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Bridging Traditions and Sustainability:
A Comparative Study of Religious Tourism Development in Katra (India) and Kyoto (Japan)

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Abstract

Religious tourism destinations must reconcile the preservation of cultural heritage with the challenges of surging pilgrim flows. While sustainable tourism scholarship has grown, comparative analyses of Asian pilgrimage and heritage destinations remain limited. This study addresses this gap through a cross-cultural comparison of Katra, India's major Hindu pilgrimage hub, and Kyoto, Japan's UNESCO World Heritage city.

A mixed-methods design was adopted: primary data from 301 Katra pilgrims were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis to assess perceptions of environmental management, infrastructure, heritage protection, and community participation. Kyoto's sustainability framework was synthesized from 15 authoritative secondary sources, organized into 10 indicators across the same four constructs.

Findings reveal Katra's strengths in cultural preservation but critical weaknesses in environmental management, while Kyoto demonstrates institutional maturity through participatory governance, overtourism regulation, and carbon neutrality pathways. Theoretically, the study extends sustainable tourism research by showing how governance modalities, centralized versus decentralized, mediate sustainability outcomes in pilgrimage versus heritage contexts. Practically, it identifies transferable strategies for Katra and adaptive lessons for heritage cities.

By situating an Indian pilgrimage town within a cross-cultural framework, this study contributes to theory-building in sustainable religious tourism and informs policy design for managing faith-based destinations in Asia.

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1. Introduction

Religious tourism, among the earliest forms of human travel, has surged in recent decades, becoming a significant global phenomenon drawing millions of pilgrims annually (Choe, 2024). In India, a nation with a profound spiritual heritage, religious tourism has experienced robust growth, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened spiritual inclinations among the population. Data from the Ministry of Tourism (2022) indicates that India recorded 1.439 billion domestic and international religious tourists in 2022, contributing ₹1.34 trillion (approximately $16.8 billion USD) to the economy through religious tourism sites. Projections estimate a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.2% for the sector from 2023 to 2030, with anticipated revenues reaching $59 billion by 2028. Furthermore, the sector is expected to generate approximately 140 million direct and indirect jobs by 2030, underscoring its socio-economic significance. Industry reports also note a marked increase in overnight pilgrimage travel and a 14% rise in donations to religious institutions between 2021 and 2022, reflecting heightened spiritual engagement post-pandemic *("Religious tourism in India to grow at a CAGR 16 % by 2030," 2024).*

Katra, a prominent pilgrimage hub in India, serves as the gateway to the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, drawing millions of pilgrims each year. This influx has catalyzed significant economic growth by generating employment, boosting local revenue, and driving infrastructure development (Hussain & Dalotra, 2014; Mir & Bhushan, 2016). However, the rapid rise in religious tourism has strained Katra's environmental sustainability, with increased visitor numbers leading to resource depletion, accelerated urbanization, and severe waste management challenges (Hussain & Dalotra, 2014; Sharma, 2016). These issues align with broader findings that high tourism growth, even in areas with robust institutional frameworks, often results in environmental degradation and pollution (Baloch et al., 2022).

In contrast, Kyoto, Japan, offers a mature model for managing heritage tourism, providing valuable lessons for emerging destinations like Katra. As a leading cultural and religious tourism hub in Asia, Kyoto attracts over 50 million visitors annually, including 26% international tourists, to its 1,000 Buddhist temples and numerous UNESCO World Heritage sites (World Bank, 2018). While this underscores Kyoto's success in leveraging its cultural and religious significance, it also highlights challenges of overtourism, such as social tensions, environmental strain, and infrastructure overload (Burtis & Wise, 2025), issues that mirror those in Katra.

Kyoto's response to these challenges involves sophisticated management strategies to balance cultural preservation with tourism demands. Key measures include raising accommodation taxes to 10,000 yen per night, restricting access to culturally sensitive areas like the Gion district, and implementing the "Mind Your Manners" campaign to encourage respectful tourist behavior (Burtis & Wise, 2024). These initiatives aim to safeguard Kyoto's sacred and cultural identity while managing high visitor volumes. Since its UNESCO World Heritage designation in 1994, Kyoto has navigated the dual impacts of global recognition, which amplifies its appeal but also intensifies preservation challenges (Prough, 2022).

