



Char Dham Yatra and Pilgrimage Tourism in Uttarakhand: Emerging Opportunities, Challenges and Future Trends

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Abstract

The attendance of tourists in Uttarakhand, a state in India that is renowned for its beautiful scenery and conventional way of life, has experienced a phenomenal increase. One of the country's primary pilgrimage centres is Uttarakhand, also known as the dev Bhoomi. Each year, thousands of tourists go to the Char Dham Yatra. Indeed, a significant portion of the state's revenue comes from pilgrimage tourism. This article provides a comprehensive survey of the diverse literature on the future prospects, challenges, and trends of "Char Dham Yatra and pilgrim tourism in Uttarakhand". It concluded that the Char Dham Yatra presents both spiritual significance and physical challenges due to high altitudes, unpredictable weather, and strenuous travel conditions. Health risks and accessibility issues make the journey demanding, especially for the elderly and those with mobility concerns. However, growing interest in helicopter services offers a practical alternative, enhancing inclusivity. With recent government investments in infrastructure and connectivity, the Yatra is becoming more accessible and safer. These developments indicate a promising future for pilgrim tourism in Uttarakhand, provided efforts continue toward sustainable growth, improved facilities, and greater accessibility for all devotees.

Keyword: Char Dham Yatra, Pilgrim Tourism, Uttarakhand, Health risks, mobility concerns, Helicopter services

1. INTRODUCTION

International comprehension is fostered by pilgrimage tourism, which also stimulates cultural activities and handicrafts. The idea of cultural ecology across countries is also embodied via pilgrims. The majority of the Pilgrim is a tourist destination, and it is home to significant and critical species that illustrate the variety of life of the area [1]. Additionally, it is a repository for medicinal plants. The majority of religious and cultural practices allow for forests and other natural occurrences, which aids in resource conservation. Due to social barrier by locals, several areas of vegetable woods are still off-limits. Pilgrimage tourism has an additional positive influence or effect on any location, as these types of forests are considered sacred channels [2].

Yamunotri, Gangotri, Badrinath, and Kedarnath are the four beneficial pillars of Dev Bhoomi in Uttarakhand. Nestled in the tranquil heights of the vast Himalayas sits Char Dham. These shrines are regarded as the main focus of the Hindu faith, as it is considered that their visit may facilitate the attainment of "moksha." The foundation of Uttarakhand's revenue-generating system is the char dham [3]. The captivating natural beauty of the Alkananda River envelops the pilgrimage site. Comparably, the size of "the Mandakini river valley" and its downstream regions around the Kedarnath temple in Rudraprayag district. Surprisingly, Char Dham's annual inflow of both incoming and outgoing visitors has a positive slope throughout the course of the decade [4].

The most ancient form of tourism has been the practice of pilgrimage to the highest expanse since the beginning of time. "The Garhwal Himalaya" is famous for its extensive pilgrimage tourism, which often takes the shape of local festivals organised via official processes and visits to highland shrines. Since "pilgrimage tourism" is a crucial component of the threshold, traditional farming is one of the dangers to the lives of the local population. One of the main drivers of socioeconomic growth is the practice of pilgrimage tourism. The local population benefits from the job possibilities provided by pilgrimage tourism [5].

PILGRIMAGE TOURISM

The term "pilgrimage tourism" refers to tourism that is primarily or exclusively driven by religious reasons, attracting "believers, pilgrims, and visitors from worldwide". Tourism that involves pilgrimage is a fusion of contemporary and primordial cultures. In modern India, pilgrimage tourism has emerged as one of the most popular types of travel. The pilgrims, the pilgrimage site, and the nation all benefit from "religious tourism and pilgrimage" in a number of ways [6]. The country's economic diversification is facilitated by pilgrimage tourism, which offers significant opportunities for "revenue generation, foreign exchange earnings, and job creation". All of the major global religions have interacted with India, and because of its secular heritage, pilgrimage travel is quite common there. In addition to having an enormous variety of pilgrimage sites, India is the birthplace and home of several faiths. People go there in search of virtue. India is the location of all these significant heavenly locations, from "the Shaktipeethas, Jyotirlingas, Dhams, and Maths to the sacred sites of Buddha". Pilgrimage tourism in India is given particular attention because it

produces jobs, fosters national integration, and generates foreign exchange profits [7], [8].

