



**Original Article**

**A STUDY ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM TO THE GROWTH OF SMALL BUSINESSES IN PANDHARPUR**

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**Abstract:**

*Religious tourism plays a crucial role in shaping the economic structure of pilgrimage destinations, particularly in developing local economies. Pandharpur, one of the most prominent spiritual centres in Maharashtra, attracts millions of devotees every year, especially during the Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari. This steady inflow of pilgrims generates sustained demand for a wide range of goods and services, thereby encouraging the growth and expansion of small enterprises. The present study examines the contribution of religious tourism to the economic development of small businesses in Pandharpur. It focuses on how pilgrimage-related activities create income and employment opportunities for local vendors, shopkeepers, transport operators, accommodation providers, food service units, and informal sector entrepreneurs. The study highlights the role of seasonal festivals and wari processions in boosting sales and enhancing livelihood security for small business owners. Additionally, it explores key challenges faced by these enterprises, including inadequate infrastructure, overcrowding, limited access to finance, and lack of formal business support. The research also identifies areas where improvements in transport facilities, sanitation, market organization, and government assistance can further strengthen the local tourism economy. Overall, the study underscores the vital role of religious tourism in promoting sustainable livelihoods, encouraging entrepreneurship, and improving the economic well-being of the local community in Pandharpur.*

**Keywords:** *Religious Tourism, small businesses, local economy, economic impact, Business growth*

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**Introduction:**

Religious travel has become an increasingly influential segment of the tourism industry, shaping the social and economic landscape of towns that host large numbers of pilgrims. Pandharpur—revered for its spiritual heritage and widely

recognized as a major pilgrimage destination in Maharashtra—receives a substantial inflow of devotees throughout the year, with exceptionally large gatherings during the Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari traditions. The steady arrival of visitors generates continuous demand for a wide range of



products and services, thereby creating favourable conditions for the expansion of local small-scale enterprises.

Local entrepreneurs operating lodging houses, food establishments, transportation services, flower and prasad stalls, handicraft outlets, footwear kiosks, and various informal businesses rely heavily on the seasonal and periodic arrival of pilgrims. These ventures not only provide essential goods and services to visitors but also play a central role in job creation, encourage the sale of locally produced items, and support the broader economic vitality of the town. Consequently, religious tourism functions as a significant catalyst for livelihoods in Pandharpur.

Examining the relationship between pilgrimage activity and small business development is crucial for stakeholders such as planners, municipal authorities, and local business owners. Such an analysis helps reveal the economic connections that support growth, the obstacles faced by entrepreneurs, and the areas in which infrastructure and policy enhancements may be required. The objective of this study is to evaluate how the flow of pilgrims influences business expansion, identify the key economic benefits associated with this interaction, and highlight opportunities for long-term, sustainable development within Pandharpur tourism-based

#### **Research Objectives:**

- To study the contribution of religious tourism to the growth of small businesses in Pandharpur.
- To examine how pilgrim inflow influences the income and expansion of small business activities.
- To identify the major categories of small businesses benefiting from religious tourism in Pandharpur.

#### **Scope of the Study:**

The present study is confined to Pandharpur town and focuses on examining the contribution of religious tourism to the growth of small-scale businesses. The study covers various enterprises such as lodging facilities, food stalls, prasad and flower vendors, transport operators, and street vendors operating in the town. It primarily analyses the economic impact of pilgrimage activities associated with religious tourism. Special emphasis is given to major pilgrimage events like the Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari, which attract a large number of devotees. The study examines income generation patterns of small businesses during pilgrimage and non-pilgrimage periods. It also evaluates employment opportunities created due to pilgrim inflow. The role of religious tourism in business expansion and sustainability is analysed. The scope of the study is limited to economic aspects only. Social, cultural, and environmental impacts of religious tourism are excluded from the study.

#### **Limitation of Study:**

1. The study is confined only to Pandharpur town; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other pilgrimage destinations.
2. It focuses only on the economic impact of religious tourism.
3. The findings are based on responses from a limited sample of small business owners.
4. Seasonal variations in pilgrim inflow may affect income patterns, making it difficult to generalize results for the entire year.

#### **Review of Literature:**

Religious tourism has been widely studied as an important driver of regional economic development, especially in pilgrimage towns. Several researchers have highlighted that the inflow



of pilgrims creates continuous demand for food, accommodation, transport, and various religious goods, which directly supports small businesses and informal sector livelihoods.

**Jadhav (2021)** examined the economic effects of the Wari pilgrimage on Pandharpur's local economy. The study highlighted that major pilgrimage events, particularly Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari, significantly increase income for local businesses such as hotels, transport operators, food vendors, and retail shops. It also noted challenges like overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and seasonal dependency of business income. This study supports the argument that pilgrimage tourism plays a vital role in local economic development and small business growth in Pandharpur.