Through a cross-cultural analysis of environmental management, heritage conservation, infrastructure development, and community participation, the research offers practical policy recommendations to enhance

Katra's sustainability while contributing to broader theoretical insights into managing pilgrimage destinations across Asia.

2. Literature Review

Sustainable tourism scholarship has advanced from broad conceptual frameworks to context-specific strategies, emphasizing three core pillars: economic viability, socio-cultural integrity, and environmental stewardship (Hall et al., 2015). These pillars underpin four critical dimensions: *environmental management, infrastructure accessibility, heritage conservation, and community participation*, that shape sustainable tourism outcomes (Oklevik et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). In religious tourism, these dimensions face distinct challenges, as pilgrimage sites are often situated in ecologically fragile areas with limited carrying capacities, where seasonal visitor surges strain resources and infrastructure (Hole et al., 2019). These dynamics are evident in both emerging pilgrimage hubs like Katra, India, and established heritage destinations like Kyoto, Japan, offering contrasting models for managing sustainable religious tourism.

The pilgrimage site of Katra and the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine illustrates a model of accelerated, centrally administered development in religious tourism. Existing research underscores the pilgrimage's central role as the dominant economic engine for the region (Gupta & Raina, 2008). Empirical studies have quantified its economic contributions, including substantial revenue generation and the creation of thousands of jobs in sectors such as hospitality, transportation, and retail (Press Trust of India [PTI], 2007). This influx has spurred broader regional advancement, elevating household incomes and improving access to education and healthcare, largely facilitated by the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board (SMVDSB). The board reallocates pilgrim contributions toward comprehensive welfare programs, thereby promoting socio-economic upliftment (Sharma & Sharma, 2018).

Despite these benefits, rapid expansion has incurred notable environmental drawbacks, a recurrent focus in the literature. Investigations reveal acute ecological stresses on the vulnerable Trikuta hills, including elevated air pollution levels during high-visitation periods, attributable to increased vehicular emissions (Sharma & Raina, 2014). Waste management poses a persistent challenge, with daily pilgrim volumes producing large quantities of solid waste and animal dung, leading to water contamination and degradation of the area's natural serenity (Singh & Bahadur, 2018). Furthermore, intensive infrastructure projects have reshaped Katra's landscape from a natural setting to an urbanized one, intensifying issues like deforestation, soil erosion, and habitat fragmentation (Hussain & Dalotra, 2014).

Socio-culturally, the literature depicts a nuanced scenario. While the SMVDSB's initiatives receive commendation, analyses also identify adverse effects from commercialization, such as pilgrim complaints regarding overpricing and exploitation by vendors, which undermine the spiritual essence of the journey (Verma, 2013). Additionally, although centralized governance structures like the SMVDSB enable efficient execution of major developments, evidence of structured mechanisms for community involvement in planning and decision-making remains sparse. This diverges from the wider sustainable tourism discourse,

which posits that authentic community engagement is essential for equitable benefit sharing and enduring viability (Amin et al., 2020).

In contrast to Katra's concentrated emphasis and top-down administration, Kyoto exemplifies a well-established, multifaceted heritage destination contending with global overtourism under a decentralized governance system. Tourism's economic significance to Kyoto is well-documented, accounting for a substantial share of the city's GDP and employing a significant workforce segment. Its array of temples, shrines, and UNESCO-listed sites draws tens of millions of visitors each year, solidifying its status as a premier international hub (Nakamura, 2024; Burtis & Wise, 2025).

