

TRANSFORMATION OF HIMALAYAN PILGRIMAGE: A SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL
ON THE WANE

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Abstract: Despite years of discourse, many tourism scholars hold that pilgrim and tourist are the same while others believe that a pilgrim (religious tourist) and a tourist (secular pilgrim) are distinct in their motivations, behaviours and use of services. Some call them 'quasi-pilgrim' or 'half tourist' due to lack of understanding. This paper is an effort to re-examine the two epithets by using the case of Himalayan pilgrimage, which was systems based, i.e. had respect for the integrity of ecosystems, and prophylactic in nature, maintaining culture and values. This traditional pilgrimage system worked on the principle of pilgrim economy, which was based on austerity and principles of ethics and equity within the religious framework, violation of which was an act of blasphemy. With the onslaught of modern tourism this age-old traditional Himalayan pilgrimage system has been transformed gradually. This paper pleads to revitalize the old Yatra practice before it comes to an end. The revitalization process should be according to the diktat provided in Hindu scripture namely *Skand Puranas*. Traditional pilgrimages by their very nature were designed to be sustainable in terms of resource use. A pilgrim and a tourist are made of different virtues – the pilgrim being pious and humble while a tourist may be a pleasure-seeker. Before this land of gods transforms into pleasure dome, the concerned stakeholder, the Badrinath temple committee in particular should cry halt to this process of transformation. The grand *dhamas yatra* should be considered as national heritage.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, transformation, pilgrim economy, Hindu *Tirtha*, sustainability, mountain communities.

Introduction

This paper is an effort to re-examine the two epithets: *tourist* and the *pilgrim* using the example of Himalayan Pilgrimage. In common parlance they are viewed as one and the same while they have little semblance and are diverse semantically (Cohen, 1979). It is for this reason that scholars address the issue with 'dichotomous undertones' (Olsen and Timothy, 2006: 6). The popular notion about a tourist is that they are a pleasure seeker while pilgrims are religious devotees who journey to a shrine or scared place (Moscardo, 2015). The former generally are outdoors consuming worldly joys and a diverse experience than what they find at home, the latter are religiously and or spiritually inspired persons who passionately desires to be with their *Guru*. Both have some likeness in their patterns of service, though their motives are grossly antipodal. The researchers argue that pilgrims, like tourists engage themselves in travelling, transportation, visitor attractions, sightseeing and purchasing souvenirs, nonetheless they are different personalities – a tourist is a tourist and a pilgrim is a pilgrim. It is just playing with the language, pronouncing them as 'quasi tourist' or 'half pilgrim' and count them in arrival figures. A tourist is an outcome of the socio-economic compulsion of a society whereas a pilgrim is a bi-product of spiritual needs. A tourist may be more interested in an opera show, though a pilgrim may like to involve in religious rites and rituals. Thus, we can see the marked variation in their motivation, behaviours and activities. Yet, the UNWTO included a pilgrim in the category of a tourist.

Is Tourist a Secular Pilgrim?

A pilgrim is an antithesis of a tourist (Singh & Kaur, 1985). Turner and Turner (1978:20) coined an amusing phrase, “A tourist is a ‘half pilgrim’ a pilgrim is ‘half tourist’”. The fact is that both are made of different virtues, behaviours and values of life. Generally, a tourist is considered a vacationer seeking thrills of entertainment and joys of life; to a pilgrim the glimpse (*darshan*) of his deity is the end all and the be all. Tourist on the other hand may be buoyant and frolicsome in nature while the pilgrim may be God-fearing, simple and single-mindedly ethical. A tourist may violate the environmental guidelines with impunity, to a pilgrim trespassing the code of conduct is an act of blasphemy.

Eade (1992) however believes that religious traveller goes to pilgrimage to gain “emotional release”. A pilgrim expects a spiritual or emotional experience; some may seek for miracle or supernatural episode. Hindu gods in India are said to have supernatural powers. Austerity, simplicity and devotion (*bhakti*) are some of the main attributes that a pilgrim should possess. On their religious journeys, many pilgrims prefer to walk than to enjoy animal ride. In olden days devotees in India used to tread several months to reach the shrines or *dhammas* (religious destinations) (Singh, 1975). Most *gurus* love to set their centre on high mountains, not easily approachable by pedestrians. Single-mindedly pilgrim crossover all impediments. Generally, a pilgrim is humble, and a tourist is arrogant. If one is frugal the other may be prodigal (Cohen, 1979). Before starting this essay a few words on the sacred mountains may be in place.