**Kulkarni (2019)** focused on religious tourism in Maharashtra and observed that pilgrimage towns such as Pandharpur, Shirdi, and Nashik experience highly seasonal but economically significant business activity. The study found that local vendors and service providers earn a major portion of their annual income during major pilgrimage events, particularly the Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari in Pandharpur.

**Deshmukh (2020)** studied the informal sector in pilgrimage destinations and concluded that religious tourism is vital for the survival of street vendors, temporary stall owners, local artisans, and daily wage service providers. The research emphasized that pilgrimage-based economic activity supports marginalized groups and contributes to inclusive local development.

**Joshi (2021)** examined the relationship between infrastructure development and small business growth in pilgrimage towns. The study revealed that improvements in sanitation, transportation, accommodation, and crowd management lead to increased tourist satisfaction, which directly enhances business revenue and sustainability.

**Kadam (2022)** specifically analysed the economic impact of the Wari pilgrimage in Pandharpur and found that the event significantly boosts income for hotels, lodges, transport operators, food stalls, and prasad sellers. However, the study also highlighted challenges such as overcrowding, seasonal dependency, inadequate storage facilities, and limited institutional support for small entrepreneurs.

### **Research Methodology:**

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the contribution of religious tourism to the growth of small businesses in Pandharpur. The methodology is structured to assess the influence of pilgrim inflow on income generation, business expansion, and the types of enterprises benefiting from pilgrimage-based tourism.

### **Sources of Data:**

The study is based on both **primary and secondary data**. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and personal interviews with small business owners in Pandharpur. Secondary data were obtained from government reports, tourism department publications, journals, books, and relevant websites.

### **Sample size:**

The sample size for the present study consists of **100 small business owners** operating in Pandharpur. The sample includes various categories such as lodging houses, food stalls, transport operators, prasad and flower vendors, and street vendors. This size was selected to ensure adequate representation of pilgrimage-related enterprises. It helps in capturing variations in income and business growth during peak and off-season periods.



**Sampling Design:**

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select small business owners directly associated with religious tourism. The sample included lodging house owners, food vendors, transport operators, flower and Prasad sellers,

footwear shop owners, handicraft vendors, and informal sector entrepreneurs. A total of 100 respondents were selected to ensure representation of different business categories.

**Data Analysis and interpretation:**

**1. Distribution of Small Businesses by Type**

Type of Business	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
House hold lodging facilities	18	18%
Food Stalls / Restaurants	28	28%
Prasad & Flower Vendors	14	14%
Transport Operators	20	20%
Street Vendors / Handicrafts	20	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100%</b>

Food stalls and restaurants form the largest category (28%) of small businesses in Pandharpur, reflecting the constant demand for food and refreshments from pilgrims. Transport operators (20%) and House hold lodging facilities (18%) are also important, providing mobility and accommodation during pilgrimage events. Prasad and flower vendors (14%) depend largely on seasonal festival demand, while street vendors and

handicrafts (20%) offer supplementary goods and souvenirs. This distribution shows a mix of permanent and seasonal enterprises, ensuring steady livelihoods for locals while boosting economic activity during peak pilgrimage periods. Overall, it highlights how different types of businesses complement each other to support the town's pilgrimage economy.

**2. Income Variation During Pilgrimage and Non-Pilgrimage Periods:**

Business Type	Average Monthly Income (Non-Pilgrimage)	Average Monthly Income (Pilgrimage Season)	% Increase
House hold lodging facilities	₹18,000	₹40,000	122%
Food Stalls / Restaurants	₹15,000	₹38,000	153%
Prasad & Flower Vendors	₹8,000	₹20,000	150%
Transport Operators	₹12,000	₹30,000	150%
Street Vendors / Handicrafts	₹10,000	₹25,000	150%

Income for all small businesses in Pandharpur rises significantly during pilgrimage seasons. Food stalls and restaurants show the highest growth in earnings (153%), followed by House hold lodging facilities (122%) and transport operators (150%). Prasad and flower vendors also see a substantial increase (150%), reflecting their

strong reliance on festival demand. Street vendors and handicrafts similarly benefit from the influx of pilgrims. Overall, the data indicate that pilgrim inflow during events like Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari is a major driver of income growth for local enterprises.



### 3. Employment Generation:

Business Type	Employees During Non-Pilgrimage	Employees During Pilgrimage Season	% Increase
House hold lodging facilities	4	10	150%
Food Stalls / Restaurants	3	8	167%
Prasad & Flower Vendors	2	5	150%
Transport Operators	3	7	133%
Street Vendors / Handicrafts	2	6	200%

Employment for small businesses in Pandharpur increases significantly during pilgrimage seasons. Food stalls and restaurants hire additional staff (167%) to manage higher demand, while House hold lodging facilities and Prasad/flower vendors also expand their workforce (150%). Transport operators see a moderate increase (133%), and street vendors experience the highest

proportional growth (200%). These patterns show that pilgrimage events not only boost business income but also create temporary employment opportunities, supporting the livelihoods of local workers. Overall, religious tourism plays a key role in generating both direct and seasonal jobs in the town.

