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# A Naturalistic Inquiry of Pilgrims' Experience at a Religious Heritage Site: The Case of a Shaktipitha in India

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Religion in the Indian context is an inseparable element that dominates Indian lives, culture and psyche wherein significant number of people undertake pilgrimages every year. Pilgrims travel to different religious sites spread throughout the country and an intimate bonding exists between people and religious sites that invariably constitute their heritage. The worship of deities is a significant and popular ancient custom in the history of Indian culture. Pilgrims to any religious heritage site participate in different activities and their involvement in these activities builds their spiritual experience. So, the purpose of this research was to investigate the pilgrims experience at a religious heritage site. For this, a suitable framework called ASEB framework (activity, setting, experience and benefit) was used, and qualitative research was conducted in a natural setting at one of the venerated Hindu pilgrimage sites in North India. Certain themes and codes were identified which acted as salient parameters to evaluate the pilgrim experience at a Goddess worshipping site, called Shaktipithas. The parameters used in the study which are described as themes and codes in the research process, include specific words, phrases or issues, which commonly occurred within and across the discussion groups. The entire study is based on the authors' direct and participant observation on site for a period of three years from 2015-2018 and the interviews conducted with different stakeholder groups. The conducted research contributes to the current body of knowledge on religious studies, as it provides a deeper insight into how the various parameters affect the spiritual experiences of a pilgrim at a religious site and moderate the visitor experience affecting the notion of pilgrimage. The research also opens up opportunities to do more qualitative / quantitative studies on the themes identified in this exploratory study or may lead to the identification of similar themes which affect the pilgrims during their most important journey, called pilgrimage, to attain salvation.

**Key Words:** Hinduism, Pilgrimage, Pilgrim Experience, Religious Heritage, Religious Tourism

## Introduction

Travel for pilgrimage has existed in the world since antiquity. According to UN World Tourism Organisation 2014 statistics 300 to 330 million pilgrims travel to different sacred sites across the world annually. Pilgrimage is globally known as a journey to a distant sacred goal (Barber, 1993). The act of pilgrimage is widely accepted by all religions of the world and so undertaking travel for religious purposes is a common practice for followers of all major religions of the world, namely Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism (Collins, 2010). For centuries, religion has been a primary reason for embarking on pilgrimage and such journeys are the oldest and most accepted form of travel (Timothy and

Olsen, 2006). Thus, millions of pilgrims every year from major religions of the world, like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, go on a pilgrimage (Rojo, 2007).

Religion and religious places hold special significance in India as it is a large cultural land known for its diversity of faiths. The custom of undertaking pilgrimage, in India, is believed to be as old as the human civilisation. This age old practice is deeply engrained in the cultural psyche of Indians and the large number of pilgrimage sites found in India confirm the entire subcontinent as one grand and continuous sacred space (Singh & Singh, 2010). The strength of this practice is evident from the large number of pilgrimage sites found in India and the

soaring numbers of pilgrims who visit them every year. It is estimated that India witnesses more than 100 million pilgrims every year to almost 2000 pilgrimage sites (Shinde, 2011). Statistics suggest that every year almost 28 million Hindus go to the River Ganga in India for pilgrimage (Singh, 2006). The annual number of pilgrims to Tirupati city is more than the total number of travellers visiting India's megacities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore and Kolkata together (Apleni and Vallabh, 2017). Globally, Hinduism is considered as one of the oldest and the third major religion of the world.<sup>[1]</sup>

About 94% of the world's Hindus live in India (Majumdar, 2018). Pilgrimage has been practiced by Hindus for centuries and the practice is seen as a form of penance. Shaktipithas (or 'Shakti Peethas' of which there are multiple sites across the country) are one revered form of Hindu Goddess site, which is visited by people for pilgrimage across India, and this pilgrimage is believed to have multiple values for its visitors. However, technological improvements and change in visitor behaviour and perception is gradually converting pilgrimage to 'religious tourism' (Shinde, 2011; Singh, 2006). Religious tourism is really picking up in the tourism market due to the ease of accessibility to such sites and also, people often confuse pilgrimage with religious tourism. This has led to a significant rise in the number of research studies being done in the domain of religious tourism (Belhassen, Caton & Stewart, 2008; Andriotis, 2009; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Kim, Kim & King, 2016; Albaqami, Allehaibi & Basori, 2018; Ackerman, 2019).

