

## Motivational Factors and Environmental Priorities in Pilgrimage Tourism: A Case Study of Manikaran, Himachal Pradesh

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the motivational antecedents leading pilgrims (and tourists) for a visit at Manikaran, Himachal Pradesh and also understand environmental priorities related with pilgrimage tourism in the same region. Manikaran One of the famous holy places in Himachal Pradesh State, India and situated the Parvati Valley. This research employs a mixed-method method from survey, interview with the visitors to identify their motivation how visitor express spirituality and what sight they have in nature. The research also includes a range of environmental issues regarding the tourist inflows that have been understood to put pressure on delicate local ecosystem management and sustainability especially over natural resources like hot springs. The results indicate that even environmental awareness varies widely and arguably most people are not motivated first-and-foremost by the environment, but rather spiritual fulfillment of cultural immersion. The paper concludes with recommendations for sustainable tourism development, concentrating on suggestions to enhance the awareness and enforcement of environmental planning practices.

**Keywords:** Pilgrimage tourism, Manikaran, tourist motivations, environmental concerns, eco-friendly tourism.

### INTRODUCTION

Religious or pilgrimage tourism has an impact on the culture, society and economy of given regions all over the world. This is a religious place for Hindus and Sikhs, also one of the most important pilgrimage centres in India-Manikaran. A major pilgrimage centre for centuries, it annually attracts thousands of pilgrims to its hallowed temples and pristine hot springs with Gurudwara Manikaran Sahib respected by Sikhs; this is indeed a holy zone (Singh & Kaur, 2023). The site is well known for its mythological importance as it is deemed linked to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati in Hinduism along with Guru Nanak — the first Sikh guru (Sharma, 2022). This mix spiritual significance has made Manikaran a pilgrimage destination and the visitors visit here to take spirituality from these natural hot springs which are believed as having curative properties on your body (Joshi, 2020).

Pilgrimage Tourism has witnessed a gradual increase in Manikaran over the last few years, due to religious euphoria as well as infrastructural augmentation and better connectivity (Bhardwaj 2021). This expansion, however, has not been without headaches in Agriculture. Verma &

Chauhan, 2022) The substantial increase in tourism has posed a serious threat on the quality of environment damaging waste management practices and exertion on local resources. Also, the fragile ecology of Parvati Valley — an extension to Great Himalayan National Park ensures potential disruption out here with over-tourism.

Although the pilgrimage tourism substantially contributed to generate economy at local level and provides employment generation opportunities for people in this region, it is also posing challenges on account of sustainability. This natural development has put cultural, economic and environmental resources at high impact risk related to tourism that remains a critical issue for local authorities and communities (Kumar et al., 2023).

Instances of religious tourism have been on an upswing in India and many visitors are now looking for enriching spiritual experiences over travel (Shinde 2015). In areas like Manikaran, especially where religious significance coincides with nature's beauty in equal proportions, the increase has been evident domestically and internationally. However, the local infrastructure had to adapt itself to cater to this growing number of tourists therefore in some cases resulted into environmental degradation and over exploitation of resources (Dey & Sarma, 2020). Pilgrimage tourism is also another source of revenue that has given push to the pilgrim industry and discussed by Mishra et al. (2022), however, brings potential negative effects to both environment such as wildlife & landscape resources and cultural heritage; The growth in pilgrimage can lead pressure on Tourism for job creation purposes etc (Singh 2019).

Within the framework of this exploratory study, we plan to reveal and investigate the forms in which pilgrimage tourism survives at Manikaran while assessing their demographic depositions –social-economic impacts, physical-chemical environment concerns and associated sustainability interventions providing a headway out. The research will proceed to investigate the motivations and experiences of pilgrims, as well as how local residents perceive this social process along its wide spectrum. It also sought to emphasise that religious tourism is an ecotourism field too and can be supported through environmental conservation steps.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Manikaran in Himachal Pradesh where religious tourism and its sub-sector pilgrimage tourism has widely seen growth over the years. Manikaran, Another ancient holy site revered by both Hindus and Sikhs that lays great emphasis not only on the spiritual aspect but also its immense historical and ecological significance. On the other hand, this expansion of pilgrimage tourism in southwestern Ethiopia led to several opportunities and challenges which have been extensively well explained by recent literature.

