

Economic Benefits and Challenges of Religious Tourism on Budget Hotels in Northern India: A Financial Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Religious tourism is a vital component of Northern India's hospitality industry, significantly benefiting budget hotels in pilgrimage destinations like Haridwar, Amritsar, and Varanasi. These hotels experience high demand during religious festivals, enabling dynamic pricing strategies and increased revenue. However, financial challenges arise during off-peak seasons when demand drops, leading to reduced occupancy and competition from alternative accommodations. This paper examines the economic benefits and challenges of religious tourism on budget hotels, highlighting the role of government support and strategic partnerships with religious institutions. The study emphasizes the importance of balancing pricing strategies and improving services based on guest feedback to maintain financial sustainability.

Keywords: Religious tourism, Budget hotels, Northern India, Dynamic pricing, Financial sustainability, Pilgrimage destinations

1. Introduction

Religious tourism has long been a significant part of India's tourism industry, particularly in Northern India, which is home to many of the country's most sacred sites. Religious travelers, pilgrims, and tourists visit these sites seeking spiritual solace, religious rituals, or cultural experiences. This form of tourism is particularly attractive to budget-conscious travelers who often prefer low-cost accommodations, leading to a proliferation of budget hotels near religious destinations. Budget hotels are small to medium-sized establishments offering affordable lodging with basic amenities, making them suitable for religious tourists who prioritize access to spiritual sites over luxury accommodations.

This paper explores the financial benefits and challenges that religious tourism brings to budget hotels in Northern India, especially in cities like Haridwar, Amritsar, Varanasi, and Katra, which are frequented by religious tourists year-round. The study investigates the seasonal fluctuations in demand, pricing strategies, and the overall financial performance of budget hotels in these regions. Given the cyclical nature of religious festivals and pilgrimages, budget hotels face varying levels of occupancy throughout the year. Understanding how they navigate these financial challenges, especially during the off-peak seasons, is crucial to assessing their long-term sustainability.

The study focuses on two key areas: the economic opportunities that religious tourism presents for budget hotels and the financial challenges during periods of low demand. By examining these factors, the paper aims to provide insights into the financial dynamics of budget hotels and propose strategies to overcome the difficulties they face.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate how religious tourism financially affects budget hotels in Northern India.
2. To explore the factors contributing to the financial challenges during off-peak religious seasons.
3. To propose strategies to overcome financial challenges during low-demand periods.

2. Literature Review

Religious tourism has grown rapidly in recent decades, with millions of pilgrims and tourists flocking to religious sites worldwide (Agarwal & Sharma, 2024). In India, religious tourism plays a crucial role in the hospitality industry, particularly in Northern India, where destinations like Vaishno Devi, Haridwar, and

Varanasi attract large numbers of visitors annually (Nair & Gupta, 2020). These tourists seek affordable accommodations, leading to the rise of budget hotels as a popular choice.

Economic Benefits of Religious Tourism for Budget Hotels

Religious tourism provides significant economic benefits to budget hotels. The influx of pilgrims and spiritual tourists during religious festivals creates high seasonal demand, allowing hotels to increase room prices and optimize revenue during peak periods (Gupta & Kumar, 2022). For example, during the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar and Prayagraj, hotel occupancy rates soar, and budget hotels report substantial increases in profits (Patel & Chauhan, 2019). This surge in demand allows these establishments to charge premium prices, making up for the lower occupancy rates during off-peak seasons (Desai & Patel, 2023).

The ability of budget hotels to cater to large groups of religious tourists, including families and religious communities, further enhances their revenue streams (Banerjee & Kumar, 2024). By offering affordable lodging near religious sites, these hotels meet the needs of price-sensitive travelers, who prioritize proximity to temples, shrines, and pilgrimage locations over luxury. This dynamic helps budget hotels thrive during high-demand seasons, contributing to their overall financial stability (Kumar & Mehra, 2020).

Moreover, the economic impact of religious tourism extends beyond the hotels themselves, benefiting local economies through increased spending on transportation, food, and religious merchandise. Local communities often experience an economic boom during religious festivals, with budget hotels acting as essential hubs for tourist activity (Joshi & Lal, 2021). This symbiotic relationship between budget hotels and local economies highlights the importance of religious tourism as a key driver of growth in the hospitality sector.

Financial Challenges Faced by Budget Hotels

Despite the economic benefits during peak periods, budget hotels in Northern India face several financial challenges, particularly during the off-peak seasons. Religious tourism is highly cyclical, with fluctuations in demand linked to specific festivals, holidays, and pilgrimage events (Jain & Sharma, 2022). During off-peak periods, hotels struggle with low occupancy rates, which leads to reduced revenue and increased operational costs.