Sacredness of Mountains

It has been observed that most mountains of the world are considered sacred and have a spiritual dimension, irrespective of the fact that they exist in the North or South; the simple explanation would be that they are extra-ordinary in their earth features: verticality, immensity and picturesque; saints and sages seek such ethereal environment – where subtle mystique pervades all through them. Seekers of such environment are metaphorically called secular pilgrim.

A casual look at the pilgrimage map of the world shall reveal that mountains are generally numinous landscape dotted with pilgrim centres. A few examples are cited here from the world of mountains for better understanding. The Buddhists traditionally believe that the spirit of the dead goes to the Mount Tai-Shan. People of East Africa bury their dead facing the sacred peak of Kilimanjaro. The Buddhists of South west China regard flora of their holy hill as the garden of gods (Bernbaum, 1990: 41). Nepal’s Gaurishanker peak embodies the Hindu god ‘Shiva’. Tibetan pilgrims worship the Mount Kailash and believe it to be the seat of God. Interesting myths and exciting anecdotal narratives are woven around the place to enhance the faith of devotees. A large number of pilgrims visit Monserrat (Spain). The Mount Sinai mentioned in Bible is known to the world as Moses received the Ten Commandments. People seek blessings and draw spiritual power from their deities who possess supernatural faculties

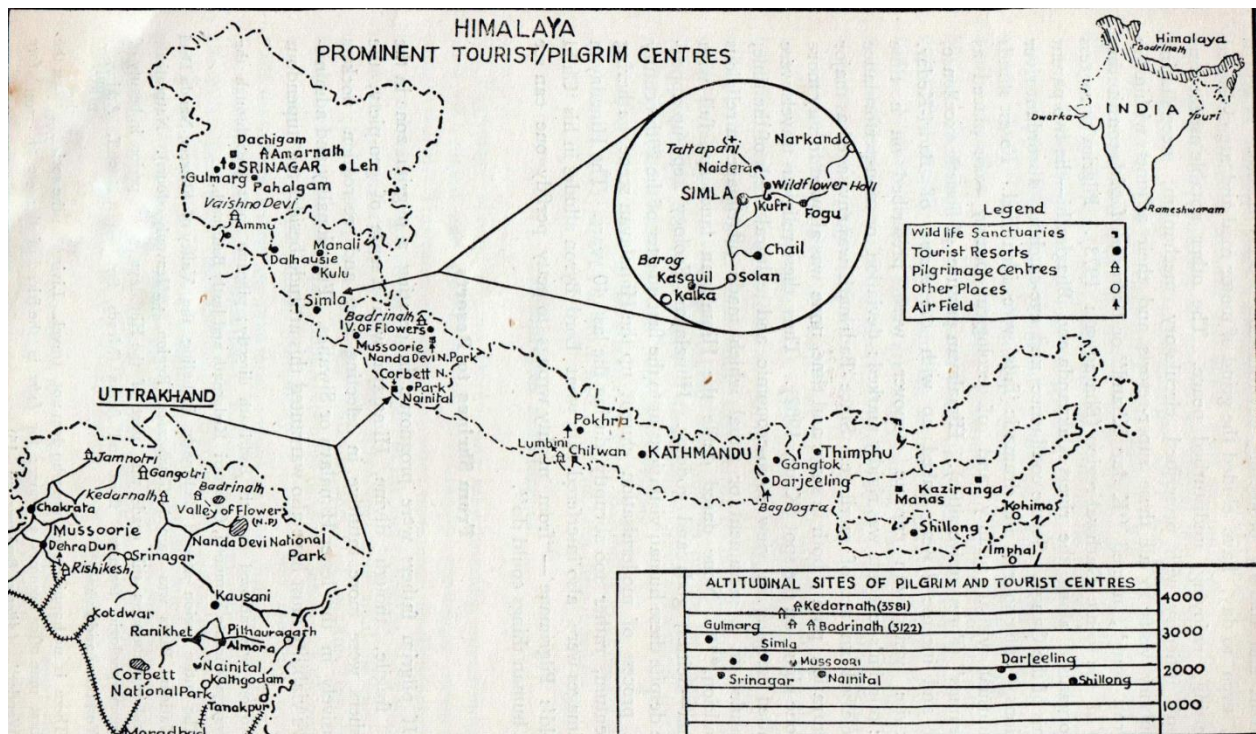
Pre-pilgrimage

Given such a divine environment of benevolent Himalaya, people gave apotheosis to their snow-covered peaks, white waters of the rivers, caves and green meadows. They must have flocked to the majestic sites. It is difficult to imagine who these people would have been: oral history, anecdotes and folklores tell us these were tribes who had entered from the northwest Himalaya and settled in Garhwal and Kumaun Himalaya (now Uttarakhand) (see Figure 1). The most prominent among them were *Kols*, who were the first to arrive in the Northern hills (Kaur, 1985). Some of them were *khasas*, *kiratas*. These tribes survived for long in the forest

of Garhwal before the arrival of Aryans (Kaur, 1985, p.27). Myriad myths, legends, religious beliefs and rituals existed among pre-Aryan inhabitants. Some of them are mentioned in *Puranas* (Kalyan Tirthank (in Hindi), Volume 31). Overtime waves of humanities started coming to India; many of them moved to difficult to access valleys (Mabbet, 1968). Traces of the presence of *Kiratas*, *Nagas*, and *Khasas* tribal can be found even today. The pre-Dravidian people are seen today, represented by *Bhotia Culture* (Nand and Kumar, 1989). Later, Aryans arrived between 1000-1200 BC and contributed significantly to the framework of travel (Kalyan Tirthank Volume 31).

Aryans were over-awed by the Himalayan natural landscape, particularly the Garhwal ranges. These tribes were untiring rambler and loved serendipity and wanderlust. They moved to the head of Garhwal's holy rivers Yamuna and Ganga. They held Lord Shiva as the supreme among the gods. As a mountain god, he is deified and worshipped all over India.

