

Religious Tourism in Karnataka: Temples, Pilgrimages, and Cultural Heritage

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Abstract—Karnataka, a southern Indian state, boasts a rich confluence of religious practices, temple architecture, and pilgrimage traditions. This paper explores the significance of religious tourism in Karnataka by focusing on major temples, sacred circuits, and cultural heritage associated with pilgrimages. The study highlights both the historical and economic dimensions, offering insights into sustainable tourism practices for preserving sacred sites. Additionally, the paper evaluates the role of religious tourism in shaping local economies, fostering heritage awareness, and promoting communal harmony.

Karnataka, a state rich in spiritual traditions and architectural grandeur, stands as a significant destination for religious tourism in India. Home to a diverse range of temples, pilgrim circuits, and sacred festivals, the state offers both spiritual solace and cultural insight. This paper explores the multifaceted role of religious tourism in Karnataka, focusing on its historical roots, prominent pilgrimage centers, and socio-economic impact. From the ancient temples of Hampi and Pattadakal to coastal shrines like Kollur and Dharmasthala, the state attracts millions of pilgrims annually, shaping local economies and cultural identities. The study highlights how religious tourism acts as a catalyst for rural development, employment generation, and heritage conservation. It also examines the challenges posed by infrastructure deficits, seasonal overcrowding, and environmental concerns. The paper concludes by proposing sustainable tourism strategies that balance spiritual experiences with heritage preservation and regional development.

Index Terms—Religious tourism, Karnataka, pilgrimage circuits, temple architecture, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is a significant component of Karnataka's tourism economy, interweaving spiritual journeys with cultural exploration. From ancient

temples in Hampi to hill shrines like Kukke Subramanya and Chamundeshwari Temple,

Karnataka offers an extraordinary blend of architectural grandeur and spiritual sanctity [1]. The state attracts millions of domestic and international tourists annually who participate in yātrās, festivals, and temple visits, reinforcing the region's cultural ethos [2].

Religious tourism, defined as travel motivated by spiritual or faith-based pursuits, has played a crucial role in shaping India's socio-cultural landscape. Karnataka, located in the southern part of India, is a major hub for religious tourism, home to a diverse spectrum of temples, rituals, festivals, and pilgrimage circuits that attract millions of devotees annually [16]. These sites not only provide spiritual enrichment but also serve as focal points of regional identity, architecture, and cultural heritage.

Karnataka's religious landscape is deeply rooted in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islamic traditions, with prominent pilgrimage centers such as Dharmasthala, Kukke Subramanya, Sringeri, Kollur, and Gokarna drawing devotees from across India and abroad [17]. The architectural marvels of the Hoysala temples in Belur and Halebidu, the rock-cut temples of Badami, and the heritage complexes of Hampi and Pattadakal reflect centuries of devotional artistry [18]. These sacred spaces are not merely religious centers but are also emblematic of the region's artistic, political, and historical narratives.

Religious tourism in Karnataka has grown significantly due to improved infrastructure, promotional policies by the Karnataka Tourism Department, and the increasing popularity of spiritual retreats and temple festivals [19]. Government initiatives like "Darshan Packages," "Heritage Trails," and the Karnataka State Tourism Policy

2020–25 have boosted pilgrim mobility and rural tourism development [20]. However, the growth of religious tourism has also presented challenges, such as overcrowding during festivals, strain on local infrastructure, waste mismanagement, and commercialization of sacred spaces [21]. Moreover, there is a growing concern about maintaining the sanctity and sustainability of heritage sites amid mass tourism [22].

This paper aims to analyze the cultural, historical, and economic importance of religious tourism in Karnataka. It explores the role of major temples and pilgrimage routes in fostering cultural continuity, promoting regional identity, and contributing to local development. It also examines current challenges and provides recommendations for sustainable religious tourism practices that respect both spiritual values and cultural heritage.

2. CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE OF KARNATAKA

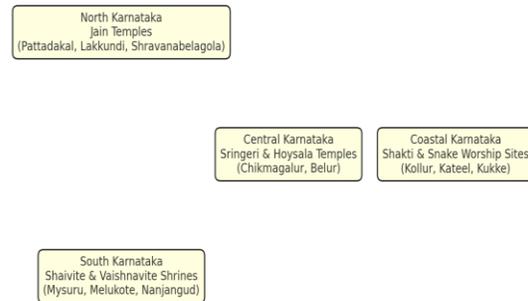
Karnataka is home to various religious traditions, including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam. The state's temples are not just spiritual hubs but are also repositories of Dravidian, Hoysala, and Chalukya architecture [3][4].

Karnataka's religious and cultural landscape is a rich tapestry shaped by centuries of spiritual traditions, dynastic patronage, temple architecture, and ritual practices. The state has historically been a center for the development of multiple religious streams including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sufism, each leaving a distinctive imprint on its temples, festivals, and sacred geographies [23].

Figure 1: Religious and Cultural Zones of Karnataka (*regional distribution of temples—e.g., North Karnataka's Jain temples, South Karnataka's Shaivite and Vaishnavite shrines*)

The presence of multiple sects, including Lingayats, Vaishnavas, and Shaivites, has influenced temple rituals, local festivals, and architectural features [5].

Figure 1: Religious and Cultural Zones of Karnataka



This schematic includes:

North Karnataka – Jain temples (e.g., Pattadakal, Lakkundi, Shravanabelagola)

South Karnataka – Shaivite and Vaishnavite shrines (e.g., Mysuru, Melukote, Nanjangud)

Coastal Karnataka – Shakti and snake-worship temples (e.g., Kollur, Kateel, Kukke)

Central Karnataka – Sringeri and Hoysala temples (e.g., Chikmagalur, Belur)

2.1 Diversity of Faith Traditions

Hinduism is the predominant religion in Karnataka, manifested through thousands of temples devoted to deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, and Ganesha. Important Vaishnavite centers like Melukote and Udupi are renowned for their Madhwa and Sri Vaishnava traditions [24]. Shaivite pilgrimage destinations such as Gokarna, Nanjangud, and Kolar have long attracted devotees, particularly during Maha Shivaratri and other observances [25]. The Lingayat movement, founded by Basavanna in the 12th century, remains a dominant Shaivite tradition in North Karnataka, with centers like Kudalasangama and Basavana Bagewadi playing central roles in spiritual pilgrimage and socio-cultural identity [26]. Jainism has also flourished in Karnataka since ancient times, especially under the patronage of the Kadamba, Rashtrakuta, and Hoysala dynasties. Shravanabelagola, home to the 57-foot monolithic statue of Bahubali, is one of the most iconic Jain pilgrimage centers in the world and hosts the Mahamastakabhisheka once every 12 years [27]. Islamic spiritual centers such as the Dargahs at Sira, Gulbarga, and Bijapur also attract pilgrims, especially during Urs festivals. Meanwhile, Buddhist remnants at Banavasi and Sannati mark Karnataka's

early Buddhist connections during the Mauryan period [28].

2.2 Sacred Geography and Temple Clusters

Karnataka's geography is deeply embedded with sacred symbolism, with riverbanks, hilltops, and forests often serving as the sites of temples and ashrams. Rivers such as the Tungabhadra, Krishna, and Kaveri hold mythological and ritual importance. Hampi, situated on the banks of the Tungabhadra River, is both a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a major center of Vaishnavite worship centered on the Virupaksha Temple [29].

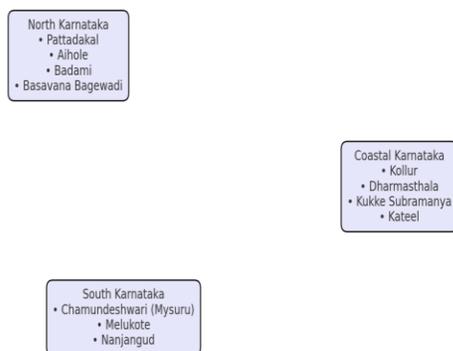
The Hoysala temple belt—including Belur, Halebidu, and Somanathapura—is noted for its star-shaped shrines, intricate stone carvings, and architectural harmony with religious iconography. These temples serve not only as devotional centers but also as expressions of artistic and philosophical synthesis [30].