These days, visitors to almost all religious sites face common issues such as parking problems, long hours waiting in queues, strict security arrangements, lack of infrastructure facilities or services, unhygienic surroundings which dilute their sacred experience and more so, they are only allowed to stand in the main sanctum for just a few seconds to offer prayers for which they travel hundreds / thousands of miles. The visitors to a religious site can have miscellaneous motives and motivations behind their visit, but the significance of the pilgrimage and its rituals is expressed by the experience encountered at such sites as which form part of our significant religious heritage (Singh, 2010).

The aim of this study therefore, is to assess how pilgrims evaluate their experience at a Hindu Shaktipitha based on a number of salient parameters.

## Literature Review and Background

The quest to know more about the mysteries of life and death pushes humans to move into the realm of ultimate power which is known as 'journey' in Indian thought. It is referred to as 'Tirtha-yatra' in Hinduism which literally means "a journey to a fording place", and is termed as 'pilgrimage' (Singh, 2013).

The words 'pilgrim' and 'pilgrimage' have a wide frame of significance and meaning. In general understanding, 'pilgrim' refers to people travelling to sacred spaces in search of spiritual gains. Theoretically, pilgrimage is described externally as a journey to a sacred site for religious purposes, and internally, as a practice of spiritual upliftment and mental wellbeing by enlightenment through contact with divine (Barber, 1993). A pilgrim's experience is defined as their involvement at a site, at special points of time in performance of prayers, celebration of festivals and performance of rituals for receiving utmost gains (Raj and Griffin, 2015). The essence and completeness of this journey relies on three aspects namely the journey undertaken, the various sacred experiences encountered during the journey and the route taken at the religious site itself (Bhardwaj, 1973).

The practice of pilgrimage continues to be a well-known act today. But, researchers have revealed that the changing travel patterns resemble 'tourism like' characteristics which include using mechanised modes of transport, movement patterns at sacred sites, bundling many sites together under packaged tours, the ways of marketing pilgrim destinations, and the consumerist behaviour of visitors. All of these are transforming pilgrimage into religious tourism which means travelling to a religious site not only for the sacred experience, but also for leisure (Shinde, 2011).

The core notion of religious tourism is still a religious dimension where visitors are motivated by religious reasons, and performing rituals is a part of the time spent and experiences encountered at the sacred site. Pilgrims and religious tourists to a sacred site have often been compared by scholars, with MacCanell (1973) being the first to claim that religious tourism is a journey of modern people and the tourist is observed as a pilgrim who undertakes a religious journey in the contemporary secular world (Collins & Kliot, 2000). In both the cases, the motivation and interests of the

1. <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3784> accessed on 15, June 2019.

visitor to a religious site may change from pilgrimage to tourism and vice-versa without them being conscious of it and accordingly the experiences are shaped, but the spiritual aspect of the experience cannot be negated. 'Shaktipithas'<sup>[2]</sup> spread throughout India and the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) nations like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Tibet, are revered Hindu sites which are visited by millions for pilgrimage every year. Pilgrimage to Shaktipithas is a widespread practice especially during the most auspicious and the longest festival of Navratras (festival of nine nights and ten days) twice a year and also during other annual festivals. This tradition of pilgrimage to goddess sites in the country called Shaktipithas has been followed for centuries and ties all sites to one cultural entity (Sircar, 1973). 32 lakh (1 lakh=100,000) visitors have been recorded at the Shakti Temple of Trilokpur every year<sup>[3]</sup> and 40 lakh pilgrims visited Chintpurni Temple in Himachal Pradesh, India in 2015<sup>[4]</sup> while almost 85 lakh pilgrims were recorded at Vaishno Devi Temple, Jammu and Kashmir, India in 2018<sup>[5]</sup>.