Figure-1: Prominent Himalayan Tourist/ Pilgrim Centres



Source: The Author

Seekers of Knowledge

Aryan settlers (1000-1200 BC) were clever people who aptly assimilated the ways and values of the indigenous societies. They studied the enchanting space most appropriately for religious activities and consecrated the region as 'Dev Bhumi', the land of Gods. Sages, saints, poets, and thinkers gradually came to know awe-inspiring space in the Himalaya where they created Hindu classic literature.

Kaur (1985) observed that around 700 BC there was a rise of a new class of Hindu society that followed the path of knowledge (*Gyan Marg*) who wandered in quest of knowledge and focused on this revered space. These wandering societies and hermits, perhaps, were the first pilgrims of Garhwal Himalaya. Saint Vyasa compiled the *Puranas* near Mana village. Gradually this

region became known far and wide. People from far-off places visited this area. Banks of rivers thronged by rambling societies and hermits; *Badrika* and *Kanava* ashram were established as renowned seats of learning. However, the concepts of pilgrimage as we see today did not exist. As time passed by pilgrimage experienced transformation, though Uttarakhand remained the sanctum of the Hindus.

The selection of the Himalaya for this study was purposeful for they are considered holy, inspiring and benevolent; a refuge of thinkers, philosophers and religious erudites, for example, sage Vedvyas composed Hindu scriptures, *the Vedas*, *Bhagwad Gita* and the *Mahabharata* on the high Himalayas. Above all, the unique tradition of *Tirtha-Yatra* (religious travelism) began from the Garhwal region several centuries ago. Another important reason for selecting Himalaya is that the Ganga, the most sacred river originates from Gaomukh in the high Himalaya. We shall see how the holy river transformed the character and psyche of mountain people, particularly of Hindus what Kaur (1985) termed as the 'Gangaization' process (P. 29).

Discussion

According to the *Rig Veda*, Tirtha-yatra is crossing of a place, 'a ford' where one may cross over to the far shore of a river or to the far shore of the world of heaven (Eck, 1981). Of all the objects, water, particularly the Ganga water is held most sacred among Hindus that washes away the sin. The concept of *Tirtha-yatra* (travelism) seems to have been evolved from the sanctity of water and ritual bathing. The act of crossing in the *Upnishad* is transition and transformation from the world of *Brahama*. In *Upnishad Puranas* and epics the word 'tirth' means as 'spiritual ford'. Attractive points of rivers' junctions were given high respect as a *tirth*, for example, *Deva Prayaga*, where the *Alaknanda* and *Bhagirathi* rivers meet, from this point the river gets its name *Ganga*. Again, the meeting point of *Yamuna* and *Ganaga* and hidden *Saraswati* rivers is named *Prayaga*.