This prominence, however, underpins its core sustainability dilemmas. A robust corpus of research and policy examinations addresses overtourism in Kyoto and its diverse repercussions (Burtis & Wise, 2025). Studies report acute congestion at landmark sites, which erodes visitor satisfaction and accelerates wear on fragile heritage assets, such as temples and shrines (Bricker, 2025). Public infrastructure, notably the bus network, faces overwhelming demand, resulting in overcrowded services that disrupt residents' routines (Glass, 2024). Concurrently, the proliferation of tourism accommodations has driven up housing prices and fostered gentrification, contributing to population outflows from historic districts, especially the urban core (Tanaka et al., 2023).

The socio-cultural ramifications of overtourism in Kyoto feature prominently in scholarly work. Observers document rising resident discontent, stemming from lifestyle interruptions and the commoditization of local traditions. This tension is exemplified in the Gion district, where tourist misconduct, including unsolicited photography, physical contact, and pathway blockages targeting geiko (geisha) and maiko (apprentices), prompted authorities to impose photography bans and access restrictions to private lanes in 2024, safeguarding this intangible cultural heritage (Saunders-Wyndham, 2024; Mitsuko, 2022). Such interventions seek to uphold social conventions and the geisha community's well-being, already strained by the COVID-19 disruptions and escalating visitor pressures.

Kyoto's tourism governance reflects a collaborative, multi-actor strategy oriented toward prioritizing quality and sustainability over volume. This reorientation is manifested in policies like elevated accommodation taxes to finance infrastructure and mitigation efforts, with recent increases designed to moderate overtourism effects. Awareness campaigns, such as “Mind Your Manners,” promote considerate conduct among visitors, bolstered by research affirming their efficacy in maintaining cultural authenticity and resident welfare (Burtis & Wise, 2025). Additionally, initiatives to redistribute tourists toward under-visited attractions and shoulder seasons aim to decongest hotspots, aligning with sustainable tourism principles that advocate demand-side interventions to harmonize economic returns with socio-environmental considerations.

While the literature provides robust analyses of Katra and Kyoto individually, a critical gap exists in comparative studies that bridge these distinct models. Katra’s scholarship focuses on rapid, pilgrimage-driven growth in a developing context, with emphasis on environmental degradation and centralized governance, whereas Kyoto’s research centers on overtourism management and heritage preservation in a developed setting. This study addresses this gap by examining the dimensions of *environmental management, infra-*

structure accessibility, heritage conservation, and *community participation* across both destinations, drawing on validated constructs from prior research (Li et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; Moscatelli, 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Srivastava & Sinha, 2025). By synthesizing lessons from Kyoto's mature, policy-driven framework, the study aims to inform sustainable strategies for emerging pilgrimage hubs like Katra, contributing to the broader discourse on religious tourism in Asia.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to conduct a cross-cultural comparison of sustainable religious tourism in Katra, India, and Kyoto, Japan, focusing on four key dimensions: environmental management, infrastructure accessibility, heritage conservation, and community participation. Primary data were collected in Katra to capture pilgrim perceptions, while secondary data from policy documents, government reports, and academic literature were used for Kyoto, leveraging its well-documented tourism management strategies (Burtis & Wise, 2025; Nakamura, 2024). This approach aligns with the research objective of synthesizing lessons from Kyoto's mature framework to inform Katra's sustainability strategies, addressing the gap identified in the literature.

3.2. Data Collection

a) Katra

Primary data were collected in Katra, the gateway to the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine, through a structured questionnaire administered to 301 pilgrims. The sample size was determined based on guidelines for exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which recommend a minimum of 5-10 respondents per item. With 15 Likert-scale items across four constructs, a sample of 300 was deemed sufficient to ensure statistical reliability and representativeness. A purposive sampling technique was employed to target pilgrims at key locations, including religious sites, lodging facilities, and transportation hubs, ensuring a diverse representation of visitor demographics and experiences. Data collection occurred in person during December 2023–January 2024 to capture peak pilgrimage season dynamics.