Shaktipithas are highly venerated seats of the pan Indian Hindu Goddess Durga or Shakti. It is suggested that there are either 51 or 108 significant Shaktipithas recorded in ancient Hindu scriptures like DbP<sup>[6]</sup> (*Devi Bhagvata Purana*) and by scholars (Singh, 2013; Tate, 2006; Hari, 1992). Shaktism is a prominent Goddess worshipping sect, whose followers are called Shakta's. They worship the 'Goddess' as a Supreme power, the 'one without a second', where all other forms, female or male, are believed to be her manifestations. Shaktism's focus on feminine worship does not mean neglecting the masculine aspect of her consort Shiva; Shiva-Shakti are strongly bound to each other, but in presence of Shakti. According to DbP, the sudden death of Goddess Shakti awakened the most destructive form of Shiva. To save the world from

destruction, Lord Vishnu had cut the body of Shakti into parts. Wherever one of her body parts fell on the earth, it became a Shaktipitha, where a temple was built to worship Shiva-Shakti. Thus, emerged these popular revered Hindu pilgrimage sites called Shaktipithas. All Shaktipithas are connected by this single concept, related to their origin and function, and this acts as a strong bond promoting cultural unity among their visitors all over the world. The distribution of these goddess shrines in the country, the common rituals and festivities and the accepted merits of this pilgrimage should be visualised as binding the country and its citizens into a single cultural entity. They also act as platforms for Sanskritization, which means upgradation by allowing intermixing of lower and upper castes of Hindu society in all religious practices (Sharma and Dixit, 2014). Shaktipithas have been bringing people from diverse cultural backgrounds together for several hundred years and this has helped to constitute our valued religious heritage (Bhandari, Kaur and Grover, 2018). This is significant for community and binds followers to their cultural roots and traditions.

However, these Shaktipithas are lesser known for their cultural significance. Typically, pilgrimage to them is followed either as a ritual or as a family tradition, and nowadays is confused with religious tourism. The number of visitors to some of the most popular Shaktipithas during festivals and fairs exceeds their actual 'carrying capacity' and imposes pressure on their existing infrastructure. Large crowds leads to long queues, parking issues, lack of quality time inside the temple precinct, etc.. Furthermore, to accommodate the annually growing numbers, new visitor facilities and measures to manage crowds are being implemented, however these are further hampering pilgrim behaviour and experience.

### Shaktipitha Naina Devi, North India

India is bordered on north by the mighty Himalayas. These mountains are considered to be a rising female vortex or the goddess herself (Tate, 2005). In fact this Asian subcontinent is also referred to as the land of female force on earth and a number of Goddesses are worshipped in India at pan India, regional and local level. The Hindu community believes all goddesses are incarnations of one supreme Goddess Shakti (Singh, 2010). Hence, the subcontinent is highly important for understanding Goddess worship. Out of the listed 51 Shaktipithas, 42 of them lie in India (Hari, 1992).

2. Shaktipitha temples or Shakti Peetha, are built all over India and in SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) nations to worship Goddess Shakti in one of her diverse forms.
3. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2008/20081001/himplus1.htm#3> accessed on 19 June,2019.
4. [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/himachal-s-mata-chintpurni-shrine-goes-online-116011400879\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/himachal-s-mata-chintpurni-shrine-goes-online-116011400879_1.html) accessed on 15 June,2019.
5. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/85-lakh-pilgrims-to-visit-vaisho-devi-by-december-31-says-shrine-board-1969799> accessed on 17 June,2019.
6. One of the oldest Hindu scriptures on the concept and customs of Goddess worship.



India has a number of sacred groves, which are mostly related to a 'presiding deity' and the majority of the religious deities are from Hinduism (C.P.R, 2008). The state of Himachal Pradesh (HP) in North India, boasts a vast number of sacred groves (C.P.R, 2008). Approximately 95% of the population of this state practices Hinduism (Himachal Pradesh Religion Census, 2011) and 2000 temples / religious sites exist in the state. According to the tourism report for 2011-2012, this state witnessed one of the highest tourist numbers in the country (Tourism Survey, 2011-2012).

The state is famous for seven Goddesses commonly referred as the Shivalik Sisters, whose magnificent Shakti temples have been built in this region (Foster and Stoddard, 2010). The temples comprise Vaishno Devi Temple, Mansa Devi Temple, Chamunda Temple, Naina Devi Temple, Chintpurni Temple, Jwalamukhi Temple and Bajreshwari Temple (Lochtefeld, 2002). Out of these, six of the temples lie in HP and a survey done at the latter four temples highlighted that 86% of visitors to this state visit these temples. Naina Devi and Chintpurni Devi are the two most visited Shakti temples in the state with Naina Devi being the most popular pilgrimage destination (Vohra and Kashyap, 2014). The popularity of Naina Devi Temple and receiving official permission to conduct survey work at the site is a crucial reason for its being identified for further research and analysis to evaluate pilgrim experiences .

