

Prospects and Challenges of Pilgrimage Tourism in India: A Case Study of Shirdi, Maharashtra

Rohan Joglekar*

Abstract

The oldest idea or original art of travel is pilgrimage tourism, which has a shorter history than modern tourism. Modern tourism was sparked by pilgrimages to sacred and holy locations. Hindu pilgrimages, known as tirtha yatras, appear to have originated and developed from a custom that predates even their civilization.

There has been an incredible improvement in the expansion of pilgrimage tourism in Maharashtra. The fast increase in the influx of pilgrims significantly contributes to the regions sustainable development by producing socio-economic advantages including enhancing educational resources, fostering global awareness and national integration, opening up of new growth centres, creating jobs & raising domestic incomes healthcare facilities and effective demand of new infrastructure is a constant. Simultaneously, removal of regional disparities is crucial.

The unrestrained & uncontrolled rapid expansion of pilgrimage tourism imposes significant costs on the environment and destruction of the environment, depletion of local resources, and other socio cultural and economic issues. The trust or the government should provide funding for such efforts of environmental conservation & protection. Boosting the natural areas economic significance, and encouraging locals & tourists in awareness of environmental values to protect these natural resources for future generations.

The study came to conclusion that there is a favourable correlation between the rise in pilgrimage tourism and other forms of tourism, and that this expansion greatly aids in the host populations sustainable development. Taking Shirdi Sansthan Trust as a case study, a famous pilgrimage destination in Maharashtra, India.

Keywords: Tourism, Maharashtra, India, Pilgrimage Tourism, Sustainability, Development

INTRODUCTION

In the centre of Maharashtra, India, lies the tranquil village called Shirdi, where spirituality permeates all the borders. It is a paradise where patience is valued above all & faith knows no religious boundaries. The tradition of the holy

saint, Shri Satchinanand Sadguru Sainath Maharaj, also referred to as “Saibaba”, is what gives Shirdi its aura. Shirdi is a holy site that has been elevated to a spiritual sanctuary thanks to Saibabas footsteps. Millions of devotees from all over India & beyond are drawn to it. Shirdi is easily accessible by train from a number of stations, including Sainagar, Manmad Junction, Kopargaon, Nagarsul & Shirdi airport. Shirdi is situated on Ahmednagar-Manmad highway. Here “Saibaba” taught the world “Shraddha- Saburi” (Faith & patience) and knowledge for sixty years of his life. With the location of his perpetual contemplation, Samadhi Shirdi has become a global hub for seekers from all walks of life.

Saibaba’s birthplace and early years remain unknown. Additionally, it’s unclear if he practiced Islam or Hinduism. He had never revealed his faith. “Sabka Malik Ek” was one of Saibabas sayings. He is revered by adherents of both faiths. In the year 1858, he arrived at Shirdi as a sixteen-year-old boy accompanied by a bridal party. The legendary Shirdi saint Saibaba got his name from Mhalsapati, the local Khandoba temple priest, who greeted him as “Aao Sai” meaning welcome saint. Saibaba spent around sixty years of his life in Shirdi. He passed away on October 15, 1918 on Vijaydashami. Saibabas followers from all religious backgrounds turned Shirdi into a revered pilgrimage site even during his life time due to his widespread fame.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The Anthropological survey of India has chosen to explore Shirdi, a hub for religious tourism or pilgrimage tourism, as a site of religious significance and shrines as part of the natural project “Cultural Dimensions of Tourism”. The research paper will specifically seek to understand:

- Sustainability practices of tourism in Shirdi as a pilgrimage centre. Promote sustainable ways to achieve growth in tourism industry.

* Assistant Chef Instructor, Symbiosis School of Culinary Arts, Pune, Maharashtra, India.
Email: asstchefinstructor@ssca.edu.in

- Socioeconomic and environmental effects of travel for pilgrimages. Solutions to minimise the adverse impacts.

A sizable sample of data was gathered via schedules, case histories, questionnaires, and in-person interviews from both pilgrims and residents.

