



# JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)

An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## CONCEPT AND APPLICATION OF PILGRIMAGE GEOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY

**Dr. Sambita Chaudhuri,**

Associate Professor, Department of Geography,  
Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah  
(under the University of Calcutta)  
and

**Ankita Koley,**

MSc Student, Department of Geography,  
Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah  
(under the University of Calcutta)

### Abstract

The concept related to the geographies of pilgrimage is not a recent phenomenon. It is one of the oldest forms of tourism and was flourished along with its region-specific engagements. Policy makers put more emphasis on every pilgrim site as they play vital role in developmental scenario of the nation. This study revolves around the importance of pilgrimage in geographic analysis to achieve a holistic development of any region. Here the performance of devotees is also explained through their reason for pilgrimage, their emotional attachment to the sacred site, their economic character as well as their indirect contribution to the development of the region.

**Key words:** *Geography, Pilgrim, Culture, Region, Development*

### Introduction

The region-specific explanation of the incidence of pilgrimage in geographic analysis is not of recent phenomenon. Its analysis through the lenses of socio-cultural development, economic benefits, inter-personal relationship and cultural pluralism is also represented in the analysis of people's movement from one place to other. Regional arrangements and it's relationship with sacred sites through human mobility is truly represented by the incidence of pilgrimage, which is useful in the developmental scenario of the pilgrim places of every country and this is a major concern for the policy makers of that part of land since the earlier days. Thus, the phenomenon of pilgrimage is depicted as a multifaceted sociocultural spatial practice in the development discourse with spatial-religious significance. It also affects the lives of host people as well as the pilgrims who

are coming to that place. The geographies of mobility, as a sub-branch of the discipline Geography, is basically deals with the movements of people and their various practices which sometimes associated with the new understandings of pilgrimage.

This study revolves around the study of pilgrimage and the mobility of human beings, which are actively participate in the development of specific places. The significance of pilgrimage in geographic analysis for the development of any region is also one of the themes of this paper. The performance of devotees is explained through their reason for pilgrimage, their emotional attachment to the sacred site, their economic character as well as their indirect contribution to the development of the region.

## Objectives and Methodology

The study aims to find out two main objectives-

- 1) To assess the importance of pilgrims and their mobility in the analysis of geography and
- 2) To understand the significant role of pilgrims in the development of any region.

The methodology used in this study is the mixed method involving qualitative and quantitative techniques based on both primary and secondary data. A small primary survey has been conducted during the March-April months of 2023, when the pilgrims come to worship the lord Shiva of the Tarakeswar Temple in West Bengal state of the Indian union. Face to face interview was conducted to 50 pilgrims who came from various parts of the state and staying there for 2-8 days. Primary survey details are then statistically categorized and cartographically represented in order to understand the geographies of pilgrimage in general and in case of regional development of the the Tarakeswar area of West Bengal state in particular.

## Review of Literature

It is very difficult to define pilgrimage accurately. Some definitions consider the significance of the place of worship as the most vital in pilgrimage study (Stoddard, 1997). The most popular concept of pilgrimage explains it as the movement of people for longer distance than that of local travel. Some scholars also explain the meanings of pilgrimage in Christian world as the theological doctrines related to some popular notions, symbolic meanings and images as perceived by individual and community. According to Turner and Turner (1978), a pilgrimage involves movement away from the 'local' environment for some specific cultural reasons. In recent years, pilgrimage has become an important topic for the cross-disciplinary study as it makes sense of both spatial and temporal aspects of people movement over the earth. In general terms, the destination of pilgrims are denoted by the place, where people experience new cultural contacts and where devotees gather to pray and worship. The complex interplay of various forces acted on the decision of devotees to select places as well as in the working performances in the pilgrim centres (Bajc, Coleman and Eade, 2007). The speed of pilgrimage has been emphasized in the western views of pilgrimage study that tries to consider that, the slow rate of movement is the major criteria for differentiation between pilgrims and normal tourists. However,

in the case of the Shikoku pilgrimage in Japan, slow travel contradicts pilgrimage character as in Japanese culture, speed seems to be a truer measure to analyse the nature of pilgrimage travel (Olsen and Wilkinson, 2016). The emergence of the concept of 'power spot' comes in the writings of Yasuda (2021) as part of the spirituality movement in the country that has developed a new form of religiosity that may also be referred as 'spiritual legitimacy' in Japan. This study is based on the power spot phenomenon developed in the Haruna Shrine, Gunma Prefecture, in Japan. Some scholars mentioned the importance of geographic engagements with pilgrimage and also analyse the incidence of movement of devotees for pray through the lenses of the worshipping, trust, good behaviours to other devotees and upgradation of inner values and beliefs on God (Scriven, 2014).