**Map of India illustrating location of Naina Devi Temple**



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India-locator-map-blank.svg>

## Theoretical Framework

The ASEB (activity, setting, experience and benefit) framework explores the way in which visitors to a site perceive its physical attributes or surrounding settings, the various activities that visitors are involved or participate in and the perceived outcomes of their visit, which helps in evaluation of their experiences at the site and the possible benefits that they believe they will achieve from the experience (Beeho & Prentice, 1997; Bond, Packer & Ballantyne, 2015). This study attempts to follow the ASEB framework by capturing the experiences of the pilgrims using a qualitative survey. Noteworthy, a qualitative approach captures the in-depth experiences and opinions of respondents (Mittal, Dhiman & Lamba, 2019).

## Research Method

This study is exploratory in nature and is based on naturalistic inquiry which is characterised by research in natural settings (rather than in laboratories), qualitative method and a case based approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1990; Bowen, 2008). Research on religious heritage is scarce and as a consequence there is little understanding of the field. To overcome this, a qualitative research approach has been followed. The respondents comprised twenty seven pilgrims (this is the number taken to reach saturation) and ten temple caretakers / architects who were administered a semi-structured questionnaire. The context was that the respondents are followers of the Hindu religion and were all Indian nationals. The questionnaire was administered by eight trained university interns working with an architecture firm and two faculty members of an undergraduate program in architecture. The respondents were interviewed in a restaurant near the temple after they had paid obeisance. Each interview lasted for 15-20 minutes. The objective of the research was to identify – and validate - relevant parameters upon which pilgrims evaluate their experiences at a religious heritage site. The pilgrims were interviewed until saturation point was reached and no new information could be solicited. Achieving data or theoretical saturation is integral to naturalistic inquiry (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Data saturation involves bringing new participants continually into the study until the data set is complete, as indicated by data replication or redundancy. In other words, saturation is reached when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns, when nothing new is being added. Charmaz, Denzin and

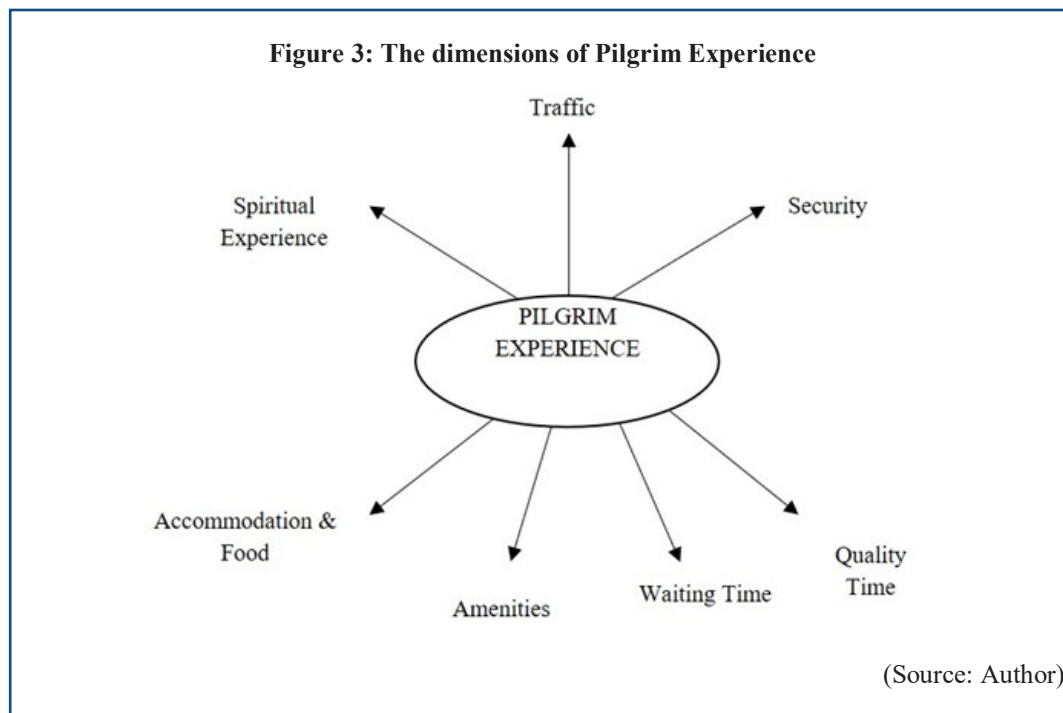
**Tale 1: Themes and codes emerging out of the study**