In coastal Karnataka, temples such as Kollur Mookambika, Kateel Durgaparameshwari, and Subramanya are important Shakti and snake-worship centers, attracting pilgrims from all over southern India [31].

Figure 1: Regional Distribution of Major Temples in Karnataka

(Clusters in North Karnataka, Coastal Karnataka, and Southern Karnataka)

Figure 1: Regional Distribution of Major Temples in Karnataka



Temples shown include:

North Karnataka: Pattadakal, Aihole, Badami, Basavana Bagewadi

Coastal Karnataka: Kollur, Dharmasthala, Kukke Subramanya, Kateel

South Karnataka: Chamundeshwari (Mysuru), Melukote, Nanjangud

Karnataka's religious landscape is, therefore, not monolithic but multi-dimensional—intersecting faith, language, caste, and region. This pluralism makes the state a living example of India's broader cultural diversity, and a prime destination for religious tourism that combines spirituality with historical depth and regional identity.

3. MAJOR PILGRIMAGE CIRCUITS AND TEMPLES IN KARNATAKA

Karnataka's sacred geography is organized into distinct pilgrimage circuits that reflect regional religious practices, dynastic patronage, and diverse architectural styles. These circuits have evolved around clusters of temples and religious centers, offering structured routes for pilgrims and tourists seeking spiritual, cultural, and historical enrichment.

3.1 North Karnataka Circuit

- Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal: Chalukyan temples and UNESCO heritage sites [6].
- Basavana Bagewadi: Birthplace of Basavanna, a central figure in the Lingayat movement [7].

North Karnataka is home to some of the oldest and most architecturally significant religious sites in South India.

- Pattadakal, Aihole, and Badami: These UNESCO heritage sites are known for their early Chalukyan temples (6th–8th centuries CE) that combine Nagara and Dravidian architectural styles [32]. The temples are dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and other deities, forming an important Shaivite pilgrimage route. Basavana Bagewadi and Kudalasangama: Central to the Lingayat movement, these sites are associated with 12th-century reformer Basavanna. Kudalasangama is where the Krishna and Malaprabha rivers converge and houses the samadhi of Basavanna [33].

- Gadag and Lakkundi: Notable for their ancient Jain and Shaivite temples, these towns are also centers of literary and architectural heritage [34].

3.2 South Karnataka Circuit

This circuit is characterized by its association with Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Devi worship,

particularly during major festivals like Dasara and Navaratri.

- Chamundeshwari Temple, Mysuru: Located atop Chamundi Hills, this temple is a Shakti peetha and the epicenter of the famous Mysore Dasara celebrations, attracting lakhs of devotees and tourists annually [4].
- Melukote: An important Sri Vaishnavite pilgrimage site associated with Ramanujacharya, it houses the Cheluvanarayana Swamy temple and attracts devotees from across South India [35].
- Nanjangud (Dakshina Kashi): Revered as the southern Varanasi, this Shaivite temple town on the Kapila River is known for the Srikanteshwara Temple [36].

3.3 Coastal Karnataka Circuit

Also known as the Parashurama Kshetra, the coastal belt features a blend of Shakti, Vaishnavite, and snake worship traditions.

