

AG Publishing House

**Sustainable Tourism Development &
Management for Viksit Bharat – Opportunities
& Challenges**

AG
PH | Books

Year: 2026

Sustainable Tourism and Historical Heritage: Integrating Ancient Practices with Contemporary Tourism in the Context of Mahakumbh for a Viksit Bharat

Dr. Ankita Srivastava^{1*}

*¹Dept. of Business Administration and Commerce, School of Liberal Studies Pandit Deendayal Energy University,
Gandhinagar*

Abstract

Mahakumbh Mela is the expression of India's rich traditional, cultural, religious and spiritual identity. Mahakumbh is celebrated once in every twelve year in Prayagraj Uttar Pradesh, where millions of pilgrims gather to the transcendental experience and take a dip in holy Triveni Sangam. Such mega events have the potential to be a sustainable model for the spiritual and inclusive sustainable tourism which blends the ancient cultural values with contemporary sustainable concerns. The present study is based on the secondary sources, user generated content available on various social media platforms, media coverage of the event, local people experience and observations. The observation method had the logistical constraints so the study largely relies upon the user generated content. The study critically evaluates the integration between community engagement, technological interventions and eco-friendly infrastructure set up. The findings of the study show the Mahakumbh model as an example of sustainable and inclusive framework for managing such mega events. MahaKumbha serve as an example of inclusive and sustainable tourism blending the traditional values with modern governance tools. The study concludes with a recommendation framework emphasizing community

ISBN No. 978-93-7640-929-7

empowerment, digital narratives and the execution of this model in other pilgrimage sites in accordance with the vision of Viksit Bharat.

Keywords: *Mahakumbh, Sustainable Tourism, Spiritual Tourism, Pilgrimage, Cultural Heritage, Visitor Experience, Uttar Pradesh.*

1 INTRODUCTION

India is known for its cultural identity, diversity and spirituality (Maclean, 2003), and due to this India has turned a globally favourite place of tourism (Bobade, 2026). In Prayagraj Uttar Pradesh a large scale mega event takes place in form of Mahakumbh. The Magh (Kumbh) Mela takes place every year however the Mahakumbh has a great importance as it happens once in every twelve years in Prayagraj. The Mahakumbh/Kumbh/Magh Mela is the expression of the faith of millions of pilgrims. It integrates mythology, indigenous cultural practice and community engagement. The Mela is held at the sacred Triveni Sangam where the holy river Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati meets which holds a great significance in Hindus. A sacred bath during the Maha Kumbh purifies and revitalizes the soul, releasing one from the cycle of rebirth (Mishra, 2004). Government initiatives such as ‘Swadesh Darshan 2.0’ and ‘Chalo India’ promote sustainable tourism growth. The Incredible India Content Hub has improved India’s reputation as a top tourist destination by playing a crucial role at International tourism forums (Mishra, 2026). In accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Indian government’s focus on India@100 and Viksit Bharat@2047 is in line with the aspect of sustainable tourism. Reconceptualizing Maha Kumbh as a sustainable tourism model is the need of the hour. This brings into focus a crucial part of how a spiritual event of this extent can be balanced with community involvement, infrastructural development, environmental responsibility (Kanaujiya & Tiwari, 2026). The Indian government has adopted commendable initiatives for crowd management, online campaigning and waste management, while there still remains room for improvement in other areas. By examining the current policy framework, the study incorporates cultural heritage, sustainability and inclusive developments into future editions of Kumbh and other large-scale events.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Tourism acts as an impetus for socio-economic development by generating employment, boosting local business, and enhancing infrastructure nationwide. In recent years, pilgrimage tourism, in particular, has emerged as a prominent segment within the country's diverse tourism contributions (Hall & Page, 2014). Spiritual tourism leads to the protection of cultural heritage and supports the adoption of environmentally responsible and sustainable travel practices (Hole et al., 2019). Lack of data regarding the long-term socio-economic and environmental impacts of large gatherings limits the development of replicable sustainability models and its applicability. Another significant gap is the role of local communities

