

# Religious Tourism - A Great Potential for Nation Building: A case study of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 19 June 2018

### Keywords

Tourism, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board, Management, Pilgrimage, Government

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism is the pilgrimage to a sacred place; however, it is little understood. The function of pilgrimage is that it allows us to understand our cultural heritage while searching for a harmonious relationship between man and the sacredness of a given place. Keeping this in view, the paper consists of a prominent religious tourist station in India known as Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine which is located in hills of the northern most State of India i.e J&K, examined its potential in transforming the region and helping the society purely from the offerings/donations it receives from the devotees visiting it. The amount which comes in the form of donations and offerings can very well be utilized by the society for its welfare. It has not only improved facilities for the tourists but also created great assets for the nation by way of establishing university, state of art hospital and undertaking various social missions. Governments and managements of religious tourist destinations must take cue from the glaring example of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board with the aim to fruitfully utilize the enormous amount of money which is generated at these places.

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## 1. Introduction

The most popular of all forms of tourism is the pilgrimage to a sacred place; however, it is little understood. The function of pilgrimage is that it allows us to understand our cultural heritage while searching for a harmonious relationship between man and the sacredness of a given place. The foremost objectives, like many ritual actions, pilgrimage is a simple, easily understandable travelling activity to a sacred place. The mixture of religious and political elements captures popular imagination and also suits to the common masses (Ross, 2007). In Indian mindset such marches called 'yātrās' (sacred journeys) are propagated as a means to upgrade and revive higher identity and a cultural awakening to strengthen the historical links that would lead to promote strong social networking.

Every human being has faith in certain ideology and follow certain way of life. These faiths can broadly be termed as religions. Religion had played a role for controlling power in Indian monarchy in the ancient past, and in contemporary India too it played a role in the formation of Hindu nationalism and corporate identity, through commonly using processions, pilgrimage, religious assemblies, and religious fairs. Major religions in the world are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism and Bahia etc. Each religion has its institutions or temples at the grass root level where the followers go to worship and perform religious ceremonies.

The followers give donations, offerings and spend money while visiting these temples as part of the traditions/customs. Amount of money in circulation due to these institutions is enormous. If this money is properly managed, it can be a great asset for all the segments of the society. Properly managed institutions have opened up schools, degree colleges, medical

colleges, free hospitals, meditation centres, free food joints (*lungars*), etc. Besides this, these also help in strengthening the moral and ethical values of the followers. These institutions educate the society, help the poor and needy, provide medical facilities to the patients, food to the hungry people and also provide solace to the destitute besides solving their daily problems.

Nations can be built up from the funds generated from religious tourism. It is said that before oil wells were discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1932, main resource of the nation was funds generated from religious tourism and the complete nation flourished on that.

### 1.1. Objective of the Study

Objective of the Study to carry out study of a prominent religious tourist station in India and see its potential in transforming the region and helping the society purely from the offerings/donations it receives from its devotees visiting it.

### 1.2 Selection of Suitable Tourist Destination for the Study

There are a large number of tourist places in India but it was decided to select the one where people visit primarily from religious angle so that impact of religious tourism could be studied. Such places are located in remote areas of the country, generally in hilly/desert areas. Prominent places among these are Kamakhya temple in Guwahati (Assam), Kedarnath-Badrinath temples in Uttarakhand, Moinuddin Chisti Dargha in Ajmer, Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine in J&K, Manikaran in Himachal Pradesh.

For the purpose of study, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine which is located in hills of the Northern most State of India i.e J&K was selected primarily from two reasons. Firstly, it is visited by a large number of devotees (7 to 10 million every year) and secondly its contribution to the society has been immense in terms of various schemes it has launched in this region. Recognizing the initiatives its management has taken during the last 30 years, it has been awarded "Best Managed Religious Destination in India" during the years 2011, 2013 and 2015 by the CNN-AWAAZ, TV and Internet Space Channel thus setting an example for others shrines to emulate.

