

**IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM OF GOD VITTHAL TEMPLE ON SLUM DEVELOPMENT IN PANDHARPUR CITY: A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH**

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**ABSTRACT**

The journey of human life has always involved movement first for survival, later for trade, culture, and ultimately for spiritual fulfilment. As societies evolved, religious tourism emerged as a powerful form of cultural spiritual mobility, shaping landscapes, economies, and settlements. Pandharpur, known as the spiritual capital of Maharashtra, receives millions of pilgrims every year who visit the sacred Shri Vitthal Rukmini Temple located on the banks of the crescent shaped Chandrabhaga River. This massive and continuous pilgrimage flow not only enriches the city's religious significance but also influences its socio economic and spatial structure. Religious tourism in Pandharpur has generated diverse opportunities in trade, services, transport, accommodation, and informal labour markets. However, it has also contributed to unplanned urban growth, increasing pressure on land, inadequate housing, congestion along pilgrimage routes, seasonal population surges, and expansion of slum pockets particularly around riverbanks, temple precincts, road corridors, and low lying zones. Migrant labourers, vendors, temporary workers, and low income service providers associated with pilgrimage activities often settle in informal or substandard housing areas, accelerating slum formation and altering the geographical character of the city. This study aims to examine how religious tourism centred around Shri Vitthal Temple has influenced slum development patterns in Pandharpur. It analyses the spatial distribution of slums, socio economic characteristics of slum dwellers linked to pilgrimage based livelihoods, and the environmental challenges caused by high density temporary and permanent settlements. The research provides a geographical assessment of how pilgrimage driven economic opportunities and infrastructural pressures shape urban morphology, population dynamics, and living conditions in Pandharpur. Ultimately, the study highlights the dual role of religious tourism as a generator of livelihood and as a catalyst of unplanned urban expansion emphasizing the need for sustainable planning strategies to balance spiritual tourism with improved urban housing and living standards.

**KEYWORDS:** Religious Tourism, Shri Vitthal Temple, Pilgrims, Slum Development, Urban Growth, Informal Settlements, Pandharpur.

**INTRODUCTION**

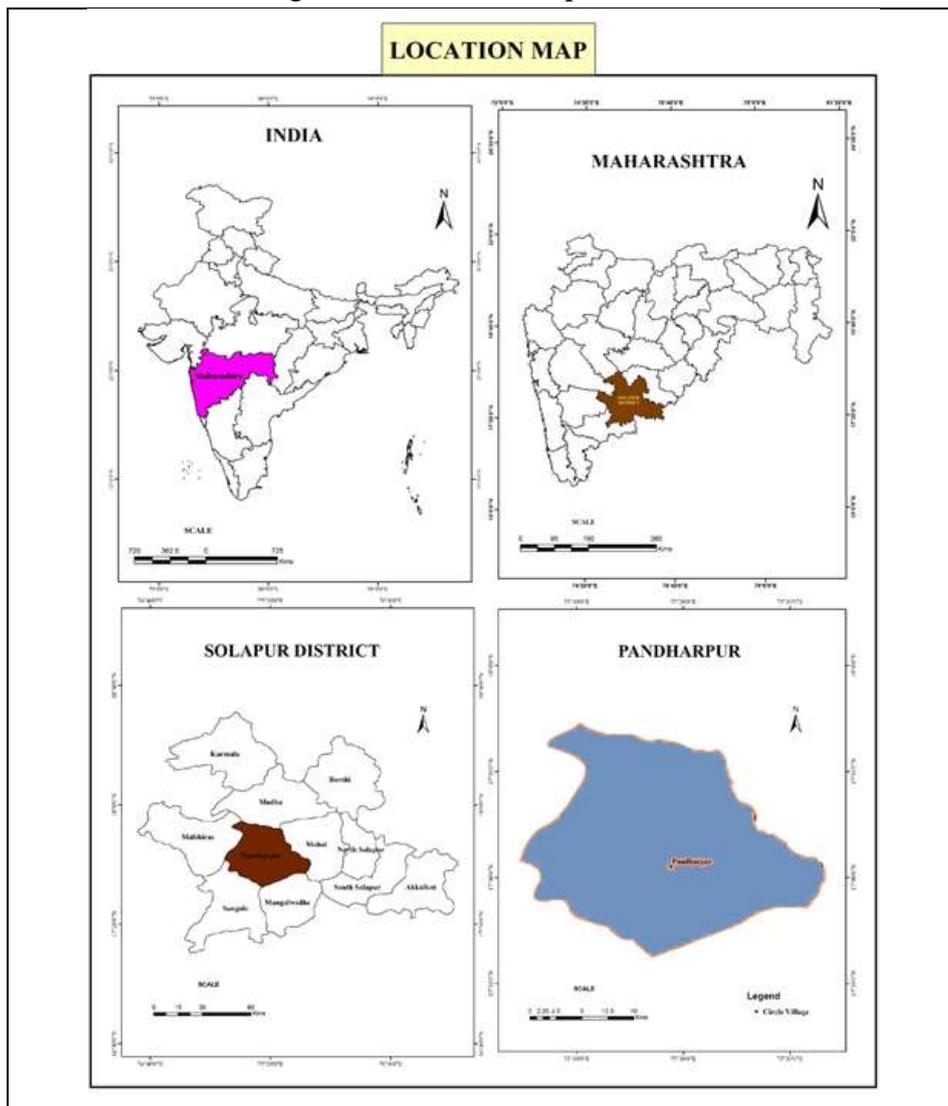
The journey of human life is often described as a spiritual or emotional quest a metaphor embedded in human history across cultures and civilizations. Since ancient times, people have moved across geographical regions in search of food, water, shelter, social interaction, and ultimately, spiritual fulfilment. As societies evolved, travel diversified into trade, education, entertainment, and pilgrimage. Out of these transformations, tourism