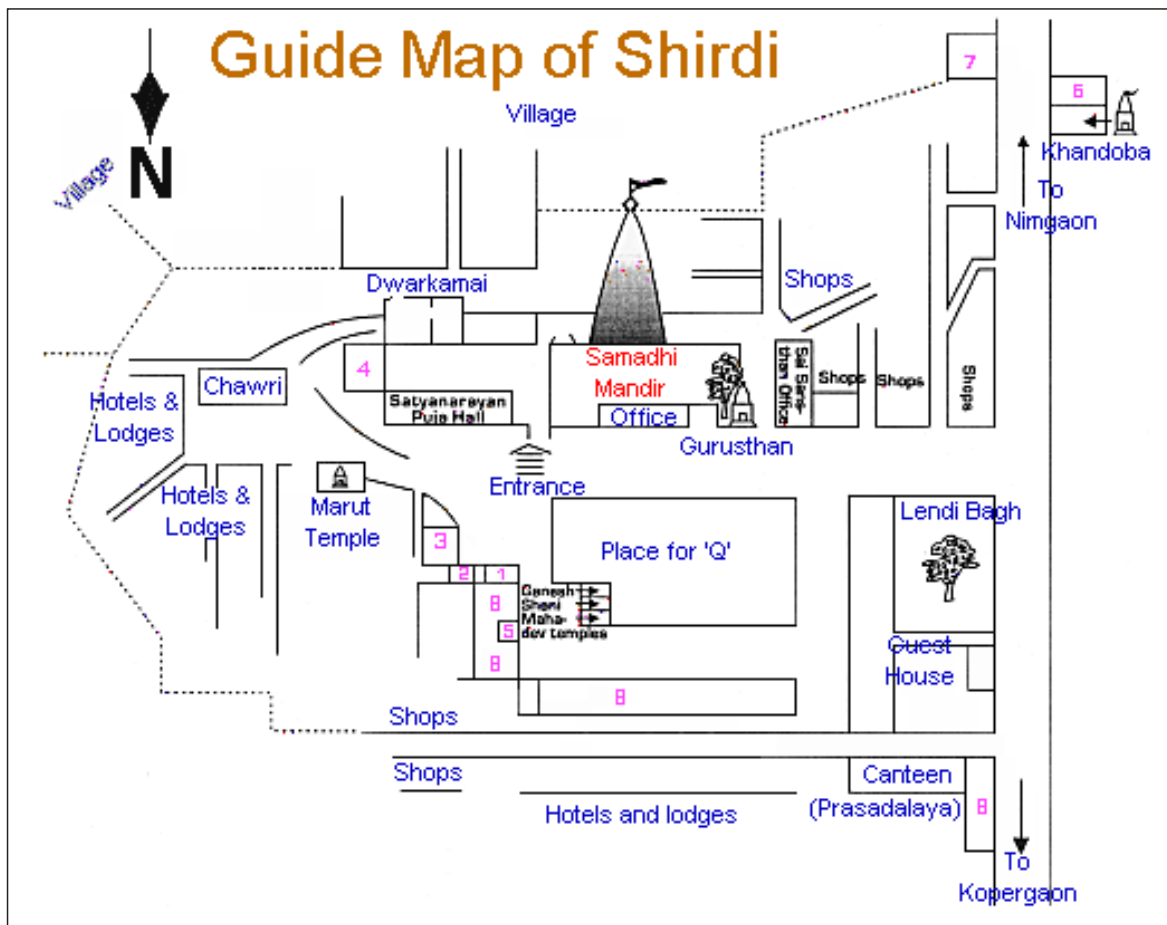


Fig. 1: Map of Shirdi Temple Premises

Places of Interest at Shirdi:

- *Sai Baba Samadhi Mandir*: Babas mortal remains were buried here. A life size marble statue of baba is placed over it. This is the main centre of attraction for tourists. All rituals during the four daily aartis are performed here.
- *Dwarkamai*: It is the masjid where Saibaba lived and blessed his devotees. A sacred fire *dhuni* is kept burning here since Baba's time. He used to distribute sacred ash from this *dhuni* and also cooked food.
- *Chavadi*: It is the village community hall where functions were held and feasts were served. Saibaba used to sleep here every alternate night and also met the sufi saints here.
- *Lendi Baug*: This garden was raised by Saibaba in his early days and he used to go for a stroll here every morning and evening.
- *Khandoba Temple*: It is situated on the Ahmednagar-Manmad road, just at the outskirts of the village.
- *There are Four Ancient Temples of Gramdevtas*: Shani, Hanuman, Mahadev & Ganesh situated close to the temple premises.
- *Sai Teerth Theme Park*: Known as India's first spiritual theme park attracts lot of tourists every year.
- *Wet n Joy Waterpark*: Designed for kids and adults attracts lot of tourists.
- *Dixit Wada Museum*: A charming little museum located in the temple premises host some rare images and artefacts used by Saibaba.

Table 1: Age Group of Pilgrims Visiting Shirdi

Age of Respondents (In Years)	Frequency (N=118)	Percentage %
Below 20	4	3.39
21 to 30	34	28.81
31 to 40	38	32.20
41 to 50	21	17.80
51 to 60	8	6.78
Above 60	13	11.02
Total	118	100.00

The table above indicates that the age range of 21 to 40 years old accounts for the largest proportion of visitors to Shirdi. It demonstrates that a sizable number of young

people as well as seniors visit Shirdi. Individuals between the ages of 41 to 50 and 51 to 60 are talkative a full of recommendations and ideas. Individuals over 60 are considered significant individuals with a wealth of life experience.

Traveling on pilgrimages offers individuals the chance to see sacred locations and is a characteristic shared by practically all the societies. The travel, destination and motive are the three main components of a pilgrimage Patange, Srinithivihahshini and Mahajan, (2013). During a customary religious journey, the traveller, propelled by a profound spiritual or religious conviction, completes the lengthy trek on foot, strengthened by a feeling of relinquishing material possessions.