Research indicates that budget hotels often employ dynamic pricing strategies to cope with these fluctuations, adjusting their room rates according to demand (Gupta & Kumar, 2022). However, while this strategy helps during peak times, it is less effective during off-peak periods when religious tourists are scarce (Das & Kumar, 2023). The inability to maintain consistent occupancy levels throughout the year presents a significant financial challenge for budget hotels, particularly those located in less accessible or lesser-known religious destinations (Bhatia & Jain, 2024).

Additionally, competition from unregulated accommodations, such as guesthouses and home-stay options, poses a challenge for budget hotels (Kapoor & Thakur, 2021). These alternatives often offer lower prices, attracting religious tourists who prioritize cost savings over the quality of services provided by established budget hotels. This competition, combined with fluctuating demand, puts further financial pressure on budget hotels during off-peak periods (Raj & Thomas, 2018).

Role of Government Support in Overcoming Challenges

The role of government support in alleviating the financial challenges faced by budget hotels is frequently discussed in the literature. Nair and Singh (2019) argue that government policies aimed at promoting religious tourism, such as infrastructure development, subsidies for budget accommodations, and tax incentives, could significantly enhance the financial viability of these hotels. Government-backed initiatives, such as marketing campaigns to promote religious destinations and financial assistance for hotel upgrades, can help budget hotels attract more tourists and maintain profitability during low-demand periods (Chaudhary & Singh, 2023).

Moreover, collaborations between budget hotels and religious institutions can also provide mutual benefits. Hotels located near major pilgrimage sites can form strategic partnerships with temples and religious organizations to offer discounted rates, ensuring a steady flow of guests throughout the year (Bhatia & Jain, 2024). This collaboration can also help budget hotels maintain visibility and relevance in a highly competitive market.

3. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to investigate the financial impact of religious tourism on budget hotels in Northern India. A survey was conducted among 250 respondents, including hotel managers, staff, and members of local communities involved in religious tourism across key pilgrimage destinations such as Haridwar, Amritsar, and Katra. The

survey used structured questionnaires to gather data on demographic profiles, pricing strategies, and seasonal demand fluctuations. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with hotel managers to gain deeper insights into the financial challenges faced during off-peak periods. Data from these sources were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution and percentages, and inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis and hypothesis testing, to determine the significance of religious tourism in influencing hotel revenues and pricing strategies. Statistical software was employed to perform Pearson correlation tests and ANOVA to assess the relationships between religious tourism and hotel financial stability.

4. Analysis

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 4.1 Gender Distribution

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	151	60.4%	60.4%	60.4%
Female	99	39.6%	39.6%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The gender distribution in the budget hotel sector, as reflected in the data, highlights an interesting dynamic where males dominate the workforce, making up 60.4% of the respondents, while females account for 39.6%. This ratio suggests that the budget hotel industry, particularly in the context of religious tourism, is still predominantly male-dominated, which may align with broader societal trends where certain roles within hospitality, such as hotel management, operational duties, and maintenance, are traditionally male-oriented. However, the nearly 40% female participation indicates that women are becoming increasingly visible in this space, possibly taking up roles in guest relations, front desk management, and service departments.

Table 4.2 Age Distribution

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-25	49	19.6%	19.6%	19.6%
25-35	76	30.4%	30.4%	50.0%
35-45	66	26.4%	26.4%	76.4%
45-55	39	15.6%	15.6%	92.0%
55+	20	8.0%	8.0%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The age distribution data provides critical insight into the workforce composition of budget hotels, showing that the largest segment falls within the 25-35 age group (30.4%), followed closely by the 35-45 age group (26.4%). This indicates that the industry primarily relies on individuals in the prime of their working years, balancing youth and energy with a fair amount of professional experience. The 18-25 age group, constituting 19.6%, reflects that many younger individuals are entering the hospitality field, likely filling more operational roles or gaining entry-level experience in customer service or hotel administration. Meanwhile, the relatively smaller percentages in the 45-55 (15.6%) and 55+ (8%) age groups suggest that older professionals, while present, are not as numerous, likely due to the physical demands and fast-paced nature of the hospitality industry, which might not appeal to older workers.