Sharma (2022) in the same vein points out that this two-way religious importance of town makes it a highly attractive destination for pilgrims belonging to different faiths. It was also critical of 'environment and tourism' not blending enough together The study recommends that local authorities and stakeholders practice sustainable tourism to minimize the eco-footprint in managing pilgrim activities.

Other than these, Joshi (2020) mentions that the environmental risks of pilgrimage tourism are environmental threats from hot spring waters being an example. The water from these springs is a major attraction for tourists, however, the resource is being over exploited and pollution has been taking place due to improper waste disposal and unsustainable practices.

Within the context of wider tourism trends, Bhardwaj (2021) discussed how pilgrimage tourism has expanded in Himachal Pradesh and created ease to craft infrastructural for pilgrimages like Manikaran. It demonstrated how better roads and places to curl up have helped draw in more tourists, turning what was once just a religious rite into an engine of economic growth for the villagers. It is a part of the global growth in religious tourism, which has been increasing over the last decades (Kumar et al., 2023).

The weak ecosystem of Parvati Valley is more prone to stress due to the numerous pilgrims and tourists visiting (Verma, Chauhan 2022). The study provides evidence to the adverse impact of mass tourism as well such as waste management problem, depletion of natural resources and burdening local infrastructure. Increase in footfall has resulted in over exploitation of the biodiversity not only within Chamba but also from all surrounding areas up to Great Himalayan National Park, questioning sustainable tourism practises too on already fragile ecosystem.

Kumar, Singh and Thakur (2023) mentioned the economic impact of pilgrimage tourism in Kullu district especially at Manikaran is an important source of income for local business establishments, hoteliers, transport operators etc. However, the constant stream of visitors — particularly during religious festivals and months with peak tourist traffic — has revived local economy. However, they also warn that the dependence on tourism can leave the area exposed to economic vicissitudes—especially in light of environmental or geopolitical problems which could interrupt irruptions flows.

Kumar et al. (2023) They also called for the introduction of responsible tourism frameworks that benefit local neighborhoods as well as help safeguard natural resources. These frameworks would include waste management improvements, environmentally sustainable infrastructure and the development of off-season tourism to minimize environmental impacts in peak period.

Singh and Kaur, (2023) have analyzed the Sikh pilgrim to Gurudwara Manikaran Sahib highlighting that religious practices remain a major pull factor for visitors. Although still maintaining that spirit fulfilment is the overriding purpose to pilgrimage, it acknowledges significant socio-cultural factors and reasons for seeking health in terms of hot springs. It also stressed formulation of policies to ensure a balance between tourism growth and preservation the religious-cum cultural heritage of Manikaran. It is claimed that religious tourism — if conducted responsibly to ensure minimal environmental damage and maximum local job creation while preserving sacred sites — can be a ‘force for good’.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the motivations and experiences of pilgrims and tourists visiting Manikaran.
2. To assess the relative importance of various environmental concern.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATABASE

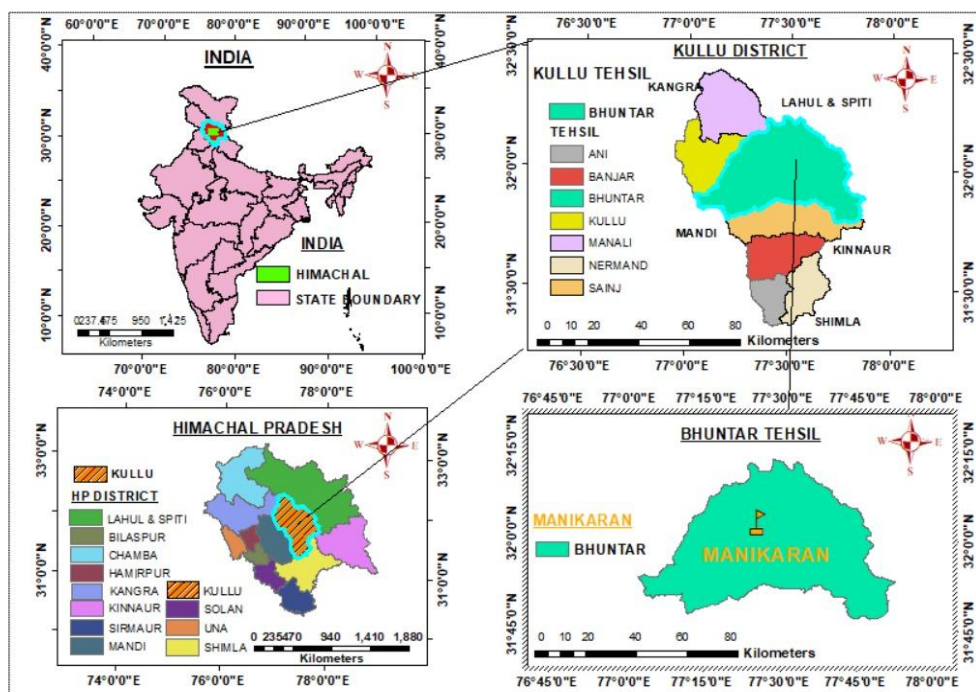
This research takes a quantitative approach, utilizing structured surveys and questionnaires to gather data on tourist arrivals, motivations for visiting Manikaran, and community concerns about tourism's environmental effects over the years 2014 to 2023. Data was collected from a sample of 120 respondents, including both pilgrims and general tourists, to understand their primary reasons for visiting—whether for religious pilgrimage, nature-based tourism, wellness purposes, or a mix of these motivations.

