

# MANAGEMENT AND SAFETY CHALLENGES IN SACRED SITES : A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KEDARNATH SHIV TEMPLE, AMBABHONA, ODISHA

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## **Abstract**

India's holy places play a big role in how people come together and practice their rituals. But with more religious tourists visiting, these sites face growing problems in management and safety. This study looks closely at one such place, the Kedarnath Shiv Temple in Ambabhona, Odisha. It's a key local Shiva shrine that holds deep cultural meaning for the region. This study uses a mix of methods i.e ethnography, surveys, and Giddens' structuration theory to explore these issues. The research pulls from Durkheim's idea of collective excitement during rituals and Giddens' view on how structures and actions shape each other. It uncovers big gaps, like poor crowd management, crumbling facilities and too much commercialization that chips away at the site's holiness. Safety risks are high too similar to accidents at other temples. Main takeaways show clashes between different groups make things worse, breaking down community bonds. Pilgrims' movements create divisions along caste, class and gender, heightening dangers. To fix this, the study suggests a layered approach to governance like using GIS technology for tracking crowds, involving locals in care and pushing for better policies to build sustainable tourism. On the theory side, it sheds light on how sacred spots get turned into commodities in places shaped by colonial histories. In practice, it offers ideas for improving temple boards and cutting disaster risks in Odisha's religious landscape.

## **Keywords**

Sacred sites, Religious tourism, Crowd safety, Sustainable governance, Temple ecology

## **Introduction**

India's sacred places act as central hubs where communities gather, strengthen their shared identity, carry out age-old rituals and weave strong social bonds that hold people together across generations. These sacred sites have long been the heart of cultural life, drawing devotees who seek spiritual solace and connection. However, in recent years, they've been overwhelmed by massive challenges in crowd management and ensuring safety, all fueled by the explosive growth in pilgrimage tourism. Swarms of visitors flood these spots during peak seasons, straining limited resources like pathways, water supplies and security setups, often leading to chaos, accidents and even loss of life. This research dives deep into these conflicts at the Kedarnath Shiv Temple in Ambabhona, Odisha a holy Shiva shrine nestled in a quiet rural setting that mirrors broader national trends. By examining the ground realities, this study looks at real life situations. These include huge uncontrolled crowds and ignoring today's safety rules. Together, they slowly destroy the temple's deep holy and calm feeling.

### **Research Objectives**

- ❖ To identify problems in institutions, infrastructure, crowd handling, resource use and coordination among groups.
- ❖ To study safety risks from a social and psychological viewpoint and explain how they worsen due to various differences.
- ❖ To explain the mix of devotee actions and institutional habits in sacred tourism, using Giddens' structuration theory.
- ❖ To create a practical policy plan at different levels, using technology (like GIS mapping and AI cameras), community involvement and legal changes.

### **Kedarnath Shiv Temple: A Quick Overview**

The Kedarnath Shiv Temple sits quietly in Ambabhona village, Bargarh district, Odisha. It's about 35-40 km north of Bargarh town, right at the base of Barapahar Mountain. This old stone temple is a big symbol of Shiva worship in the area and shows off the region's building history. As one of the eight Asta Sambhu temples in western Odisha, it pulls in visitors who want peace by its calm atmosphere. The carvings and stories carved into it follow the classic Kalinga style.

### **Historical Evolution**

It was built back in the days of the Sambalpur Kingdom. Records say Dewan Dakshin Rai did it under Raja Ajit Singh around 1765. But locals talk about divine dreams and say skilled workers from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century started it. Stories mix gods with real history. They say Shiva himself blessed it, making it like a sister temple to the famous one in Uttarakhand's Himalayas. Today, folks are repairing it to protect its ancient charm from modern changes.

(Satellite image of Kedarnath Shiv Temple, Ambabhona)





(Image of Kedarnath Shiv Temple, Ambabhona)

### **Architectural Significance**

This temple fits right into Odisha's style with fancy carved pillars and walls full of myths like scenes with Ganesha and other gods. Inside the sanctorum there is a natural Shiva lingam that appeared on its own. A holy pond surrounds it, giving the place a magical vibe. It doesn't have a tall tower like some temples; instead, its simple stone work holds ancient pieces. That old craft stands strong even as farm life changes around it.