With the rise of modern civilization and tremendous increase in India's population, the holy waters are mindlessly polluted, yet millions of devotees bathe religiously. Speaking metaphorically, the Ganga is the soul of India, giving birth to famous religious centres like Badrinath, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Prayaga, and Kashi where millions of pilgrims assemble for taking religious bath. At *Prayaga* on national bathing festival (Kumbha) a sea of humanity can be seen bathing in the Ganga waters. Table-1 shows tens of thousands of visitors, of them 80 per cent are pilgrims. This not only pollutes water but creates the problem of managing mass-pilgrims.

Let us have a close look at the Himalayan Pilgrimage. Being considered as the most ancient art of travel, it was unique in planning, system-based and much closer to today's much talked about concept of 'sustainability'. It emphasizes the fact that 'unless a society is sustainable, travelism cannot be sustainable' (Singh, 2017). Saints and seers had native intelligence, spiritual power and deep understanding of ecosystems. Indefatigable traveller as they were, they did a close reconnaissance of the Himalayan weak or resilient spaces that would endure for ages and can withstand natural shocks such as seismic threats endemic to these regions of beauty. Since the Himalayas were far off from the human settlement, only few could visit the place. Those who could reach there were bound by the rigid Hindu code. It may be noted in passing that trespassers of the environmental code may walk away with impunity but breaching religious code of conduct would wrong the entire *yatra* and its merits (*Moksha*).

Table-1. Numbers of Tourists visiting Badrinath (2006-2016)

Years	No. of pilgrims
2006	741256
2007	901262
2008	911333
2009	916925
2010	921950
2011	981000
2012	985998
2013	497744
2014	180000
2015	359146
2016	624745

Source: www.badrikedar.org

Pilgrim-fathers marked a four spiritual *Dhama* circuit along with Badrinath at the apex (Vishnu Puranas 5.24, 6). This spiritual zone was named *Badri ka Ashram*, locally called *Gandhmadan* (Hindu Elesium).

Badrinath Tirtha was considered supreme with three more Dhamas namely Dwarika, Rameshwarm and Puri as satellites. Similarly, Kedarenath has five *kedars*. Though Badrinath (Raj Badree) must be visited to earn full merits of the *yatra*, but only on the last leg of the *yatra*. The Hindu *Tirtha* itinerary followed a circulatory mechanism in clock wise order so that a pilgrim has the reward of long and cumbersome journey. He has been ordained to pay his obeisance to all these holy places, then he is entitled to 'cross the ford'. A pilgrim had to be clean from within and without. He should be righteous, humble and honest. Violation of Hindu code would deprive the pilgrim of heavenly joys.

Badrinath: The Pilgrim's Highway

The gifted makers of *Tirtha* were forward-looking people in creating 300 km long *Tirtha*-route from Rishikesh to Badrinath. They placed *chattis* (temporary shelter) after tracking 6-8 km a day where the pilgrims were provided sleeping spaces and given food provisions. Unique to this programme was the introduction of *Panda-system*. *Pandas* were picked from local people, trained in elementary pilgrim services. He would explain code of conduct to pilgrims, such as a pilgrim shall not cut trees, shall not pluck flowers, shall respect the environment, shall not disturb wildlife, should be a vegetarian and taken no intoxicants (Kalyan Tirthank, in Hindi, volume31). The *pandas* were superb in native hospitality and meticulous in keeping visitors' records, such as the visitors' contact, days of stay, money spent or borrowed. Rishikesh had a pilgrim's bank that facilitated money transaction for pilgrims. With the modern technological mechanism, the *panda system* has vanished altogether from the Himalayan pilgrimage.

Access to the beauty is critical. This happened with the construction of Badrinath road that opened way to vehicular traffic. This highway made Badrinath accessible, ignoring the five prayagas. A metalled road was considered essential for the development of this socio-economic backwardness of the region. It introduced new mobility to people, goods and services. Furthermore, it opened doors for tourism. Road to high Himalayas was also important on defensive measure after the Sino-Indian clash in 1962. Road network generally boosted the economy, but the pilgrim economy pitted against the tourist economy which was gradually penetrating into the system.

