

SUSTAINABLE PILGRIMAGE TOURISM: BALANCING SOCIOECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (THE CASE OF BUKHARA REGION)

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Abstract: During the evolution of people, they have been guided by beliefs. And today, this ongoing process is being called with different names in the travel world according to the purpose of the trip. However, faith-based issues are still dominant factors on any kind of religious tourism. That is, religious tourism, pilgrimage tourism, halal tourism, Muslim travel or other forms of tourism are all faith-based and have many followers, sacred and holy destinations. Therefore, some researchers started to question the religious tourism and its other forms from the context of sustainability. Sustainability should be important not only in mass tourism, but also in other special types of travel, including ever increasing religious tourism. This study explores some conceptual frameworks that supports balance among the environmental, social and economic impacts that come from pilgrims in these destinations. **Firstly**, the paper analyses the meaning and essence of pilgrimage tourism and its other shapes, positive and negative socio-economic, environmental outcomes by literature review. **Secondly**, investigates some components which are the integral part of sustainability policy. **Finally**, conceptual framework of sustainable pilgrimage tourism models is suggested in the conclusion part.

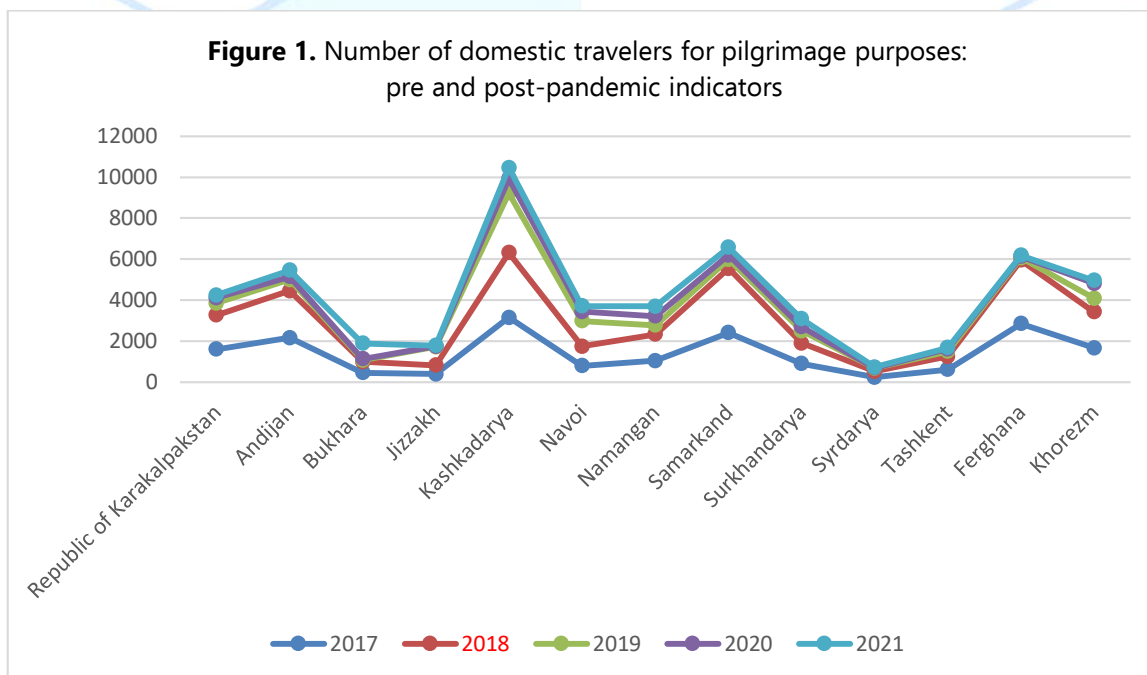
Key words: faith-based; pilgrimage tourism; religious tourism; halal tourism; sustainable tourism; impact; spiritual value

Introduction:

According to recent report of Future Market Insights, the estimated global faith-based tourism market across the globe could reach an estimated market value above 15 billion U.S. dollars with the increased annual growth rate about 10.5 percent from 2023 to 2033 and contributes about 3% or 5% of all tourism market revenue. In many countries, this sector is becoming not only economically important, but also having social significance. However, its environmental impacts are often not taken into account. In most countries, environmental negative consequences occur when the number of visitors exceeds the capacity of the destination during the religious

ceremonies, festivals or gatherings. For example, the only Muslim holiday of Ramadan itself attracts millions of inbound and outbound visitors. The Maha Kumbh Mela festival in India attracts over 120 million Hindus every 12 years, whereas the annual Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia drew around three million Muslims in 2018. These figures are alarming for host countries and call for management of tourist flows through various sustainability models.

Uzbekistan is also a country of special importance among Muslim travelers. In particular, today there are 784 Islamic shrines in Uzbekistan, 19 Christian and 8 Buddhist cultural heritage sites in the republic. The mobility of inbound travelers is also has dynamic characteristics during the pre and post-pandemic period (Figure 1).



Source: Formed by author based on data annual reports

During the pre-pandemic period, there may have been a diverse distribution of inbound pilgrims to Uzbekistan from various regions. This can be seen through the different percentages assigned to each region in the figure. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of travel restrictions, it is expected that the regional share of inbound travelers to Uzbekistan has undergone significant changes. The figure demonstrates that the proportions assigned to each region might have experienced shifts, reflecting the impact of the pandemic on travel patterns. As the world begins to recover from the pandemic and travel resumes, it will be crucial for Uzbekistan to monitor and adapt its tourism strategies to attract Muslim travelers from various regions. Understanding the changing regional share and trends will enable the country to develop targeted marketing campaigns, engage with specific markets effectively, and address the unique needs and preferences of Muslim travelers from

different parts of the world. By analyzing and responding to the dynamic characteristics of inbound traveler mobility by regional share, Uzbekistan can position itself as a preferred destination for Muslim travelers, ensuring sustainable growth in this market segment. This includes implementing measures to promote the country's Islamic heritage, providing quality services and amenities, and fostering collaborations between tourism stakeholders from different regions to enhance the visitor experience. In this article, we set out to reflect on how pilgrimage tourism can be sustainable by providing a balance between socio-economic and cultural impacts by investigating some models.

Literature review:

Pilgrimage tourism overview: The practice of traveling for religious purposes has been present in humanity since ancient times. This type of tourism, known as religious tourism, involves embarking on a journey due to a strong belief or devotion. It often takes the form of a pilgrimage, where individuals with religious motivations are considered tourists. Scholars began showing interest in pilgrimage tourism as a subject of study in the 20th century, with Victor Turner being one of the first to delve into its characteristics. However, it wasn't until the 21st century that serious interest in pilgrimage tourism emerged and continues to be a topic of research today.