### **Socio-Cultural Role**

The temple acts as a gathering spot for the community. It brings together different castes and tribes through rituals that fit into area's daily life and economy. The big event is Maha Shivaratri in the Magha month when huge crowds come for parades, songs, and all-night prayers (Jagara). The energy is electric, but it puts pressure on village resources. It brings in money from offerings and visitors, but Odisha's growing tourism might make it too commercial

### **Literature Review**

India's sacred sites which Durkheim (1912) saw as generating collective effervescence and Eliade (1959) as divine irruptions into the mundane, now grapple with overcrowding and safety issues. This aligns with Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, as pilgrims' rituals fuel commercialization amid post-colonial tourism booms (van der Veer, 1994). Empirical data reveals these sites draw 100 crore visitors annually with overcrowding at Char Dham, Sabarimala and Odisha's Jagannath Puri causing deadly stampedes, financial mismanagement (CAG 2021 reported over ₹100 crore in lapses) and inadequate facilities like 7-hour queues at Kedarnath in Uttarakhand. Improved management strategies include zoning, GIS mapping and ITBP deployments which have reduced crowds by 40%. Safety audits highlight vulnerabilities for women, environmental hazards (e.g., 2024 floods trapping over 200 pilgrims, Landslides in Amarnath Yatra, 2013 Kedarnath flood) and priest-led disorder eroding sanctity. Yet, in-depth studies of smaller rural temples such as Ambabhona's Kedarnath Shiv Temple on Odisha's Asta Sambhu routes, remain scarce. These demand mixed-methods research on caste-class dynamics and technological interventions to address gaps in Odisha's temple funding policies.

### **Research Methodology**

This research paper looks at how to handle management issues and safety problems at sacred sites. To give an overall conclusion, Kedarnath Shiv Temple in Ambabhona is taken for field study. This study uses a mixed methods, based on pragmatism ideas from Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). The goal is to blend ethnography data; giving a full picture of how social patterns play out in holy places. The setup runs different approaches side by side like watching people up closely, talking deeply with few folks and handing out surveys to few pilgrims, priests, officials and locals. The respondents were picked on purpose, splitting by rural/urban backgrounds, caste and gender. The fieldwork was done right at the temple (coordinates 21.35°N, 83.65°E) in Odisha's Bargarh district, covering quiet days, huge crowds during Maha Shivaratri (over 20,000 people). For gathering information, various sources and methods (flexible

question lists, tracked crowds with GPS, recorded sounds, notes on the spot) etc were used . Finally, the data was combined to properly test the ideas.

### **Management Challenges**

This sext looks closely at the management issues at Kedarnath Shiv Temple in Ambabhona. It shows how poor organization weakens the temple's spiritual role during busy pilgrimage seasons.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Institutional Mismanagement**

Giddens' ideas help explain the repeating problems in how the temple is run. The boards in charge, set up by the Odisha Hindu Religious Endowments Act of 1951, stick to old ways because of unclear money records and control by a few powerful people. This breaks the sense of community Durkheim talked about, turning it into group fights. Priests act in their own interest, like in principal-agent problems described by Eisenhardt in 1989. The government's hand-off of power after independence splits authority, as seen in studies of temple economies by Fuller in 2003. At Ambabhona, this leads to last-minute festival plans without checking if they have enough staff or resources.

### **Crowd Control and Infrastructure Deficits**

During peak time like MahaShivaratri, around 15,000 to 20,000 people crowd in which is five times more than the 2-acre temple area can handle. This creates over 5 people per square meter, a level that often leads to disorder according to Fruin's research. Unlike Puri, there's no RFID tracking or cameras, so visitors wait 2-4 hours in lines on rough dirt paths. Broken walls and just one entrance make jams worse. Basic setups are missing too.No shaded spots to rest, unreliable water (just one tap for every 5,000 people) much like 70% of pilgrimage sites across India that fail simple checks.

### **Commercialization and Cultural Erosion**

Priests asking for donations (₹50-500 per person) turn the simple act of seeing the deity into a business deal which ruins the pure feel of the rituals. Out of pilgrims asked, 60% said they felt forced into it much like the "DONATION GANGS". Street vendors with over 30 stalls along the roads mix devotion with shopping crowds, just as Van der Veer described with his idea of holy places turning into markets. Culturally, it damages the true essence of Asta Sambhu.

### **Stakeholder Conflicts (Priests, Devotees, Authorities)**

Tensions between priests and visitors like priests letting donors skip the line cause many complaints. Local council and temple board fights over control slow down improvements, such as fencing plans that got stuck. Visitors, divided by caste, argue over ritual spots. Officials put tourism money ahead of safety, following ongoing social patterns. Interviews show women often face harassment in mixed lines.

### **Safety Challenges**

This section looks closely at the safety risks people face when visiting the Kedarnath Shiv Temple, Ambabhona as well as other religious places . It uses real data collected from the field, combined with different types of risks, to show how deep social and structural problems in society create dangers, especially during big religious festivals when crowds peak.

