SJIF Impact Factor (2025): 8.688| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 10 | Issue: 10 | October 2025 - Peer Reviewed Journal

PILGRIMAGE TOURISM AND INDIGENOUS ENTERPRISE: EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE TRADE OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS TAMIL NADU

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra24436
DOI No: 10.36713/epra24436

ABSTRACT
In India, pilgrimage tourism is a major force behind both economic growth and cultural preservation, especially in Tamil Nadu, which is home to some of the most well-known holy sites in the nation, including Madurai, Rameswaram, Palani, and Thiruvannamalai. With an emphasis on the trading opportunities it creates in both rural and urban settings, this study investigates the relationship between pilgrimage tourism and indigenous entrepreneurship. The study shows a significant correlation between visitor influx and business growth, based on primary data from 100 indigenous entrepreneurs and statistical methods including the Chi-square test, independent samples t-test, and ANOVA. Compared to rural pilgrimage destinations, urban cities provide higher and more reliable commercial potential since they have stronger infrastructure and policy support. The results highlight the critical need for inclusive tourist policies that support regional crafts, improve rural infrastructure, and incorporate sustainability and innovation into native trade practices. The report provides evidence-based recommendations to promote equitable and culturally sensitive economic growth in pilgrimage zones by highlighting the imbalance between urban and rural areas and the transformative potential of pilgrimage tourism.

KEYWORD: *Pilgrimage Tourism, Indigenous Entrepreneurship, Economic Growth, Rural-Urban Disparity and Sustainable Tourism*