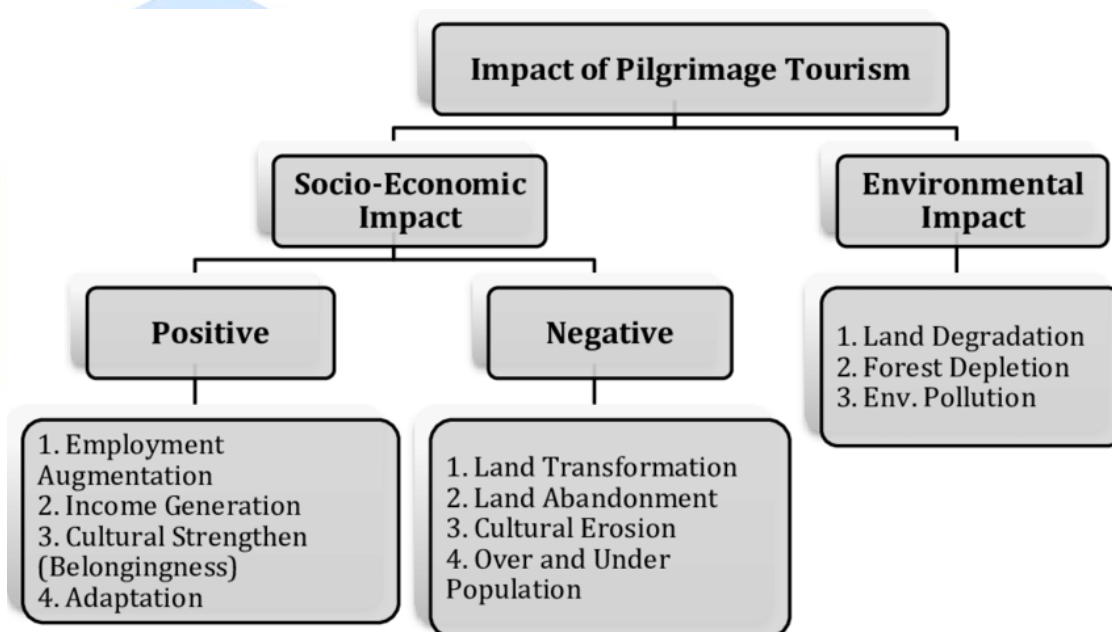
According to Rinschede, religious tourism can be defined as any journey that is motivated, either fully or partially, by religious reasons. However, visitors to religious sites or events are not solely driven by religious issues. Their motivation is often influenced by religious, cultural, traditional, spiritual, and scenic factors, which interact to shape their decision to embark on a trip¹². This means that in recent decades, traditional pilgrimage destinations have transformed into multifunctional tourist sites that attract not only the religiously inclined, but also those interested in their historical, architectural, cultural, or artistic significance. Pilgrimages are complex and ever-evolving phenomena that involve the interplay of religious, secular, and natural factors within the geographic space of sacred journeys.

Figure 2. Literature review map: connections of authors on the topic of pilgrimage tourism

¹ Drule, Alexandra, Mihai Băcilă, Raluca Ciornea, and Alexandru Chiș. 2015. Segmenting Visitors Encountered at Sacred Sites Based on Travelling Motivations and Constraints. *Current Science* 109: 256–70.

² Hughes, Karen, Nigel Bond, and Roy Ballantyne. 2013. Designing and Managing Interpretive Experiences at Religious Sites: Visitors' Perceptions of Canterbury Cathedral. *Tourism Management* 36: 210–20.

Figure 3. Impact of pilgrimage tourism



Source: Sati, Vishwambhar. (2015)⁵.

Socio-economic and environmental framework: Pilgrimage tourism holds a significant socio-economic importance in the lives of millions of people worldwide. It provides spiritual solace, cultural immersion, and a chance to connect with religious heritage. However, the rapid increase in the number of pilgrims has placed immense pressure on the socio-economic and environmental aspects of pilgrimage sites. In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of pilgrimage tourism, it is vital to establish a comprehensive framework that addresses both socio-economic development and environmental conservation.

1. Socio-economic Framework:

a) Local Empowerment: Pilgrimage sites often have the potential to uplift the local communities through economic opportunities. By promoting local businesses, crafts, and services, pilgrimage tourism can become a catalyst for sustainable socio-economic development. Moreover, involving local communities in decision-making processes and sharing the benefits of tourism revenue contribute to their empowerment.

b) Infrastructure and Services: Developing adequate infrastructure and services is crucial to enhance the pilgrimage experience and improve the well-being of both pilgrims and local communities. Investments in transportation, accommodation, healthcare facilities, sanitation, and waste management systems are essential to

⁵ Sati, Vishwambhar. (2015). Pilgrimage Tourism in Mountain Regions: Socio-Economic and Environmental Implications in the Garhwal Himalaya. South Asian Journal of Tourism and Heritage. 8.

maintain a positive impact on local communities and reduce the burden on pilgrimage sites.

c) **Cultural Preservation:** Preserving the cultural heritage associated with pilgrimage sites is essential for maintaining authenticity and attracting tourists. Emphasizing the protection of sacred sites, traditional practices, and local customs not only preserves the socio-cultural fabric but also safeguards the spiritual significance of the pilgrimage experience.

