stays correlated with higher per capita spending, revealing the significant economic contribution of long-duration pilgrims. Short-duration visitors (1-day pilgrims), while large in number, had relatively minimal expenditure. These trends are vital for stakeholders including local vendors, hoteliers, and city planners to assess infrastructure scalability and resource allocation across different pilgrimage durations.

**Table 11: Accommodation Types Used and Satisfaction Levels (N = 892).**

Type of Accommodation	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Avg. Satisfaction (1-5 Scale)
Tent/Temporary Camps by Govt	271	30.4	3.88
Paid Dharmshalas/ Ashrams	212	23.8	4.01

Hotels/Guesthouses	139	15.6	4.17
Stayed with Relatives/Friends	86	9.6	3.94
Open Ground (No formal stay)	184	20.6	2.92

#### **Interpretation:**

Government-provided tent accommodations were used by the largest group, though satisfaction levels here (3.88) were slightly lower than for hotels and ashrams. Hotels and guesthouses received the highest satisfaction (4.17), though only 15.6% could afford or access them. Alarming, over 20% of pilgrims reported staying in open grounds without formal shelter, indicating a potential risk to health and safety. These findings suggest a clear demand for scalable, hygienic, and affordable accommodation solutions during future mega events, especially for vulnerable populations.

#### **4.1. Discussion**

This section discusses the key findings presented in Section 4 considering the existing literature discussed in Section 2. The aim is to interpret the statistical results, analyse the alignment or divergence from previous research, and articulate how this study contributes to addressing the literature gap, particularly with respect to Maha Kumbh 2025, a mega-event that occurs only once every 144 years.

#### **4.2. Demographic Realities and the Changing Pilgrim Profile**

The demographic profile of pilgrims at Maha Kumbh 2025 reflects a diverse, dynamic mix that aligns with previous findings on evolving pilgrimage trends. As seen in Table 1, most respondents were between the ages of 31–70, representing a mature group with strong religious inclination. This confirms earlier observations by Maheshwari and Singh (2009), who noted high levels of religious motivation and psychological well-being among middle-aged and elderly pilgrims. However, the significant participation of younger individuals (24% between ages 18–30) indicates a generational shift and evolving attitudes toward religious tourism. Moreover, a notable portion of respondents had undergraduate or postgraduate education (44.9%), contradicting the stereotype that religious pilgrimages attract predominantly uneducated masses. This mirrors findings by Jyotsna and Sai (2023), who suggested that the modern pilgrim is often educated, spiritually curious, and critically aware of the infrastructure and logistics surrounding religious events.

#### **4.3. Infrastructure Satisfaction and Persistent Gaps**

The data presented in Table 2 indicates that while core services like cleanliness at ghats (mean score: 3.88) and medical facilities (3.79) received relatively high satisfaction ratings, critical services such as public toilets (2.91), drinking water (3.22), and mobile connectivity (3.04) were rated significantly lower.

This reflects the mixed perceptions of pilgrims regarding basic amenities and highlights that infrastructure planning remains an area of partial success. These findings align with those of Gupta and Basak (2018), who reported similar dissatisfaction with sanitation and water facilities during the Ratha Yatra festival. Despite improvements in many sectors, sanitation and digital access still pose a challenge in handling mega pilgrimages, particularly when dealing with millions of attendees. This emphasizes the point made by Joseph et al. (2020), who advocated for an integrated planning approach that balances ritual aesthetics with hygiene and accessibility.

#### **4.4. Challenges of Overcrowding and Mobility**

As shown in Table 3, overcrowding was reported by 73.3% of respondents, followed closely by long walking distances (65.8%) and inadequate toilet facilities (52.9%). These findings reflect systemic logistical challenges inherent in events of this magnitude. While the literature acknowledges the transcendental nature of the Kumbh Mela (Buzinde et al., 2014), the reality of spatial constraints often overshadows the spiritual intent of pilgrims. These physical challenges were also prevalent in Sharma's (2021) study on Prayagraj and Varanasi, where accessibility and crowd pressure diluted the spiritual ambiance. Importantly, mobile network issues (reported by 44.6%) may seem secondary but can impact coordination, safety, and access to emergency services, especially in a digital-first era.