CHAR DHAM IN UTTARAKHAND

Uttarakhand, popularly known "as Devbhoomi or the Land of Gods", is home to several temples and welcomes pilgrims all year round. In Uttarakhand, the Char Dham Yatra is one of the most renowned "spiritual destinations and circuits" that devotees visit. During this yatra, or pilgrimage, people go to the four holy sites—"Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath"—that are nestled high in the Himalayas. Whereas 'dham' indicates places of worship, 'char' in Hindi means four. Approximately half of the year is spent closed at the high-altitude sanctuaries [9]. They operate during the summer months, commencing in April or May, and conclude in November or October as winter strikes. The general consensus is that "the Char Dham Yatra" ought to be performed in a clockwise manner. Due to this, the pilgrimage commences in Yamunotri and proceeds to "Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath". The journey may be finished by road or by air (there are helicopter alternatives available). As part of the Do Dham Yatra, some devotees also visit the shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath [10]. The Yamunotri temple, dedicated to the goddess Yamuna, is situated near the source of the Yamuna River, India's second-holiest river after the Ganga, in the Uttarkashi district. The Uttarkashi area is also home to Gangotri, a temple dedicated to the Goddess Ganga, the most sacred of all Indian rivers. The Rudraprayag district is home to the shrine of Lord Shiva, Kedarnath. At Badrinath, where the holy Badrinath Temple is located, Lord Vishnu is adored. "The Char Dham Yatra" is both challenging and amazing, and it fulfils the soul [11].



Figure 1 Char Dham (Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Yamunotri). [12]

Challenges in Char Dham Yatra and Pilgrim Tourism

Altitude and Terrain: "The 4 temples of the Char Dham Yatra" are located at great elevations, with Kedarnath at 3,583 meters and Gangotri at 3,133 meters. Walking is tiring since there is less oxygen in the thin air. High altitude sickness symptoms that trekkers may experience include headaches, nausea, and shortness of breath. Before starting the journey, it is important to thoroughly acclimatise. There are portions of the trekking routes that are precipitous, craggy, and treacherous. With a 5-kilometer ascent, the Yamunotri course gains more than 1800 meters of height. It's a 15-kilometer climb to Kedarnath. These high Himalayan trails are guaranteed to pain muscles and bones that aren't used to them. It is essential to use sturdy hiking shoes to prevent injuries.

Weather Conditions: The weather might be unpredictable since the Char Dham Yatra usually takes place in both the "summer and monsoon seasons". Even in the finest months for hiking, unexpected "snowfall, torrential rain, thick fog, and thunderstorms" are frequent occurrences. This increases the physical difficulty and hazard of the mountainous terrain. It is recommended to have emergency supplies, rain gear, and enough warm clothes on hand.

Long Distances Between Temples: "The Char Dham circuit" itself winds across the Garhwal Himalayas for more than 1700 kilometres from Delhi. The majority of pilgrims complete the circuit by road in 12 days, travelling up to 140 km per day on average. It may be both draining and uncomfortable to spend extended periods of time in a car on twisting mountain roads. It is advised to take breaks and recuperate in between temples.

Staying Safe and Healthy: The cold and rainy weather makes health hazards including pneumonia, influenza, frostbite, and hypothermia a reality. Adequate nutrition, prescribed medication, remaining dry, and bringing a first-aid kit are indispensable. On this extremely taxing trip, trekkers should pay attention to their body's signals and avoid pushing themselves too far. The Char Dham Yatra requires interior fortitude in addition to the physical rigours, as it also includes spiritual and emotional challenges.

Future Prospects of Char Dham Yatra and Pilgrim Tourism

Helicopter facility: There are many factors that might lead to a significant surge in demand for helicopter excursions to the four sacred locations. The main advantage of buying

one of these Char Dham packs is the convenience and time savings they provide pilgrims. For those with limited mobility, traversing challenging terrain may be a physically demanding and exhausting experience. Helicopter transportation has made it possible for those with mobility impairments to take part in the pilgrimage, removing the need for them to traverse the challenging surfaces of the conventional routes.

Infrastructure Development: The Indian government has recently made large expenditures in the construction of the region's infrastructure because it understands the importance of "the Char Dham pilgrimage". In order to increase accessibility to the pilgrimage sites, this involves building better roads and enhancing connectivity. The government's goal in investing in road infrastructure is to make the holy places more accessible to a larger number of people, particularly those who may have previously found it impossible to go to these remote locations.