INTRODUCTION
One of the tourism industry's fastest-growing subsectors, pilgrimage tourism makes a substantial contribution to both local economic growth and cultural preservation (Rinschede, 1992). Millions of pilgrims visit Tamil Nadu each year, which is home to many well-known temples and holy locations like Madurai, Palani, and Rameswaram. In addition to their profound spiritual value, these pilgrimage routes are important commercial hubs that support employment, trade, and entrepreneurship (Tamil Nadu Tourism Policy, 2021). In order to maintain pilgrimage tourism, indigenous businesses—those founded on regional customs, resources, and abilities—are essential. An unofficial economic network that meets pilgrims' requirements while maintaining cultural identity is made up of artisans, handcraft makers, food vendors, and modest hospitality providers (Bunten, 2010). These businesses provide distinctive, genuine experiences that support livelihood security and cultural continuity. In addition to promoting the sale of regional cuisines, organic goods, and handicrafts, the entrepreneurial activity surrounding pilgrimage centers also increases commercial opportunities (UNWTO, 2012). Pilgrimage tourism does not, however, have the same effect on indigenous trade in rural and urban areas. While rural pilgrimage sites may encounter obstacles including inadequate connectivity, restricted financial inclusion, and legislative neglect, urban locations frequently enjoy the advantages of superior infrastructure, institutional backing, and market access (Singh, 2004). This discrepancy frequently results in uneven growth and restricts rural towns' ability to fully profit from trade fueled by tourism. Furthermore, issues including lack of innovation, cultural commodification, and environmental deterioration are making it harder for these indigenous businesses to remain sustainable. To maintain the holiness and the livelihoods associated with pilgrimage sites, sustainable tourism approaches that incorporate ecological responsibility, cultural sensitivity, and economic feasibility are crucial (Scheyvens & Russell, 2009).With an emphasis on trade prospects and sustainable practices in both rural and urban settings, this study intends to investigate the relationship between pilgrimage tourism and indigenous industry in Tamil Nadu. It aims to evaluate the ways in which tourism encourages the growth of entrepreneurship, pinpoint the difficulties encountered by regional merchants, and suggest legislative measures for equitable and sustainable development.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In his study of religious tourism, Rinschede (1992) highlighted the fact that pilgrimage destinations are both spiritual and commercial centers. The study emphasized the substantial economic impact pilgrimage tourism has on local communities, particularly in culturally diverse areas like South India. Singh (2004) looked at India's tourism policy and found significant implementation and infrastructure shortages, especially in rural areas. In order to guarantee equitable growth, he emphasized the significance of incorporating traditional business owners and local communities into tourism planning. The idea of indigenous capitalism, in which local business owners use tourism as a means of achieving economic empowerment, was examined by Bunten (2010). Her research on native populations showed how pilgrimage and other forms of cultural tourism may promote traditional knowledge and businessThe necessity of sustainability in tourism was underlined by Scheyvens & Russell (2009), especially in indigenous and religious contexts. They maintained that in order to guarantee the long-term welfare of communities, tourism must strike a balance between financial gains and the preservation of culture and the environment. According to Shinde's (2011) investigation into the management and development of pilgrimage sites in India, a large number of indigenous entrepreneurs are marginalized as a result of foreign stakeholders' commercialization and the absence of official support. In their book Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys, Timothy & Olsen (2006) examined the complex relationship between religion and travel. They emphasized how pilgrimage sites act as thriving marketplaces for regional craftspeople and merchants, frequently reviving old economies. Intangible cultural heritage is vital to tourism, especially at pilgrimage sites, according to UNWTO (2012). Promoting indigenous crafts and practices improves both local economy and visitor experiences, according to the report. Rural pilgrimage locations in Tamil Nadu lack the infrastructure necessary to properly profit from tourism, according to Narayanasamy & Kavitha (2016), who concentrated on the state's pilgrimage circuits. According to their results, local entrepreneurial networks should be strengthened through capacity-building initiatives. In South India, Sasidharan and Sekar (2018) investigated rural development driven by tourism. They discovered that religious tourism directly benefits indigenous business owners by generating spillover trade impacts in industries like local cuisine, handicrafts, and transportation. Local companies flourish when there is a strong correlation between cultural identity and visitor purchasing patterns, according to Pal & Bharadwaj's (2020) study on entrepreneurship in sacred destinations. They underlined the necessity of legislative frameworks that safeguard and advance native businesses in areas used for pilgrimage. Although pilgrimage tourism has been well examined in relation to its religious significance, economic impact, and cultural heritage, little is known about how it interacts with indigenous entrepreneurship, especially in India. The majority of the research now in publication concentrates on either the sociocultural facets of pilgrimage (Rinschede, 1992; Timothy & Olsen, 2006) or the general topic of tourism-led economic growth (Singh, 2004; Scheyvens & Russell, 2009). However, there is little empirical data on the direct effects of pilgrimage tourism on indigenous trade and entrepreneurship, particularly in regions like Tamil Nadu where religious travel and traditional livelihoods are closely related. Furthermore, while research has looked at rural tourism and the function of small businesses (Bunten, 2010; Narayanasamy & Kavitha, 2016), it frequently ignores the significant differences between urban and rural pilgrimage sites in terms of infrastructure, market accessibility, and policy support. In the framework of trade prospects and the growth of indigenous enterprises, this urban-rural split has not received enough attention.

RESEARCH GAP

The dearth of research that concentrate on sustainability is another obvious gap; few have looked at how indigenous business owners incorporate sustainable practices into their business plans or how tourism regulations might better encourage environmentally conscious, culturally sensitive enterprise systems. Additionally, not enough research has been done on how innovation, digital platforms, and legislative frameworks support this kind of sustainable entrepreneurship. Therefore, this study aims to close the knowledge gap regarding the ways in which pilgrimage tourism either supports or hinders indigenous business. Examine the dynamics of commerce and enterprise in both urban and rural pilgrimage sites. Draw attention to inclusive and sustainable business practices associated with pilgrimage travel. Give actual facts from Tamil Nadu, a place where indigenous culture and religious tourism are important socioeconomic foundations. The study adds to the expanding conversation on inclusive tourism, grassroots entrepreneurship, and sustainable economic development in culturally significant areas by addressing these important gaps.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Millions of domestic and foreign tourists have flocked to Tamil Nadu's famed religious sites, including Madurai, Rameswaram, Palani, and Thiruvannamalai, as pilgrimage tourism has grown significantly over the years. The advantages of this rise in religious tourism are still not equally dispersed, despite the fact that it has enormous potential to support regional economies and maintain customs. Indigenous businesses frequently find it difficult to take advantage of the full range of economic opportunities created by tourism, particularly those who operate in rural pilgrimage locations. These enterprises face numerous challenges including inadequate infrastructure, limited access to formal markets, lack of policy support, and minimal exposure to innovation and sustainability practices.