The study by Tomer and Aurora (2012) explains the important behavioural aspects of pilgrims in North India including the purpose of visit, mode of transportation used, frequency of their visit in one place, accommodation conditions, reason for stay, days of stay and the total financial cost for all items used by the pilgrims in those places. These places in North India are the sacred sites of Vaishno Devi (J&K), Chintpurni/ Jwalaji (H.P.), Golden Temple (Punjab), Kurukshetra (Haryana) and Haridwar (Uttaranchal). Batra (2003) concentrated on the Buddhist pilgrim sites of India and revealed that there are potentialities of these places to attract a large number of tourists from Far East and South-East Asia. This study also mentions that India being the religious hearth of Buddhism, religious tourism may flourish in this holy land.

### **Importance of Pilgrimage in Geography of West Bengal: Case Study on Tarakeswar Shiva Temple, West Bengal**

The religious faith of people, cultural diversity, age-old heritage helped India to develop as the centre for pilgrimages since earlier days and it is continuing till today. Not only that, religious tourism also has flourished in this country due to its diverse natural resources and region-specific cultural excellency in art, craft, artefacts, and other cultural attributes. The growth of Indian domestic tourism, where about 44.5 percent of export earnings of Indian Tourism are from pilgrims' spending. Many Indian pilgrim centres receive a high influx of pilgrims annually (Albayrak et al., 2018; Griffin & Raj, 2018). As the influx of pilgrims at various religious destinations in India is increasing, it helps to capitalize on surrounding markets by providing pilgrims with all their requirements (Pai, Nayak P, & Badlani, 2016). The Shiva temple in Tarakeswar, Hoogly district of the West Bengal state is attracting millions of pilgrims every year during the festivals of *Shivaratri* (March), *Chaitrasankranti* (April) and *Shravan* (July-August). Such huge gathering of devotees was also recorded in the reports by Hunter (1876) and Bentley (1929). However, in recent years, there is an increase in devotees in this place, which is believed to be the result of the improved means of transport. Besides this, the influence of mass-media, folk-dramas and films also glorify the Shiva tradition of Hindu religious beliefs (Chakraborti, 1982). The Taraknath temple is one of the most important examples of the state of West Bengal dedicated to the Lord Shiva. Built in 1729, it is the famous pilgrimage spot in the town of Tarakeswar, West Bengal, India. Here, Lord Shiva is worshiped as Tarakanatha and he is a violent (*Ugra*) form here, who drank venom (Vish)

during *Samudra-manthan*. Tarakeshwarnath is the husband of Bhagwati Tara. He grants his devotees a good health and life and fulfils all the wishes that a person wants.

A story is associated with this temple. It is believed that, Raja Vishnu Das came from Ayodhya to settle in the nearby place of present Tarakeswar town during 18<sup>th</sup> century. He and his brother discovered a place with a Shiva lingam, where every day, cows used to pour their milk there. After some days, with the help of local villagers, Raja and his brother constructed the temple of lord Shiva at present Tarakeswar temple. However, the present structure of the temple was constructed by Raja Bharamalla in 1729. Regarding the architectural character, the temple is an *atchala* structure of Bengal temple architecture type. The temple's main building has a '*natmandir*' in front and close by there are the shrines of Kali and Lakshmi Narayan. A water tank, namely *Dudhpukur*, is located to the north of the Shiva temple. It is believed that, one's prayers may get fulfilled if the person takes a dip in the *Dudhpukur* (Photo 1).