Theme	Codes	Theme	Codes	
<b>S1 Traffic</b> (7 occurrences)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parking problems</li> <li>• Smaller parking lots</li> <li>• Traffic jam on narrow roads</li> <li>• Paid parking but no one takes responsibility</li> <li>• Parking is very haphazard and uncared</li> <li>• Parking lots are not paved or metalled</li> <li>• Roads are not metalled</li> </ul>	<b>S4 Waiting time</b> (7 occurrences)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long standing hours</li> <li>• Long queues before the main shrine</li> <li>• Long queues begin from the entrance</li> <li>• Routes are diverted purposely to elongate the waiting time</li> <li>• Stand for hours in harsh weather</li> <li>• People are closely packed in queues which is very uncomfortable</li> <li>• Overhead bridge becomes too congested and unbearable during summers especially</li> </ul>	
	<b>S2 Security</b> (8 occurrences)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rude security personnel</li> <li>• Pushing n shooing</li> <li>• Not allowed to stand in main sanctum in festive times</li> <li>• Not allowed to stand or sit at other open spaces around the main shrine</li> <li>• Visit is highly time bound</li> <li>• Forced to keep moving in line and not experience it properly</li> <li>• Not allowed to sit in open areas around the shrines</li> <li>• Have to vacate the precinct as early as possible</li> </ul>	<b>S5 Amenities</b> (5 occurrences)
<b>S3 Spiritual Experience</b> (18 occurrences)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less time in sanctum</li> <li>• Improper and unsatisfactory obeisance</li> <li>• Offering prayers is a family custom</li> <li>• Daily rituals are visible only if you reach in early hours or are standing in the front in the queue</li> <li>• Prasad (religious offering) cannot be properly offered</li> <li>• Wishes cannot be made comfortably</li> <li>• Havan<sup>[7]</sup> space is too occupied and can't be accessed easily</li> <li>• Forced to offer prayers in the pre-defined pattern</li> <li>• No space for personal prayers / havans</li> <li>• Priests perform prayers hurriedly which is unsatisfactory</li> <li>• Priests manhandle the offerings made by visitors</li> <li>• Have to take VIP entry which is less satisfactory</li> <li>• Follow the predefined pattern but have no knowledge</li> <li>• Donation of silver eyes is pious but many do not know</li> <li>• Sacred kund / pool is lying vacant and unmaintained for years</li> <li>• Main shrine is highly inaccessible for old people who cannot climb large flight of stairs or stand in queues for 5 to 6 hours during festivals</li> <li>• Absence of facilities or easy access for old people</li> <li>• No separate lines for women and kids and have to face problems</li> </ul>	<b>S6 Accommodation and Food</b> (9 occurrences)	
	<b>S7 Quality time</b> (5 occurrences)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memorable time is restricted to 2-3 seconds of prayers</li> <li>• Lack of quality time</li> <li>• Absence of visitor spaces to spend quality time or self chantings</li> <li>• The visitor waiting hall is too small to sit for longer</li> <li>• One has to vacate visitor hall in short time period to accommodate others</li> </ul>

7. A special prayer that is performed by making offerings in fire in presence of a priest.

8. The food that is served to visitors in religious places after being offered to the deity.





ASEB framework it is important to evaluate and manage pilgrim experiences, and these seven themes are very critical dimensions to measure pilgrim experiences. Each theme (or dimension) is discussed in detail in the following sections.

### ***Traffic***

Traffic congestion is a frequent occurrence and concern at pilgrimage sites. It delays the estimated arrival time of visitors and also creates uncertainty in their minds regarding the time that will be spent on site; it negatively affects their reverence towards and perspective of the destination they are visiting (Morgan, 2013). This assertion is actively supported by Shyr, Chao & Huang (2015) who propose that the mindset of the visitors to a sacred site is badly affected and changed by poor and chaotic traffic conditions. Traffic congestion happens to be a chief attribute of a religious trip that has the power to strongly affect visitor behaviour. It comprises several traits like the issue of overcrowding, the total distance travelled, the elongated time spent travelling due to human and vehicular congestions and finally the impact of this delayed additional time on the overall time of the trip. Traffic jams have been defined as the time taken for travel or postponement in addition to the agreed norm, which varies due to difference in mode of transport selected, the particular time of the day when visit has been conducted, the travel approach and the topographical conditions of the site (Mathew, 2012). The interviews on site brought to light similar facts that there is frequent traffic congestion during festive