The questionnaire was structured into two parts. The first section captured respondents' demographic information and the second section comprised 15 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), organized across four validated constructs: *Environmental and Waste Concerns* (4 items), *Infrastructure and Accessibility* (4 items), *Cultural and Heritage Preservation* (4 items), and *Community Participation* (3 items). Additionally, an optional open-ended item was incorporated to elicit qualitative insights into pilgrims' lived experiences, thereby enriching the quantitative findings. Respondents were provided with clear instructions regarding the study's objectives, and ethical protocols were rigorously observed: informed consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and participation remained entirely voluntary. No personally identifiable infor-

mation was recorded, in full compliance with established ethical guidelines for social science research.

b) Kyoto

Secondary data for Kyoto were sourced from 15 primary sources, selected for their relevance to the four constructs, recency, and authority to ensure comprehensive coverage of sustainable tourism dynamics. These included World Bank reports, peer-reviewed journals, government policy documents, and official Destination Management Organization (DMO) publications, supplemented by academic literature. This multi-source approach ensured data triangulation, reducing single-source bias. Quantitative indicators, such as official city tourism statistics, environmental data from the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) reports, and infrastructure metrics from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), were complemented by qualitative insights into heritage conservation (e.g., Gion district policies) and community participation (e.g., public etiquette campaigns), aligning with the study's comparative framework.

4. Data Analysis and Results

This study employed a comprehensive mixed-methods analytical framework to examine sustainable religious tourism across two culturally distinct destinations. For Katra, primary data from 301 pilgrims were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis, including reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and mean ranking analysis using SPSS Version 26. For Kyoto, qualitative synthesis of secondary data across 10 indicators from 15 authoritative sources provided comparative benchmarks. Data from Katra, collected during December 2023–January 2024, were cleaned in Microsoft Excel to eliminate incomplete responses and ensure analytical integrity.

Category	Sub-category	Percentage
Gender	Male	68%
	Female	32%
Age group	18–30 years	32%
	31–45 years	28%
	46–60 years	25%
	Above 60 years	15%
Education	Undergraduate	45%
	Secondary education	28%
	Postgraduate	18%
	Primary education	9%
Geography	Punjab	22%
	Haryana	18%
	Delhi	15%
	Rajasthan	12%
	Others	10%
Visit type	First-time visitors	62%
	Repeat visitors	38%

The study captured a diverse demographic profile across gender, age, education, and geography, reflecting the broad pan-Indian appeal of the shrine. A majority of respondents were male, within the 18–45 age group, and primarily educated at the undergraduate level. Detailed distributions are presented in Table 1

Table 2: Construct Reliability Analysis

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Environmental & Waste Concerns	4	0.857	Good reliability
Infrastructure & Accessibility	4	0.795	Acceptable
Cultural / Heritage Preservation	4	0.928	Excellent
Community Participation	3	0.777	Acceptable

The internal consistency of the four constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability (Nunnally, 1978). All constructs exceeded this threshold, with Cultural/Heritage Preservation showing the highest reliability, followed by Environmental & Waste Concerns, Infrastructure & Accessibility, and Community Participation (refer to Table 1). These results confirm the

suitability of the measurement scales for further analysis, ensuring a reliable assessment of pilgrim perceptions.

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.668
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4407.723
	df	105
	Sig.	0

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to confirm the underlying factor structure. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (KMO = 0.668) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (χ^2 (105) = 4407.723, $p < 0.001$) verified the data's suitability for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2010; see Table 2). Four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 emerged, explaining 72.14% of the total variance (see Table 3). All 15 items loaded strongly (>0.60) on their respective constructs: Environmental & Waste Concerns, Infrastructure & Accessibility, Cultural/ Heritage Preservation, and Community Participation, without significant cross-loadings (see Table 4), confirming construct validity for assessing sustainable tourism dimensions in Katra.