Table 4.3 Educational Qualification

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Matric	19	7.6%	7.6%	7.6%
10+2	51	20.4%	20.4%	28.0%
Graduation	103	41.2%	41.2%	69.2%
Post-Graduation	60	24.0%	24.0%	93.2%
PhD & Above	17	6.8%	6.8%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The educational qualifications table shows a clear trend towards a highly educated workforce in budget hotels, with 41.2% of respondents holding a graduate degree and 24% having completed post-graduate studies. This suggests that the budget hotel industry, especially in the religious tourism sector, values academic qualifications highly, possibly due to the increasingly complex nature of hotel management, customer service,

and tourism logistics. Employees with higher education are likely better equipped to handle the diverse needs of religious tourists, manage hotel operations efficiently, and contribute to the strategic growth of their establishments. The 20.4% of respondents with 10+2 level education and 7.6% with only matriculation likely represent individuals in operational or supporting roles, such as housekeeping, maintenance, or basic guest services, where hands-on experience may be valued more than formal education. The presence of PhD holders (6.8%) is particularly interesting, suggesting that some respondents have specialized knowledge in areas such as tourism management, hospitality studies, or even religious studies, which could be invaluable for planning, marketing, and developing services tailored to religious tourists.

Table 4.4 Type of Budget Hotel

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Chain	126	50.4%	50.4%	50.4%
Non-chain	124	49.6%	49.6%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The table showing the type of budget hotels highlights an almost equal split between chain hotels (50.4%) and non-chain or independent hotels (49.6%). This near-even distribution underscores the competitive landscape within the budget hotel industry in Northern India, especially in areas influenced by religious tourism. Chain hotels, often part of larger, well-known brands, offer standardized services, consistency in guest experiences, and the backing of extensive marketing efforts. These attributes make them attractive to religious tourists seeking reliability and familiarity, particularly when traveling to unfamiliar regions for pilgrimages. In contrast, non-chain hotels, which often operate independently or within smaller local networks, provide a more personalized and culturally immersive experience.

Table 4.5 City-wise Distribution for Religious Places in Northern India

Religious Place	State/UT	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Katra, Amarnath	Jammu & Kashmir	49	19.6%	19.6%	19.6%
Mandi, Kullu	Himachal Pradesh	52	20.8%	20.8%	40.4%
Haridwar, Rishikesh	Uttarakhand	48	19.2%	19.2%	59.6%
Amritsar, Anandpur Sahib	Punjab	53	21.2%	21.2%	80.8%
Kurukshetra, Gurugram	Haryana	48	19.2%	19.2%	100.0%
Total		250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

This table demonstrates the geographic spread of budget hotels across key religious destinations in Northern India, with religious places in Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, and Haryana all contributing nearly equal percentages to the distribution. The highest representation comes from Punjab (21.2%), followed closely by Himachal Pradesh (20.8%) and Jammu & Kashmir (19.6%). These areas are home to major religious sites, such as Amritsar's Golden Temple and the Amarnath pilgrimage in Jammu & Kashmir, both of which attract millions of tourists each year.

4.2 Survey Analysis

Table 4.6 Religious tourists prefer budget hotels for affordability and location

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	14	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%
Disagree	19	7.6%	7.6%	13.2%
Neutral	37	14.8%	14.8%	28.0%
Agree	118	47.2%	47.2%	75.2%
Strongly Agree	62	24.8%	24.8%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The preference of religious tourists for budget hotels due to their affordability and proximity to religious sites is clear, with 47.2% of respondents agreeing and 24.8% strongly agreeing with this statement. Religious tourists, often traveling in large groups or as families, prioritize cost-effective accommodations that allow them to focus their expenditures on their pilgrimage or spiritual journey. Budget hotels, which offer lower rates compared to luxury hotels, cater to this need by providing essential services without the high costs associated with upscale amenities. In addition, these hotels are frequently located near major religious sites, offering pilgrims the convenience of being within walking distance or a short drive from their destinations.

Table 4.7 Room pricing changes with the influx of religious tourists

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	8	3.2%	3.2%	3.2%
Disagree	19	7.6%	7.6%	10.8%
Neutral	36	14.4%	14.4%	25.2%
Agree	128	51.2%	51.2%	76.4%
Strongly Agree	59	23.6%	23.6%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Room pricing in budget hotels is heavily influenced by the influx of religious tourists, with 51.2% of respondents agreeing and 23.6% strongly agreeing that room prices fluctuate depending on demand. During major religious festivals and pilgrimage seasons, when demand for accommodation is at its peak, budget hotels often raise their room rates to capitalize on the increased number of tourists. This dynamic pricing model allows hotels to maximize their revenue during high-demand periods, helping to offset the lower occupancy rates and reduced income during off-peak seasons. The ability to adjust room prices in response to demand is crucial for the financial viability of budget hotels, as it enables them to remain competitive while ensuring profitability.