One can imagine the challenge of sighting a *tirtha* in the primitive environment. Since the rivers Ganga and Yamuna were most sacred, their sources and neighbourhood were awesome and solitaire in naturalness; the waters were pure; virgin place and untrammelled by humans. Tranquil environment at the head of these rivers were considered most holy. The Alaknanda had clusters of *tirthas*, particularly as the junctions such as *Deva Prayag*, *Nand Prayag*, *Karana Prayag*, and *Rudra Prayag*. All these places of beauty were declared Tirthas sites. The old yatra route ran parallel to the Ganga, leading to the supreme Tirtha – Badrinath.

Literature Review

Thus far, we were attempting to collect threads to knit a yarn for understanding the evolution of the Tirtha concept. Since history is mute about the facts that happened several thousand years ago, most of the stories have been weaned out of oral history, anecdotes, folklore and videos. Eck's (1981) chapter on *Tirthas of India* was immensely useful. The tradition of pilgrimage is still alive despite the assault of modernity. One can witness the crowd of devotees moving to the Tirtha shouting loudly '*Bam Bhole*' carrying their bare belongings on their shoulder. Austerity is their core trait, they are still seen moving bare-footed, and half-fed, because pilgrimages are panceas to atone your sin (Eck, 1981). The harder you suffer, the better would be divine reward. On the *Ghats* of Ganga, on the great bath (Kumbha), one can see India in its microcosm. There are strong elements of resilience in the institution of Tirthyatra that it outlives mortality. Much of the precious material exists in *Rig Veda*, *Skand Puranas*, *Manusmriti* but these are not easily accessible. However, this shortcoming was compensated by a very exhaustive chapter by Eck. Kaur's (1985) research, Himalayan Pilgrimage is scientific account. Most interesting work was *Ghumakkar Shastra* by Rahul Shankaratayan. A wealth of information was found in a special issue of Hindi magazine *Kalyan Tirthank* by Geeta Press, anecdotal and folklorish narratives were assembled from the pandas of Badrinath. Bernham (1990) provided more information on the sacredness of mountains.

The scene changes as we enter into the post-industrial era that witnessed a different kind of traveller called 'tourist' who was seeking pleasure, had a quest to know the *Other*, discovering some newness and novelty; loved consumerism; attitudinally ostentatious; cared little for ethics, least interested in the environment. Those who were *for* tourism, named it 'secular pilgrim' (Margry, 2015, p.5). There is a wide wedge between a tourist and a pilgrim. The former is free from all constraints – "do as one pleases, eat and spend money as he likes" (Krippendorff, 1987, p. 33). On the contrary a pilgrim was found simple, frugal and pious (Cohen, 1979). Eck (1981) believes that a pilgrim is *Tirthyatri* – a separate class of traveller!!

Indian *Tirtha* crossing in sacred geography found in history of religion 20(4), page 323-340. Not less informative was the special issue of *Kalyan* Vol. 31. It has now appeared in book form. For conceptual framework Bhardwaj (1973) was helpful. Of all the books, Kaur (1985) was mine of information. It was very close to our theme. Amongst the research journals *Tourism Recreation Research*, *Journal of Heritage Tourism* and *Annals of Tourism Research* (special

issue) provided thematical approach. Among the most valuable books was *Tourism, Religion and Spirituality* (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Recently, Richard Butler and Wantanee Suntikul (2018) have come out with a well- documented book on tourism and religion which has many useful references.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Despite years of debate and discussion some scholars still hold that a pilgrim should not have been in the category of a tourist. Many countries outside of UNWTO subscribe to this fact. To illustrate this idea, we have selected the case of Himalayan Hindu pilgrimage that are famously known for developing the art of travel in the past ages. The Himalayan scholars identified fascinating sites. Saints and sages were great travellers. Incredible, as it seems, they walked bare foot on ice and created niches for their expression of thoughts. It is a region in Garhwal where Vedvyas composed 4 *Vedas* and *Mahabharata*. Some of the battles scenes of the epic are located here. Manu the first Hindu lawgiver lived here and wrote *Manusmiriti*.

Their pathways overtime developed into long pilgrim routes. These pilgrimage routes were cautiously carved from Rishi Kesh to Gao-mukh, a 300-km long route. The guiding motto of a pilgrim was “harder you suffer, the better would be the divine gain”. This shows that a tourist is an antithesis of a pilgrim. In ancient days pilgrims treaded from Kerala to Badrinath or Kedarnath on the higher Himalaya.