Sustainable Tourism Development & Management for Viksit Bharat – Opportunities & Challenges

particularly informal workers, local vendors, and support staff in facilitating and maintaining these events. Although community participation is identified as a pillar of sustainable tourism ([Scheyvens, 1999](#); [Tosun, 2000](#)), their lived experiences, empowerment, and challenges remain yet to be studied. With time, the rising influence of digital technologies in tourism, online content offers valuable insights into the public perception of infrastructure, service quality, and spiritual experience. Yet, pedagogic integration of such user-generated narratives into tourism studies is nominal ([Ryan, 2020](#)). This study emphasizes on these gaps by critically analyzing the Mahakumbh' 2026 as a case of sustainable spiritual tourism focusing on environmental management, inclusive infrastructure, and the intersection of traditional faith practices with contemporary governance models. It examines how environmental concerns were addressed during earlier Maha Kumbh gatherings, assesses infrastructure development and its lasting impact on urban spaces, and highlights the contributions of local communities, self-help groups, and informal sectors incorporating digital technologies, promoting inclusive tourism, and developing smart infrastructure to enhance future event planning and execution.

3 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This research is spatially limited to Prayagraj, UP. It adopts a qualitative method based entirely on secondary sources such as official documents and policy frameworks released by institutions such as the Ministry of Tourism, the Uttar Pradesh Government, and the Prayagraj Development Authority. It also utilizes scholarly literature, including previous research studies, books, media events, public records of earlier Mahakumbh events, with particular attention to 2013 (The last Mahakumbh in Prayagraj). Due to practical limitations, no primary data collection such as interviews or surveys has been conducted. Instead, the study contributes by integrating existing information, identifying gaps in current understanding, and applying theoretical perspectives related to sustainable tourism.

4 OBJECTIVES

- To study the contribution of Mahakumbh 2026 as a sustainable and spiritually grounded tourism model in India
- To study the effectiveness of the measures implemented at the event in the area of environment, infrastructure and crowd management.
- To study the pilgrims and local residents lived experiences and challenges faced at the Mahakumbh 2026
- To suggest the framework for sustainable and inclusive spiritual tourism establishing Mahakumbh as a model for Viksit Bharat

5 METHODOLOGY

This study is largely based on secondary sources. Under the study the systematic review of government reports, tourism policy documents, Websites of Uttar Pradesh Tourism & Prayagraj Development

Authority and various media coverages of Mahakumbh 2026. Apart from these sources the study analyses the user generated content extensively available at the different social media platforms where the users have shared their lived experiences and challenges. Observation was another method based on which some challenges were reported, however due to the logistical constraints and considering the level and spread of the event the observation method was not very effective due to the constraints of movements and mobility. Hence the study rely upon the user generated content available on Youtube, Blog Posts and Social Media posts to analyse the public perception and Pilgrims experience related to the infrastructural facilities and accessibility of various essential services like transportation, healthcare, sanitation and crowd management. On the collected data thematic analysis was performed to identify the recurring patterns by focusing on evaluating sustainable practices, identifying service gaps and giving recommendations for the improvements of future mega and spiritual events which attracts the faith of millions of visitors.

6 CASE CONTEXT: MAHAKUMBH 2026

The Mahakumbh 2026 is a expression of India's rich tradition and civic organization. In the very first month of the Mahakumbh, the event set a global benchmark for a religious gathering by attracting over 450 million devotees. The Mahakumbh mela organized at the sacred Triveni Sangam (confluence of three holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Mythical Saraswati) exemplifies the fusion of India's rich culture and tradition with modernity. The planning for such a mega event started years in advance in coordination with Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, Smart City Mission teams, and several central government agencies. 2026 marked the very next Mahakumbh mela after 2013, hence the technology based new measures were introduced to manage the safety and security of the crowd, AI powered Surveillance, digital token system introduction for accessing the ghats, Drone monitoring and introducing GIS based mapping for emergency services (Kanaujiya & Tiwari, 2026). The infrastructure at Mahakumbh was aligned with India's SDG commitment which was truly reflected from the initiatives such as solar power lights, bio toilets, automated garbage disposal systems, and plastic-free zones integrated into the event's blueprint (Jayanthi & Kulkarni, 2026) and in addition to it large number of (approx. 22000) sanitation workers were deployed ensuring continuous waste management, Mobile Water ATM's facilitating the drinking water availability for all devotees and continuous monitoring of water and sanitation quality was practiced.