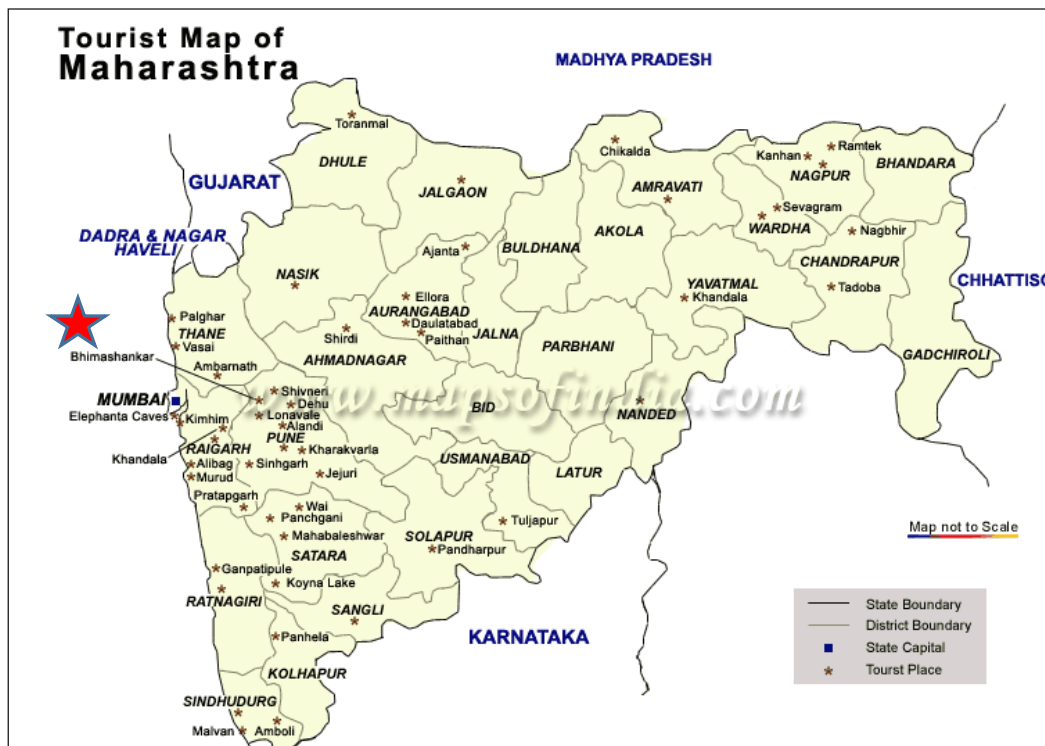


Fig. 2: Tourist Map of Maharashtra

Shirdi is a pilgrimage centre in western Indian state of Maharashtra. Because of its significance as a hub for a guru devotion in India, centered around the figure of Saibaba (c.1832-1918), a non- sectarian saint who is revered as a guru and even as a deity, Shirdi has seen significant demographic shift and rapid economic growth in recent years. ‘Shirdi Saibaba’ has gained so much popularity in less than a century that his followers have constructed hundreds of temples in almost every major Indian city from Nagpur & Thiruvanthapuram to Mumbai

& Chennai and cities from almost every continent, such as Dallas, Houston, London, New York, Nairobi, Sydney, Singapore, Tokyo, Toronto & Vancouver.

When considering the amount and regularity of such travel, pilgrimage is a mass movement even if it is essentially an individually motivated journey guided by personal religion.

Rao and Suresh (2013) Hindu pilgrimage sites are connected with installed divinities, naturally occurring

divinities, historically significant religious structures, association with mythological scriptural events, or distinctive natural settings; these factors can be combined to create several types of destinations for guru devotion. Guru sites honor the coincidence of a guru's birth or residence in a certain area. They are largely disconnected from "traditional" sacred geographies, established temples, inherited lineages of religious experts, and the infrastructure that supports pilgrimages. Furthermore, pilgrimage sites near major cities like Delhi & Mumbai have seen a sharp rise in the number or rental & residential buildings, which has accelerated urbanization & drastically altered social dynamics. Just as the inflow of Indian middle-class tourists and property owners has altered the social fabric of the impacted locations, this largely uncontrolled development has altered their spatial character.

METHODOLOGY

It has been stated that in recent decades, pilgrimage travel to pilgrimage centers has expanded dramatically as a result of improved transportation infrastructure and enhanced accessibility. While many tourist trips explicitly contain a spiritual component, a significant part of this trips are driven by "religious needs" but also have touristic elements (Gladstone, 2005; Rinschede, 1992). (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). The majority of research on pilgrimage (and tourism) has been comparative & ethnographic, which has limited our understanding of the ramifications of the rise in modern pilgrimage travel to sacred sites- environmental concern being one among them. The topic of sacred site environments has just recently come up for consideration (Shackley, 2001; Tanner & Mitchell, 2002). Since over 100 million Indians travel on pilgrimages annually (Times of India, 2001), the environmental concerns are particularly important in the Indian setting, where domestic tourism is the major industry (Gladstone, 2005; Richter, 1989). The literature on pilgrimage and the environment hasn't paid much, if any, attention to the relationship between pilgrimage travel and the surroundings of the pilgrimage, particularly in Indian contexts, is anthropological in nature and covers its religious, cultural, social and economic aspects.

Morinis (1984) offers a thorough analysis of a large portion of this material by classifying it into major categories such as typological, ethnographic, and fragmented. Although there is ample evidence of the

pilgrimage industry's operations (Caplan, 1997; Fuller, 1992; Parry, 1994; Van Der Veer, 1988), relatively few studies genuinely place pilgrimage in the contemporary setting and mention how pilgrimage and pilgrims in India have changed over time (Singh, 2004; Singh & Singh, 1999). Geographical studies have primarily concentrated on the distribution of pilgrimage sites, their historical significance (Champalaxami, 1986), and the pilgrims patterns of travel (Rinschede, 1995). However, they have not provided much insight into the effects on the environment. Though they are constrained by their emphasis on contrasting it with the mythological or historical picture of the sacred location, a few studies offer powerful emotive accounts of environmental degradation in pilgrimage centers.