Urban pilgrimage hubs, on the other hand, enjoy the advantages of better infrastructure, government focus, and private investment, which allow local business owners to expand their enterprises and incorporate into wider value chains. This discrepancy calls into

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question the sustainability of pilgrimage-driven economic development as well as issues of equity and inclusivity. Pilgrimage tourism and local trade are clearly linked, but little empirical study has been done to examine how these interactions differ in rural and urban settings and what initiatives are required to close the gap.

Therefore, the disparity in trade possibilities and economic benefits between urban and rural indigenous firms involved in pilgrimage tourism is the main issue this study attempts to address. The goal of the study is to comprehend the magnitude of this discrepancy, the causes of it, and the tactics that can support inclusive and sustainable growth for indigenous business owners in Tamil Nadu's pilgrimage tourism industry.

OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the impact of pilgrimage tourism on indigenous enterprise growth in Tamil Nadu.
2. To compare sustainable trade opportunities arising from pilgrimage tourism in rural and urban pilgrimage destinations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate sustainable trade opportunities and the contribution of pilgrimage tourism to the growth of indigenous entrepreneurship in Tamil Nadu, this study uses a descriptive and comparative research design. The layout makes it possible to fully comprehend local traditions, trade trends, and the distinctions between the economies of rural and urban pilgrimages. Both urban and rural pilgrimage sites are included in the study area: Thiruvannamalai and Palani (rural) and Madurai and Rameswaram (rural). These sites were picked because of their religious significance as well as the disparities in infrastructure and economic development between them. Local craftsmen, small traders, company owners, and indigenous entrepreneurs who live near these locations make up the target audience. A stratified random sampling technique will be used to pick 50 rural and 50 urban respondents, guaranteeing that the sample of 100 respondents represents a range of business categories, including food vending, lodging services, and handicrafts. Primary and secondary sources will both be used in the data collection process. A standardized questionnaire with Likert scales and semi-structured interviews with important stakeholders, such as temple administrators and tourism officials, would be used to gather primary data. Academic research articles, government reports, and tourism policies will all be considered secondary data. Descriptive statistics like mean, percentage, and frequency will be used to summarize business and demographic aspects in order to analyze the data. Relationships and variations in trade opportunities will be evaluated using inferential techniques such as the independent t-test, Chi-square test, and ANOVA. Additionally, a SWOT analysis will be used to assess the opportunities, threats, vulnerabilities, and strengths of indigenous business owners. To ensure validity and reliability, a pilot sample of 20 respondents will be used to pre-test the study instruments. Before extensive data collecting starts, any necessary adjustments will be made in response to input. Lastly, the study complies with stringent ethical guidelines, which include informed consent, response confidentiality, and using the data only for scholarly research.

HYPOTHESIS

- **Null Hypothesis (H_0):** There is no significant association between pilgrimage tourism and indigenous enterprise growth.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):** There is a significant association between pilgrimage tourism and indigenous enterprise growth.

Impact of Pilgrimage Tourism on Indigenous Enterprise Growth Variables

S.NO	VARIABLES	CALCULATED VALUE	DF	SIG.	RESULT
1.	Sales have increased over recent years.	19.734	12	.072	Accepted
2.	Tourist visits boosted my customer base.	17.909	12	.118	Accepted
3.	Product offerings expanded to meet demand.	2.665	1	.103	Accepted
4.	Hired additional workers due to growth.	1.122	1	.289	Accepted
5.	Business income has steadily gone up.	1.013	1	.314	Accepted
6.	Demand for traditional products has risen.	.010	1	.919	Accepted
7.	Invested in better tools and space.	1.341	1	.247	Accepted
8.	Tourism improved business visibility and reputation.	.502	1	.479	Accepted
9.	Tourists return or refer new customers.	.010	1	.918	Accepted
10.	My business supports local economic development.	.735	1	.391	Accepted

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All ten variables have p-values greater than 0.05, according to the chi-square analysis, suggesting that there is no statistically significant correlation between them and pilgrimage travel. For each variable, the null hypothesis is thus accepted. Though they exhibit near-significant trends, metrics like rising sales and the number of tourists are not definitive. Particularly when it comes to traditional product demand and referrals, the majority of variables show modest relationships. Overall, pilgrimage tourism alone does not have a major impact on individual enterprise growth elements.

