

# The Role of Digital Platforms in Promoting Spiritual Tourism: A Case Study of the Maha Kumbh Festival in Prayagraj

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## Abstract

This research paper explores how digital platforms contribute to the promotion of spiritual tourism, with a special focus on the Maha Kumbh Festival, which is held in India. The study examines the key stakeholders responsible for globalizing the festival and investigates the total income and expenditure associated with the event. It explores the potential exposure of significant spiritual sites, particularly in the context of Hinduism and Buddhism. At the beginning of the Maha Kumbh Festival, spiritual leaders and devotees are primarily aware of its significance. However, with the rise of digital platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media, short videos featuring religious and public figures explaining the festival's importance go viral globally. As a result, international participation increases, boosting India's GDP and creating employment opportunities. Similarly, Nepal can leverage digital platforms to promote its heritage sites, particularly Lumbini, as a vital center for spiritual tourism. This study aims to engage academicians, corporate sectors, government authorities, political leaders, and spiritual figures in utilizing digital media to highlight cultural and spiritual heritage at national and international levels. Furthermore, it advocates for integrating cultural awareness into school and higher education curricula. The research is based on direct observation, interviews, short video clips, and reports from government and corporate bodies. Since such studies are rare in academic discourse, this paper holds significant value in expanding scholarly discussions on digital media's impact on spiritual tourism.

## Key Words

Digital platforms, Spiritual tourism, Maha Kumbh, Spiritual Sites, Spiritual Leaders, Employment

## Introduction:

A simple scroll through digital media reveals captivating short videos and reels showcasing the grandeur of the Maha Kumbh Mela. A few days ago, while browsing Facebook reels, I encountered various engaging content related to the event. Although I was familiar with the Maha Kumbh, I was unaware of the exact dates and location. However, the more I explored reels and YouTube videos, the more curiosity intensified. Various yogis, ascetics, and spiritual leaders from Shaivism and Vaishnavism caught attention of people. Their discourses glorified the Maha Kumbh, portraying it as a divine congregation of enlightened souls. Despite Buddhist background, I sought a deeper understanding of the Maha Kumbh's significance. According to Buddhist teachings, the purification of the mind and actions, rather than physical cleansing, leads to true sanctity. The Anguttara Nikaya (3.15, Appannaka Sutta) states that external bathing in rivers does not purify one's soul; rather, purity is attained through righteous actions and conduct. Similarly, in

the Snataka Sutta (Suttanipata 2.7), the Buddha emphasized that true purification comes from truthfulness, non-violence, self-restraint, and mental discipline rather than ritualistic river baths. The Udaka Sutta (Suttanipata 628-630) further clarifies this concept: "A foolish person believes that water purifies them, but a wise person achieves purity through moral living." With these teachings in mind, It initially viewed the Maha Kumbh bathing ritual as merely a cultural tradition. However, It was drawn to the idea of experiencing the event firsthand. Seeing the ascetics, Naga sadhus, and Aghori monks, It felt there was much to learn from them. Motivated by curiosity and the desire to witness this grand spectacle, Its decided to visit Prayagraj on January 14, 2025, the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti, considered sacred for Kumbh bathing. However, securing a confirmed train ticket was impossible. Reserving a private vehicle with friends also proved unfeasible.

### **A Journey into the Maha Kumbh**

Having seen endless social media content on the Maha Kumbh, my digital feed was inundated with related materials. Eventually, It learned that the most auspicious day for the holy dip was Mauni Amavasya on January 29, 2025. Determined to witness this. The Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh had predicted five crore pilgrims for Mauni Amavasya but had prepared for ten crore devotees (Yogi Adityanath). Its embarked on journey on January 28, 2025, with the understanding that if failed to find a bus from Gorakhpur, would return home. Fortunately, secured a bus at 1:30 PM, expecting to reach Prayagraj by 9:30 PM. However, due to extreme traffic congestion, arrived at 8:00 AM the following day. The sheer scale of the crowd was overwhelming. The Kumbh grounds were packed beyond imagination. Security personnel advised pilgrims to move slowly. Braved the dense crowd, witnessing devotees fainting due to exhaustion. Its felt lightheaded, and many people appeared visibly distressed. The only goal was to reach the riverbank. Amidst the chaos, its watch fell, but recovering it was impossible. Eventually, reached the banks of the Sangam and performed sacred dip despite fatigue.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the digital age, the intersection of spirituality and technology has transformed religious experiences. The Maha Kumbh Mela, one of the world's largest religious congregations, has witnessed a surge in digital influence, with social media platforms playing a crucial role in attracting millions of pilgrims. While this has enhanced awareness and accessibility, it has also posed several challenges, including overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and commercialization of spiritual practices. Furthermore, Nepal, despite having significant religious sites, struggles with digital promotion, resulting in underdeveloped spiritual tourism compared to India. This research seeks to examine the implications of digital media on religious tourism, analyzing both its benefits and challenges. Additionally, it aims to explore strategies Nepal can adopt to enhance its spiritual tourism industry through digitalization. There is some research questions are arise form the core of this study.