In addition to visitor surveys, a separate survey targeting 100 local residents was conducted to explore their views on tourism's environmental impact, with a particular focus on critical issues such as waste management, water scarcity, river pollution, and deforestation.

Secondary data was gathered from local tourism authorities and religious organizations, as Manikaran receives a substantial influx of pilgrims annually. Tourist arrival data from 2014 to 2023 was sourced from government reports and records maintained by religious institutions, providing an overview of tourism trends in the area over time.

## STUDY REGION

**Study Area Map: Manikaran, Kullu District.**



**Figure 1. Administrative Map Manikaran, Kullu.**

Manikaran is a religious site in Himachal Pradesh, located at approx 1,760 meters altitude with geographical coordinates at a latitude of  $32^{\circ}02'00''$  and a longitude of  $77^{\circ}21'00''$ . It comes under Manikaran Gram Panchayat of Kullu Block/Tehsil of Kullu district. With a total area of 821

hectares, it has a population of 6,136 residents living in 1,295 households. The town popular among sikh for Gurudwara Manikaran sahib, also features a well-known Lord Shiva temple as well some other smaller Hindu shrines highlighting its religious pluralism. The closest town is Bhuntar and nearest airport as well. Popular for its pristine Gurudwara and hot springs, Manikaran draws 280,000 tourists every year. Especially between June and September, that massive amount of incoming traffic ensures economic growth within the local area at the same time as piling up an environmental concerns related with proper waste management.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In analyzing the line graph(fig 2.0) for tourist inflow to Manikaran from 2014 to 2023, we can identify several important trends. The data shows a substantial rise in domestic tourism, with visitor numbers reaching up to 27,000 in recent years. This increase is noteworthy, especially against a backdrop of declining international tourism, which fell from approximately 30,000 to 12,000, influenced largely by global travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This contrast highlights how domestic tourism proved resilient and rebounded robustly after the disruptions, underscoring a consistent demand for pilgrimage and eco-tourism within India.

Interestingly, the graph reveals that foreign tourist numbers remained relatively stable, averaging between 2,000 to 3,000 annually, even during the pandemic (2020–2023). This stability, alongside a modest increase of around 3,000 since 2020, suggests that international tourists, albeit a smaller percentage of the total (10-15%), continue to be drawn to Manikaran for its unique offerings. The consistent flow of international tourists indicates that Manikaran retains its allure as a spiritual and eco-tourism destination, attracting visitors from around the globe despite travel disruptions.