**Photo 1: Tarakeswar Temple and Dudhpukur**



Source: Author during primary survey

**Photo 2: Pilgrims for worshipping at Tarakeswar Temple**



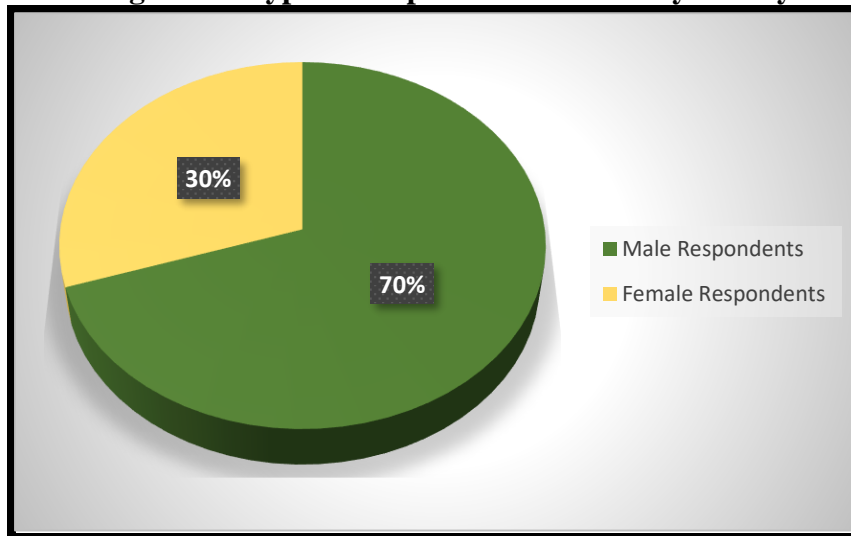
Source: Author during primary survey



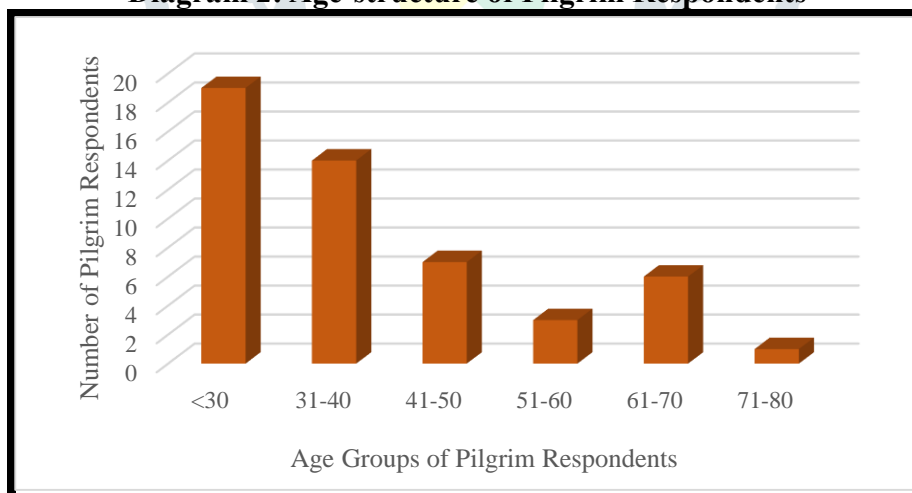
According to Hindu beliefs, Monday is the day for offering puja to lord Shiva and thus, a large number of pilgrims visit the temple especially on Mondays. However, all over the year, there are quite a large number of pilgrims come to pray to lord Shiva. There are special celebrations during the Shravan month, when thousands of pilgrims visit this temple. The whole month of *Sravana* (mid-July to mid-August) is auspicious for Shiva when celebrations are held in each Monday and devotees take a dip and collect water, which is later poured on the Shiva lingam. Besides this time, on the occasions of '*Shivaratri*' and '*Gajan*' during Bengali month *Phalgun* (Feb-March) and *Chaitra* (mid-April) respectively, a large influx of devotees assemble here to pray to the lord (Photo 2).

### Demographic Structure of Respondents

**Diagram 1: Type of Respondents in Primary Survey**



**Diagram 2: Age-structure of Pilgrim Respondents**



Barber (1991) defined pilgrimage as 'a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding'. Various dimensions of cultural tourism are developing with new and new ideas and prospects. Being a new trend in tourism industry, cultural tourism representing the country's cultural excellency, its age-old religious heritage, historical architecture and many more. Pilgrimage is one type of cultural tourism that was present in earlier days but was not celebrated like

contemporary times. This type of tourism is used to glorify the country's cultural tradition and historical artistry along with specific idea of rituals and customs of the country. Though pilgrimage was present in every part of the world in different forms and types based on the people's requirement and demand but now the character and intensity has been changed with greater accessibility to remote sacred sites and with improved way of information diffusion through technological advancement and spread of digital knowledge. In this type of cultural tourism, every region is witnessing a revival in terms of gradually increasing numbers of tourists in the domestic and international tourist circuit and making the tourism sector a more employment-generating segment of economy. This type of tourism involves a journey to the locations associated with people's beliefs and faiths. By definition, when people move to other places in order to worship or pray or for 'darshan' is referred to as pilgrims. Various types of pilgrims, who are visiting religious places, how they were motivated in selecting the site, activities performed during the visits, their varied demands and economic contribution to the places of visit – may be counted as important parameters of analysis for researchers regarding the nature of pilgrim geographies.