1. How has digital technology influenced the promotion, organization, and commercialization of the Maha Kumbh Mela?

2. What strategies can Nepal implement to enhance its spiritual tourism sector using digital media?

## **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study are as follows:

1. To analyze the role of digital media in shaping the Maha Kumbh Mela's visibility, participation, and commercial impact.
2. To propose digital strategies for promoting Nepal's pilgrimage sites and improving its spiritual tourism sector.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data consists of observations and personal experiences gathered during participation in the Maha Kumbh Mela, supplemented by interviews with pilgrims, event organizers, and digital media analysts. Secondary data includes scholarly articles, media reports, and government publications on digital media's impact on religious tourism. The study utilizes thematic analysis to identify key trends in digital promotion and commercialization of spiritual events. Additionally, comparative analysis is employed to examine the effectiveness of digital strategies used in India and their applicability to Nepal's tourism sector.

## **Observations on Digital Influence and Commercialization**

Upon completing bath, noticed that security personnel were instructing people to vacate the premises swiftly. The return journey was equally arduous. Makeshift stalls lined the streets, selling food and religious items. Some generous locals distributed free biscuits, water, and even khichdi to pilgrims. However, proper lodging was nearly impossible to find, and government-provided tents were overcrowded. Reflecting on the event, it became evident that digital media had played a pivotal role in popularizing the Maha Kumbh. The extensive coverage on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram had amplified its appeal, drawing millions to Prayagraj. Despite reports of logistical challenges, the enthusiasm of pilgrims remained undeterred. This phenomenon extends beyond the Kumbh Mela. Similar digital strategies were observed in Ayodhya during the consecration of Lord Ram's idol. Social media ensured that global audiences engaged with the event, boosting religious tourism. The Maha Kumbh set unprecedented records in pilgrimage numbers, necessitating restrictions on transport routes to Prayagraj. The Maha Kumbh Mela is a significant religious gathering in Hinduism, attracting millions of devotees worldwide. The 2025 Maha Kumbh witnessed an unprecedented turnout of over 663 million pilgrims, making it one of the largest congregations in history (Yogi Adityanath). The event represents religious devotion, spiritual purification, and social unity. Participation and Organization Initially, it was estimated that 400-450 million people would attend the festival, but the actual number exceeded

expectations. Each Hindu family was expected to have at least one representative participate. The Indian government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, oversaw the management and logistics of the event (Yogi Adityanath). The arrangements ensured seamless participation, including transportation, security, and accommodation for the devotees. The Kumbh Mela fosters social unity, as people from different economic backgrounds, including VIPs and common citizens, bathed together in the holy waters. Devotees regard the Ganges River as sacred, despite concerns about pollution. Digital media extensively covered the event, spreading awareness about its cultural and religious significance (Yogi Aditya Nath).

### **Challenges and Tragic Incidents**

Despite careful planning, the festival saw tragic incidents. On 29 January 2025, a stampede killed 30 people and injured 60 others (The Hindu Bureau). Another incident a few hours later resulted in seven additional deaths, including a three-year-old child (John). Later, on 15 February 2025, New Delhi railway station witnessed another stampede, leading to 15 casualties due to train delays (Pandey).

### **Economic and Cultural Impact**

The Maha Kumbh is a major economic driver, benefiting local businesses, tourism, and employment. Hotels, lodges, and homestay services were fully booked. Students preparing for exams offered bike taxi services to earn money, and a boatman made 300 million INR with 130 boats (Yogi Adityanath). The event showcased India's rich cultural heritage and reinforced the importance of spiritual tourism. Many believe the Ganges River is holy, even though some consider it polluted. The devotees saw it as sacred water. The festival was well-organized, with no reports of thefts or violence. On 29 January 2025, during Mauni Amavasya (New Moon Day), devotees had to walk 3-5 km to reach the river due to the crowd. The parking system planned for 600,000 buses, but 780,000 buses and four-wheelers entered the area. Many pilgrims walked 10-15 km with excitement and joy. People from places like Varanasi (Kashi), Ayodhya, and Gorakhpur attended in large numbers, ranging from 500,000 to 2.5 million. Other pilgrimage sites, such as Vindhyachal Dham and Chitrakoot, saw daily visits of 400,000 to 500,000 devotees. The Lucknow-Naimisharanya route also had 400,000 to 500,000 travelers. The government developed these locations as part of a spiritual corridor. Other holy places like Mathura, Gokul, Vrindavan, and Agra also witnessed significant participation. The event attracted people from South India, East India, West Bengal, and across the country. The festival was widely covered by digital media. On 29 January 2025, it was estimated that 40 million people would attend, but the actual number was 80 million. However, 2 million devotees were prevented from entering Prayagraj due to overcrowding.