### **Risk Typology in Sacred Sites**

Safety risks at sacred sites like Ambabhona's Kedarnath Shiv Temple divide into natural factors (rugged terrain and monsoons), human-induced issues (crowd overcrowding) and techno-social elements (poor access roads), analyzed through Perrow's 1984 normal accident theory where tightly linked systems turn small problems into major events. At Ambabhona, field data suggests 65% of hazards arise from unpaved ghats (steps) that cause slips, mapped via GPS pilgrim routes; this aligns with broader Odisha vehicle overturns on hilly roads like nearby Barapahar, reporting incidents with injuries from 2023-2025. Analogous events, such as Uttarakhand's Kedarnath cloudbursts stranding over 200 in 2024 and helicopter crashes due to wind shear, highlight amplified cascades in pilgrimage settings.

## Empirical Analysis

Logistic regression from Shivaratri 2025 data links crowd densities above 4 people per square meter to near-stampede risks across 5 cases, mirroring national patterns like the 2025 Maha Kumbh stampede (30 deaths at high densities). Local records note 2 vehicle flips on Barapahar roads (2023-2025, 15 injuries total), while 2025 Shivaratri saw related Odisha accidents like bridge falls killing 2 pilgrims returning from celebrations. Surveys reveal 72% of pilgrims flag missing signage and evacuation practice with women and lower-caste groups facing higher vulnerabilities in queues.

## Structural Vulnerabilities

Old retaining walls are falling apart (40% in bad shape) and the pond edges leave people exposed to falls with no guardrails in place. Bargarh sits in seismic zone III and often faces flash floods, much like issues in the Himalayas, but there's no early alert system. From field notes in ethnography, slippery stone steps lead to 20% of slips for older folks (based on interviews).

## Policy Recommendations

This part pulls together the real-world results to create a layered system for running the Kedarnath Shiv Temple in Ambabhona as well as other sacred places . It puts structuration theory into action to build strong, lasting ways to govern holy site. **Multi-Level Governance Model**

At the local level, village councils (panchayats) handle community watch patrols. In the middle, district boards manage checks on resources. At the top, state teams like NDRF and ITBP run emergency practice drills. This shifts 40% of the funds based on VRV scores (Visitor Risk Vulnerability) which come from GIS maps showing crowd hotspots. Tests in Uttarakhand showed positive results (this cuts traffic jams by 35%).

## Technology Enabled Solutions

RFID tags need to be used so up to 500 visitors can get darshan per hour. AI cameras can be added on dashboards that send alerts if crowds get too dense (over 4 people per square meter), then reroute them. Applications in local languages should be made for live updates on wait times and directions to queues. This halves waiting periods and makes things fairer for women with separate online lines. A 2025 trial at Puri proved it drops accident risks by 0.6 points while keeping traditions smooth.

## Community Based Management Strategies

People from the local area should be trained to be volunteers. These folks act as cultural guides and quick responders during events. This builds a sense of ownership. To include everyone 50% spots for SC,ST and women could be set aside. Form groups for abhishekam rituals to end priest control. One-third of the dakshina (donations) should be directed to fix up infrastructure.

## Legal And Institutional Reforms

- ❖ Amend the Odisha Endowments Act to require cultural impact assessments before major festivals.
- ❖ Conduct audits every three months under CAG supervision.
- ❖ Set up special funds for sacred sites using a 1% tax on tourism income.
- ❖ Enforce 100-meter vendor-free zones around temples.
- ❖ Draw lessons from Puri's reforms after 2021.

## Summary of The Findings

This research paper shows how poor management and safety issues at Kedarnath Shiv Temple in Ambabhona are breaking down the special sense of community among pilgrims. More and more visitors are putting pressure on the place and the way the temple runs just keeps repeating old problems. Real-world evidence backs up key ideas like conflicts among different groups cause a lot of overcrowding and new technology like mapping tools and tracking tags can cut down many safety risks. When crowds get too packed, it leads to near-stampedes. Priests turning rituals into a business forces people into things they don't want, and certain groups like women from lower castes face much

higher dangers which hurts the overall unity that sociologists like Durkheim talked about. A closer look reveals crumbling facilities, like broken steps and no safety signs, similar to problems flagged in other Odisha temples with huge funding waste. Stories from the ground paint Ambabhona as a small example of India's colonial past where devotion mixes in new ways. It calls for big changes at every level i.e flexible leadership, smart monitoring technology and local people taking charge to bring back a strong spiritual vibe. These insights push forward the study of pilgrimages, calling for better funding and fairer ways to handle religious tourism across India's holy sites.

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