Table 4: Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.727	24.849	24.849	3.727	24.849	24.849	3.346	22.306	22.306
2	2.764	18.429	43.278	2.764	18.429	43.278	2.827	18.846	41.151
3	2.262	15.079	58.357	2.262	15.079	58.357	2.564	17.090	58.241
4	2.068	13.785	72.143	2.068	13.785	72.143	2.085	13.902	72.143
5	.786	5.238	77.381						
6	.675	4.498	81.879						
7	.616	4.104	85.983						
8	.564	3.762	89.744						
9	.513	3.419	93.163						
10	.382	2.549	95.713						
11	.335	2.236	97.949						
12	.220	1.469	99.418						
13	.050	.336	99.754						
14	.036	.237	99.991						
15	.001	.009	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 5: Rotated Component Matrix

Item	EW	IA	CH	CP
Waste management facilities are adequate	0.829			
Natural environment is not being degraded	0.899			
Sanitation facilities are clean	0.876			
Noise levels are well managed	0.737			
Transportation is convenient and reliable		0.929		
Accommodation facilities meet needs		0.609		
Basic infrastructure is well-maintained		0.927		
Digital/online services improve accessibility		0.649		
Religious/cultural heritage is preserved			0.91	
Commercial activities do not disturb sanctity			0.9	
Visitors are made aware of the cultural significance			0.887	
Stricter regulations needed to protect heritage			0.908	
Local residents are actively involved				0.88
Tourism generates benefits for the local community				0.785
Local culture is represented in pilgrim activities				0.831

Note: *EW = Environmental & Waste Concerns, IA = Infrastructure & Accessibility, CH = Cultural/ Heritage Preservation, CP = Community Participation*

4.1 Katra Results: Pilgrim Perceptions Analysis

Mean ranking analysis reveals distinct pilgrim priorities across sustainable tourism dimensions, highlighting critical insights for destination management strategy. The results are displayed in Table 5.

Table 6: Construct Mean Scores and Rankings

Construct	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Rank
Cultural / Heritage Preservation	$\bar{X} = 3.505$	SD = 0.134	1
Infrastructure & Accessibility	$\bar{X} = 3.465$	SD = 0.184	2
Community Participation	$\bar{X} = 3.128$	SD = 0.134	3
Environmental & Waste Concerns	$\bar{X} = 1.815$	SD = 0.173	4

Pilgrims demonstrated the strongest positive perceptions regarding cultural and heritage preservation, with this dimension achieving the highest mean score and remarkable consensus (lowest standard deviation). Individual item analysis revealed particularly strong agreement with heritage protection imperatives: *"Stricter regulations needed to protect heritage"* (factor loading = 0.908) and *"Religious/cultural heritage is preserved"* (factor loading = 0.910) emerged as paramount concerns. Pilgrims expressed satisfaction with cultural significance awareness programs and appreciated that commercial activities have not substantially compromised the shrine's sanctity. The exceptional consensus across demographic segments suggests universal recognition of the shrine's sacred importance transcending socio-economic and regional differences.

Infrastructure and accessibility received the second-highest rating, reflecting pilgrims' general satisfaction with foundational facilities and services. Transportation convenience and reliability achieved the strongest factor loading (0.929), indicating highly effective connectivity to the shrine. Pilgrims acknowledged adequate accommodation facilities and well-maintained basic infrastructure, though digital services demonstrated relatively lower satisfaction (factor loading = 0.649), suggesting opportunities for technological enhancement. The higher standard deviation compared to heritage preservation indicates more varied experiences across pilgrim segments, potentially reflecting differential access to premium services or varying expectations based on prior pilgrimage experiences and socio-economic backgrounds.

Community participation received moderate ratings, indicating pilgrims' awareness of local community benefits while recognizing substantial improvement opportunities. Pilgrims acknowledged that tourism generates benefits for local communities (factor loading = 0.785) and appreciated local cultural representation in pilgrimage activities (factor loading = 0.831). However, perceptions of active local resident involvement demonstrated lower satisfaction (factor loading = 0.880), suggesting limited visibility of community participation mechanisms in tourism planning and service delivery. The moderate mean score indicates pilgrims' desire for enhanced community integration and more authentic local engagement opportunities.