Apart from all arrangements the event attracted the major community participation where the SHGs, local entrepreneurs, artisans and informal sector workers have contributed in food preparation, accommodation, souvenirs and various other cultural engagement for pilgrims (Mishra, 2026). The contribution of religious traditions like **Kalpavas**, community kitchens (langars), and public discourses by saints not has strengthened spiritual participation and economic sustenance for thousands of families (Bobade, 2026). The Mahakumbh has witnessed the presence of global spiritual leaders reinforcing its national importance and boosting India's soft power credentials (Maclean, 2003). Time to time the

Sustainable Tourism Development & Management for Viksit Bharat – Opportunities & Challenges

participation of the renowned cultural artists have transformed the Mela into a cultural confluence, promoting Indian diversity and intangible heritage (Raj & Morpeth, 2007). The user generated content and digital platforms played a pivotal role in branding the Mahakumbh as an Mega-event attracting and influencing millions of devotees to take a dip in the holy water and to get immersed in the transcendental experience. These contents provide the data on the lived experiences of users and form a good quality data source which can be very helpful for policymakers (Bobade, 2026). Mahakumbh 2026 emerged as a testament of sustainable mega event which demonstrated that when heritage, faith and governance are aligned they generate an event like Mahakumbh. It provides a valuable lesson for sustainable tourism goal achievement by combining spiritual significance, technological interventions, and community-centred planning.

The above figure shows the dimensions based on which the overall experience of Mahakumbh 2026 has been assessed. The key areas which shaped the planning, governance and lived experiences of the event have emerged as a theme promoting the spiritual-cultural integration, digital governance, preparedness and inclusive provisions. The findings provide an integrated understanding of managing such a Megaevent like Mahakumbh 2026.

7 FINDINGS

The studies finding highlights the following themes:

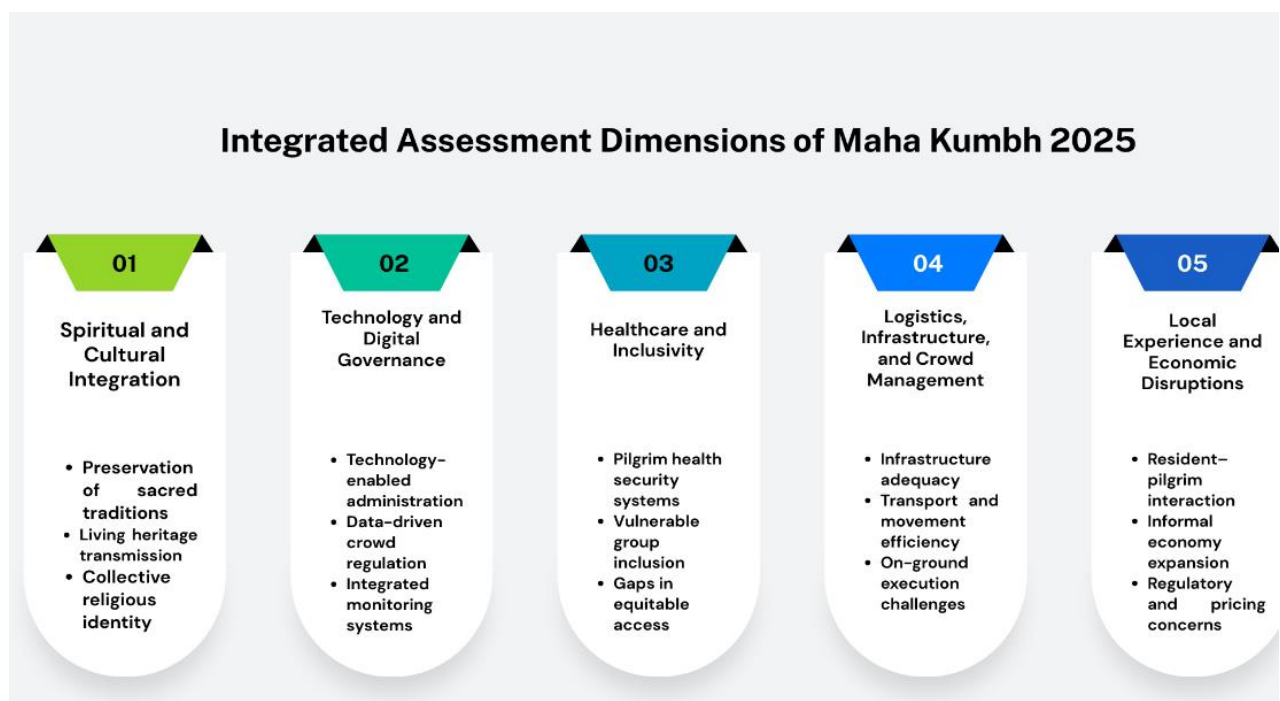


Table 1: Summary

Theme	Key Findings	Recommendations
Heritage & Ritual Integration	Traditional rituals like Kalpavas and spiritual discourses were well conducted; rich cultural heritage was prominently displayed.	Form a permanent spiritual advisory body; deepen engagement with local priests and scholars in early planning phases to preserve micro-traditions and intangible heritage.
Infrastructure & Accessibility	Large-scale facilities were built swiftly, but pilgrims reported issues with walking distances, accessibility, and lack of rest zones in some areas.	Introduce more inclusive infrastructure such as adaptive shelters, shaded rest zones, assistive mobility corridors, and real-time navigation in multiple languages.
Digital & Technological Use	AI surveillance, drone monitoring, and ghat access token systems were well-received, though not uniformly adopted or interactive for public use.	An integrated app can be developed which will facilitate the registration process, notifications, e-services available and a centralized feedback system. leverage YouTube/social media for dynamic crowd insights and engagement.
Environmental Management	Sanitation and Cleanliness was good. Sanitation workers worked best; Plastic bans were helpful; However some concern area were highlighted like river pollution.	Deploying the real time waste dash boards and waste segregation system can strengthen the better environmental management. Expansion of vendor green certifications community-based eco-monitoring can enhance it further.
Local Economy & Services	Despite of the participation of SHGs and local vendors, higher price of certain items and irregular services resulted in visitors and locals dissatisfaction.	Public Price display; help desks for visitors and training can fix this problem. A redressal system should be deployed to protect the consumers and local ethical businesses.
Cultural Soft Power	The local culture was well highlighted and appreciated however the global cultural engagement was not visible.	Global Exhibitions; establishing a Phyigital Kumbh Repository and partnerships with heritage institutions will increase global access and participation.

Sustainable Tourism Development & Management for Viksit Bharat – Opportunities & Challenges