emerged as an important cultural and economic activity, influencing landscapes and shaping human settlements. Among its various forms, religious tourism holds a distinct place as it combines faith, culture, tradition, and community movement on a massive scale. India, being home to diverse religions and spiritual traditions, witnesses uninterrupted pilgrim flows to sacred destinations such as Vaishno Devi (Jammu & Kashmir), Kedarnath (Uttarakhand), Ram Mandir (Ayodhya), Golden Temple (Amritsar), and Jagannath Puri (Odisha). Maharashtra, enriched with saintly traditions and devotional heritage, is also home to major pilgrimage centres like Shirdi, Tuljapur, Trimbakeshwar, Shani Shingnapur, and above all, Pandharpur, the spiritual heart of the state. Pandharpur, located along the crescent shaped Chandrabhaga River, is revered for the Shri Vitthal–Rukmini Temple, drawing millions of devotees annually. The city is considered the cultural and devotional capital of Maharashtra. The Wari Yatra one of the world’s largest foot pilgrimages brings lakhs of Warkaris every Ashadhi and Kartiki Ekadashi. These massive religious gatherings generate unique socio cultural vibrancy, economic opportunities, and service oriented livelihoods that make Pandharpur a dynamic pilgrimage centre. However, alongside its spiritual prominence, the city faces significant geographical and urban challenges due to the intense, seasonal, and continuous influx of pilgrims. The constant pressure on land, services, water supply, sanitation, and accommodation has shaped the spatial organisation of Pandharpur. Over the years, religious tourism has played a crucial role in accelerating unplanned urban expansion, informal economic activities, migrant inflow, and the rise of temporary and permanent slum settlements especially near the river basin, temple precincts, main road corridors, and low lying zones. Many low income groups such as vendors, labourers, small service providers, seasonal workers, rickshaw drivers, cleaners, temporary lodge staff, and informal sector employees depend heavily on pilgrimage activities for livelihood. Due to limited access to affordable housing, irregular income, and rising land values, a large proportion of these workers settle in informal or substandard dwellings, contributing to the growth of slums and congested residential pockets. Over time, these settlements expand both spatially and demographically, creating multiple socio economic, environmental, and infrastructural challenges for the city. Thus, while religious tourism generates substantial employment and socio cultural energy in Pandharpur, it simultaneously influences slum proliferation, uneven land use patterns, pressure on urban infrastructure, and deterioration of local environmental conditions. Understanding this relationship is essential to evolve sustainable strategies for urban planning, housing improvement, and balancing pilgrimage based growth with the quality of life for local residents.