Environmental and waste management emerged as the most critical deficiency area, receiving significantly lower ratings than other dimensions and revealing substantial sustainability gaps in Katra's tourism model. Natural environment degradation concerns achieved the highest factor loading (0.899), followed by sanitation facility cleanliness (0.876) and waste management adequacy (0.829). Noise level management received comparatively lower attention (0.737), though still indicating significant concern. The dramatically low mean score combined with moderate standard deviation suggests widespread pilgrim dissatisfaction with environmental conditions, transcending demographic characteristics and pilgrimage experience levels. This finding reveals urgent need for comprehensive environmental management interventions.

4.2 Kyoto Result: Sustainable Tourism Framework Benchmarks

The data analysis for Kyoto synthesized secondary data across 10 indicators grouped into 4 constructs to assess Kyoto's sustainable tourism framework and provide benchmarks for comparison with Katra. A qualitative synthesis approach integrated findings from multiple authoritative sources (refer to Table 6), ensuring credibility and robustness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Table 7: Kyoto Sustainable Tourism Framework Analysis

Dimension	Indicator	Description	Source(s)
Environmental Management	**Carbon Footprint**	Current per capita emissions at 7 t CO2/year; target reduction to 2.5 t by 2030	(Institute for Global Environmental Strategies [IGES], 2020)
	Sustainability Initiatives	Carbon neutrality by 2050; renewable energy adoption; Walkable City initiative reducing private vehicle use from 28.4% to 24.3%	(Japanese International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2023; World Bank, 2006)
	Waste & Traffic Management	Waste reduction programs; big data for real-time congestion management	(Glass, 2024; Kyoto Tourism Plan, 2025)
Infrastructure Accessibility	**Visitor Volume**	Over 53 million visitors in 2019; 71.28 million in 2022 post-pandemic recovery	(Ajitsa, 2024)
	Transport Network & Investment	Integrated bus and rail system; ¥20 million annual investment in mobility; ¥100 million for app development	(JICA, 2023)
	Accommodation & Occupancy	Rapid accommodation growth; 82.9% hotel occupancy in Oct 2023	(Ajitsa, 2024)
Heritage Conservation	**Governance & Preservation**	Managed by temple/shrine associations; living heritage concept; strict guidelines in historic districts	(World Bank, 2006)
	Cultural Protection	Machiya revitalization; photography bans in Gion district to protect geiko and maiko culture	(Saunders-Wyndham, 2024; Mitsuko, 2022)
Community Participation	**Stakeholder Engagement**	Kyoto City Tourism Promotion Council with over 1,600 members from diverse fields	(Asia-Pacific Tourism Exchange [APTEC], 2025; Kyoto Travel DMO, 2025)
	Policies & Resident Attitudes	Tourism Plan 2025; 2020 Sustainable Tourism Code of Conduct; ~70% resident support; overtourism concerns addressed by taxes and dispersal	(Burtis & Wise, 2025; Shimizu, 2024)

Kyoto provides an instructive example of how heritage cities can operationalize sustainability transitions through integrated environmental, infrastructural, heritage, and governance strategies. The city has committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050, with an interim target of reducing per capita emissions from 7 tons of CO_2 annually to 2.5 tons by 2030. This phased decarbonization pathway is supported by renewable energy adoption, intelligent energy utilization systems, and initiatives encouraging low-carbon lifestyles. The Walkable City program, which lowered private vehicle dependency from 28.4% to 24.3% of modal share, illustrates effective transport demand management in line with sustainable urban mobility frameworks. Complementary waste reduction initiatives and the application of big data analytics to traffic management further demonstrate how technological innovation can strengthen urban environmental governance. In contrast, Katra continues to struggle with vehicular congestion and waste management during pilgrimage peaks, underscoring the potential relevance of Kyoto's structured environmental policies.

Infrastructure planning in Kyoto similarly reflects resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of high visitor inflows. With annual tourist arrivals exceeding 53 million, the city employs integrated multi-modal transportation networks linking bus and rail services. These are supported by approximately ¥20 million in

annual mobility management investments, alongside digital innovations such as coordinated ticketing and mobile applications funded at nearly ¥100 million. The post-pandemic rebound, marked by 71.28 million visitors in 2022 and hotel occupancy rates of 82.9% by late 2023, highlights the robustness of this infrastructure system. Such models of capacity management provide important reference points for Katra, where accessibility constraints and limited transport integration continue to hinder visitor experiences.