The primary survey of the present study deals with the nature of pilgrim geographies in Tarakeswar temple area in Hoogly district of West Bengal state. In recent years, the changing character of socio-political and economic situation results in changing cultural scenario of the region, but the significance of the Taraknath temple of the Tarakeswar is still glowing in the minds of Hindu pilgrims. Hundreds and thousands of devotees come here during the months of March-April, when the *Gajan* and *Charak* festival take place. Devotees come with barefoot and gather here to pour water on the Shivalinga located inside the main temple.

The increase in the number of visitors for the last three to four decades to Tarakeswar, Hoogly has led to an increase in total number of pilgrims volume in whole West Bengal and this increase brought qualitative changes in the pilgrim sites also. The motivation for pilgrims to come to Tarakeswar increased due to spread of mass-media in recent decades, the improvement in transportation networks as well as the improvement of pilgrim-related facilities and information. The *Dudhpukur*, i.e., a nearby pond, is believed to be a sacred one and is believed to fulfil the wish of an individual if the person takes a bath in it. Government of West Bengal adopted a plan to improve the Tarakeswar temple and the *Dudhpukur* to make the whole site more pilgrim friendly. The rejuvenation of the *Dudhpukur* is planned to include a ozone treatment for oxidation of bacteria and other water borne pathogens that will reduce the contamination of pond water (a times of India report, 6<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2021).

The primary survey reveals that, people generally select places with religious attribute to visit in order to fulfil some wish. The wish of having good fortune and good health for self and for dear ones in family are the utmost important reason for visiting any sacred site. The information collected from the primary survey are categorized into various reasons for pilgrimage in the Tarakeswar Shiva temple. The study on pilgrims, who are pouring water on the Shiva lingam and staying at the compound for 2-8 days reveals the fact that, there are various reasons for which these devotees come to this site. These are-

- Pray for children,
- Pray for illness,
- Child related rituals,
- Trust and regular prayer,
- Pray for self,
- Pray for family and
- any other reasons.

The in-depth interview shows that, majority of pilgrims came to pray for the recovery from various types of illness, which they are facing in their life. It is followed by the child-related rituals, that are performed by devotees here. The third important reason is the prayer for self, i.e., pray for the better education, for better employment and for the good health of individual. As majority of pilgrims are of the age of less than 30 years, hence most of them are unmarried males and they come along with their friends and pray for their own future to the lord Shiva.

### **Impact of Pilgrimage to the Region's Development Scenario**

Identifying the reasons for pilgrimage, their demands, problems they are facing during the worship and during their stay, the environment of the place where these pilgrims are staying- all will aid the concerned temple management and policymakers in understanding and managing the situation during the peak period. These key cultural and infrastructural attributes help to assess the nature of needs and requirements of pilgrims. These are considered critical from a management point of view as it is very essential to provide all necessary facilities to the pilgrims during the maximum influx of people at a point. This situation needs to be managed and facilitated by the policymakers at the government and state as well as local administrative (municipality or block) level. Not only that, the concerned temple management/ trust also pays more attention in arranging the pilgrim sites during the festive occasion so that peaceful and sustainable pilgrimage destination environment resulting into overall pilgrim satisfaction. This will surely connect the place with emotional and psychological attachment and a good experience for every pilgrim regarding the pilgrim place and their worship performances. The mentality of revisit to the place and a positive experience of the worshipping activities are closely interconnected. For every pilgrim site, the temple management has a vital role in enhancing the understanding of the pilgrims for the sites through properly managing the crowd, pilgrims' safety, temple hygiene, hospitableness, recreation facilities and other support services, helping the pilgrims to gather a positive spiritual engagement and a peaceful stay (Jyotsna and Sai, 2022). The convergence of the religious space and touristic space creates complexity to the traditional destination management practices of every pilgrim sites. As these sites have become multi-use in nature, i.e. for recreation, education and leisure rather than strictly for religious instruction and rituals, this complexity increases (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). The Tarakeswar Development Authority (TDA) is planned to develop the extended galleries, where devotees can stay and also to construct more places for clean drinking water and more toilets for the pilgrims.

Region's local economy also get strengthened during the festive season, when more devotees come to that place. Here, as people come from distant places and stay for some days to pour water on *Shivalingam* during the *Sravan* month, thus a local market has flourished to facilitate every pilgrim by providing their basic daily requirement as well as by supplying various types of offerings they want to offer to lord Shiva.

## Conclusion

Pilgrimage is significant in contemporary period as it involves the human mobility, status of transport and communication, cultural convergence and also the socio-economic development of any region. The movement of traveller or group of travellers to any particular site for religious purposes is the traditional religious journey since earlier days or the modern secular journey of present globalised era. Present diffusion of information and the importance of religious cult and beliefs influence the increased number of people all over the world who are engaged in pilgrim geography. Besides, the religious organizations and pilgrims sometimes differ their journey from the touristic experience as their main motto is to worship and offer prayers to God.