## **STUDY AREA**

Pandharpur, one of the most sacred pilgrimage destinations of western India, is situated in the southeastern part of Solapur district, Maharashtra. Geographically positioned at 17°40'28.3908" N latitude and 75°19'25.4028" E longitude, the city occupies 20.2 sq. km and forms the central urban core of Pandharpur tahsil. The city is popularly known as the “Spiritual Capital of Maharashtra” because it hosts the historic and sacred Shri Vitthal–Rukmini Temple, attracting millions of pilgrims annually. Pandharpur city is developed along the banks of the crescent shaped Bhima River, locally known as the Chandrabhaga. The river curves around the settlement, giving the city both religious significance and

geographical sensitivity. The urban area consists of 33 municipal wards, among which the highest concentration of wards lies near the ST Stand and the Railway Station, areas that act as major entry points for pilgrims and migrant workers. These nodal points experience heavy population pressure, dense temporary settlements, and informal economic activities during peak pilgrimage seasons. According to the 2011 Census, Pandharpur had a population of 98,923, with a sex ratio of 953 and a literacy rate of 71 percent. These demographic parameters, combined with constant inflow of pilgrims, seasonal vendors, transport helpers, and temporary workers, have contributed to rapid and uneven urban growth. As a result, more than 50 percent of the slum settlements in Pandharpur are found around the Shri Vitthal Temple area, as temple centric commerce and devotional activities create continuous demand for low cost housing and informal workspaces.



## **OBJECTIVES**

The present research aims to conduct a geographical assessment of how religious tourism associated with the Shri Vitthal Temple influences slum formation and urban development patterns in Pandharpur city. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the spatial and functional characteristics of religious tourism centred around the Shri Vitthal Temple in Pandharpur city.
2. To analyse the impact of Shri Vitthal Temple–based religious tourism on the growth, distribution, and socio economic conditions of slum settlements in Pandharpur city.

### **DATA BASE**

The present research is based on both primary and secondary data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how religious tourism associated with the Shri Vitthal Temple influences slum development in Pandharpur city. Primary data was collected through detailed field visits to major slum settlements, including temple adjacent slums, riverbank slums, roadside slums and densely populated ward level slum clusters where the impact of pilgrimage activities is most prominent. A structured schedule and questionnaire were used to gather information on demographic characteristics of slum households, housing quality, access to water and sanitation, economic dependency on religious tourism, migration histories and seasonal influx patterns, which are directly or indirectly shaped by pilgrimage based employment. Extensive slum mapping was conducted across the 33 municipal wards, with special attention to wards having the highest concentration of slums such as Ward No. 1, 4, 7, 8, 15 and 16. In depth interviews with slum residents, migrant workers, informal vendors, priests, devotees, Warkaris, shopkeepers, lodge owners and ward officials helped identify how temple related economic opportunities attract low income groups who later settle in informal or substandard housing areas. Secondary data was obtained from various published and unpublished sources, including the District Census Handbook (2011), Socio Economic Summary of Solapur District (2023), Pandharpur Municipal Council records on slum locations, ward wise population density, housing status and urban infrastructure availability, government tourism documents, historical texts related to the Vitthal Temple and Wari tradition, and academic studies on religious tourism, urbanization and slum proliferation.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present research is based on both primary and secondary data, and the descriptive research method has been adopted to examine in depth the relationship between religious tourism centred around the Shri Vitthal Temple and slum development in Pandharpur city. Primary data collection involved extensive field surveys conducted in major slum areas, temple precincts, riverbank settlements, and commercial zones influenced by pilgrimage activities. Structured questionnaires and schedules were used to gather information on demographic features, housing conditions, migration patterns, livelihood dependence on temple based tourism, access to basic services and the spatial distribution of slum clusters. Interviews were held with key respondents such as temple trust members, municipal officials, shopkeepers, vendors, informal workers, devotees, Warkaris, lodge owners and slum residents to understand the socio economic pressures and opportunities created by religious tourism. Ward wise observations and slum mapping techniques were applied to identify the concentration of slums, especially in areas surrounding the Shri Vitthal Temple and major transport nodes such as the ST stand and railway station.