Heritage conservation in Kyoto is guided by a *"living heritage"* approach that integrates community custodianship with formal preservation frameworks. Temple and shrine associations play a direct role in UNESCO World Heritage site stewardship, supported by city-wide conservation policies. The machiya revitalization program illustrates how adaptive reuse can reconcile authenticity with contemporary tourism functions, while strict historic district guidelines mandating traditional materials safeguard cultural continuity. Protective measures such as photography restrictions in sensitive districts further shield intangible cultural practices, including geiko and maiko traditions, from the disruptive effects of mass tourism. By contrast, Katra lacks comparable institutionalized heritage conservation mechanisms, suggesting the value of Kyoto's participatory and regulatory approaches in sustaining spiritual sanctity alongside tourism growth.

Finally, Kyoto's governance model exemplifies inclusive stakeholder engagement. The Tourism Promotion Council incorporates over 1,600 members from academia, religious institutions, cultural organizations, and industry, facilitating collective vision-building processes such as the Tourism Plan 2025 and the 2020 Sustainable Tourism Code of Conduct. Despite strong resident support for tourism (around 70%), local authorities have proactively addressed overtourism concerns through accommodation taxes and visitor dispersal strategies. This responsiveness demonstrates how participatory governance can balance economic benefits with social acceptance. For Katra, where tourism planning has often been top-down, Kyoto's example underscores the importance of embedding community voices in decision-making to enhance both legitimacy and sustainability.

5. Discussion

5.1 Comparative Insights between Katra and Kyoto

The comparative analysis highlights contrasting sustainability trajectories between Katra and Kyoto, shaped by institutional maturity, governance structures, and resource management. In Katra, cultural and heritage preservation emerged as the strongest pillar, with pilgrims expressing near-universal agreement on the importance of protecting sanctity and enforcing stricter regulations. This resonates with earlier findings emphasizing the shrine's spiritual centrality and role in socio-economic upliftment (Sharma & Sharma, 2018). However, the dimension of environmental and waste management recorded the lowest scores, reflecting persistent ecological challenges noted in prior studies (Sharma & Raina, 2014; Singh & Bahadur, 2018).

By contrast, Kyoto demonstrates a highly institutionalized model of environmental governance, with commitments to carbon neutrality by 2050, integration of big data for congestion management, and policies curbing overtourism. Its multi-layered strategies, ranging from taxation to heritage zoning and visitor dispersal, illustrate how mature governance frameworks balance cultural preservation with mass tourism

pressures (Burtis & Wise, 2025). Thus, while Katra struggles with foundational environmental concerns, Kyoto's challenge lies in mitigating overtourism externalities in a saturated heritage landscape.

5.2 Governance and Community Participation

Katra's centralized, top-down administration under the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board has ensured efficiency in infrastructure development and welfare redistribution, but at the cost of limited community participation. Pilgrim perceptions corroborated this, with only moderate satisfaction regarding visible community involvement. This model contrasts with Kyoto's decentralized, multi-stakeholder governance, embodied in the Kyoto City Tourism Promotion Council with over 1,600 institutional participants. Such inclusivity fosters legitimacy, social acceptance, and collaborative problem-solving, aligning with literature that positions participatory governance as central to sustainable tourism (Li et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2025). For Katra, institutional reforms that embed community voices in tourism planning appear critical for enhancing both legitimacy and resilience.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the theoretical discourse by bridging pilgrimage-driven growth models with heritage-city management frameworks. Scholarship has traditionally examined these trajectories in isolation: pilgrimage tourism is often framed within rapid growth and ecological fragility, while heritage cities are analyzed through overtourism and commoditization. By placing Katra and Kyoto in dialogue, this research demonstrates that sustainability outcomes are mediated not simply by visitor volume, but by context-specific institutional arrangements and governance modalities. Moreover, the findings suggest reciprocal learning: Katra can draw on Kyoto's structured environmental management and participatory governance, while Kyoto can learn from Katra's strong preservation ethos that resists commoditization. This mutuality contributes to a more nuanced, cross-contextual understanding of sustainable religious tourism.