This enduring interest from both domestic and international tourists points to Manikaran's solid reputation and increasing popularity as a pilgrimage and eco-tourism site. The data highlights its resilience and appeal, suggesting that tourism stakeholders may want to focus on maintaining and enhancing the visitor experience to support continued growth across both domestic and international markets

**Table 1. Tourist arrival pattern (2014-2023)**

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists	Total Tourists
2014	18,000	2,000	20,000
2015	20,000	2,500	22,500
2016	22,000	2,000	24,000
2017	24,000	2,000	26,000
2018	28,000	2,000	30,000
2019	30,000	2,000	32,000
2020	12,000	3,000	15,000
2021	15,000	3,000	18,000

2022	22,000	3,000	25,000
2023	27,000	3,000	30,000

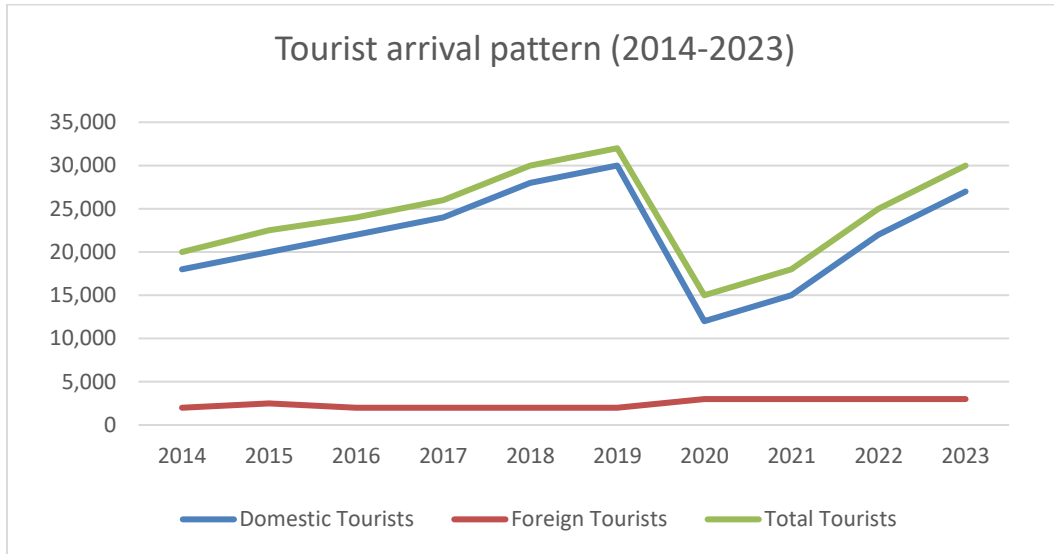


Figure. 2 Tourist Arrival Trends in Manikaran (2014-2023).

Figure 3 indicates that tourist arrivals in Manikaran follow a strong seasonal trend, with the highest influx in July (30,000 visitors) and June (25,000), together comprising over one-third of the annual total. This peak likely aligns with favorable weather and religious events, making summer the most popular season. In contrast, winter months such as November to February experience lower footfall, reflecting Manikaran's tourism reliance on seasonal conditions and cultural activities to drive visitor engagement.

