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Pilgrim Experience and Revisit Intention Post COVID-19: An Exploratory Study of Amarnath Holy Shrine in Jammu and Kashmir, India

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The present preliminary study seeks to explore the pilgrim tourist experience and their revisit intentions post-COVID pandemic. Data were collected at the Amarnath Holy Shrine in Jammu and Kashmir, India, using a combination of primary and secondary sources, including seven in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews with pilgrims using the snowball sampling technique. Five main themes were found regarding revisiting intentions, including ease of registration, safety and security, health facilities, accommodation facilities, food and beverage services, and connectivity of the destinations. The study highlights that despite COVID-19, most respondents agree to return to visit the holy Amarnath Cave as they felt that they would not be affected by COVID-19 in the future. This research has implications for tourists' safety and security concerns at religious sites, including highlighting the need for proper infrastructure development to enhance the sustainability of religious destinations. Regarding social impacts, the local administration must make efforts to carry out the pilgrimage in a sustainable way post-COVID-19, following new procedures to ensure the safety and health of the tourist and the local community. The Shrine board and Local administration must formally implement these standards via formal Standards of Procedure (SOP).

Key Words: COVID-19, religious tourism, intention to revisit, Amarnath Cave-Shrine, J&K, India

Introduction

Pilgrimage, as 'A journey to a distant sacred goal' (Barber, 1991:1), has a long history and exists in some form or other in most world religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Travel also has a long history, with the term 'traveller' having Latin roots (*tornus*), referring to a person who makes a circumlocutory excursion, for the most part for joy, and returns home after their trip. The contemporary utilisation of the term, recognising the 'pilgrim' as a religious traveller and the 'visitor' as a vacationer, is a socially built dichotomy that considers the voyagers' thought processes (Smith, 1992). While pilgrimage and travel have long been recognised as a viable field of study by medievalists and history of travel industry specialists (Smith, 1992), during the 1990s, interested scholars from various disciplines were researching pilgrimage and other types of spiritual journeys. This was in part

because, whether traditional and religious or modern and secular, pilgrimage was, and still is, encountering a resurgence around the globe, with religious and secular sites being the travel goal of people in search of meaning (Digance, 2003). Today, there is a burgeoning literature on pilgrimage and religious tourism, with scholars using pilgrimage travel as a lens to examine several political, social, behavioral, financial, and geographic areas of research (e.g., Smith, 1992; Vukonic, 1996; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Olsen & Timothy, 2022).

Past examinations and conceptualisations of religious tourism have demonstrated how religious tourism differs from other niche markets within the travel industry (Nyikana, 2017). Considering the significance of religious tourism and the absence of research regarding the experience of pilgrims (Huang & Chu, 2020), the present study explores the spiritual experience of pilgrims visiting Amarnath Cave / Shrine (a Sacred Hindu Temple

of Goddess Shiva) in Jammu and Kashmir, India. Many industry-focused publications talk of how religious tourism is a 'rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry' (Griffin & Raj, 2018). For instance, 84 papers on religious tourism and pilgrimage were published between 1983 and 2018 in 12 leading tourism journals (Kim & King, 2020). In this context of growth, Amarnath is one of India's most famous pilgrimage destinations organised by the State Government of Jammu and Kashmir every year. The Shrine plays an essential part in Hindu culture and is considered one of the holiest shrines. Every year 'Amarnath Yatra' is marked by 'Pratham Pujan' (first worship), which is said to summon the blessings of Baba Amarnath (Sacred Hindu Temple of Goddess Shiva). This event attracts many devotees from all over the world to this remarkable place, which claims not only to be a significant heavenly place but also a site of general gathering of religious tourists. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the pilgrim experience during 2019 and also examine pilgrims' revisiting intention post-COVID-19. More particularly, the study investigates the impact of religious tourism experience on overall satisfaction and revisiting intention.