#### **4.5. Spiritual Experience as a Pillar of Fulfilment**

Table 4 and Table 5 provide robust evidence that despite infrastructural and logistical hurdles, pilgrims reported overwhelmingly high levels of satisfaction with spiritual activities. Ritual bathing scored 4.42 on average, followed by saint-darshan (4.07) and temple access (4.13). Furthermore, over 83% of respondents said they felt spiritually uplifted, and 88% expressed a willingness to return for future Kumbh Melas. These results affirm the centrality of

faith in framing the pilgrimage experience. Similar findings were noted by Vembu *et al.* (2017), who highlighted that ritual performance and divine connection often override dissatisfaction in peripheral services. This also strengthens the psychological argument presented by Bhandari and Mittal (2020), who proposed that ritual environments shape spiritual cognition and perception more than infrastructural surroundings. This insight is vital: while physical discomforts exist, the perceived religious value and emotional payoff remain extremely high.

#### **4.6. Correlation Insights: Infrastructure and Fulfilment**

Table 6 reveals strong positive correlations between sanitation and overall satisfaction ( $r = 0.63$ ), and between crowd management and satisfaction ( $r = 0.57$ ). These findings are in line with Kumar and Singh (2015), who emphasized that gaps in sanitation significantly affect the perceived quality of pilgrimage experiences. Interestingly, the correlation between mobile connectivity and spiritual fulfilment was very weak ( $r = 0.18$ ), suggesting that for most pilgrims, digital connectivity plays a minimal role in spiritual outcomes. This is particularly important in the context of modern digital governance, where emphasis is placed on mobile apps and tech-based management systems. These results suggest that while such tools are useful for operational efficiency, they do not directly influence the core spiritual outcomes sought by pilgrims.

#### **4.7. Age-Based Variations in Experience**

In Table 7, it was observed that pilgrims aged 51–70 reported the highest spiritual fulfilment (4.46), whereas younger age groups reported lower infrastructure satisfaction. This supports earlier research by Kalavar and Buzinde (2015), which found that older pilgrims demonstrate higher emotional engagement and a sense of spiritual transformation. The younger cohort's expectations may be influenced by consumer culture and exposure to more technologically advanced environments, thereby leading to relatively lower satisfaction scores for infrastructure. These insights highlight the importance of segmenting event services based on demographic profiles to tailor services that meet varying expectations.

#### **4.8. Media Reach and Informational Awareness**

Table 8 shows that most pilgrims relied on family/friend recommendations (27.7%) and television (26.7%) for information. Social media was

also a significant source (21.4%), while only 5.7% accessed official government apps. This aligns with the findings of Singh and Adityam (2024), who argued that spiritual narratives are often socially transmitted through community networks rather than institutional sources. However, the relatively low use of digital apps is noteworthy and signals a need for more effective official outreach, particularly in enhancing real-time navigation and safety measures during the event.

#### **4.9. Pilgrim Feedback: Voices for Future Policy**

Table 9 underscores the demand for improvements in sanitation (53.6%), signage (39.9%), and crowd management (46.2%). These suggestions reflect an informed and participatory mindset among pilgrims, challenging the assumption that religious participants are passive recipients. The request for Wi-Fi and app-based updates by 22.2% and 16%, respectively, shows the emergence of a hybrid pilgrim, devout but also digitally aware. This matches the growing body of literature on tech-mediated spirituality and modern pilgrimage, as discussed by Jyotsna and Sai (2023).

##### **5.9. Economic and Hospitality Considerations**

The analysis of Table 10 reveals that longer stays resulted in higher spending, averaging INR 3,430 for pilgrims who stayed more than a week. This aligns with the observations of Vembu *et al.* (2017), who discussed the economic potential of spiritual tourism. From a policy and planning perspective, encouraging longer stays through incentives (e.g., subsidized camps or rituals) could contribute significantly to the local economy.