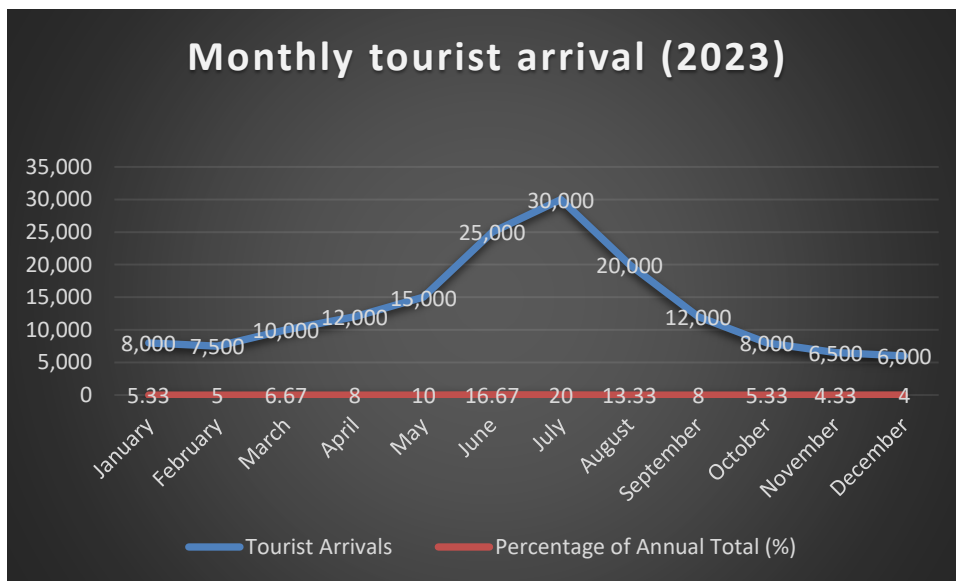
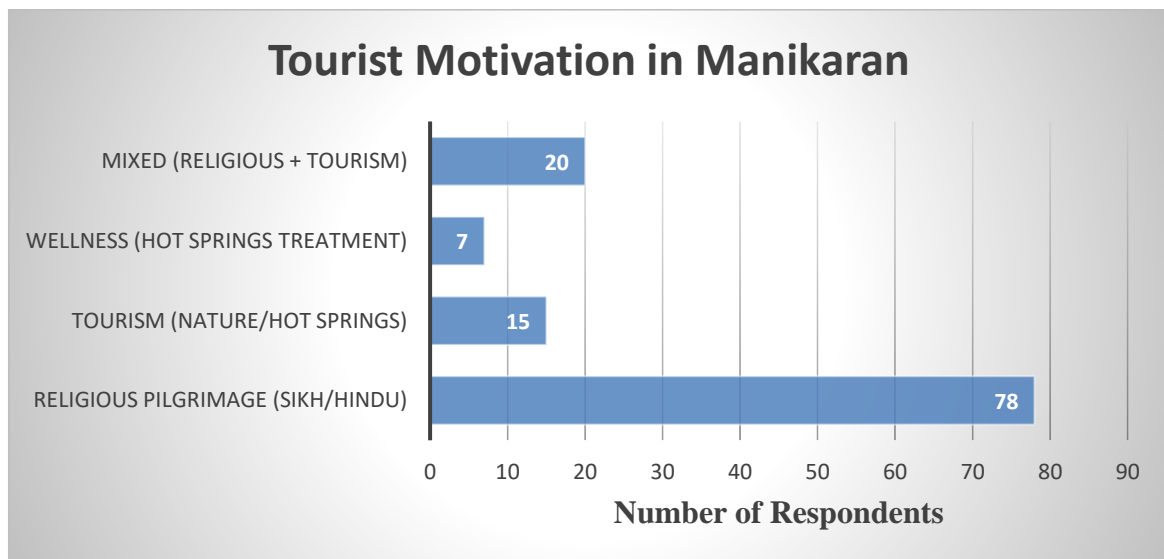


Figure 3: Monthly tourist arrival (2023)

Table 2 presents the various motivations behind tourists' visits to Manikaran. The data reveals that a substantial majority, comprising 78 respondents (65%), are motivated by religious pilgrimage, highlighting the area's significance as a sacred site for both Sikhs and Hindus. This strong inclination towards religious activities emphasizes the cultural importance of Manikaran in attracting spiritual seekers. In contrast, only 15 respondents (12.5%) visit for nature-based tourism, which includes attractions such as the hot springs. Additionally, a small segment, with 7 respondents (5.8%), is drawn to wellness treatments offered at the hot springs, while 20 respondents (16.7%) indicated a mixed motivation that combines both religious and tourism activities. This diversity in visitor motivations underscores the multifaceted appeal of Manikaran, suggesting that while religious pilgrimage remains the primary driver, there is a growing interest in nature and wellness tourism that could be further explored and developed.

Purpose	Number of Respondents
Religious Pilgrimage (Sikh/Hindu)	78
Tourism (Nature/Hot Springs)	15
Wellness (Hot Springs Treatment)	7
Mixed (Religious + Tourism)	20