Travel for religious purposes is considered the oldest form of tourism (Zamani-Farahani & Eid, 2016). On a basic level, people visit sacred sites for various reasons, ranging from touring and entertainment to seeking divine power, to be healed, and to receive blessings (Božic, Spasojevic, Vujicic & Stamenkovic, 2016). There has been a sharp increase in published books, book chapters, and journal articles on the intersections between pilgrimage and tourism (Digence, 2003; Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

Prior to the 1990s, pilgrimage as a research idea was scarce and the activity was considered to be a minor market niche. The origins of its study, however, can be traced back to concepts and theories – primarily developed by sociologists and anthropologists – that were examined in the tourism literature of the 1970s and 1980s and focused on the 'visitor experience' and the psychosocial dynamics that underpin various forms of tourism, including pilgrimage (Cohen, 1979, 1992a, 1992b, 1998; Jackson & Hudman, 1995; MacCannell, 1973; Turner & Turner, 1969, 1978). In the 1990s, new ideas and concepts were incorporated into pilgrimage research, including Smith's continuum of travel from

'pilgrim' as a religious traveler to 'tourist' as a vacationer (Smith, 1992); the heterogeneity of pilgrimage and pilgrimage as a forum for competing for religious and secular discourses (Eade & Sallnow, 1991); two distinct types of pilgrimage centers – formal and informal (Cohen, 1992a); and the complex relationship between tourism and pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner, 2010, 2016).

In current use, the term 'pilgrimage' simply implies a religious tour. Occasionally the word pilgrimage is utilised in various secular settings, for instance, visits to war graves or the graves and habitations of famous people. One example is Elvis Presley's mansion and burial chamber in Memphis (Reader & Walter, 1993; Alderman, 2002) or the visit to graveyards, churchyards, and funerary destinations sacred and secular (Seaton, 1999). Researchers have started to consider the developing business sector for 'New Age' spiritual travel for Pilgrimage, self-awareness, and non-conventional spiritual practices (Attix, 2002; Munro, 2017). This refers to expanding measures of exploration committed to modern secular Pilgrimage where the quest for the miraculous is a characteristic mutual by recent secular Pilgrimage (Digance, 2003).

Review of Literature

Pilgrimage Tourism Experience

Pilgrimage is a rapidly evolving phrase and practice that has developed from a solely religious concept to now embrace both the sacred and the secular (Badone & Roseman, 2004). A pilgrimage is defined as

A journey motivated by religious or spiritual inspiration, undertaken by individuals or groups, to a location deemed more sacred or beneficial than the everyday environment, to seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object to obtain spiritual, emotional, or physical healing or benefit (Margry, 2008:17).

Pilgrimages exemplify the intersection of 'numerous cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental dimensions of society,' which have been studied by scholars from 'geography, religious studies, anthropology, and cognate disciplines' (Buzinde, Kalaver, Kohli & Manuel-Navarrete, 2014:2).

As a form of leisure travel, a pilgrimage is not regarded as a religious occurrence (Hyde & Harman, 2011). Pilgrimages have been classified as either religious or secular because sometimes spiritual, cultural, recreational, educational (Hughes *et al.*, 2013) and celebratory objectives can dominate religious ones (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). However, Graburn (1983) proposes that visitors and pilgrims can undergo a process during a pilgrimage, namely one related to self-transformation, knowledge and status (Graburn, 1983). In Barber's (1993) view, the objective of pilgrimage tourism can be divided into two categories: involvement in sacred destinations and perceptions of one's inner spirit.

Understanding pilgrimage as an activity distinct from other leisure pursuits demonstrates the need to tease out its relationship to tourism. A common moniker for people who combine pilgrimage with tourism is the term 'pilgrimage tourist' (Turner & Turner, 1978). These days, travellers are increasingly interested in discovering, experiencing, participating in, learning about, and becoming a part of daily life in destinations where they can do all of these things (Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Simone-Charteris & Boyd, 2011). Tourists who go on pilgrimages are immersed in the culture and religion of the countries they visit and their daily lives. Most pilgrims go through a temporary (or sometimes permanent) shift in their outlook on life and relationship with the sacred and God (Pavicic *et al.*, 2007).

Spiritual experiences can be had by tourists and pilgrims while on vacation. Travelling can offer people a spirituality that is marked by transcendence and connection. There are two sorts of pilgrimage experiences, those that involve spirituality and those that involve social unity, according to Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli, and Manuel-Navarrete (2014). Spiritual experiences are linked to pilgrims' perceptions of divinity, whereas social unity experiences refer to feelings of 'union, solidarity, or belonging' not constrained by a person's social station (Buzinde *et al.*, 2014:12). By participating in residents' and believers' rituals and investigating the personal meaning of experiences (Thomas *et al.*, 2018), pilgrimage visitors can get information about the local culture that they or their friends are unlikely to encounter at home. As a result, a pilgrimage is a physical journey that can offer educational possibilities and aids pilgrims in discovering

new information about themselves and their identities while encouraging spirituality (Geertz, 1966).