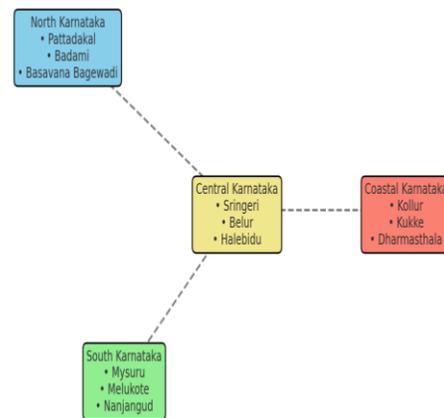
- Kollur Mookambika Temple: A major Shakti temple revered by devotees from Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, particularly for children’s education rituals like *vidyarambham* [37].
- Dharmasthala: A unique site where Jain administration oversees a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Manjunatha (Shiva). Known for its inclusive spiritual traditions, community service, and free meals (anna daana) to pilgrims [38].
- Kukke Subramanya: Famous for its rituals related to naga dosha and sarpa samskara, it is one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in India [39].
- Kateel Durgaparameshwari and Udupi Sri Krishna Mutt: These sites form key nodes in the religious life of the coastal districts and are linked with Tuluva traditions and Dvaita Vedanta philosophy [10].

3.4 Central Karnataka and River Circuits

- Sringeri Sharada Peetham: Established by Adi Shankaracharya on the banks of the Tunga River, this site is one of the four Advaita mathas and holds immense scholarly and spiritual significance [11].
- Harihar and Hampi: Harihar is known for the Harihareshwara temple, while Hampi, apart from its heritage status, is also a center of Vaishnavism with the Virupaksha Temple as a major shrine [12].

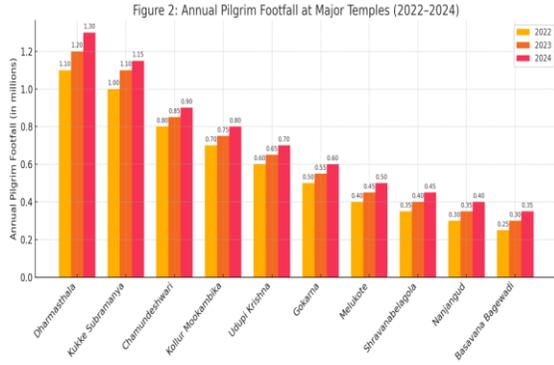
Figure 2: Pilgrimage Circuits of Karnataka – Map Illustration
(Showing routes and nodes across North, South, Coastal, and Central Karnataka)

Figure 2: Pilgrimage Circuits of Karnataka - Map Illustration



These circuits not only provide structured pilgrimage experiences but also boost regional economies through temple tourism, hospitality, artisanal industries, and transport services. Many of these temples are integral to regional identity and are also part of state-sponsored tourism and conservation programs.

Figure 2: Annual Pilgrim Footfall at Major Temples (2022–2024)
Bar graph comparing pilgrim numbers for top 10 temples



4. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Religious tourism contributes significantly to Karnataka’s rural and semi-urban economies. It boosts hospitality, transport, and handicraft sectors. According to the Karnataka Tourism Department, religious tourism accounted for over 30% of total tourist footfall in 2023 [12].

Religious tourism in Karnataka is not only a matter of spiritual devotion but also a powerful driver of economic activity, employment, and social transformation. The state’s vast network of pilgrimage centers contributes significantly to the hospitality sector, transportation, local crafts, food services, and informal employment. Religious tourism has helped bridge the rural–urban divide by generating income and infrastructural improvements in temple towns and surrounding villages.

Religious tourism also facilitates community development and employment generation [13].

4.1 Contribution to Local and Regional Economies

According to the Karnataka Tourism Department, religious tourism accounts for over 30% of the state’s total domestic tourist footfall annually [44]. Temples such as Dharmasthala, Kukke Subramanya, Chamundeshwari (Mysuru), and Kollur Mookambika receive millions of pilgrims each year, resulting in a robust demand for lodging, transportation, food services, and local products [45].

The economic ecosystem around religious centers is characterized by:

- Temple-run institutions: Many temples like Dharmasthala operate educational, healthcare, and vocational institutions funded through donations and temple revenues [46].
- Cottage industries: Handicrafts, religious artifacts, pooja items, and traditional foods are

widely sold near temple premises, supporting local artisans and women’s self-help groups [47].