**Table 2.** Factors driving tourists to visit Manikaran

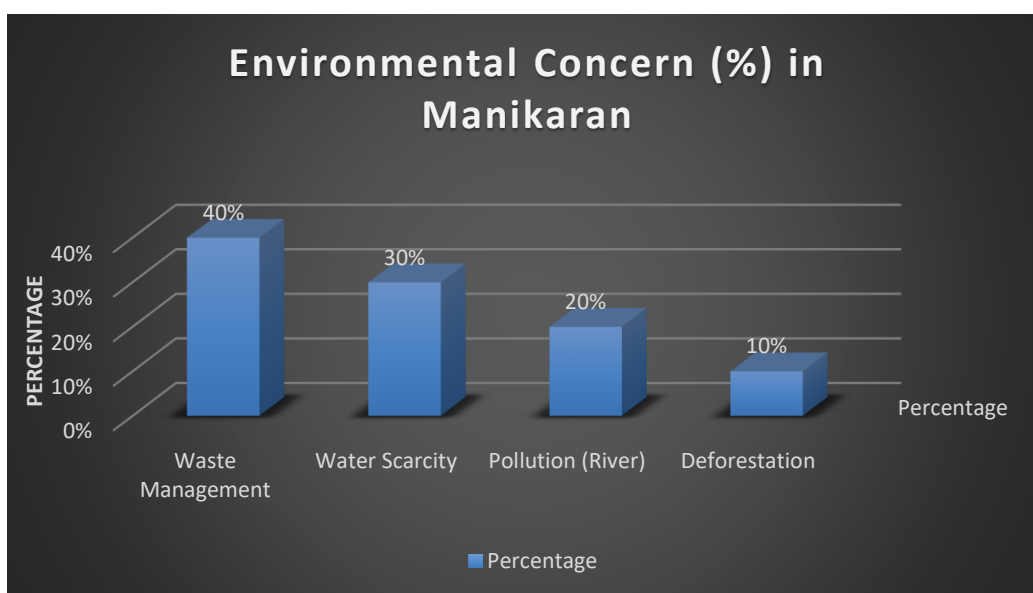


**Figure. 4** Tourist Motivation in Manikaran, Himachal Pradesh.

Table 3 highlights the problems related to environment stated by locals from Manikaran, which is represented in Fig.5. The data obtained shows waste management to be at the top of this list as a major concern with 40% among residents noting it. This is to be expected since the site has faced pressures of higher tourism visitation which can lead further localised waste generation on-site. After this, water scarcity is a significant worry for 30% of respondents emphasising the strain tourism puts on local water sources. Though a minority of 20% residents reported pollution in Parvati River, this symptom directly highlights that religious and tourism activities can both have its negative effect to the water quality as an important resource for community and ecosystem. Lastly, 10% of respondents have deforestation as their most likely emerging environmental threat suggesting that changes in land use could lead to the loss of biodiversity and overall ecosystem health. The takeaway is that the need for improved environmental management to mitigate these challenges of concern impacting on tourism development in this region, given that much of the reserve there has also been declared a RAMSAR site due to ecological fragility.

**Table 3. Relative importance of various environmental concerns as reported by local residents in Manikaran.**

Concern	Percentage
Waste Management	40%
Water Scarcity	30%
Pollution (River)	20%
Deforestation	10%



**Figure. 5 Environmental Concern in Manikaran, Kullu District, HP.**



## SUGGESTION

The data indicates several areas for improvement in tourism management and environmental conservation in Manikaran. Given the consistent rise in tourist arrivals, especially for religious pilgrimage, authorities should implement sustainable tourism strategies that mitigate the environmental impact. Improving **waste management**, identified by 40% of residents as the most pressing issue, should be a priority. Installing more waste disposal facilities, promoting eco-friendly practices, and raising awareness among tourists could help address this challenge. Additionally, the issue of **water scarcity**, affecting 30% of locals, requires attention. Efforts such as rainwater harvesting, improving water distribution systems, and educating visitors on water conservation can help relieve the strain on local resources. Furthermore, measures should be taken to reduce **river pollution** from religious and tourist activities. Encouraging cleaner practices, regulating waste disposal, and conducting regular clean-up drives in and around the Parvati River can significantly reduce pollution levels. Though **deforestation** was only raised by 10% of respondents, it is crucial to monitor and control tree cutting and land development to preserve the area's natural beauty and biodiversity.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study suggest that spiritual fulfillment and cultural exposure are among the foremost motivators for visiting Manikaran, whereas level of environmental awareness amongst tourists varied. This has posed an increasing demand on inadequate infrastructure, waste management and sustainable resource challenges in the local ecosystems. In order to keep the place intact and as natural & spiritual destination, it is crucial for everyone visiting there should follow sustainable tourism practises in promoting environmental responsibility. Significant policy implications are needed to control the environmental consequences of pilgrimage tourism in the region, and from an environmental perspective increase awareness on what needs to be done how we can accomplish better eco-friendly infrastructure through various policies. . Only by the combined effort of local community, tourists and administration, Manikaran can booming pilgrimage place cum tourist destination with preserving its ecological balance.

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