Behavioural / Revisiting Intention & Experience

Behavioural intention can be defined as

the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein as cited in Liu & Jang, 2009:339).

Thus, behavioural intention is a rational construct to forecast future behaviour. Various studies (e.g., González, Comesaña & Brea, 2007; Petrick, 2004; Chen & Chen, 2010) have suggested various factors that indicate tourists' behavioural intentions, such as customer satisfaction, quality, perceived value, motivation, and experience. Within the travel industry, the positive behavioural intention of vacationers is a significant objective for fulfilling their travel goals and repeat patronage. Studies from various scholars propose that different variables, such as service encounter, traveller inspiration, the fulfilment of desires at accommodation units, quality or perceived worth (e.g., Choi & Chu, 2001; Alegre & Cladera, 2009; Chang, 2013; Nazki, 2018) are the principal determinants of behavioural intention.

According to earlier research, several authors pointed out the importance of visitors' experiences as pre-visit characteristics that predict whether or not they will return (Hsu & Crotts, 2006; Oh *et al.*, 2007; Cole & Chancellor, 2009; Chen & Funk, 2010; Hosany & Witham, 2010). However, few studies (e.g., Weed, 2005; Hosany & Witham, 2010) have established a favourable correlation between these parameters observed during a visit and repeat patronage. Although several studies have examined the relationship between pre-visitation influence factors and revisit intentions, such as destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Huang & Hsu, 2009), or the effect of pre-visit motivation and post-visit satisfaction on tourists' revisit intentions (Huang & Hsu, 2009), there remains a dearth of studies examining the relationship between the antecedents of tourists' revisit intentions and how they affect the tourist's revisit intention for a place. This may be due to a lack of theoretical and empirical evidence (Um *et al.*, 2006). As a result, this study addresses this gap by studying revisit intentions of Pilgrimage tourists Post COVID-19.

Figure 1: Cave Temple of Lord Amarnath

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cave_Temple_of_Lord_Amarnath.jpg

Study Site

The main focus of this study was to explore the role of the tourist experience in predicting behavioural intentions to visit pilgrimage sites such as the Amarnath Shrine in the Kashmir Valley in India. The Holy Amarnath Cave / Shrine is a sacred Hindu site located in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir in India. The cave is 3,888m above sea level and is approximately 141 km from Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir. The site is reached by traveling through the town of Pahalgam and The holy cave (Figure 1) is surrounded by mountains which are covered by snow throughout the year.

The cave is considered to be one of the holiest shrines for Hindus in India. In the month of Shravan (July - August), devotees make the annual pilgrimage to Amarnath Cave, crossing the challenging mountainous terrain. The holy cave is 40m in height and is covered in stalagmites. The Cave is considered by Hindus to be a Shiva Linga¹. Millions of devotees trek through the mountains to the Shri Amarnathji Shrine in South Kashmir every year

1 A 'Shiva Linga', is an abstract or aniconic representation of the Hindu god Shiva in Shaivism

(see Figure 2) throughout the summer months to pay obeisance. The Shrine is managed by the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB), which is also responsible for managing the Shri Amarnathji Yatra and up-grading facilities for holy pilgrims. Two years ago, the SASB struggled with the decision of whether or not they should hold the Amarnath Yatra due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The decision was made to hold the Yatra (religious visit) but in a limited form. They organisers stressed that all standard operating procedures (SOPs) of COVID-19 would be followed with full strictness during the Yatra to stop the impact of COVID-19.

Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature in that its primary impetus is to investigate the pilgrims' experience and perception of revisit intention post-covid-19. A mixed methodology was adopted. Data were collected by using both primary and secondary sources. The data from secondary sources were collected from published literature in leading journals, books and government publications available at the national and international level.

Figure 2: Location of Jammu and Kashmir

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jammu_and_Kashmir_in_India_\(de-facto\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jammu_and_Kashmir_in_India_(de-facto).svg)

Primary data were collected by using in-depth semi-structured interviews with the pilgrims who visited at least once. According to Longhurst (2009), one person may get the information from another by asking questions or verbal interchanges. Even though the interviewers prepared a list of predetermined questions, they allowed participants to discuss issues they wanted to talk about. The unit of analysis was pilgrims who had already visited the Holy Amarnath Shrine in the Kashmir Valley. It was a challenge to find pilgrims who had undertaken the Yatra in July 2019 and were planning to visit again in 2020. Therefore, the snowball sampling technique was used (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017) to network with those who had participated in the pilgrimage.