### 1.3 Location and History of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine

This shrine is located in Trikuta hills of J&K State (India) at an altitude of 5,200 feet above mean sea level. At the foot hills is the town Katra from where a pilgrim has to cover around 14 KM of hilly track to reach the sanctum sanctorum popularly known as Bhawan. Prominent spots enroute to Bhawan are Ban Ganga, Charan Paduka, Adhkuwari and Sanjhi Chhatt.

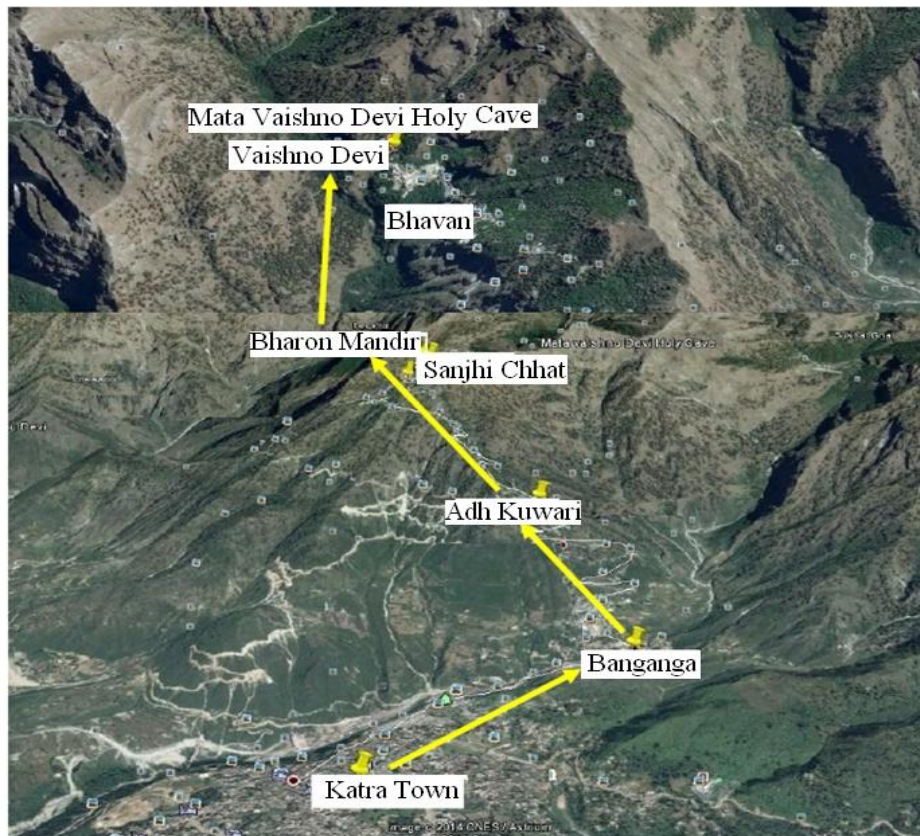


Figure 1: Route from Katra town to Bhawan

The shrine is visited mostly by Hindus throughout the year. One of the authors of this paper has been visiting this temple for the last over 50 years and seen the drastic improvements which have taken place in this area and the contribution made by its management in uplifting the society since then. The second author has carried out a study of its history, management and the quantifiable works it has done for the society.

As per the legend, during *Sat yug*, one day the three main Hindu Goddesses (*Devis*) viz. Maa Maha Kali, Maa Maha Lakshmi and Maa Maha Saraswati got together and pooled their collective spiritual strengths (*Tejas*). A stunning bright light emanated from the place where the *Tejas* of the three manifestations coalesced and a beautiful young girl emerged out of the *Tejas*. The *Devis* told the girl that they had created her so that she lives on earth and spends her time in upholding righteousness. They also told that she would take birth in the house of Ratnakar and his wife who reside in the southern part of India and who were their devotees. She was also told that she would evolve herself spiritually so that she reaches higher

levels of consciousness, after which she would merge into Lord Vishnu and become one with him.

Sometimes later, a beautiful girl was born to Ratnakar and his wife. The couple named the child Vaishnavi. The girl, right from her childhood displayed a hunger for knowledge which was like a vortex and which no amount of teaching and learning could sufficiently satiate. As per the legend, she relinquished all household comforts and went deep into the forests for *Tapasaya* (Meditation). In between during *Tretya yug*, Lord Rama (Incarnation of Vishnu) came to her and told her to go to Trikuta hills, elevate her level of spirituality and bless the mankind from there. He also told her that he would take birth with name *Kalki* during *Kalyug* then merge her into himself.