2. Environmental Framework:

a) **Sustainable Resource Management:** Pilgrimage sites are often located in fragile ecosystems, vulnerable to environmental degradation. Implementing sustainable resource management strategies such as water and energy conservation, waste reduction, and bio-diversity protection ensures the ecological balance remains intact. Striking a harmony between pilgrimage activities and the surrounding environment is crucial to safeguard natural resources for future generations.

b) **Responsible Tourism Practices:** Encouraging responsible tourism practices like reducing carbon emissions, promoting eco-friendly transportation options, and respecting wildlife and natural habitats is essential. Pilgrims should be educated about the importance of minimizing their environmental footprint during their journey and encouraged to participate in environmental initiatives.

c) **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Effective collaboration among stakeholders, including religious authorities, government bodies, local communities, and tourism organizations, is paramount to implement sustainable pilgrimage tourism initiatives. A collective effort that integrates different perspectives and fosters partnerships can facilitate the development of a cohesive and holistic framework.

Conclusion: The conceptual framework for sustainable pilgrimage tourism comprises various components that need to be considered to ensure the long-term sustainability of pilgrimage destinations. These components include:

1. **Environmental Conservation:** This component focuses on minimizing the negative impacts of pilgrimage tourism on the environment. It includes measures such as promoting responsible waste management, reducing water and energy consumption, preserving natural resources, and protecting biodiversity. It also involves raising awareness among pilgrims about environmental issues and encouraging them to adopt sustainable behaviors.

2. **Social and Cultural Preservation:** This component emphasizes the importance of preserving the social and cultural fabric of pilgrimage destinations. It involves promoting respect for local customs, traditions, and cultural heritage. It also includes ensuring the well-being and rights of local communities, promoting social inclusivity, and supporting community development initiatives. Additionally, it

involves educating pilgrims about the significance of cultural heritage and encouraging them to engage in responsible and respectful behavior.

3. Economic Benefits: This component focuses on maximizing the economic benefits of pilgrimage tourism for local communities. It includes strategies such as promoting local businesses, supporting local agriculture and handicraft industries, and ensuring fair distribution of economic benefits among stakeholders. It also involves creating employment opportunities for local communities and encouraging the reinvestment of tourism revenues into community development projects.

4. Infrastructure and Accessibility: This component addresses the need for appropriate infrastructure and accessibility in pilgrimage destinations. It includes developing and maintaining adequate transportation networks, accommodation facilities, and other tourism infrastructure. It also involves ensuring accessibility for all, including people with disabilities, and promoting inclusive tourism practices.

5. Stakeholder Collaboration: This component emphasizes the importance of collaboration among various stakeholders involved in pilgrimage tourism. It involves fostering partnerships between government bodies, communities, tour operators, religious institutions, and other relevant stakeholders. It also includes promoting open and transparent communication, sharing best practices, and involving local communities in the decision-making processes related to pilgrimage tourism.

6. Education and Awareness: This component focuses on educating and raising awareness among pilgrims, local communities, and other stakeholders about sustainable pilgrimage tourism practices. It involves providing information about the importance of sustainability, promoting responsible tourism behavior, and encouraging the adoption of sustainable practices at individual and collective levels.

By considering these components, the conceptual framework for sustainable pilgrimage tourism provides a holistic approach to ensure the long-term sustainability of pilgrimage destinations. It recognizes the interdependence of environmental, social, cultural, and economic aspects and seeks to strike a balance between them for the benefit of all stakeholders involved. Sustainable pilgrimage tourism requires a well-rounded approach that addresses both socio-economic and environmental dimensions. By implementing a comprehensive framework, pilgrimage sites can become models of sustainable development, promoting the well-being of local communities, protecting the environment, and preserving cultural heritage. It is imperative for all stakeholders to actively participate in nurturing sustainable pilgrimage tourism, ensuring that future generations can continue to benefit from these sacred journeys in a way that respects, uplifts, and conserves.

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