The consequences of pilgrimage for holy spaces have not even been critically examined in environmental studies, despite their merit. This could be partly attributed to the environmental studies field's late emergence in India (Gadgil & Guha, 1995) and its preoccupation with issues related to deforestation, the rural environment, growing urban problems and rising population (Agarwal, 2000; Dwivedi & Khator, 1995; Gadgil & Guha, 1995). The idea that the gods will take care of all the issues at these places could also be the reasons why environmental concerns are not given high attention in sacred places (Shackley, 2001). Although religious and ethical principles form the basis of much environmental concern in India, sacred sites that serves as archives for this knowledge have not been thoroughly examined in relation to environmental concerns. Although insightful, the study of the connections between religion, the environment, and religious activities is speculative (Chappel & Tucker, 2000; Dwivedi, 2000; Nelson, 1998, 2000). Studies that primarily include the political dimension have focused on how religious discourses construct nature and the environment. It is commendable that there has been recent interest in tracking and measuring specific environmental degradation indicators in pilgrimage centers (Kiran A. Shinde; Trivedi & Agarwal, 2003). However, it appears that there has been less attention paid to the need to examine the relationship between pilgrimage and the environmental effects in pilgrimage centers.

However, it appears that modern Indian pilgrimages have taken on a completely different shape from the ancient ones. There have been significant increase in the number of pilgrims visiting holy places, but there have

also been noticeable changes in the fundamental nature of the pilgrimage (Shinde, 1995). The contemporary version exhibits more “tourism like” traits, such as shifting visitation patterns, minimum visitor participation in rituals, commercial organization typical of package tours, specific destination marketing strategies, and visitor consumerist behaviour (Gladstone, 2005; Gandhi & Guha, 1995; Singh, 2002). Unaware of the religious significance of time in performing a pilgrimage, a significant percentage of travellers to holy locations have added goal of vacationing (Gladstone, 2005). This contextualisation aids in concentrating on pilgrims as physical beings with the capacity to significantly alter the physical surroundings of pilgrimage sites in ways distinct from those of customary pilgrimages.

This essay seeks to explore the elements that affect a pilgrimage center’s atmosphere and the ways in which these elements interact and are addressed by different organizations. The Indian Environmental Protection Act of 1986 defined the “environment” as water, air and land and the interrelationship which exists among and between water, air and land, and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organisms, and property” (cited from Dwivedi & Khator, 1995:96). The research of this study was done in January 2023 while on a pilgrimage to the holy temple of Shirdi, Sai baba, Maharashtra one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in India.

URBANIZING SHIRDI’S PILGRIMAGE ECONOMY

There were perhaps 200 dwellings and a thousand people living in Shirdi in the 1910s. The town has grown from a little village to a major pan Indian and even an international pilgrimage hub in less than a century. At present, a municipal council is in charge of overseeing Shirdi, which spans a land area of 1298 hectares or around 3207 acres, with an estimated 30,973 residents. Based on field observations and SSST – corroborated data, estimates indicate that Shirdi receives over eight million pilgrim visits yearly, with a floating population that fluctuates between a cautious minimum of 25,000 visitors per day and weekend peaks of 75,000 – 80,000. The three largest festivals, Ramnavami (March-April), Gurupournima (July-August), Vijaydashmi (September-October) – experience seasonal maxima of 3,00,000 tourists per day.

Since 2004, the SSST has played a significant role in directing the town’s growth. Currently, the trust employs around 1400 people in its thirteen divisions under its executive wing, which consists of 20 board members. The administrative department of the temple sets the guidelines for devotional rites and may alter their structure as it sees fit. Due to hygienic issues and safety concerns resulting from the enormous number of pilgrims completing the rite, the customary practice of offering coconuts as Prasad would no longer be allowed in the temple premises. Concerning public safety, Shirdi is not the first temple to outlaw ritual coconuts. Several popular temples have followed suit, like the Siddhivinayak Temple in downtown, Mumbai which outlawed a practice in 2007 due to the possibility that coconuts to be used to carry bombs. With 812 large family friendly rooms that can sleep up to seven thousand people, as well as additional halls that maybe used as dormitories. The SSST oversees accommodation in its 16 buildings. Additionally, it offers complimentary bus service from the temple premises, dining hall & its lodging centres. Apart from SSST, several important institutions function in Shirdi’s new pilgrimage economy. Hotels, eateries, and retail establishments that offer services to guests are among them. There are roughly more than 500 establishments offering accommodation. This comprises 200 guesthouses that solely provide accommodation. Just 185 hotels out of the total number are registered with the municipality. The recent addition of airport, great rail network and amazing road connectivity has increased the footfall massively.