- Employment: Religious tourism directly and indirectly generates employment for temple staff, priests, guides, flower vendors, transport operators, and hoteliers [48].

Table 1: Estimated Economic Contribution of Major Temples in Karnataka (2023)

Temple Site	Annual Visitors (millions)	Estimated Revenue (INR Crores)
Dharmasthala	1.2	45
Kukke Subramanya	1.1	40
Chamundeshwari Temple	0.9	30
Kollur Mookambika	0.7	25
Udupi Krishna Mutt	0.6	22

(Sources: Karnataka Tourism Department, 2024 Report)

4.2 Social Cohesion and Cultural Preservation

Religious tourism plays a key role in preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage such as traditional music, temple architecture, local cuisine, festivals, rituals, and folklore [49]. Pilgrimage festivals such as Mysore Dasara, Mahamastakabhisheka at Shravanabelagola, and Rathotsavas in various temples reinforce community participation and intergenerational cultural exchange.

Temples also serve as social spaces that transcend caste and class divisions, especially during mass feeding events (*anna daana*) and community rituals. Sites like Dharmasthala and Gokarna attract people of multiple faiths, showing religious tourism’s potential for interfaith dialogue and social harmony [50].

4.3 Rural Development and Infrastructure Growth

Increased tourist footfall has prompted government and temple authorities to improve road connectivity, sanitation, drinking water, parking, and lodging facilities in temple towns. These infrastructure upgrades benefit not only pilgrims but also local

residents by improving quality of life and access to services [51].

Government schemes such as the “Comprehensive Development of Tourist Circuits” and public–private partnerships have targeted temple clusters for holistic development [52].

4.4 Challenges

Despite these benefits, religious tourism also presents challenges:

- Overcrowding and congestion during festival seasons
- Environmental stress from plastic waste, traffic, and water usage
- Cultural commodification due to excessive commercialization of spiritual spaces
- Neglect of lesser-known sites while focusing primarily on “star temples”

These challenges call for sustainable tourism practices that balance economic benefits with cultural and environmental responsibility.

5. CHALLENGES AND SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIES

Despite its benefits, religious tourism poses threats to cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. While religious tourism in Karnataka has emerged as a strong pillar of the state’s cultural economy, its rapid growth has brought forth multiple challenges related to sustainability, infrastructure, cultural integrity, and environmental impact. As pilgrimage sites attract increasing numbers of visitors, the need for balanced development that respects both sacredness and sustainability become crucial.

Challenges include:

- Overcrowding during festivals
- Waste management near temple towns
- Infrastructure stress in heritage zones [14]

Strategies for improvement:

- Promotion of eco-friendly pilgrimages
- Digitization of temple services
- Community-led heritage conservation models [15]

5.1 Key Challenges in Religious Tourism

a. Infrastructure Overload

Many pilgrimage destinations in Karnataka, especially during peak seasons (e.g., Dasara, Mahamastakabhisheka, or annual Rathotsavas), face

massive overcrowding. Inadequate road access, parking congestion, insufficient accommodations, and strained water and sanitation facilities pose difficulties for both pilgrims and locals [53].

b. Environmental Degradation

Unregulated footfall in ecologically sensitive areas like Kollur, Kukke Subramanya, and Hampi leads to deforestation, solid waste accumulation (especially plastics), and water pollution in nearby rivers and temple tanks [54]. Ritual practices like mass bathing and offerings also add to ecological pressure.

c. Cultural Commodification

Excessive commercialization—such as aggressive street vending, overcharging by local businesses, and touristic dilution of rituals—can erode the sanctity of religious experiences [55]. There is a growing concern about the loss of authenticity and transformation of pilgrimage into spectacle.

d. Uneven Development

Focus on popular temples has led to the marginalization of lesser-known sacred sites. Smaller shrines and rural religious circuits receive little attention or funding, despite their cultural significance and potential to attract niche tourists [56].