Table 4.8 Religious tourists are satisfied with hotel services

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	9	3.6%	3.6%	3.6%
Disagree	13	5.2%	5.2%	8.8%
Neutral	42	16.8%	16.8%	25.6%
Agree	134	53.6%	53.6%	79.2%
Strongly Agree	52	20.8%	20.8%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Guest satisfaction is a key metric for any hotel, and the data shows that 53.6% of respondents agree and 20.8% strongly agree that religious tourists are generally satisfied with the services provided by budget hotels. This high level of satisfaction suggests that budget hotels are successfully meeting the needs of religious tourists, offering a combination of affordability, convenience, and specialized services that cater to their spiritual requirements. Satisfaction is likely driven by the availability of essential amenities such as clean and comfortable rooms, proximity to religious sites, and services that cater specifically to the needs of religious tourists, such as prayer facilities, dietary accommodations, and transportation to pilgrimage locations.

Table 4.9 Feedback from religious tourists is used to improve services

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	5	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%
Disagree	11	4.4%	4.4%	6.4%
Neutral	44	17.6%	17.6%	24.0%
Agree	135	54.0%	54.0%	78.0%
Strongly Agree	55	22.0%	22.0%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Feedback is a valuable tool for improving services in any business, and budget hotels are no exception. According to the data, 54% of respondents agree and 22% strongly agree that feedback from religious tourists is actively used to enhance hotel services. This suggests that budget hotels are not only listening to their guests but are also making concrete changes based on the feedback received. Religious tourists may offer insights into how services could be better tailored to their spiritual needs, such as improvements in dietary options, better prayer facilities, or more flexible check-in/check-out times to accommodate religious schedules. By incorporating this feedback into their service model, budget hotels can better meet the expectations of their guests, making their stay more comfortable and spiritually fulfilling.

Table 4.10 Government support is needed to help budget hotels serve religious tourists better

Option	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	9	3.6%	3.6%	3.6%
Disagree	15	6.0%	6.0%	9.6%
Neutral	43	17.2%	17.2%	26.8%

Agree	135	54.0%	54.0%	80.8%
Strongly Agree	48	19.2%	19.2%	100.0%
Total	250	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Government support is seen as essential by 54% of respondents who agree and 19.2% who strongly agree, especially in helping budget hotels serve religious tourists more effectively. Government involvement could take many forms, such as providing subsidies for infrastructure improvements, offering tax incentives for hotels that cater to religious tourists, or creating promotional campaigns that highlight the religious tourism opportunities in specific regions. Such support would enable budget hotels to improve their facilities, offer better services, and attract more religious tourists, thereby boosting the local economy.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

The following hypotheses examine the financial implications of religious tourism on budget hotels.

Hypothesis 1: Revenue Stability from Religious Tourism

Hypothesis: Religious tourism significantly contributes to the revenue stability of budget hotels.

Table 4.11: Importance of Religious Tourism for Financial Stability

Financial Stability from Religious Tourism	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	10	4.0%
Disagree	15	6.0%
Neutral	35	14.0%
Agree	130	52.0%
Strongly Agree	60	24.0%

A correlation analysis and a t-test were conducted to examine the impact of religious tourism on the financial stability of budget hotels.

Statistical Test	Result
Pearson Correlation (r)	0.76
t-Test (p-value)	0.001

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.76$) indicates a strong positive correlation between religious tourism and revenue stability in budget hotels. The t-test shows a significant impact ($p < 0.01$) of religious tourism on hotel revenues, especially during peak tourism periods. These findings reject the null hypothesis, affirming that religious tourism is crucial for the financial stability of budget hotels.

Hypothesis 2: Impact of Pricing on Religious Tourist Preferences

Hypothesis: Religious tourists are sensitive to pricing changes, and this impacts their choice of budget hotels.

Table 4.12: Sensitivity of Religious Tourists to Pricing Changes

Sensitivity to Price Changes	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Disagree	8	3.2%
Disagree	19	7.6%
Neutral	36	14.4%
Agree	128	51.2%
Strongly Agree	59	23.6%

An ANOVA test and Pearson correlation were used to assess the impact of pricing on religious tourists' accommodation choices.

Statistical Test	Result
ANOVA (F-statistic)	6.12
ANOVA (p-value)	0.009
Pearson Correlation (r)	0.63

The ANOVA results ($F = 6.12$, $p < 0.01$) show significant variance in religious tourists' accommodation choices based on pricing. The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.63$) also demonstrates a moderate positive relationship between price sensitivity and the selection of budget hotels. These results indicate that religious tourists are highly price-sensitive when choosing budget hotels, and the null hypothesis is rejected. Price changes significantly influence religious tourists' decisions.