A total of seven in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2020, the researchers contacted the Shiva Samiti Association from Punjab, India, and the members of other pilgrimage associations to get in contact with pilgrims who had visited in July 2019. Other respondents were identified by following the Snowball sampling technique. The respondents who were interviewed had paid obeisance at the holy cave /shrine at least once, with the most recent visit being in 2019. According to Burns and Grove (1993), Mason (2010) and

Naderifar *et al.* (2017), a researcher may continue with data collection until they believe they have reached data saturation. Data saturation is a subjective phenomenon, but is achieved when it is felt that more observations and interviews will not affect the interpretation of the results. Therefore in the present study, because the research is exploratory, sufficient data saturation was achieved after the seventh interview and the researcher did not feel the need to conduct further interviews.

The following questions were asked over the phone to seven pilgrims who had participated in pilgrimage to Shri Amarnath Holy Cave:

- Q1.** What were the various motivating factors that made you want to make the pilgrimage to Amarnath Shrine in 2019?
- Q2.** What was your personal experience while undertaking the 2019 pilgrimage?
- Q3.** Will you revisit the Shrine if pilgrimage trips to the Holy Cave resume again in 2020 or in the future?
- Q4.** What suggestions would you provide to the local administration/Shri Shrine Board regarding enhancing the pilgrimage experience in the future?

Presentation of Findings

Initially, twenty people were contacted over the phone for participation in the telephone conversation, seven of them gave their consent to participate while the remaining were busy with their schedules. Regarding the demographic profile the seven respondents who had visited Amarnath Holy Cave / Shrine in July- August 2019, six were male and only one was female. Four of the respondents were in the 30 to 45 age range, with two respondents between 20 to 30 years of age and one belonging to the 46 to 60 age group.

Theme 1: Spiritual Uplift

Blackwell (2010) noted that pilgrimage motivation is multifaceted and plays a pivotal role in determining why tourists / pilgrims travel. In this study, several motivations were listed as to why respondents undertook their pilgrimage journey. One of the most important motivations was the development of spiritual fulfilment. As some respondents noted,

I visited this holy cave for the development of spiritual upliftment and spiritual solace (R2).

I myself motivated my family members to pay homage at the cave, especially to my wife .. I told her ... let's go for prayer and seek an internal peace by visiting together (R5).

In addition to spiritual upliftment, one respondent commented that being connected with a specific association motivates him to engage in pilgrimage:

I thank Shiva Samiti, who motivated my friends and me to undertake this journey and supported us financially. I think I got this opportunity with a wish of Lord Shiva (R1).

Theme 2: Ease of Registration for the Pilgrimage / Tour

The second theme of the study was the 'ease of registration' for the holy journey. A pilgrimage that offers high-quality service, engaging experiences, and a distinct and recognisable image is highly likely to be chosen, revisited, and recommended by tourists (Chang, Li & Vincent, 2020). The researchers viewed that information and communication tools (ICTs) played an essential role in enhancing the religious experience and tourism experiences by offering a hassle-free online registration

process and travel formalities (De Asceniis, Mutangala, & Cantoni, 2018). The views of many of the respondents (R1, R2, R5, and R7) can be best summarised by the following statement:

The process for the getting registered for the journey is easy and encourages all the peoples to get themselves registered ... in Jammu and Kashmir (R1).

Another respondent showed concern about the required formalities concerning health check-ups:

It is effortless to register though we have to undergo certain medical check-ups and formalities (R4).

The findings confirmed that the registration process for pilgrims to visit is easy, which was also acknowledged by other respondents (R1, R2, R3, and R5).

I did my registration at PNB bank where a separate counter was there, and the whole process was so easy (R6).

Theme 2: Accessibility and Transportation Facilities

Physical access issues are a major problem in tourism. Destinations with high quality accessibility leads to the enhancement of the experience. At the same time, the inaccessible environment represents a significant barrier to people in tourism (Eichhorn & Buhalis, 2011). The respondents agreed that the destination is well connected with air, road and train transportation to Jammu. As R6 explained,

Regarding the accessibility, I feel that accessibility from Jammu to the Holy Shrine and other parts of the country are comfortable and easily available. We reported to Jammu base camp and started our journey in our Bus early in the morning on the next day (R6).

Further, respondent R7 pointed out that

The tour is not expensive at all; even a person who has a minimum of five thousand rupees in his pocket may undertake this holy pilgrimage journey (R7).