Health & Safety Systems	Very effective medical facilities was available; Large number of pilgrims availed both the services through AYUSH and allopathic setups; though there were some remote areas which reported the inaccessibility.	Establishing Mobile Clinics, tele medicine, multilingual hygiene campaigning will help in creating awareness. Predictive health analytics, , heat stress, and first aid in advance of peak days can be arranged for better accessibility.
Cultural Sustainability	The Mahakumbh witnessed the simplicity, rooted traditions, conservation, faith and respect for nature and culture.	Integration of such values into national tourism policy and framework can ensure sustainability and authenticity across spiritual destinations.
Community Participation	The local people, vendors, SHGs and Artisans participated in various economic activities; the local economy got a temporary boom.	Partnering with community stakeholders and providing structured training and capacity-building initiatives can improve participation.
Infrastructure and Eco Planning	The infrastructure was truly sustainable and inclusive. Usage of solar lights, bio toilets, Water ATMs, plastic bans was visible effectively working.	Institutionalization of green infrastructure norms, conducting environmental audits, and scaling up successful eco-friendly solutions can help.
Visitor Experience & Spirituality	There were mixed experiences of visitors where millions of pilgrims experienced the spiritual upliftment and cultural immersion; some expressed the challenging logistical experiences.	Promotion of visitors orientation programs on spiritual responsibility, environmental behavior, and cultural sensitivity using digital platforms.
Role of Digital Media	User-generated content (UGC) on YouTube and other platforms significantly amplified visibility, trust, and tourism engagement.	Establish a national archive for UGC related to heritage tourism and collaborate with content creators, influencers, and cultural ambassadors under ethical guidelines.
Policy Relevance	Mahakumbh aligns with SDGs, India's G20 heritage priorities, and the Viksit Bharat vision; it offers a scalable model for other religious destinations.	Develop a national sustainability knowledge portal, documentation toolkit, and replicable standard operating procedures (SOPs) for religious tourism and mega-event governance.

Source: Compiled by the author based on secondary data analysis of policy documents, visitor-generated content, and verified academic literature.

Suggested Framework For Sustainable And Inclusive Spiritual Tourism

To strengthen the government efforts and introduce a more robust administrative system, this study suggests a framework which will promote the sustainable and inclusive spiritual tourism.

The study suggests an integrated framework for inclusive and sustainable spiritual tourism which can strengthen the planning and execution of such mega events by highlighting the findings. Millions of pilgrims visit such places for a transcendental experience every year and based on their lived experiences they share their views on different technology-based platforms. Hence there is a need for a heritage centric governance which can provide a smart and accessible infrastructure using technology for better community engagement. This will also help in creating eco-friendly integrated systems which would be helpful in better planning of healthcare systems and predictable risk preparedness apart from various other benefits like infra development. The spiritual tourism today needs a modern administrative system capable in handling ecological responsibility and large-scale community engagement. This framework is a value-added model capable in supporting the future planning and executions of such mega events. This framework aligns the cultural preservation with the broader vision of Inclusive development and Viksit Bharat. Building on this framework, the concluding section synthesizes key insights and outlines directions for future research and policy engagement.



Figure 13: MahaKumbh sustainable model for spiritual tourism

8 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE SCOPE

Mahakumbh 2026 is an example of robust alignment of governance and community involvement. It is a testament of India's ability to set global benchmarks for sustainable and inclusive tourism. The framework proposed under this study is an attempt to enhance the excellence in managing such mega events. The framework is proposed based on the commendable efforts of government and civic bodies. For achieving India's dream of Viksit Bharat 2047 a robust system is needed which can help in eco friendly planning, stakeholders empowerment and better digital story telling. This study has certain limitations as well. The study is conducted based on the secondary data, user generated contents and observations and some interactions with local visitors. Future researches can combine this method with primary data which can generate better results and would be helpful in achieving excellence. Further the future researchers can also study the other pilgrim destinations like Char Dham, Pushkar and Sabrimala temple, which attracts millions of devotees every year. Moreover the researchers can also undertake longitudinal studies for examining the long term impact of such events. The findings of such researches can deeper the understanding.