season at Naina Devi site. The pilgrims face a number of problems like un-surfaced narrow roads which lead to long queues that start 1-2 km away from the temple parking lot, haphazard parking of cars, unofficial parking lots, paid parking with no one to guide the visitors, etc.. These all create inconvenience for visitors and affect the tourist behaviour strongly and impact the scheduled time for the visit by compromising the spiritual time inside the complex that the visitor had planned. All this affects their sacred experience inside the temple complex.

### ***Security***

Safety and security are two significant conditions for any form of travel and tourism. In the last two decades, the features of visitor safety and their security have gained an increase significance (Kovari & Zimanyi, 2011). The security of travellers and their safety has become a multifaceted conception that comprises a wide range of aspects like political security, communal safety, health hazards and sanitation issues, personal data safety, lawful protection of travellers, consumer protection, safety in communication, disaster mitigation and protection from environmental hazards, getting authentic information, assuring quality services to ensure their safety, etc.

Tourist security has modified itself from a minor factor to a crucial element that has an imperative influence on tourism (Hall, Timothy & Duval, 2012). Hence, this calls for coordinated efforts at various levels like among the tourism officials and the tourism sector, the



ever-growing media, the government officials and the non-governmental organisations, along with other interested voluntary groups. The respondents on site complained about many aspects related to security and the security officials that are deployed in Naina Devi during peak festive season. The security personnel, to manage the crowd, are often very rude to pilgrims and keep pushing and directing them to quickly complete their obeisance and leave the temple complex. The pilgrims travel from far off corners of the country to offer prayers but are not allowed to stand in the main sanctum even for a minute and are not allowed to sit / stand in open spaces around shrine during peak hours which seriously upsets them and affects the spiritual experience and satisfaction for which they come to the shrine.

### *Spiritual Experience*

Considering contemporary transformations in the modes whereby people seek transcendence in life, religious journeys have become an important ritual in the emerging spiritual market (Heelas *et al.*, 2005). Fedele (2012), for example, refers to the growing religious traveller, and has coined the term 'new pilgrims' which means those religious visitors who visit sacred traditional sites for different reasons than the traditional pilgrims. Others refer to this as 'unchurching' (Wood, 2007), or 'discursive shifts' (Fedele, 2012) or 'subjective turns' (Heelas *et al.*, 2005) which are shifting from religion to a broadly defined spirituality. The survey brought forward the changed concept of spiritual satisfaction which is not new in Hindu ideology but, earlier it was associated with 'moksha' or salvation and a better life after death for which pilgrims undertake a pilgrimage and perform associated rituals. Today, however, the shifting trend of pilgrimage to religious tourism has moderated the concept of spiritual satisfaction to offering obeisance comfortably, taking some time, seeking your wishes and then leaving the main sanctum. Some of the visitors may enhance their spiritual satisfaction and thereby their spiritual experience by sitting or chanting in open spaces around the shrine and giving themselves time to feel connections with the supreme.

Considering the present scenario, security only allows visitors a limited time in main sanctum and around the shrines and often manhandle the offerings made by visitors, directing them to hastily perform their prayers. Also, many elements which add to the overall spiritual experience, like the sacred pool lacks maintenance; the hawan kund (container for sacred fire) is deteriorating

in appearance; the sacred gates are rusting, these and other evidence of neglect hamper the pilgrim experience.

### *Waiting Time*

Waiting time and standing in queues has a negative effect on customer satisfaction in the context of any service delivery process (Mittal, 2016). While it is important to reduce waiting time by innovative methods such as advance bookings (online), the actual waiting time can also be made more comfortable by providing facilities (drinking water, TV screens, weather protection etc.) for the visitors. The key is to make waiting time as comfortable and satisfying as possible (Li, 2010; Tom & Lucey, 1997; Gnoth, Bigne & Andreu, 2006). The pilgrims at Naina Devi temple face long waiting hours standing in queues in extreme weather conditions which often extend to 3-4 hours depending on the footfall.