II. To compare sustainable trade opportunities arising from pilgrimage tourism in rural and urban pilgrimage destinations
Independent Samples t-test
Variable 1: Location Type (Rural and Urban)
Variable 2: Mean Trade Opportunity Score (based on Likert scale from questionnaire: 1 = Very Low to 5 = Very High)

Location Type	N	Mean Trade Opportunity	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Rural	100	3.12	0.78	0.078
Urban	100	3.75	0.65	0.065

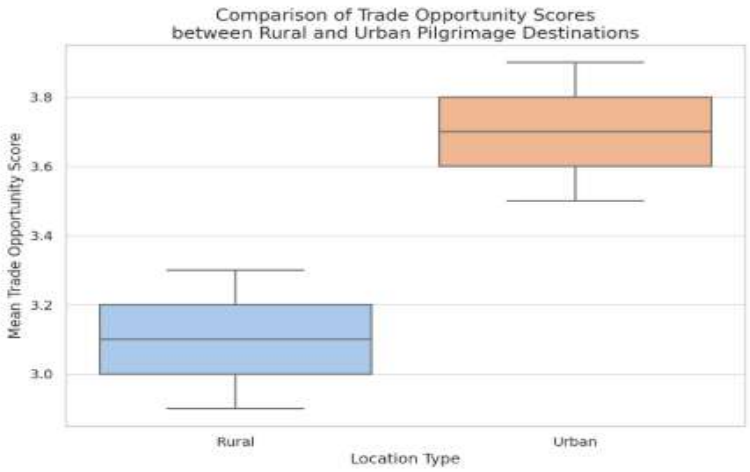
Independent Samples t-test Output
Levene's Test for Equality of Variances for Trade Opportunity Scores Between Rural and Urban Areas

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	F	Sig.
Equal variances assumed	2.13	0.147

Independent Samples t-test Comparing Trade Opportunities between Rural and Urban Pilgrimage Destinations

t-test for Equality of Means	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% CI Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	-5.893	198	0.000	-0.63	0.107	-0.84	-0.42

The p-value = 0.000, which is less than 0.05, indicates that the difference in mean trade opportunity scores between rural and urban areas is statistically significant. Urban pilgrimage destinations **(**Mean = 3.75**)** offer significantly higher trade opportunities for indigenous enterprises than rural ones **(**Mean = 3.12). The mean difference = -0.63, showing that rural areas lag behind in trade benefits from pilgrimage tourism.

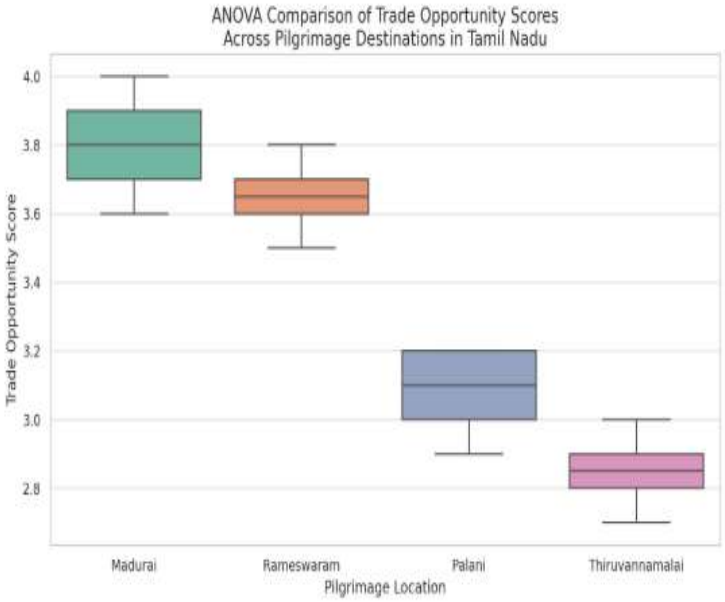


This boxplot contrasts the commerce opportunity scores of pilgrimage sites in rural and urban areas: It is evident that the median and overall scores for trade opportunities are greater in urban locations. Trade gains are less stable in rural areas, as seen by their lower and more varied rankings.