However, from the tourism industry's point of view, pilgrims can be treated as tourists. Like any other sort of tourism, religious tourism has an impact on the economy of the religious site in terms of region's economy, change in local people's income structure, profit and employment of the region and so on. Though majority of religious sites attract pilgrims during the main worship time, hence seasonal fairs and festivals based on religious rituals are organised during that period. But it is necessary to mention that the economy of the region changes drastically with the gathering of pilgrims in that place. In Tarakeswar also, though during *Sravana*, *Chaitrasankranti*, and *Shivaratri*- majority of pilgrim gathering occur, but the regular influx of devotees also adds more economic impact over the region's developmental scenario. Hence, pilgrimage contributes in Tarakeswar's local economy in terms of value added and employment, during some part of the year in particular, but throughout the whole year in general. In addition, meaningful and appropriate policies are needed to be incorporated for developing sustainable measures to overcome the negative impacts of pilgrim tourism in the study area.

## References

- Albayrak, T., Herstein, R., Caber, M., Drori, N., Bideci, M., & Berger, R. (2018). Exploring religious tourist experiences in Jerusalem: The intersection of Abrahamic religions. *Tourism Management*, 69, 285–296.
- Bajc, V., Coleman, S., & Eade, J. (2007). Introduction: mobility and centring in pilgrimage. *Mobilities*, 2(3), 321-329.
- Barber, R. (1991). *Pilgrimages*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd
- Batra, A. (2003). Indian Tourist Sites - In the Footprints of the Buddha, *ABAC Journal*, 23, (2), 46 – 57



- Chakraborti, Prafulla (1982). Impact of Socio-Economic Changes on a Religious Complex: A Case Study on Tarakeswar. *Indian Journal of Social Research*. Vol XXIII, No 2. August.
- Collins-Kreiner, N. (2010). Researching pilgrimage: Continuity and transformations. *Annals of tourism research*, 37(2), 440-456.
- Griffin, K., & Raj, R. (2018). The importance of religious tourism and pilgrimage: Reflecting on definitions, motives and data. *The International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3), 2–9.
- Frey, N. L. (2004). Pilgrimage and its aftermath. *Intersecting journeys: The anthropology of pilgrimage and tourism*, 89-109.
- Jyotsna, J. H. & Prakash Sai, L. (2022): Modelling pilgrim-tourist experience in Hindu religious destinations: an Interactive Qualitative Analysis, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, DOI: 10.1080/14766825.2022.2095914
- Joseph, Joice, K. G., Ambady, Dev, Karunakaran, Hsu, Edbert & A.P., Pradeep Kumar. (2020). Pilgrim Satisfaction in a Mass Religious Gathering: Study from Sabarimala Destination, Kerala State of India. *Journal of Religion and Health*. 59. 10.1007/s10943-019-00814-w.
- Kim, B., Kim, S., & King, B. (2020). Religious tourism studies: Evolution, progress, and future prospects. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 45(2), 185–203.
- Olsen, D., & Timothy, D. (2006). *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*.
- Olsen, D. H., & Wilkinson, G. (2016). Are fast pilgrims true pilgrims? The Shikoku pilgrimage. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 61, 228-230.
- Reader, I. (2007). Pilgrimage growth in the modern world: Meanings and implications. *Religion*, 37(3), 210-229.
- Scriven, R. (2014). Geographies of Pilgrimage: Meaningful movements and embodied mobilities. *Geography Compass*, 8 (4), 249-261
- Stoddard, Robert. (1997). *Defining and Classifying Pilgrimages*. Geography Faculty Publications. University of Nebraska – Lincoln.
- Tomer, Padmini and R.S. Arora (2012). Pilgrimage Tourism: An Empirical Study of Pilgrims' Behaviour in North India. *International Journal of Marketing & Business communication* volume 1 Issue 2 April 2012.
- Turner, V., and E. Turner. (1978). *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture: Anthropological perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Times of India report (2021). West Bengal: Rs 80 crore makeover on cards for Tarakeswar-Dudhpukur. 6<sup>th</sup> November, 2021. ([http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/87545296.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/87545296.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)) retrieved on 13/06/2023.
- Yasuda, Shin. (2021). Spiritual Legitimacy in Contemporary Japan: A Case Study of the Power Spot Phenomenon and the Haruna Shrine, Gunma. *Religions*. 12. 177. 10.3390/rel12030177.