These quotes suggest that the means of transportation available from the Jammu (Jammu & Kashmir) base camp and the other states of India are pretty comfortable and also affordable. However, respondent R1 said that

the bad road from Jammu to Srinagar creates anxiety and tension for pilgrims.

Regarding the road connectivity, of course, road connectivity from Jammu to Srinagar is there, but it's cumbersome due to one-way traffic, road widening, especially from Ramban to Banihal ... During our travel, we were stuck there for 8-10 hours, and even at the time of return, it took us much time to travel (R1).

Theme 3: Safety, Securities & Health Facilities

Safety and security are essential aspects of the tourism industry and influence tourists' decisions to visit their destination (Mastroianni, 2017). Moreover, safety and security are critical for tourism destinations to enhance their image and provide a positive experience. (Fuchs & Pizam, 2011; Santos, Silva & Amorim, 2018).

All of the respondents felt that the safety and security arrangements during the journey were adequate, that the security forces, local staff, and local community were very supportive of their safety, and that sufficient medical facilities and check-up centres were available on the way to the Holy Cave.

To avoid any mishaps due to natural disasters and other types of crisis during the holy journey, the security forces and local administration keep a very close eye on the weather forecast, rains, falling stone coming on the road and the health and medical facilities. All the arrangements were in place, and that too was free of charge (R7).

Throughout the journey, there were persons of security and health deployed at each centre. They were helping the tourists during any exigency or emergency or at the time of health problems. Moreover, there were specific announcement systems along the roadside, and speakers reverberated by informing or warning us at the time of any calamity like heavy rains, strong wind or cloud bursts (R1).

Yes, I was delighted with the safety and security arrangements. I have been visiting the Shrine since 2009 and I am accustomed to the position and other security aspects. In our group, certain persons were first-timers; they were worried about their safety and security, especially of terror attacks due to militancy in the Kashmir valley. But I didn't worry during my last visit

and I am willing to come again and again despite activism in the valley (R6).

Theme 4: Crisis/Disaster Management

Avraham and Ketter (2008) state that to attract residents, visitors, and investors, destinations must continuously improve their image, particularly when a crisis or disaster impacts the destination - they must enhance visitor perceptions of the place. All of the respondents felt that the administration and Shrine Board had taken the necessary steps to mitigate any natural disaster and crises during the pilgrimage.

Regarding disaster / crisis management, the government actively makes announcements or alarming signals from time to time about snow / rains. They also pause the Yatra, even from starting point, if there are any storms, thunder or showers / rains, we have been stopped one day when there were falling stones, and heavy rains were also predicted (R-5).

...the small part of the road, which I took by foot almost comprises of seven to eight kilometres, was slippery, and there was a danger of getting injured due to falling stones, and it was wet as well. But we were assisted at every point by the authorities (R-3).

Theme 5: Accommodation and Food & Beverages Services

Accommodation is a significant component of the tourism industry. Vidhya and Selvam (2019) note that accommodation such as hotels, guest houses, and other forms of lodging should be adequately maintained and cleaned and that staff behaviour and attitude should be hospitable and service-oriented. During the telephone interviews, all of the respondents acknowledged that the local government, local community, Shrine Board, and other organisations had done an excellent job regarding the available accommodation and food and beverage facilities. As one of the respondents explained,

I was offered tents with my wife and daughters, but I choose one private tent services which the local people were offering, and regarding the food & beverages, there were a variety of food & beverages stalls, distributing food and beverages free of cost, although the food on payment was also available from the local vendors near to tents (R3).

Intention to Revisit Post-COVID -19 Pandemic

The respondents were asked regarding their intentions to revisit the Holy Cave / Shrine, especially post COVID-19. More specifically, they were asked if they would go on another pilgrimage once the Cave / Shrine was open or if they would wait. All the respondents except R6 confirmed that they would like to travel and pay homage to the Holy Cave as soon as possible. R6 stated that he would not ask people to join the Yatra and wait until the COVID-19 pandemic was truly over. Respondent R1 stated,

Yes, as I told you earlier, it becomes a divine habit for me, and I don't care about any kind of risk, but I would prefer to come up as a sole traveller or with an existing group this time and I will avoid joining or being associated with new peoples this time due to COVID-19. I will visit again if it is thrown open by the Shrine Board (R1).

Many of the respondents seemed to have great faith and trust in Lord Shiva that they would not be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they would take risks with the belief that nothing is going to happen to their health.

I have trust and confidence in Lord Shiva, he will take care of everything, COVID-19 came as per his will and will vanish as per his will and wish. I feel so confident, and I am ready to take risks because I trust and have faith that corona would not happen to us while paying our obeisance there (R1).