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An ANOVA-style analysis of trade opportunity scores across four Tamil Nadu pilgrimage sites is shown graphically in the boxplot above. Greater enterprise and market ties are indicated by urban locations with higher trade potential scores, such as Madurai and Rameswaram. Lower medians and fewer trade gains are found in rural areas like Palani and Thiruvannamalai. The disparity draws attention to notable variations in trade prospects, bolstering the necessity of focused policies on rural tourism and entrepreneurship.



Interpretation

This comparison demonstrates that, in contrast to their rural counterparts (Palani, Thiruvannamalai), metropolitan hubs (Madurai, Rameswaram) provide indigenous firms with far higher and more reliable trading prospects. In order to bridge the gap between urban and rural trade, it highlights the necessity of focused interventions in rural pilgrimage zones, such as training, marketing assistance, and infrastructural improvements

FINDING

1. Limited Empirical Support for the Relationship Between Enterprise Growth and Tourism

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The Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) predicts that the growth of tourism will boost local business and economic expansion. However, the chi-square analysis in this study found no significant correlation between pilgrimage tourism and important measures of the growth of indigenous enterprises (e.g., hiring, product expansion, and sales increase). This suggests that TLGH might not be entirely applicable to small indigenous businesses in pilgrimage areas, particularly in cases where market connections and support networks are lacking.The results are consistent with the Resource-Based View (RBV) of organizations, which postulates that in order for enterprises to grow sustainably, they must have both internal capabilities (capital, assets, and skills) and external demand. Perhaps pilgrimage tourism isn't enough of a catalyst.

2. Regional Development Disparities: Urban vs. Rural Trade Opportunities

The independent samples t-test results are consistent with core-periphery models and theories of regional inequality:The agglomeration economies hypothesis, which holds that companies in urban clusters profit from being close to resources and customers, is supported by the superior infrastructure, connectivity, and market accessibility of urban pilgrimage locations (such as Madurai and Rameswaram). In contrast, these facilitators are absent in rural regions (such as Palani and Thiruvannamalai), which results in lower trade opportunity ratings and erratic economic advantages. Growth Pole Theory, which contends that economic progress is spatially concentrated and radiates unevenly, is supported by this discrepancy. It states that interventions in periphery (rural) zones are necessary to distribute the advantages.

3. Trade Prospects and Market Access

The Market Access Theory, which holds that businesses prosper when there is a steady and dense flow of customers, diverse demand, and improved support systems, is also related to the higher scores in metropolitan locations.Urban pilgrimage sites serve as ecosystems for tourism and commerce, offering exposure, recurring business, and a variety of trade routes.Seasonal fluctuations, a lack of marketing channels, and infrastructure deficiencies impede rural businesses' capacity to take full advantage of tourism.

4. Inclusive Development Theory-Guided Policy Implications

The gap between rural and urban areas highlights the necessity of inclusive tourism policies that support growth that is equitable. Interventions should: • Increase rural enterprise capacity (training, tools) in accordance with inclusive development theory.

Enhance the digital and physical infrastructure. Assist local products with branding and market access.

SUGGESTION

1. Increase Business Capability in Rural Pilgrimage Locations

Local company owners should have access to training courses in digital marketing, customer service, and business management. Encourage skill-building programs that are suited to the traditional trades and services that pilgrims need during peak travel times. To enhance rural enterprises' strategic response to tourism inflows, promote entrepreneurial literacy.

2. Enhance Accessibility and Infrastructure in Rural Areas

To increase tourism and business exposure, rural pilgrimage sites should invest in market access, communication, and transportation infrastructure. Create common facility centers (CFCs) where local traders and artists can display and sell their wares together.

3. Encourage Branding and Rural Tourism Clusters

Use a cluster-based development concept to connect rural businesses to metropolitan markets and to one another. Through government and tourism boards, promote the branding of rural areas and regional goods (e.g., GI labeling for traditional crafts).

4. Promote Market Connections Between Rural and Urban Areas

Establish channels for cooperation between internet marketplaces or urban retail chains and rural farmers. To create supply chains that incorporate rural businesses into larger tourism value networks, promote public-private partnerships (PPPs).