Secondary data was obtained from the District Census Handbook, municipal development reports, tourism documents, socio economic summaries and research publications, which helped provide historical and contextual support to the primary findings. This integrated and systematic methodological approach allows for a comprehensive geographical analysis of how religious tourism influences the formation, expansion and socio economic dynamics of slums in Pandharpur.

### **THE VITTHAL TEMPLE PLACE**

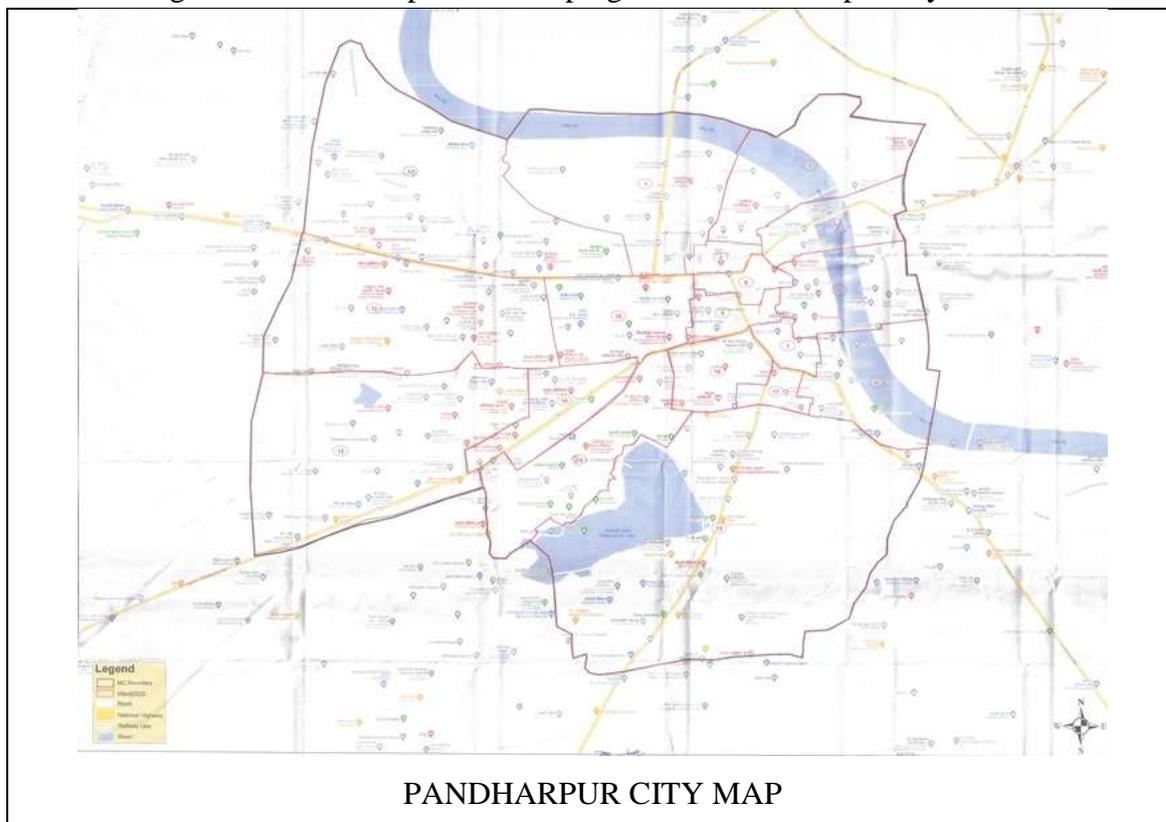
The Shri Vitthal Temple in Pandharpur, dedicated to Lord Vitthal a revered form of Krishna—and Goddess Rukmini, stands as one of Maharashtra’s most sacred and culturally significant pilgrimage centres, located on the holy crescent shaped banks of the Chandrabhaga (Bhima) River in Solapur district, approximately 65 km from Solapur and 230 km from Pune, and geographically positioned in the southeastern part of Maharashtra near the Karnataka border, making it easily accessible from major urban centres such as Mumbai, Pune, Solapur, Hyderabad, and Kolhapur through well developed road and rail networks, with Pandharpur Railway Station serving as the nearest rail terminus and Pune Airport functioning as the closest air link. The temple is famous not only for its spiritual grandeur but also for its continuous historical, cultural, and religious importance; it attracts millions of devotees every year, particularly during the grand Wari pilgrimage and festivals such as Ashadhi and Kartiki Ekadashi, during which the entire town transforms into a vibrant devotional landscape filled with abhangas, musical instruments, devotional gatherings, and spiritual fervour. The idol of Lord Vitthal—also known as Vithoba, Pandurang, and Pandharinath—is characterised by his iconic pose as a young, dark skinned deity standing confidently on a brick with hands on his waist, holding the Sudarshan Chakra and conch, adorned with a Tulsi garland and sandalwood paste symbolising purity, devotion, and divine balance; beside him stands Goddess Rukmini, or Rakhumai, depicted in a traditional nine yard sari, adorned with Tulsi garlands and jewellery that signify prosperity, grace, and spiritual energy. Historically, this temple’s origins date back to 83 CE as documented in the Skanda Purana and Padma Purana, with significant contributions from the Yadava, Hoysala, and Maratha dynasties, including expansions by Hoysala King Vishnuvardhan and later renovations in the 1990s. Architecturally, the temple follows the Nagara style and comprises the Garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum), Ansattaya (inner sanctum), Sabhamandapa (assembly hall), and additional shrines dedicated to Ganesha, Garuda, Dattatreya, as well as saint shrines of Tukaram and Namdev, making the temple complex a culturally rich and historically layered structure. The temple administration is highly systematic and includes departments such as establishment, accounting, ritual management, sanitation, water management, legal affairs, prasad distribution, donation management, construction, electricity, security, computer management, and CCTV operations, ensuring that all daily rituals—from the Kakad Aarti in the early morning to the Shej Aarti at night—are performed smoothly according to Vedic tradition, including Panchamrut Abhishek and midday puja. Pandharpur’s identity as “Dakshin Kashi” is reinforced during major festivals like Ashadhi Ekadashi, when lakhs of Varkaris walk for nearly 21 days from Alandi and Dehu to reach Pandharpur, filling the town with devotion and religious enthusiasm; other important festivals include Kartiki, Maghi and Chaitra