As the time passed, Maha Yogi Guru Goraksh Nath ji, who had the vision of the episode between Lord Rama and Vaishnavi in the retrospective time frame, became curious to know whether Vaishnavi had been able to attain a high level of spirituality or not. He sent his most able disciple "Bhairon Nath" to find out the truth. Bhairon Nath was enamored by Vaishnavi's

extraordinary beauty and losing all good sense, began to pester Vaishnavi to marry him. After she refused for the marriage, he misbehaved with her. To avoid confrontation, she decided to go to Trikuta hills for meditation. After crossing Katra town, she rested a while at Ban Ganga, Adhkuwari and finally reached the Bhawan area. Bhairo Nath with ill intentions kept on following her and Vaishnavi was compelled to behead him outside the mouth of the cave. The severed head of Bhairo Nath fell with a force at a distant hill top *Bhairo Ghati*. Later Vaishnavi shed off her human form, assumed the face of a rock and immersed herself into meditation forever. Thus Vaishnavi, in the form of a five and half feet tall rock with three heads (*Pindies*) on the top is the ultimate destination of a devotee. These *Pindies* constitute the Sanctum Sanctorum of the holy cave known as the shrine of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Ji which is revered by one and all.

People of Northern India have a great faith in the Mata Vaishno shrine and visit it very frequently. Devotees from other parts of the country also visit the shrine throughout the year. Since time immemorial, the local *pujaries* were worshipping the Goddess and the pilgrimage was manned by a private trust till 1986.

#### 1.4 Conditions Prevailing before 1986

The management and control of the shrine, before 1986, was with a private trust called Dharamarth Trust and a group of traditional local residents called *Baridars* (so called because they collected their offering as per their turn – *bari*). This management showed hardly any interest to improve the facilities for the pilgrims (*yatris*). While offerings were pocketed by the *Baridars*, the other incomes including rentals and royalties were taken by the Trust. There were hardly any facilities for the pilgrims leading to poor state of affairs. The pilgrims who reached the Holy town of Katra from all over India with devotion and faith in their hearts were often met with all kinds of hardships, insensitivity and mismanagement. People in the surrounding villages were poor and some of them forced their female children to beg in the name of *Kanjak* (young girls who are generally worshipped and given eatables and offerings in the name of Goddess Vaishno). Enroute from the base town of Katra to the shrine located in hills, hundreds of such *kanjaks* were seen. Sanitation standards in the eating joints enroute was nonexistent and flies were seen hovering over sweets and eatables displaced for sale for the pilgrims leading to epidemics and spread of diseases.

In spite of gross mismanagement of the shrine, the pilgrims used to visit it purely because of immense faith in Goddess Vaishno Devi. During 1980's, around one to 1.3 million pilgrims used to visit the shrine every year.

#### 1.5 Establishment of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB)

In 1986, the Govt. of J&K passed an act in the Legislative Assembly and transferred complete control of the shrine and the areas around to a Board which they named as Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (popularly known as Shrine Board). As per the composition of this Board, the Governor of J&K State is to head the board with 9 other eminent personalities from

different fields as its members. Initially there was too much of opposition from the Dharamarth Trust and the *Baridars* and they wanted to take back the control of the shrine. Govt. of J&K, however, did not succumb to their pressure and went ahead with its own plan.

#### 1.6 Actions Initiated by the Shrine Board

The Shrine Board acted very fast and with a few days of its formation took the following steps:

1. With the help of para-military forces, took control of the shrine.
2. They brought educated and qualified *pundits* and *Pujaries* to perform pooja of the deities.
3. They declared that all the offerings to the deities will centrally be collected, counted in a transparent way and on each day, details of collections will be made public.
4. Framed rules for recruitment of various employees for the administration and management of the complete shrine and the route from Katra to the *Bhawan* (main temple)
5. Decided to request the Govt. of J&K for sparing a few experts (IAS, KAS, engineers, and officials from revenue and forest departments etc.), on deputation, to run various wings of the management.
6. A plan was made to improve the hilly route from Katra to Bhawan, make it safe and if funds still available, then to establish facilities for the society. These facilities could be opening up of the educational institutions, hospitals, morality centres and improving infrastructure of Katra city and neighbouring areas.