The overhead bridge that leads to the main temple entrance is narrow and becomes congested especially in summer season. The temple lacks facilities like projection screens to show the sanctum proceedings, weather protection screens or shelters, as well as visitor waiting facilities so that the long waiting hours could be made slightly comfortable. The temple authorities do devise special elongated queuing systems at the temple complex in the festive season to manage the crowd, but, it in turn increases the pilgrim waiting time, majorly affecting their experience.

### *Amenities*

Prior research has shown that public facilities such as resting places, toilets, drinking water, garbage bins, general cleanliness and hygienic surroundings have a positive impact on tourist experience (Ramakumar & Shinde, 2008; Hassan & Iankova, 2012; Ali & Howaidee, 2012). The temple receives a huge footfall during festivals and annual fairs during which the visitor amenities fall short. Portable service units are installed at some locations in the complex which are not maintained to acceptable hygiene levels and the service (toilet) blocks are located at far off locations which are inaccessible for children and older visitors. The complex also has open drains along the main approach routes which look dirty.

### ***Accommodation and Food***

According to Gunn and Var (2002) availability of accommodation and quality restaurants is considered to be critical when it comes to the development of a tourism site. There are a number of hotels and lodges near the temple and the temple has visitor lodges where accommodation and bedding are provided on first come first served basis. However, the visitor numbers are so high that they exceed the local 'carrying capacity'. Many of the people who cannot afford expensive rooms in nearby hotels opt to sleep either in open areas or the corridors of the temple at night. The dining hall is not at a very obvious location and has limited capacity, and so, food is served in the open stadium near the entrance where visitors suffer the extremes of the local weather. The food junctions inside the temple are not very hygienic and generally charge high prices at busy times.

### ***Quality Time***

According to Raj and Morpeth (2007), in olden times, pilgrims undertook religious journeys across difficult terrain on foot, and participated in all rituals under the expert assistance of priests. They fulfilled the true motive of their journey and built their sacred experiences by spending quality time in the complex where they were free regarding the time spent on site. On the contrary, today's pilgrims are governed by multiple factors; they opt for mechanised transport methods, have personal time constraints, and are controlled on site in terms of time spent and places where they spend their time. This makes them feel that their quality time on-site is restricted to 2-3 seconds when they can offer prayers in the main sanctum. They are limited regarding entry to the site, being restricted to accessible visitor spaces; in addition, tight security arrangements are in place. These are some of the reasons due to which their memorable quality time is compromised in the site and their level of spiritual satisfaction is also affected (Bhandari, 2019).

### **Conclusions**

The pursuit of happiness is a much sought after outcome of a pilgrim's visit to a religious location (Kim, Kim & King, 2016) and the general experience of the pilgrim tends to moderate this outcome. The outcome of this study can be seen to identify strong interconnections between the parameters identified and the pilgrim experience at such religious heritage sites. The research applied the ASEB framework to evaluate visitor experiences and these experiences have been verified at a popular Shaktipitha site in north India. In order to seek a holistic experience and its associated benefits, the agencies and organisations managing a pilgrimage site need to remove or reduce the inhibiting factors and focus on the facilitating factors. The dimensions identified in the research (Figure 3) indicate, unsurprisingly, that while the quest for spirituality remains the major dimension describing a pilgrim's experience, issues such as accommodation and food, security and traffic, are, however, equally important components of the overall pilgrim experience.

The word cloud (Figure 2) illustrates that some salient issues (based on the size of the word in the cloud) that affect and moderate the pilgrim experience which cropped up during the interviews are *hours, time, queues, visitor, prayers, facilities, parking* and so on. The findings of this study will help to contribute to the current body of knowledge by creating an awareness regarding parameters / themes that shape and affect the pilgrim experience at a religious site.

### **Future Scope and Limitations**

This research opens up many new avenues for further research on similar themes to evaluate pilgrim experience in more depth and finally devising some means to upgrade their sacred experience for which they undertake such pilgrimages. This research is a naturalistic inquiry based on a natural setting which will serve as a prototype for evaluating similar parameters in future qualitative research on similar religious heritage sites in India and outside India. The limitations of this study are also an inspiration and opportunity to do more. Specifically, a qualitative study could be followed by a quantitative study wherein one could have a large representative sample and data collection could be based on a scientifically developed questionnaire which may capture some of the themes that have emerged in this exploratory study.

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