Ekadashi, Gudi Padwa, Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti, Akshaya Tritiya, Nag Panchami, Raksha Bandhan, and Gokul Ashtami, with Vasant Panchami marking the divine marriage celebration of Vitthal and Rukmini. The temple's spiritual influence also stretches beyond Maharashtra into Karnataka, Goa, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, where Vitthal is worshipped with equal devotion, and the legend of the great devotee Pundalik remains central to its sanctity. Ashadhi Ekadashi consistently attracts massive pilgrim numbers, as reflected in estimated turnouts such as 15 lakh in 2015, 13 lakh in 2016, 14 lakh in 2017 and 2018, 16 lakh in 2019, limited turnout during 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, 10 lakh in 2022, 13 lakh in 2023, and an enormous 18 lakh in 2024. This uninterrupted and large scale influx of pilgrims exerts immense demographic and infrastructural pressure on Pandharpur city, particularly in regions surrounding the Vitthal Temple, the ST stand, the railway station, major commercial corridors, and riverbank areas. As religious tourism creates continuous employment opportunities for vendors, hawkers, transport workers, hotel staff, temporary labourers, seasonal migrants, and informal sector workers, many economically weaker families settle permanently in nearby low cost informal housing areas. This has led to the rapid expansion of slum clusters, with more than 50 percent of Pandharpur's slums located within the temple's influence zone, where demand for cheap accommodation, proximity to pilgrim movement routes, and access to tourism related income sources encourage the formation of substandard settlements. The spiritual magnetism of the Vitthal Temple thus not only shapes cultural and devotional practices but also significantly influences the urban morphology, socio economic composition, settlement distribution, and slum development patterns of Pandharpur city—making the temple not just a religious hub but also a powerful geographical force shaping the city's social and urban landscape.