5. Create Specific Policy Measures

Create policies for the growth of tourism in a certain area using diverse approaches for urban and rural locations. Provide monetary rewards or subsidies to companies that operate in undeveloped rural pilgrimage destinations.

6. Constantly Track and Assess the Impact of Tourism

Establish a methodical framework for monitoring to determine how tourism affects local businesses over the long run. To comprehend the changing difficulties faced by rural entrepreneurs, conduct needs assessments on a regular basis.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how pilgrimage tourism affected the development of indigenous businesses and trade prospects in Tamil Nadu's rural and urban pilgrimage locations. The findings painted a complex picture: whereas pilgrimage tourism boosts regional economic activity, it has a statistically negligible direct impact on metrics of individual business growth. According to chi-square analysis, factors including higher sales, a larger client base, and product diversity did not significantly correlate with pilgrimage tourism, indicating that travel by itself does not ensure the growth of an entrepreneurial venture. This is consistent with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which highlights the value of both external demand and internal capabilities.

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The trade opportunities between rural and urban pilgrimage locations, however, were shown to differ significantly. The findings of the independent samples t-test indicated that, in comparison to rural locations like Palani and Thiruvannamalai, urban areas like Madurai and Rameswaram offer noticeably larger and more consistent trade benefits. This result is consistent with theories of agglomeration economics and regional inequality, which hold that improved visibility, market accessibility, and infrastructure improve business opportunities in metropolitan areas.

Overall, the study highlights a critical gap in trade and enterprise benefits between rural and urban pilgrimage destinations. It highlights the necessity of focused interventions through market connections, infrastructure development, and skill training in rural areas. Policymakers and tourist planners can guarantee that the economic potential of pilgrimage tourism is more fairly dispersed by resolving these structural imbalances, which would support inclusive and sustainable rural development in Tamil Nadu.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Increase Indigenous Entrepreneurs' Capability in Rural Areas

Put in place focused skill-building initiatives that emphasize digital literacy, customer service, tourism service delivery, and business planning. Encourage entrepreneurial education for traditional craftspeople, merchants, and small businesses in rural pilgrimage sites. Promote community-based business models to lower individual risk and take advantage of group resources.

2. Enhance Market Access and Infrastructure at Rural Pilgrimage Sites

To improve visitor experience and foot traffic in rural regions, build tourist-friendly infrastructure, such as improved roads, signage, transportation, and cleanliness. Provide stalls or rural market hubs close to pilgrimage sites so that nearby companies can showcase and sell traditional goods. Encourage digital platforms and last-mile connectivity for online marketing and sales of domestic products.

3. Encourage the Integration of Rural and Urban Trade

To increase reach and regularize commerce, encourage collaborations between rural producers and metropolitan distributors or tour operators. Create tourist circuits that link rural and urban locations, making sure that pilgrims using well-traveled routes give rural business owners visibility. Provide e-commerce platforms and training to link rural craftspeople with wider markets outside of the busiest pilgrimage seasons.

4. Promote local product branding and value addition

To boost the commercial value of traditional crafts and foods connected to pilgrimage sites, support their branding and certification (such as GI labeling). Start "Pilgrim's Souvenir" or "Buy Local" campaigns to entice travelers to buy genuine, regional goods. Provide workshops on packaging and design to assist rural companies in enhancing the tourist appeal of their goods.

5. Create Area-Specific and Inclusive Tourism Policies

Create distinct tourism development policies for pilgrimage sites in rural and urban areas that take into account their particular capacities and limitations. Provide low-interest loans, subsidies, or other financial incentives to encourage rural business owners to invest in tourism-related projects. Promote the involvement of Panchayats, Self-Help Groups, and cooperatives in tourist planning and benefit distribution.

6. Put in Place Monitoring and Assessment Systems

Install data gathering tools to track pilgrimage tourism's long-term financial effects on local businesses. To direct changes to policies and programs pertaining to tourism, conduct impact assessments on a regular basis. Establish channels for local business owners to provide feedback so that policies stay applicable and efficient.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I sincerely acknowledge the financial support provided by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, for carrying out this research. I also extend our gratitude to the ICSSR for their guidance and support throughout the research process.

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