Table 11 further reflects that while government camps housed the majority, satisfaction was highest among those staying in hotels or paid ashrams. Alarming, 20.6% of respondents stayed in open grounds without proper facilities. This demands urgent intervention to ensure safe, accessible, and dignified accommodation for all pilgrims, especially during extreme weather conditions.

This study contributes significantly to the academic discourse on religious tourism by being the first survey-based, large-scale quantitative study of Maha Kumbh 2025, a once-in-144-year event. Previous studies primarily used interviews and ethnographic methods and focused on earlier iterations like the ArdhKumbh or Sabarimala. By exclusively using structured surveys and descriptive statistical tools, this study provided a generalizable dataset that documents not just spiritual sentiment but also perceptions of infrastructure, challenges, media usage, economic impact, and suggestions for

future improvements. In doing so, this research not only fills the previously identified literature gap but also provides actionable insights for urban planners, tourism boards, policymakers, and religious organizations. The findings emphasize the need to shift from ad-hoc spiritual event management toward an inclusive, data-driven, and pilgrim-centred planning framework.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present study offers a comprehensive and timely contribution to the field of religious tourism by documenting and analysing the lived experiences of pilgrims during the Maha Kumbh 2025, an event of unmatched religious, cultural, and demographic magnitude. Conducted through a robust survey-based methodology and focused on diverse dimensions including infrastructure, challenges, satisfaction, and spiritual fulfilment, the research fills a critical void in scholarly discourse by providing empirical insights into an event that occurs only once every 144 years. In doing so, the study affirms the enduring relevance of pilgrimage in contemporary India, not just as a religious obligation but as a spiritually transformative and socially unifying experience.

One of the key implications of this research is the validation of the Maha Kumbh as a site of deep spiritual fulfilment, with an overwhelming majority of respondents reporting emotional peace, religious satisfaction, and a desire to return. These outcomes reaffirm earlier findings that spirituality often outweighs logistical hardships in shaping the overall pilgrimage experience. At the same time, the results underscore persistent infrastructural and administrative challenges, particularly in areas like sanitation, crowd control, and water access, which, if unaddressed, could dilute the quality of spiritual immersion in future events. Therefore, a dual approach is necessary, one that preserves the sacred ethos of the Mela while simultaneously investing in modern planning, resource allocation, and technology-driven solutions.

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The research also reveals the changing demographic and psychographic profile of pilgrims, with substantial participation from younger and more educated cohorts. This shift demands a more nuanced and segmented approach to event planning that caters to different age groups, expectations, and digital competencies. The data also suggest that traditional channels such as community referrals and mass media continue to dominate in awareness generation, while official digital platforms remain underutilized. Future strategies should therefore integrate both offline and online tools to enhance outreach, navigation, and safety protocols during mega pilgrimages.

From a policy perspective, the study presents actionable feedback directly from pilgrims, offering a roadmap for future improvement. Suggestions such as increasing toilets, improving signage, and offering better accommodation reveal a more informed and participatory pilgrim community. This reinforces the idea that religious tourism must now evolve into a citizen-led, data-backed governance model where pilgrim feedback becomes central to planning and implementation. Additionally, the economic findings related to duration of stay and spending behaviour suggest untapped opportunities for sustainable local economic development through extended pilgrimage offerings and integrated tourism packages.

Looking forward, this research opens several avenues for future inquiry. While the current study relied solely on survey data, future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach to integrate personal narratives, emotional dimensions, and longitudinal tracking of post-event impacts. There is also potential to explore comparative analyses across different Kumbh sites or international pilgrimages to assess commonalities and divergences in religious tourism frameworks. In sum, this study serves as both a documentation of a historic spiritual event and a springboard for future academic, administrative, and spiritual engagements with mega-pilgrimages in India and beyond.

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