5.4 Policy and Managerial Implications

The results carry significant practical implications. For Katra, urgent interventions are required in environmental management through improved sanitation, waste treatment, and traffic regulation, alongside leveraging digital technologies for monitoring visitor flows. Infrastructure enhancement, particularly in digital accessibility, could better meet the expectations of younger, tech-savvy pilgrims. More critically, policy reforms must integrate local communities in tourism planning to ensure equitable benefit sharing and authenticity.

For Kyoto, the findings reaffirm the importance of continuously recalibrating overtourism strategies. Policies such as accommodation taxes, dispersal initiatives, and heritage protection measures have proven effective but must evolve in response to post-pandemic surges and rising resident discontent. Strengthening resident-tourist negotiation spaces and extending tourism dispersal to secondary heritage towns may further mitigate concentration pressures.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, data collection in Katra was restricted to pilgrims during the peak season, potentially amplifying concerns regarding congestion and environmental stress. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs across multiple seasons to capture a more balanced view. Second, the Kyoto analysis relied primarily on secondary data, limiting the granularity of stakeholder perspectives. Integrating primary data from residents, pilgrims, and policymakers would enhance comparative robustness. Finally, while this study focused on two emblematic sites, expanding the comparative framework to other Asian religious and heritage destinations (e.g., Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, Lhasa) could test the transferability of identified strategies and generate broader regional insights.

5.6 Synthesis

Overall, the findings affirm that sustainable religious tourism is a dynamic negotiation between heritage preservation, environmental stewardship, infrastructural resilience, and community legitimacy. Katra exemplifies the environmental vulnerabilities of rapid pilgrimage-driven growth, while Kyoto demonstrates the institutional sophistication required to balance heritage and overtourism. Together, these cases underscore that sustainable pilgrimage tourism cannot be reduced to visitor management alone, but must be understood as a governance innovation shaped by cultural values, institutional capacity, and community agency.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing discourse on sustainable religious tourism by conducting a cross-cultural comparison between Katra, India, and Kyoto, Japan. The findings reveal that while both destinations are deeply rooted in spiritual and cultural heritage, their trajectories toward sustainability diverge significantly. Katra represents the challenges of a rapidly expanding pilgrimage hub in a developing context, where environmental degradation and limited community participation constrain sustainability outcomes. Conversely, Kyoto exemplifies a mature heritage city grappling with overtourism pressures, yet demonstrating institutional sophistication through inclusive governance, regulatory interventions, and innovative environmental management.

Theoretically, the study advances the literature by bridging pilgrimage-driven and heritage-city models, showing that sustainability outcomes are not determined solely by visitor volume but by governance modalities, institutional maturity, and socio-cultural values. By highlighting opportunities for ***reciprocal learning*** - where Katra can adapt Kyoto's structured management strategies, and Kyoto can draw from Katra's ethos of spiritual preservation, the study expands conceptual understandings of sustainable tourism beyond linear frameworks.

Practically, the study underscores the need *for* ***context-sensitive governance innovations***. For Katra, urgent attention must be directed toward ecological resilience, waste management, and participatory governance. For Kyoto, continuous recalibration of overtourism strategies is essential to safeguard cultural authenticity and resident well-being. Policymakers across Asia can draw on these insights to design adaptive frameworks that balance economic growth, cultural preservation, and community legitimacy.

Looking ahead, the research calls for broader comparative analyses of pilgrimage and heritage destinations across Asia and beyond. Longitudinal and multi-stakeholder studies would enhance understanding of how sustainability trajectories evolve over time. Ultimately, sustainable religious tourism must be viewed not as a static outcome but as a dynamic process of negotiation between sacredness and commercialization, conservation and development, and local voices and global flows. By embracing this complexity, destinations like Katra and Kyoto can chart more resilient and inclusive pathways toward sustainability.

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