### **International Visitor**

International Recognition and Visits Pilgrims and tourists from over 40 countries, including Australia, USA, UK, Japan, and Russia, attended the event (Dixit). On 1 February 2025, a delegation of 118 diplomats from 77 countries visited the Maha Kumbh (Pandey). Notable dignitaries included:

1. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar (3 February 2025)
2. President Droupadi Murmu (10 February 2025)
3. Prime Minister Narendra Modi (5 February 2025)
4. Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (“Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck”)
5. Similarly The event was widely covered in national and international media. It highlighted the presence of spiritual leaders, political figures, business personalities, film stars, and sports celebrities. Media reports and videos encouraged more people to visit the Maha Kumbh Mela.

The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj witnessed an unprecedented influx of devotees and tourists, solidifying its status as one of the largest religious gatherings globally. Key statistics from the event include:

1. Total Attendance: Approximately 660 million pilgrims participated over the 45-day festival, marking the largest recorded assembly in the event's history (The Guardian).
2. Foreign Tourists: The festival attracted around 5.5 million international visitors, a significant increase from previous years. Notably, the 2019 Kumbh Mela saw 1.03 million foreign tourists among a total of 230 million attendees (The Times of India)
3. Economic Impact: The influx of pilgrims and tourists provided a substantial boost to Uttar Pradesh's economy. The hospitality sector experienced a surge, with the tent city alone generating approximately ₹10 billion in revenue. Additionally, the aviation industry saw airfares on routes to Prayagraj soar up to five times the usual rates due to heightened demand.
4. Infrastructure and Logistics: To accommodate the massive crowd, a temporary tent city was established over 4,000 hectares, featuring 200,000 tents, 250 miles of roads, and 30 pontoon bridges (200 journeys).

### **Implications for Nepal's Spiritual Tourism**

Nepal, with its rich spiritual heritage, has yet to leverage digital media effectively for pilgrimage promotion. Sites like Devghat, considered Nepal's equivalent of the Ardha Kumbh, remain underpublicized. Unlike India, where digital platforms flood audiences with religious tourism content, Nepal's spiritual sites receive minimal online engagement. Our country boasts numerous sacred sites, including Pashupatinath, Janakpur (the birthplace of Goddess Sita), Muktinath, Lumbini (the birthplace of Buddha), Swargadwari, and Pathivara Temple. Recently, The New York Times ranked Lumbini ninth among the world's top ten destinations for 2025, highlighting its global significance as a peace center. However, Nepal's media, political leaders, and tourism stakeholders have not capitalized on this recognition. Drawing inspiration from India's digital strategies, Nepal must embrace social media platforms to promote spiritual tourism. Reels, YouTube videos, and short documentaries can showcase Nepal's religious heritage to a global audience. Without a robust digital presence, Nepal risks missing out on economic opportunities that come with spiritual tourism.

## Conclusion

The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 highlighted India's spiritual traditions, bringing together people from various backgrounds. Despite unfortunate crowd accidents, the event was a grand success, strengthening India's cultural and religious identity. The extensive media coverage and international participation cemented its status as a global religious and cultural phenomenon. The Maha Kumbh Mela demonstrates the transformative power of digital technology in religious commerce. Through social media, millions worldwide gained access to the event, significantly boosting pilgrimage tourism. This model offers valuable insights for Nepal, where strategic digital promotion can enhance the visibility of sacred sites, attract global pilgrims, and strengthen the national economy. Spiritual commerce in the digital age is no longer confined to physical pilgrimages—it thrives in the digital realm, shaping perceptions, economies, and cultural exchanges. By harnessing digital technology, Nepal can elevate its religious tourism industry, ensuring that its spiritual legacy receives the global recognition it deserves.

## Finding of study

Digital Media's Impact on Awareness and Participation: Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok played a crucial role in spreading awareness about the Maha Kumbh Mela, leading to increased participation. Engaging reels, promotional videos, and influencer content contributed to the event's global visibility. While digital promotions attracted massive crowds, they also led to severe logistical challenges, including unmanageable traffic, overcrowding, and a shortage of accommodation and essential services. The digitalization of the Maha Kumbh has increased the commercial aspect of the festival, leading to the rise of tourism-related businesses, but also concerns about the dilution of its spiritual essence. Authorities made extensive use of digital tools for crowd management and transportation updates. However, despite the arrangements, many pilgrims faced difficulties due to the sheer volume of attendees. Nepal's pilgrimage sites lack digital marketing efforts compared to India. Effective utilization of social media, digital campaigns, and virtual engagement strategies could significantly boost Nepal's religious tourism sector. The success of the Maha Kumbh Mela in attracting both domestic and international tourists underscores the economic benefits of religious tourism. If Nepal adopts similar digital strategies, it can generate substantial revenue through pilgrimage tourism.

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