## **IMPACT OF TEMPLE TOURISM ON SLUM DEVELOPMENT IN PANDHARPUR CITY**

Temple tourism centred around the Shri Vitthal Temple has a direct, strong, and measurable impact on the development, expansion, and spatial distribution of slums in Pandharpur city. The temple attracts 15–18 lakh pilgrims during Ashadhi Ekadashi, 6–10 lakh during Kartiki, and a weekly average of 20,000–30,000 visitors, creating year round and seasonal economic opportunities that pull thousands of low income migrant workers into the city. As nearly 60–70 percent of these migrants depend on temporary, irregular tourism based occupations such as selling garlands, prasad, food items, luggage carrying, autorickshaw driving, and shop assistance, they cannot afford formal housing near the temple precinct. This leads to the concentration of slum settlements in wards closest to the temple, ST stand, railway station, old bazaar, and riverbank zones. More than 50percent of Pandharpur's slums occur within a 2–3 km radius of the Vitthal Temple, particularly in high density clusters such as Anilnagar, Jagdamba Colony, Ambabai Patangan, Badave Char, Garad Galli, Ambedkar Nagar, and Suleman Chal. During peak seasons, an additional 2–3 lakh temporary workers arrive in the city, expanding riverbank and roadside slums by 20–30percent due to makeshift huts and temporary shelters. Overcrowding reaches extreme levels in slum wards, with population densities rising to 1,200–1,800 persons per hectare, nearly triple the city average.

Temple tourism raises land prices near the temple, making legal housing unaffordable for the poor, forcing them into encroachments and marginal lands. Meanwhile, water supply declines by 20–25percent, waste generation increases by 40–50percent, and drainage systems overflow during festival periods, worsening living conditions in slums. Thus, while temple tourism strengthens the local economy and sustains thousands of livelihoods, it simultaneously accelerates slum proliferation, overcrowding, environmental pressure, and infrastructural stress in temple adjacent wards. The geographical pattern is clear: where temple tourism is strongest, slum development is fastest, making religious tourism both an economic engine and an urban problem shaping force in Pandharpur city.



#### A) Positive Impacts of Temple Tourism on Slum

##### 1. Increased Employment and Income Opportunities

Temple tourism generates nearly 22,000–25,000 tourism related jobs in Pandharpur, of which 65–70percent are occupied by slum residents. Occupations such as prasad selling, garland making, flower vending, food stalls, luggage carrying, bhajan mandali work, and transport services provide regular income. During Ashadhi and Kartiki, slum household incomes increase by 25–35percent, rising from Rs. 6,000– Rs. 10,000 per month to Rs. 9,000– Rs. 14,000 per month. The presence of 1,200+ temporary stalls set up near the temple allows slum dwellers to earn Rs. 800– Rs. 1,500 per day during peak periods.

##### 2. Growth of Small Scale and Family Based Businesses

Nearly 3,500–4,000 micro businesses operate in temple influence zones, and 40–60percent are managed by families from slum areas. Tourism increases their seasonal turnover by 40–60percent, especially during Ekadashis and Wari processions. Slum based home industries

such as garland making, sweet preparation, and bead necklaces see demand rise by 50–70percent.

### 3. Greater Economic Inclusion of Women

Women from slum households contribute significantly to temple tourism, with 35–40percent of them engaged in income generating work. On average, they earn Rs. 200– Rs. 500 per day selling flowers, candles, turmeric packets, and food items. Women run SHGs report a 30–40percent income increase during festival months. This strengthens their socio economic status and financial independence.

### 4. Opportunities for Seasonal Savings and Social Integration

Temple festivals bring opportunities for slum families to save Rs. 3,000– Rs. 6,000 per month during peak seasons. With lakhs of pilgrims participating in bhajans, dindis, and kirtans, slum residents engage in social and devotional activities, creating cultural identity and social cohesion.