The most remarkable sustainable approach started by SSST is the Prasadalay which is powered entirely by 73 big CST’s (Concentrated Solar Thermal) panels which can cook and serve 3000 meals in one setting. The suns energy is harnessed by these panels which heat millions of litres of water and turn it into steam. Steam is piped into the kitchen in the large vessels in which the food is made. Steam cooking is the most hygienic, efficient and clean method of cooking food particularly in large gatherings. The feed water pump system of Shirdi is designed to produce steam for cooking when even electricity is not available. Shirdi thus, has the world’s largest solar steam system that cooks food for 20,000 devotees daily. The prasadam production for thousands of devotees saves Rs. 10,500 per day on LPG, as informed by Sansthan officials.

Travel has led to some changes in the economy and in the mobility of occupations. Farmers in the area have begun cultivating flowers in the fields that were previously used for cultivation of pulses & cereals. The Saibaba temple has a great demand for flowers and lot of them are even cultivated and transported to different states. Horticulture has boomed. There is a greater need for qualified drivers and cleaners at Shirdi because there are so many cars of tourists. The youth of Shirdi and the surrounding rural areas now have the chance to pursue these careers and make a comfortable living.

IMPACT OF PILGRIMAGE TOURISM ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL

The flood of tourists has a variety of effects on the surroundings of pilgrimage sites. Short-term peak demands that put a strain on the essential services, the build-up of massive amounts of residual wastes, high pollution levels, and the clearance of land (including forests in many places) to make ways for amenities and temporary lodging for pilgrims are typical examples of this effects. Such environmental effects in and around the pilgrimage centres are most likely to peak and then gradually diminish due to the periodic and sporadic character of traditional pilgrimage. The ecology of a pilgrimage place is largely affected by 2 factors:

The volume of visitors & the areas urbanization.

Although tourism is a large industry worldwide and a significant source of income, governments are beginning to actively address the issues of carbon emissions and waste pollution from tourism related activities as a result of climate change. Enhancing the directions of development decisions and increasing public environmental literacy are the best ways to address the issues brought about by the growth of tourism industry. This would enable the public and decision makers to adopt a more sustainable perspective on decisions pertaining to tourism development.

Examining the current condition of tourism development in relation to people's attitudes towards environmental literacy is evidently a useful approach to assess the merits and drawbacks of actions made for sustainable tourist development.

Economic Impact: Tourism is viewed as a crucial tool for fostering local economic growth, creating job's locally, enhancing infrastructure locally, and bringing in foreign investments and so on. This helps draw in new industries and strengthen the local economy while also enhancing the areas economic standing (Shinde, 2000).

Since the economy is the main focus of tourism development policy, the issue of economic impact has received more attention than social and environmental impact because it is simpler to measure, has a more robust methodology, and is more convenient and reliable in terms of the data available (Shinde, 2007). The cost of people, industrial development, and village development can all be used to analyse the economic impact. These factors can result in increased wage income, entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, integrity of public facility maintenance, tourism development feedback to the community, integration of local speciality industries, increased leisure opportunities, convenience of public local transportation, local health standards that are raised, development protection policy settings, the creation of creative goods and increased expenditure costs, and higher land and housing prices. Thus the researcher thinks that looking at the things like employment, earnings, consumption, industry, building, facilities, prices, incentives, health care, cultural and creative activities, community feedback and the policy coordination will yield the most accurate economic effect variables.