Environmental Considerations: As individuals become more cognisant of the necessity to safeguard the environment, the tourism industry, which encompasses helicopter services, is increasingly emphasising environmentally responsible practices. Cleaner and more ecologically friendly technologies may be used more often by "operators of Char Dham helicopter packs" to reduce their adverse impact on the environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

(SATI, 2023) [13] The purpose of this essay is to outline the patterns and influxes of pilgrims in the Uttarakhand Himalayan region. In the Uttarakhand Himalaya, pilgrimages are mostly concentrated in the highlands and valleys. The number of pilgrims entering the pilgrimage centres varies depending on whether they are travelling via a river valley or the highlands. The availability of transport and lodging infrastructure was the primary cause of the shift in pilgrimage numbers during these mountain and valley pilgrimages. In addition to causing soil degradation and obstacles, climate-induced disasters may have disastrous effects on the state of Uttarakhand. If appropriate tourist infrastructure is made available, this analysis shows "that pilgrimage tourism" has enormous potential for the Uttarakhand Himalaya's economic growth.

(Bora & Rout, 2023) [14] In every faith, pilgrimage has a holy importance. Despite the fact that pilgrimage tourism has a great deal of potential to generate income, foreign currency profits, and jobs, the tourist industry has yet to take meaningful steps to comprehend the demands and

expectations of pilgrims. This chapter conducted a comprehensive examination of the grey areas in which travellers encounter obstacles related to the built environment of sacrosanct sites. The chapter is significant in that it emphasises the specific areas that require refinement in order to facilitate the growth of religious destinations and sites. Two categories were used to classify the issues found: those that occurred at the level of destination and those that occurred on-site or on institution property. The results show that there are few interpretative and reflective methods available to meet the pilgrims' needs and demands.

(Rauthan & Pant, 2023) [15] Any holy site may have a wide range of visitors, from inquisitive tourists hoping to learn more to devoted pilgrims using their pilgrimage to satisfy their own religious goals. In India, we call such a journey a Tirth Yatra. There are many natural and cultural beauties in the Holy Mountain of Dev Bhumi Uttarakhand, often referred to as "the Land of God and Goddess". For decades, the well-known tourist destination Pauri Garhwal has served as a centre for pilgrimages and religion. Due to its many economic and social advantages, the tourism sector is strategically significant to the Indian economy. The tourism business provides a number of important economic benefits, including jobs, cash, and foreign exchange. Other industries, such as building, handicrafts, and agriculture, gain from the expansion and advancement that tourism may bring.

(Kishor & Kukreti, 2023) [16] The study should examine the issues that encompass the motivations behind rural tourism, the significant challenges that this form of tourism encounters, and the potential for development. This covers issues pertaining to its effects on sociocultural systems, the rural economy, and environmental sustainability. This study's findings, which are based on interviews, surveys, and conversations with visitors, stakeholders, and local people, suggest that rural tourism in Uttarakhand may provide significant prospects for job creation, revenue streams, and even poverty alleviation. However, it also highlights issues that need addressed for the growth of rural sustainable tourism, such as inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified labour, and environmental concerns. For Uttarakhand's policymakers and other stakeholders, the conclusions and suggestions presented here should act as a roadmap for creating long-lasting policies and initiatives that promote rural tourism and development.

(D. Joshi & Joshi, 2022) [17] In Uttarakhand, tourism is a huge sector. This industry provides the state with a

significant amount of its money. Uttarakhand sees a lot of visitors throughout the year since it has so many picturesque hill stations and pilgrimage sites. "Adventure seekers, yoga enthusiasts, pilgrims, romantic couples, families", and amusing groups of friends have all been welcomed to this state. However, there is always room for improvement in any subject. Uttarakhand tourism may be promoted in a variety of ways.

(Semwal & Upreti, 2019b) [12] So much destruction occurred that it was dubbed THE HIMALAYAN TSUNAMI. The spirit of tourists both prior to and following the accident is examined in this research. The Chardham region's tourism patterns have been studied via an examination of both domestic and international visitors. Despite being intangible beliefs, religion, faith, and customs can still be quantified by the number of individuals who visit a location within a specific time frame. This paper examines the number of tourists ingress, as well as their faith and unwavering spirit both prior to and following the disasters. Chardham is the sole destination for the study's data on tourist influx from 2008 to 2018.