In nut-shell, the Shrine Board decided to go full throttle, establish processes and procedures which were most efficient and ensuring transparency, decided to utilize all the income of the shrine in most judicious way for upliftment of the society. Every penny received as part of offerings or otherwise is accounted for on daily basis, controlled by highly efficient IAS, KAS, Revenue officials and others who help the Shrine Board in providing best possible facilities to the pilgrims and also establish institution and facilities for the common masses.

As the facilities increased in the shrine area, the number of pilgrims started increasing. During 1986, the pilgrims were just about 1.3 million. This figure has increased manifold since then recording the highest number of over 10 million pilgrims during 2011 and 2012. Even during the worst conditions when the State of J&K witnessed natural calamities like enormous floods and militant attacks during 2013 to 2015, the number of pilgrims was always above 7.8 million each year. That shows the faith of the public in this well managed religious tourist destination.

#### 1.7 Results Obtained since 1986 till Date

With the progressive actions taken by the Shrine Board, the financial transactions became very transparent. Every penny which came as part of the offerings started to improve the foot track to *Bhawan* and innumerable facilities were added. In less than 30 years of its existence, it has effectively utilized the income from the pilgrims in the following areas:-

1. Upgrading facilities for pilgrims at Jammu, Katra and all along the complete hilly route from Katra to Bhawan.
2. Opening up a fully residential University named Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University (SMVDU) which as on today provides higher education to over 2,000 students and employment to over 500 personnel directly or indirectly.
3. Established a fully residential School named Gurukul at Ban Ganga to train students in the Sanskrit education and religious
4. A 230-bedded Super-Specialty hospital for the patients of this region is under construction where in health care facilities would be provided by a reputed national level health care company named *Narayana Hrududalaya Ltd.*
5. Construction of a multi-purpose modern sports stadium at Katra to promote indoor and outdoor sports
6. Providing help to the needy segment of the society at other locations too.
7. Encouraging literary and social events in Jammu region from time to time

It has generated tremendous employment and GDP of the region has increased manifold. Over 3,000 personnel were given employment by the Shrine Board for management of pilgrims. Besides this over 100 thousand personnel have got indirect employment in hotels, shops, tourist taxi offices, *pithoo* and pony services etc. Economy of the area has also got a quantum jump. Brief on each of these works in enumerated in the (Appendix A) enclosed.

**1.8 Findings of the Case Study**

Going by the history of this shrine, one gets prompted to know as to what strengths are present in the this tourist destination which created miracles in just 30 years and generated enormous assets. So a SWOT analysis has been carried out so as to know the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which would have existed prior to formation of the Shrine Board in 1986. For this a large number of documents were studied and the people of that era (1960-1986) who were associated with the shrine were interviewed. Findings of the same are tabulated below:

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People of Northern India have a great faith in the shrine and want to visit it periodically</li> <li>• Most of devotees want to go there during <i>Navratras</i> (which come twice in a year) and take blessings</li> <li>• Hills have scenic beauty and weather remains pleasant throughout the year</li> <li>• Well connected by air and train with rest of the country (nearest station being Jammu city which is just 40 km away)</li> <li>• Some of the devotees have the capability to donate huge amounts for betterment of the facilities</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From Katra to Bhawan, track condition was poor, sanitation was bad</li> <li>• No lighting on the track so it was difficult to walk during dark hours. Also during rainy season, pilgrims have to walk against all odds. Even medical facilities were almost nonexistent</li> <li>• Even after reaching the shrine after covering 14 KM of hilly track, one has to stand in the queue for a couple of days to have <i>darshans</i> of deities</li> <li>• For elderly people, no air/ vehicular services were available to cover the track</li> <li>• Train and air facilities are in Jammu town which is 40 KM away from Katra</li> </ul>
<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shrine becoming unattractive, devotees will stop coming here and go to other similar shrines in the neighbourhood.</li> <li>• Shrines of Maa Vaishno Devi in the neighbouring state of H.P are becoming more popular.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a great potential as there is no other shrine of Maa Vaishno Devi of that caliber and importance</li> <li>• It is part of J&amp;K which is known for its tourist destinations. So tourist coming to J&amp;K could be attracted to visit this shrine too</li> <li>• Some of the hard core devotees were financially very well off and have the capability to donate huge amounts for the betterment of facilities</li> </ul>