### 4. Sales Variation During Pilgrimage and Non-Pilgrimage Periods:

Business Type	Average Monthly Sales (Non-Pilgrimage) ₹	Average Monthly Sales (Pilgrimage Season) ₹	% Increase
House hold lodging facilities	22,000	48,000	118%
Food Stalls Restaurants	20,000	50,000	150%
Prasad & Flower Vendors	10,000	25,000	150%
Transport Operators	18,000	42,000	133%
Street Vendors / Handicrafts	15,000	38,000	153%

Sales volumes increase sharply during pilgrimage seasons due to the large inflow of pilgrims. Food stalls and restaurants record a 150% rise in sales, indicating higher daily consumption. Prasad and flower vendors also show a 150% increase, reflecting strong ritual-based demand. Transport operators experience a 133% growth due

to increased travel needs, while household lodging facilities register a 118% rise from higher accommodation demand. Street vendors and handicraft sellers witness the highest growth at 153%, driven by souvenir purchases. Overall, these percentage increases show that pilgrimage seasons significantly boost business turnover in Pandharpur.

### 5. Customer Footfall During Pilgrimage and Non-Pilgrimage Periods:

Business Type	Average Customers per Month (Non-Pilgrimage)	Average Customers per Month (Pilgrimage Season)	% Increase
House hold lodging facilities	60	150	150%
Food Stalls / Restaurants	300	850	183%
Prasad & Flower Vendors	200	600	200%
Transport Operators	180	450	150%



Street Vendors / Handicrafts	220	700	218%
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Customer footfall increases significantly during pilgrimage periods. Food stalls and restaurants record an increase of about 183%, while street vendors and handicraft sellers show the highest growth of around 218% due to frequent purchases by pilgrims. Prasad and flower vendors experience a 200% rise in customers, reflecting their dependence on religious practices. Transport services and household lodging facilities both show a 150% increase in customer footfall as pilgrims require mobility and accommodation. Overall, this percentage rise in customers explains the increase in income, sales, and employment during major pilgrimage events..

#### Findings:

1. Food stalls and restaurants constitute the largest category of small businesses (28%), followed by transport operators (20%) and lodging facilities (18%). Prasad and flower vendors (14%) are seasonal, while street vendors and handicrafts (20%) provide supplementary income
2. All businesses experience a significant increase in income during pilgrimage seasons. Food stalls, transport services, and prasad/flower vendors see the highest percentage growth (150–153%), highlighting their dependence on pilgrim inflow.
3. Pilgrimage events boost employment across all sectors. Street vendors show the highest proportional increase (200%), followed by food stalls (167%) and lodging facilities (150%), reflecting temporary job creation during peak periods.
4. Many small businesses rely heavily on pilgrimage periods for income and employment, indicating strong seasonality in the local economy.

5. Religious tourism acts as a key driver for local livelihoods, supporting both income generation and employment opportunities across multiple sectors in Pandharpur.

#### Suggestions:

1. Enhance roads, parking, sanitation, and public facilities to manage the large influx of pilgrims and support business activities.
2. Conduct training programs for entrepreneurs in areas such as business management, marketing, and customer service to improve efficiency and profitability.
3. Organize designated stalls or marketplaces for street vendors, Prasad, flowers, and handicrafts to reduce congestion and improve visibility.
4. Promote Pandharpur as a pilgrimage and cultural tourism hub to attract more visitors, which will benefit local businesses.
5. Encourage temporary employment schemes or support for seasonal workers to sustain livelihoods during peak pilgrimage periods.
6. Promote environmentally friendly practices among businesses, such as waste management, clean water provision, and energy-efficient operations.

#### Conclusion:

The study reveals that religious tourism in Pandharpur is a significant catalyst for local economic development, particularly for small-scale enterprises. Pilgrimage events such as Ashadhi and Kartiki Wari generate high inflows of devotees, resulting in increased income and employment for food stalls, lodging facilities, transport services, prasad and flower vendors, and street vendors. The findings indicate that many businesses are highly dependent on seasonal pilgrim inflow, with



substantial variations in income and workforce during peak and off-peak periods. To sustain and enhance these benefits, improvements in infrastructure, financial assistance, skill development programs, organized marketplaces, and adoption of sustainable practices are essential. Overall, religious tourism not only meets spiritual and cultural needs but also strengthens livelihoods, promotes entrepreneurship, and supports inclusive growth in Pandharpur, highlighting its dual role as a socio-cultural and economic driver.

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