## B) Negative Impacts of Temple Tourism on Slum Development

### 1. Rapid Expansion of Slums and Encroachments

Temple adjacent land values increase by 150–250percent during festival seasons, making formal housing impossible for low income migrants. Hence, slum areas in wards around the temple expand annually. An estimated 8,000–10,000 families now live in temple influence slums. Every Ashadhi, 2,000–3,000 temporary huts are added along pilgrim routes and riverbanks, many becoming permanent.

### 2. Overcrowding and High Population Density

Slum density reaches 1,800 persons per hectare in central wards such as Ward 1, 4, 7, and 8. Temporary festival migrants increase slum populations by 20–30percent, causing extreme congestion. Average slum household size increases from 5.1 persons to 6.4 persons during festivals due to incoming relatives and workers.

### 3. Severe Pressure on Water, Sanitation, and Drainage

Water demand in temple zones rises to 18–20 MLD (Million Litres per Day) during festivals, but municipal supply remains 12–14 MLD, creating a 25–30percent shortage in slum wards. Waste generation increases from 45–50 tons/day to 70–80 tons/day, overwhelming sanitation systems. Drainage lines clog by 35–40percent, and open drains overflow in slum pockets.

### 4. Environmental Degradation of Riverbank Slums

Riverbank slums discharge nearly 300–400 kg/day of plastic waste, food leftovers, and wastewater during festivals. Open defecation increases by 40–60percent near the ghats. Seasonal hut clusters along Chandrabhaga expand by 20–30percent, causing soil erosion and river pollution.

#### 5. Traffic Pressure and Safety Concerns

Festival traffic increases to 15,000–20,000 vehicles per day around temple adjacent slums. Slum families living near highways and temple entry roads face frequent accidents, noise pollution (70–85 dB), and air pollution due to vehicle emissions.

#### 6. Rising Land Prices and Housing Inequality

Land prices in temple centric wards rise from Rs. 8,000/sq.m to Rs.25,000–Rs.35,000/sq.m, pushing slum dwellers to unplanned, dangerous, or flood prone areas. More than 65percent of new slum residents cite high rental rates as the reason for choosing informal housing.

#### 7. Health Risks and Poor Hygiene Conditions

Disease incidence in slums increases by 30–40percent during festival seasons due to contaminated water, poor sanitation, and overcrowding. Cases of diarrhoea, dengue, malaria, and skin infections rise sharply. Medical camps report 20–25percent higher patient footfall during Ashadhi and Kartiki.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present research clearly shows that temple tourism, centered on the Shri Vitthal Temple, has become the single most influential force shaping the socio economic, demographic and spatial structure of Pandharpur city. The temple attracts millions of pilgrims every year, creating vast economic opportunities for local residents, migrant workers and slum communities, but the study shows that this religious tourism also intensifies unplanned urban development and increases the expansion of slum settlements. The prevalence of slums within a 2 3 km radius of the temple, the continuous increase in informal housing near ST stands, railway stations, riverside areas and pilgrimage routes, and the seasonal influx of 2 3 lakh temporary workers highlight the deep interdependence between temple based economic activities and the emergence of high density slums. The findings reveal that 60 70percent of slum households directly depend on temple centric livelihoods, yet this economic dependence coexists with serious challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, declining water availability, waste accumulation, and environmental degradation along the Chandrabhaga River. The city's infrastructure cannot cope with the pressure of large numbers of pilgrims, leading to periodic breakdowns in drainage, solid waste management, and basic services in slum affected wards. This research reveals that temple tourism serves as an important economic lifeline for thousands of vulnerable households, but at the same time it exacerbates spatial inequalities by pushing the urban poor into encroached, dangerous, and poorly serviced lands where formal housing is impossible to obtain. Finally, the study concludes that slum development in Pandharpur is not just a housing problem but a structural consequence of religious tourism driven urbanization, which requires integrated planning approaches to balance spiritual heritage, economic dependence, and sustainable urban development. For Pandharpur to develop as a holy pilgrimage center and a livable city, policies should prioritize affordable housing, controlled vending zones, improved sanitation, riverbank protection, and strengthening infrastructure compatible with the unique rhythm of temple tourism.

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