Study has been carried out of all the actions taken by the Shrine Board in the last 30 years. Feedback from the pilgrims and other stake holders have been collected beside study of material on the subject to know about the changes and processes those have resulted in bringing in tremendous amount of transformation in the society besides creating long lasting assets for the society. Main processes initiated by the

Shrine Board which brought in this change are described below :

1. **Re-engineered the Command and Control Structure:** The so-called owners of the shrine viz. Dharamarth Trust and *Baridars*, who had been pocketing money for their personal benefits were removed forcibly with the help of para-military forces

and control handed over to a newly constituted Shrine Board headed by top man in the State i.e the Governor of the State assisted a team of nine prominent personalities who were expert in their fields. Structure of the organization from top to bottom was re-engineered to bring in efficiency and accountability in the system

2. **Requisitioned Services of Experts:** Expert in administration and management were brought in to carry out the day to day functioning. Accordingly, the Govt. of J&K was requested for sparing a few IAS, KAS qualified officers, engineers and officials from revenue and forest departments etc., on deputation, to run various wings of the management. Even for performing Puja (worship) rituals of the deities, the Shrine Board brought educated and qualified *pundits* and *Pujaries* from various parts of the country.
3. **Brought Transparency in Financial Dealings:** The Board started collecting all the offerings, donations and money collected from various sources centrally in a very transparent manner. All donation boxes were opened in the presence of the devotees and even counting done in a room, walls of which are transparent so that everyone could see the process. Details of collections will be made public on daily basis.
4. **Framed Extensive Rules and Regulations:** Framed rules for recruitment of various employees for the administration and management of the shrine, route from Katra to the *Bhawan* and all futuristic developmental works to be undertaken.
5. **Prepared Master Plan for Utilization of Funds:** A master plan was made to improve the hilly route from Katra to Bhavan, make it safe, attractive and hassle free. Also a plan for utilization of funds for creating educational and medical facilities for the society, state of the art sports infrastructure for the Katra town was prepared. Funds were also allocated for preserving the culture of region, promoting sports and giving boost to the social missions like 'Save Girl Child',

## 2. Lessons for All Religious Tourist Destinations in the Country

A review of the enormous number of useful facilities created/work done for the society in just a short span of 30 years with no help from the government is a glaring example for all the religious institutions in the country. There are thousands of temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras in the country which can take the example of SMVD Shrine Board and emulate so that they play a constructive role for building the society and providing it with best education and medical opportunities besides making the travel.

## 3. Conclusion

Destinations where the tourists come to get solace and pay obeisance to the almighty have great potential to build the social society. The amount which comes in the form of donations and offerings can very well be utilized by the society for its welfare. However, it is to be ensured that the management of these religious tourist destinations is given in the hands of the experts who are who are motivated, willing to provide selfless service and have vision for the region. Change in management of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine is a glaring example. It has not only improved facilities for the tourists but also created great assets for the nation by way of establishing university, state of art hospital and undertaking various social missions. Governments and managements of religious tourist destinations must take cue from the glaring example of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board with the aim to fruitfully utilize the enormous amount of money which is generated at these places.

Besides this, these also help in strengthening the moral and ethical values of the followers. These institutions educate the society, help the poor and needy, provide medical facilities to the patients, food to the hungry people and also provide solace to the destitute besides solving their daily problems.

Nations can be built up from the funds generated from religious tourism. It is said that before oil wells were discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1932, main resource of the nation was funds generated from religious tourism and the complete nation flourished on that.

Example of the shrine of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi is an example before us which has done so much for the society. All the religious institutions in the country are expected to take prompt from it and make religious tourism as a source for establishment for nation building thus enhancing quality of life of the citizen besides taking the country forward.

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