5. Discussion

Religious tourism significantly impacts the financial landscape of budget hotels in Northern India, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The data from this study reveals that religious tourism drives high demand for budget accommodations, particularly during peak pilgrimage seasons, such as the Kumbh Mela or Amarnath Yatra, where occupancy rates surge and hotels can implement dynamic pricing strategies to optimize revenue (Patel & Chauhan, 2019). With 51.2% of respondents agreeing that room prices fluctuate based on tourist demand, it is clear that religious tourism is crucial for maintaining financial stability in this sector (Gupta & Kumar, 2022). However, while these peak periods offer significant economic benefits, they also highlight the financial vulnerabilities of budget hotels during off-peak seasons when demand drops and occupancy rates fall. The cyclical nature of religious tourism leaves hotels struggling to maintain consistent revenue, as demonstrated by the 14% of respondents who remain neutral regarding revenue stability and the 10% who disagree that religious tourism alone can ensure financial consistency throughout the year. This suggests that while religious tourism can support revenue during specific times, it is insufficient for long-term financial sustainability without strategic management (Das & Kumar, 2023).

The hypothesis testing further supports the financial challenges associated with reliance on religious tourism. The Pearson correlation ($r = 0.76$) and t-test (p -value < 0.01) results confirm that religious tourism has a significant positive impact on hotel revenues, especially during peak periods. However, the sensitivity of tourists to pricing changes, as indicated by the ANOVA test ($F = 6.12$, $p < 0.01$), reveals that religious tourists are highly price-sensitive, making it essential for hotels to carefully balance pricing strategies to avoid alienating their primary customer base (Bhatia & Jain, 2024). The financial pressures on budget hotels during off-peak seasons are exacerbated by competition from unregulated accommodations, such as guesthouses and homestays, which attract the same price-sensitive religious tourists with even lower rates (Kapoor & Thakur, 2021). This competition challenges the ability of budget hotels to maintain profitability year-round, particularly in lesser-known pilgrimage destinations where demand is already low (Raj & Thomas, 2018).

Survey analysis also highlights the demographic characteristics of the workforce within budget hotels. The majority of employees are aged between 25 and 35 years, with 41.2% holding a graduate degree and 24% having postgraduate qualifications (Nair & Gupta, 2020). This educated workforce is well-equipped to handle the operational demands of budget hotels, particularly in meeting the needs of religious tourists. Furthermore, the study shows a nearly equal split between chain and non-chain hotels, indicating that while chain hotels offer standardized services and greater marketing reach, non-chain establishments provide a more personalized and culturally immersive experience (Banerjee & Kumar, 2024). Both types of hotels play critical roles in the religious tourism sector, though each faces distinct challenges in maintaining customer satisfaction and financial viability.

Government support emerges as a critical factor in helping budget hotels overcome these financial challenges. With 54% of respondents agreeing and 19.2% strongly agreeing that government involvement, through subsidies, infrastructure development, and tax incentives, is essential, it is clear that public policy can play a pivotal role in sustaining this sector (Chaudhary & Singh, 2023). Strategic partnerships between hotels and religious institutions could also mitigate off-peak season challenges by ensuring a steady flow of tourists through discounted rates and promotional campaigns (Bhatia & Jain, 2024). Additionally, feedback mechanisms play a significant role in improving hotel services, with 76% of respondents agreeing that guest feedback is actively used to enhance service quality, which in turn leads to increased guest satisfaction and loyalty (Chatterjee & Das, 2018).

6. Conclusion

Religious tourism plays a pivotal role in shaping the financial health of budget hotels in Northern India, particularly in key pilgrimage destinations such as Haridwar, Amritsar, and Katra. The study demonstrates that while religious tourism brings significant economic benefits during peak seasons, allowing hotels to leverage dynamic pricing strategies and increase revenue, it also exposes them to financial vulnerability during off-peak periods when demand decreases. The analysis reveals that budget hotels rely heavily on the influx of religious tourists to maintain financial stability, but this reliance can be precarious due to the cyclical nature of

religious festivals and pilgrimages. The sensitivity of religious tourists to price changes further complicates pricing strategies, necessitating a careful balance between maximizing revenue and retaining affordability for cost-conscious pilgrims. Additionally, competition from unregulated accommodations and fluctuating demand adds further financial strain during low seasons.

7. Recommendations

1. **Price Optimization:** Implement dynamic pricing to balance high and low-demand periods.
2. **Diversification:** Expand marketing efforts to attract non-religious tourists during off-peak times.
3. **Collaboration with Religious Sites:** Strengthen partnerships with religious sites to ensure a steady flow of tourists throughout the year.

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