(Joveriya & Mariya, 2019) [18] The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and other international organisations have highlighted the enormous development possibility for tourism, especially in relation to developing countries like India. There is a lot of room for tourism in India because of its abundant natural beauty and resources, including historical sites, archaeological remnants, beaches, mountains, and rich biodiversity. In addition to its rich cultural heritage, Uttarakhand, referred to as Devbhoomi or the "Abode of Gods," is a place of pilgrimage and temples, blessed with a healthy climate, unusual vegetation, and a wealth of flora. Additionally, the captivating scenic landscapes, stunning lakes, and mountain peaks of Uttarakhand render it a popular tourist destination both domestically and internationally. Based on secondary sources of data, the study is qualitative in character and attempts to analyse the issue as well as the state's tourist growth potential.

(Manju Devi & Dr. K. C. Purohit, 2018) [19] For numerous nations, tourism is not only significant but also essential, particularly for those with underdeveloped or developing economies. India has a lot of places where people travel on pilgrimages in order to unwind and develop ethics. The infrastructure of a tourist destination is crucial to drawing visitors. The following criteria have been considered for the evaluation of tourism-related infrastructure issues at specific tourist destinations "(Har-ki-paudi, Kankhal, Piran

Kaliyar, Shantikunj, and Mansa Devi)": road conditions, traffic control, parking spaces, power supply, drinking water and medical facilities, general safety and security, ATM/bank facilities, sewage and drainage system, garbage disposal, and cleanliness. According to the findings, there is no discernible difference in how they see infrastructure-related concerns.

(Sharma, 2018) [20] The most well-known and revered Hindu pilgrimage is the Char Dham Yatra in the state of Uttarakhand. The locations of these sacred sites are all in the most susceptible regions of the state, where forest fires, earthquakes, floods, and cloudbursts often occur. Attempts are made in this paper to evaluate the influence of natural disasters on the "Char Dham Yatra (Chhota Char Dham Yatra)". Based on the level of vulnerability, which is determined by "the climatic information from NATMO" and the incidences of natural disasters over the past twenty years, the State is divided into four zones. The vulnerability of the pilgrimage route is also evaluated by calculating the percentage of the route that passes through the various risk zones. The paper also recommends risk reduction measures to ensure that individuals of all ages can complete this sacred pilgrimage without experiencing any type of inconvenience.

(Bisht et al., 2015) [21] In addition to attempting to analyse the business aspect of religio-culture tourism to the Four-Dhams, the article aims to investigate the richness and scope of the region's cultural resources. The report begins with a thorough analysis of tourism in Four-Dham. This is followed by an examination of the commercial aspects of the livelihood that tourism provides to the local population. The people themselves are ignorant of many aspects of cultural tourism, much alone their widespread appeal. These include the month-long Holi celebration, Ramlilas, Mahabharat festivals, Lord Shiva festivals, flower festivals, Nanda Devi Rajjat, and dozens of other customs. The combination of the region's scenic attractiveness, pleasant climate, and festivals of this nature can attract a significant number of travellers to the villages, thereby providing supplementary income for the local population. In order to encourage such tourism, the report suggests data-centric research, steps to achieve the bare minimum of infrastructure, and proactive government policies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Char Dham Yatra, spanning the high altitudes of the Garhwal Himalayas, presents significant physical and environmental challenges due to thin air,

unpredictable weather, and difficult terrain. Pilgrims often face altitude sickness, fatigue from long road journeys, and health risks such as hypothermia and pneumonia, particularly during the summer and monsoon seasons. Despite these difficulties, the spiritual significance of the Char Dham circuit continues to draw a vast number of pilgrims each year. The growing demand for helicopter services highlights the need for safer and more accessible travel alternatives, especially for elderly and mobility-impaired individuals. Recognizing the cultural and religious importance of this pilgrimage, the Indian government has undertaken substantial infrastructure developments, including improved road networks and better connectivity to remote regions. These efforts are expected to ease the journey, reduce health risks, and accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims in the future. To ensure the sustainable growth of pilgrim tourism, it is crucial to continue enhancing accessibility, healthcare support, and emergency services while preserving the ecological balance of the Himalayan region. This balanced approach will not only promote inclusive participation in the Char Dham Yatra but also position Uttarakhand as a model for spiritual and sustainable tourism development.

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