Our forefathers, saints and sages were highly knowledgeable scholars. They had a reconnaissance of spectacular attractions and marked them for the development. The best sight for religious obligations and sacrament was called *dhama*. Pilgrim routes were carved after studying resilience of the ecosystem to ensure sustainability. The religious resort (dhama) were set up amidst nature’s excellences, such as, Yamnotri, Gangotri and their tributaries. All routes had to follow faithfully the code of conduct, for example, route to Badrinath was punctuated by *Chattis*. In his religious, diktat Adi Shankracharya laid down that every Hindu must visit the four dhamas during his lifetime. Badrinath among them was supreme as it paves the way to heaven.

Thus, a pilgrim followed the religious code of conduct faithfully and rigidly. Similarly, it was coded that no one shall overstay at Badrinath more than 48 hours otherwise his journey would be foiled. Shankracharya had the premonition that in times to come more people shall visit these *dhamas*, causing injury to the cultural/natural capital of the Himalaya. These *dhamas* are now full of the pilgrims. On an average 6 to 9 lakh visitors could be seen during the summer. It was given that no animal would be killed. This applied even to the king of the place. The waters of the Ganga were considered pure. Pilgrim take away waters in in bottles back home.

Gradually marked changes could be seen in variation and alteration of goods and services. Mountain communities are highly attached to their land hence the process of transformation was slow. Here lies the difference between change and transformation.

The aforesaid discussion brings home one point clearly that a pilgrim is a pilgrim and a tourist is a tourist and at occasion they can exchange characters, for example, a pilgrim to Badrinath may take a route to Mana, the *Bhotia* Village, located in the north of Badrinath. It is emphasized that living in this globalized world change is inevitable. To resist transformation, revitalization movement is considered necessary. Revitalization gives new life or vigour to the culture.

It is time that stakeholders of the temple committee with local community and government should launch revitalization process and protect that has remained as vestiges. This movement should start with young community members.

In Hinduism tirtha is a sacred place connected to holy waters, 'river ford'. It is also associated with sacred mountains, residence of a sage, or place made sacred by the presence of a saint. Considering on a broader scale, the *tirtha yatra* or pilgrimage is journey in pursuit of some moral or spiritual significance – journey to a shrine.

It is therefore difficult to define a tourist from a traveller – a traveller from a visitor, a visitor from an excursionist and a tourist from a pilgrim. Travel is a common factor in all these terms. It is advisable to remove this confusion. For a non-tourism student these terms are synonymous. Mark the paradox that all travellers are tourists, but all tourists are not travellers (Singh, 2015). Some movement is necessary to qualify for a tourist (Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

So often the terms travel and tourism are used in tandem, as synonyms. A lot of debate and discussions have taken place, yet the problem remains unresolved.

Surprisingly, the definition of a tourist also holds good for different personalities as discussed above. Nations were also disagreed on excursionist having the same definition except that s/he has to stay 24 hours in the country visited. Fretching (1976: 59) focused on three points to make the definition precise – unambiguity facilitated measurement and follows established usage very closely. Since then definition created refinement for precision.

Since a pilgrim is not a dollar spinner, nor is he a high spender, he is conveniently ignored. He is often clubbed with domestic tourists. There is a dire need of UNWTO to express concern on this issue. It is still arguable that a pilgrim is markedly different and unlike of a tourist – if a visitor is categorized as a tourist, a pilgrim should be given a respectable category. We suggest '*Tirth-yatri*' will be most appropriate though it sounds native and vernacular. It sounds better than pilgrim, tourist, quasi-tourist, half tourist or domestic tourist. History records that *Tirtha-yatra* represents the glory of Indian culture which must be preserved and revitalized if possible.

The Alaknanda route will be alive in use after its physical and spiritual renewal. This is an age of wellness where people take long walks for their physical fitness. Part of this pilgrim route can be developed for yoga training centres. All around Rishikesh the green environment offers this opportunity. Since Uttarakhand is now an independent state, tourism shall flourish. Ideal would be that as far as possible it should be *niche* tourism to compete neighbouring Himalayan states, particularly Himachal Pradesh. Lastly, the Alaknanda route which has a history of several thousand years should be designated as a national heritage site.

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