Social Impacts: (Shinde, 2007) Due to the importance of tourism, there is a tendency for social relations to become more self-serving and indifferent, which has negative effects on the local social system, individual behaviour deviation, growing coldness and utilitarianism of social relations, and local social conflicts brought on by racial discrimination. On the plus side, tourism development intervention can positively promote cultural and lifestyle communication, reduce population outflow, and maintain a more robust social structure, as well as contribute towards the preservation of local culture. These include better living standards, a wider range of vocational opportunities, decline in out-migration patterns, and reduction in racial barriers, greater community openness, a rise in intercommunal conflicts, and a rise in crime and unemployment during the off months. It will have an impact on tourism's popularity, expenditure costs, raise land and housing prices, highlight local architectural

features, make visitors feel welcome, foster positive interactions with locals, and promote cross strait cultural exchanges. It will also give rise to increased leisure opportunities, encourage involvement in community tourism affairs, provide enough local tourism indicators and options for recreational facilities, and strengthen tourism development organizations.

Environmental Impacts: ((Dwivedi & Khator, 1995) there are two main sources of environmental consequences. Tourism activities themselves have an impact on the environment, as do the facilities they use. The natural and manmade environments, which include soil erosion, vegetation loss, and ecosystem alterations are the two categories of physical environment. A large number of buildings from the new era, that for an incongruous landscape with the existing facilities, as well as traffic congestion, noise, air & water pollution, and waste resulting from population growth, are all examples of the negative effects of the man-made environment.

Thus, the most accurate environmental impact factors, can be found by examining, tourism and recreational facilities, natural ecosystems, public transportation, parking and open space, visitor environmental quality, trash, motor vehicle emissions, and water & air quality.

Shirdi's has become popular by Saibaba's fame & devotion; growth is due to the followership for Saibaba mostly from the urban cities of India and the public frequently look for his heavenly help with their everyday issues.

Saibaba's appeal appears to be worldwide because he led a mendicant (*fakir*) life, was excommunicated from all religious organizations, and is still regarded by his followers as a guru who should be "revered along with other household dieties". The Shri Sai Sansthan Trust (SSST) is a public charitable trust supported by the state and is responsible for managing the shrine and the surrounding religious tourism, with is credited with the town's expansion concurrently.

CONCLUSION

The locals believe that faith, or Shraddha, is the primary force behind human existence and that one must maintain their faith in something. Shirdi people continue to believe in Saibaba. This belief has also attracted thousands

of visitors to Shirdi, enabling it to develop from a tiny village into India's premier tourist destination. Humans go on a pilgrimage to find contentment and tranquillity. For all worlds' religion together, pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise.

After visiting Shirdi, tourists typically have great experiences and no complaints. The secular perception of Saibaba has changed a little in the recent years as a result of Hindu control over the Sansthans trust.

Before and during the journey, cultivating an ecological consciousness can be a useful tool for acknowledging and lessening our impact on ecosystems and natural resources. Creating mental habits that are in line with ecology, including building a personal connection with the land, can help us recognize the value of traditional agriculture, preserve water and energy and reap the rewards of good land stewardship.

Humans are to blame for the negative effects on the environment, such as pollution, global warming, piles of solid waste, and climate change. If the human activity is the cause for the depletion of natural resources, then human activity is also the cause of the need to preserve natural resources and reverse harmful environmental effects. The topic of environmental degradation can be addressed in a number of ways including the adoption of eco-friendly practices, proper waste management, and enhanced sanitation and application of laws and policies.

Pilgrims can follow some ideas to make their pilgrimage fruitful:

- Do not litter, avoid using disposable items.
- Ethics and spirit of sustainability must be followed in eating and drinking.
- Use of required amount of water to minimise the waste.
- Prepare mindfully for the pilgrimage and do not consider it a mere recreational activity.
- Make your mind full with green ideas so that whenever you return home from the pilgrimage the green ideas can help in making your surroundings better.

NGO's, locals and the business sector should step up to support the conservation and preservation of these pilgrimage sites in addition to the government,

which should be responsible for maintaining temples, shrines and other buildings in a sustainable manner. These locations can benefit locals more and be kept for enjoyment for future generations when they are properly conserved and maintained.

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