9 REFERENCES

- [1] Ashworth, G. J. (2011). Preservation, conservation and heritage: Approaches to the past in the present through the built environment. *Asian Anthropology*, 10(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2011.10552601>
- [2] Bansal, S. P., & Kumar, J. (2011). Ecotourism for community development: A stakeholder's perspective in Great Himalayan National Park. *Tourismos*, 6(2), 65–84.
- [3] Bobade, A. P. (2026). *Experience marketing – Curating a spiritual congregation at Maha Kumbh*.
- [4] Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2011). Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 19(4–5), 411–421. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.580586>
- [5] Butler, R. W. (1999). Sustainable tourism: A state-of-the-art review. *Tourism Geographies*, 1(1), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616689908721291>
- [6] Government of Uttar Pradesh. (2023). *Maha Kumbh 2026 concept note*. Prayagraj Smart City Ltd.
- [7] Halme, M. (2001). Learning for sustainable development in tourism networks. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 10(2), 100–114.
- [8] Hall, C. M., & Page, S. J. (2014). *The geography of tourism and recreation: Environment, place and space* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- [9] Hole, Y. H., Khedkar, E. B., & Pawar, S. P. (2019). The significance of pilgrimage tourism to sustainable development with special reference to the Indian context. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 8(3), 1–12.

- [10] Jayanthi, B. V., & Kulkarni, K. S. (2026). From sanctity to sustainability: Mahakumbh 2026 – A beacon of eco-tourism and green governance. *International Journal of Environmental Sciences*, 210–222.
- [11] Kanaujiya, A. K., & Tiwari, V. (2026). A comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted significance of the Kumbh Mela in India: An emerging epicenter of global Hindu religious tourism.
- [12] Kapoor, P. (2016). *Spiritual tourism in India: Exploring potential and challenges*. Sage India.
- [13] Maclean, K. (2003). Making the colonial state work for you: The modern beginnings of the ancient Kumbh Mela in Allahabad. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 62(3), 873–905. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3591893>
- [14] Ministry of Tourism. (2022). *Sustainable tourism in heritage cities of India*. Government of India.
- [15] Mishra, D. R. (2026). *Behavioral intentions towards spiritual tourism: Promoting cultural heritage and sustainability through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG11.4) in Maha Kumbh, Prayagraj, India*.
- [16] Mishra, J. S. (2004). *Mahakumbh: The greatest show on Earth*. Har-Anand Publications.
- [17] Muhanna, E. (2006). Sustainable tourism development and environmental management for developing countries. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 4(2), 14–30.
- [18] Raj, R., & Morpeth, N. D. (2007). *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: An international perspective*. CABI.
- [19] Ryan, W. G. (2020). *Managing international events*. Routledge.
- [20] Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. *Tourism Management*, 20(2), 245–249. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(98\)00084-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(98)00084-3)
- [21] Sharma, K. K. (2005). *Tourism and development: Designing governance for sustainability*. Sarup & Sons.
- [22] Timothy, D. J., & Nyaupane, G. P. (2009). *Cultural heritage and tourism in the developing world: A regional perspective*. Routledge.
- [23] Tosun, C. (2000). Limits to community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries. *Tourism Management*, 21(6), 613–633. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177\(00\)00009-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-5177(00)00009-1)
- [24] UNESCO. (2017). *Kumbh Mela: Intangible cultural heritage of humanity*. <https://ich.unesco.org>
- [25] UNWTO. (2020). *Guidelines for the development of sustainable tourism*. <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>
- [26] Weiler, B., & Ham, S. H. (2002). Tour guide training: A model for sustainable capacity building in developing countries. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 10(1), 52–69.
- [27] World Bank. (2014). *Managing India's urban transition: Policy notes for sustainable development*.

Sustainable Tourism Development & Management for Viksit Bharat – Opportunities & Challenges

- [28] Singh, T. V. (2002). *Altering values and integrating conservation and community concerns: Ecotourism in the Indian context*. In T. V. Singh (Ed.), *Tourism and development: Issues and challenges in Asia* (pp. 263–280). Channel View Publications.
- [29] Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. *Tourism Management*, 20(2), 245–249
- [30] Kumar, S., & Singh, R. (2021). Spiritual tourism and sustainable development: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 19(4), 455–472.
- [31] Rao, V. (2020). Pilgrimage tourism in India: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Heritage Management*, 5(1), 45–60
- [32] Sen, A. (2022). *Informality and inclusion in tourism: Voices from the margins*. Routledge.