5.2 Sustainable Tourism Strategies

a. Infrastructure and Mobility Solutions

- Development of integrated transit systems such as ‘Temple Circuit Shuttle Services’ with electric vehicles in congested towns (e.g., Udupi, Gokarna)
- Creation of multi-tiered parking zones, clean public toilets, and resting areas for pilgrims
- Installation of digital queuing and crowd management systems during festivals

b. Environmental Sustainability Measures

- Mandatory waste segregation and plastic bans within temple zones
- Implementation of eco-sanitation and solar-powered lighting in heritage temple towns
- Community-driven River and tank rejuvenation projects to restore temple ecosystems [57]

c. Cultural Heritage Preservation

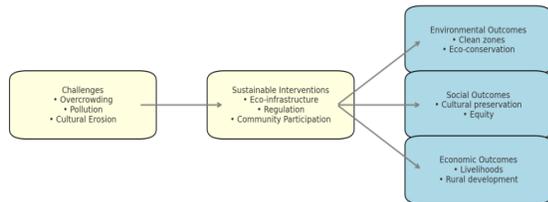
- Training of local guides in cultural history and ritual significance
- Regulation of commercial activities inside temple premises

- Support for temple-based artisans and folk performers through state-endorsed livelihood schemes [58]
- d. Inclusive and Equitable Tourism
- Promoting lesser-known temples (e.g., Amritapura, Banavasi, and Humcha) through “Heritage Temple Trails” to distribute tourist footfall more evenly
 - Integrating disabled-friendly infrastructure and multilingual signages
 - Encouraging community participation in tourism planning and benefit-sharing [59]

Figure 3: Framework for Sustainable Religious Tourism in Karnataka

(flowchart linking challenges, interventions, and expected outcomes: environmental, social, economic)

Figure 3: Framework for Sustainable Religious Tourism in Karnataka



It visually represents:

Challenges: Overcrowding, Pollution, Cultural Erosion

Interventions: Eco-infrastructure, Regulation, Community Participation

Outcomes:

Environmental (Clean zones, Eco-conservation)

Social (Cultural preservation, Equity)

Economic (Livelihoods, Rural development)

Sustainable religious tourism requires coordinated efforts between temple administrations, local governments, heritage experts, and civil society. Karnataka’s religious sites must be viewed not only as spiritual hubs but also as shared cultural resources needing long-term stewardship.

6. CONCLUSION

Religious tourism in Karnataka is a dynamic sector that embodies the spiritual and cultural depth of the

state. From the sacred river banks of the Tungabhadra to the coastal hills of the Western Ghats, Karnataka’s temple trails foster spiritual awakening and cultural appreciation. Policy support and sustainable practices are crucial to preserve these invaluable religious sites for future generations.

Religious tourism in Karnataka represents a vibrant intersection of spirituality, culture, and economic development. With its vast array of temples, pilgrimage circuits, sacred festivals, and spiritual traditions, the state continues to attract millions of devotees and tourists every year. These sacred sites not only foster individual devotion but also act as cultural repositories that preserve and transmit Karnataka’s rich heritage across generations.

The paper has shown how religious tourism contributes significantly to the regional economy by generating employment, encouraging infrastructure development, and supporting artisanal and service sectors. Moreover, temple towns have emerged as crucial nodes for cultural exchange, interfaith harmony, and community welfare, particularly through initiatives like *anna daana*, temple-run hospitals, and educational services. However, the growth of religious tourism is not without challenges. Issues such as environmental degradation, overcrowding, commercialization, and neglect of lesser-known sites demand urgent attention. Sustainable tourism practices—ranging from green infrastructure to equitable development policies—are essential to balance devotional experiences with heritage conservation and socio-economic inclusivity. As Karnataka continues to position itself as a spiritual and cultural tourism destination, the state must adopt a long-term vision rooted in sustainability, community participation, and cultural sensitivity. Only then can religious tourism fulfill its dual role as a means of spiritual fulfillment and a driver of regional transformation.

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