I will recommend to all my friends and relatives to visit the holy cave shrine, those who have anxiety and are concerned about safety & security due to ongoing political crises and terrorist activities. I would like to suggest that there is no fear and that our God will always protect us from evil. Moreover, it is easy to register for Yatra and is not costly because of the government and shrine board. They put all the effort into making all the arrangements efficiently and effectively. Pilgrims can always opt for helicopter services, a Pithuwala or a Palkis² (R2).

2 A Pithuwala is a person who carries luggage, usually on their back; a Palkis is a 'litter' or sedan chair - carried by two or more people.

I have been the part of the holy journey for the last five years, and COVID-19 can't stop me, I want to come again and again to my deity as he is the creator and whatever is happening happens for good and per his will, and I have faith he will save our life (R5).

Conclusion

The present study aimed to understand the pilgrimage tourist experience and the intention of pilgrims towards Amarnath Holy Cave / Shrine in India post-COVID. The study findings reveal that the main motivation of people who visited the holy Cave/Shrine was finding eternal peace for their soul and the related emotions attached to visiting the cave. The study highlights a number of emergent themes from primary research concerning tourist experiences - the ease of registration, safety and security, health facilities, accommodation facilities, food and beverage services, and connectivity of the destinations.

Arising from these findings issues such as crowd management and carrying capacity should be taken into consideration when managing the pilgrimage / religious journey. The safety and security of the pilgrims must be ensured and the local government may also need to improve the health facilities available at the shrine. The road / route to the shrine has been upgraded and macadamised.

Almost all the respondents agreed that they would visit the site when it was reopened post-COVID pandemic, therefore, there are implications for the local stakeholders and administration to provide essential services for pilgrims by following new SOP's issued by the Government / Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare concerning registration payments, transportation, accommodations, and food and beverage services. All stakeholders should also be aware of the highest standards in these new SOPs, and thus, training sessions should be provided. In view of the ongoing pandemic and fear of the spread of infection, the following suggestions may be given to the local administration and stakeholders:

1. Large numbers of pilgrims should not be permitted at the site until the COVID pandemic is completely under control or is over;
2. Singing should not be allowed, but recorded religious songs may be played;
3. All pilgrims should be responsible for their own essential toiletries and bedding;
4. Pilgrims should bring and use personal mats and handkerchiefs / pieces of cloth;
5. The distribution of holy water and food offerings should not be allowed inside the premises of shrines / temples;
6. Authorities should ensure that all entrances have sanitisation dispensers and thermal screenings;
7. Masks / face covers should be mandatory for all pilgrims and staff members;
8. All food and beverage items, especially natural Ayurveda³, offered to pilgrims should follow the highest standards of health and safety, thus, increasing immunity and enabling the pilgrims to avoid any infection due to the Covid pandemic.

Applications and Recommendations

This study's findings reveal that pilgrims are satisfied but concerned about the road connectivity and pilgrimage path that leads to the Shrine / Cave from the Base Camp. Therefore, the government and other tourism stakeholders should make an effort to upgrade and maintain the driving and pedestrian roads to the Holy Cave. There should be proper fencing to protect from stones falling from the mountains throughout the pilgrimage path to minimise the risk of injuries to the devotees. The crowd management and sustainability aspects of the destination, especially the Pahalgam (i.e., the Base Camp), should be taken care of, including the avoidance of over-crowding and minimisation of risks to the local ecology. As such, carrying capacity needs to be addressed, not just along the pilgrimage route but also at the Base Camp. Efforts to plan for disaster mitigation should also be considered through collaboration between local administration, the local community, and other associations / NGOs to provide a safe and healthy environment for the destination's community. Regarding accommodation and food facilities, while pilgrims are generally satisfied, more can be done regarding hygiene and sanitation, particularly where there are concerns about cooking and serving standards at food stalls.

Limitations

This paper presents the findings of exploratory research, and despite the small study sample, interesting findings were received. Further research could explore the themes of this paper more deeply and/or with a larger audience of respondents. Another limitation of the present research is that only one pilgrimage site was selected for the study. Further studies are encouraged to conduct research at more multicultural sites to examine different tourist motivations and revisit intentions, especially COVID-19. The researcher plans to undertake further studies focussing on the pilgrim's post-COVID-19 trip experiences and satisfaction.

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³ Ayurveda is a natural system of medicine, originated in India more than 3,000 years ago.

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