

The Role of Mobile Applications in Shaping Pilgrim Experiences at Kumbh Mela: A Study of Digital Transformation in Religious Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Kumbh Mela, one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, attracts millions of pilgrims seeking spiritual experiences. In recent years, mobile applications have emerged as a powerful tool in enhancing the pilgrimage experience, transforming the way pilgrims navigate, connect, and engage with the event. This study explores the role of mobile applications in shaping the pilgrim experience at the Kumbh Mela, focusing on the digital transformation of religious tourism, by analysing the features and functionalities of mobile apps that are used during the event -such as real time updates, navigation assistance and emergency services this paper investigates how digital technologies enhance the convenience, safety and overall experience of the pilgrims, ultimately the paper highlights the pivotal role of mobile applications in the digital evolution of religious tourism, showcasing how mobile apps are not only facilitating a smoother pilgrim experience but also bridging the gap between tradition and modernity in the sacred space of Kumbh Mela .

This research underscores the growing importance of mobile technologies in religious tourism, providing valuable insights for event organizers, tourism authorities, and pilgrims alike in navigating the intersection of tradition and digital innovation at the Kumbh Mela.

KEYWORDS: Kumbh Mela, Mobile Applications, pilgrim experiences, Digital Transformation, Religious tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, religious tourism has been essential to forming cultural identities and encouraging spiritual interaction. The Kumbh Mela, a grand Hindu pilgrimage that alternates between four holy sites in India—Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain—is one of the biggest and most recognizable religious events in the world. As per Hindu mythology, the origin of Kumbh is found in the ancient “Samudra Manthan” or “churning of the ocean”. Mela means fair, while Kumbh means pitcher in Sanskrit. According to Hindu mythology, after a protracted conflict between the Gods and the Demons that lasted 12 days and 12 nights, the nectar of immortality was poured from a pitcher onto four distinct locations in India: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nasik, and Ujjain. These locations alternate with the Mela in its various manifestations. Every three years, one of these sites—the Ganga in Haridwar, the Godavari in Nasik, the Kshipra in Ujjain, or the Sangam (the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the fabled Saraswati rivers) in Allahabad—hosts the Kumbh Mela. (Sridhar et al., 2015). The word ‘pilgrim’ originates from the Latin *peregrinus*, meaning

"foreign" or "traveller," which evolved into a term specifically for those journeying for spiritual reasons, when someone goes to a sacred location for religious purposes, usually as part of a devotional act or spiritual journey, they are referred to as pilgrims. A significant portion of the pilgrims are from rural areas of India, while they come from all over the country.

The Kumbh mela's tone and content have undergone significant transformations in recent times, propelled by shifting social, economic, and political landscapes (Lochtefeld, 2004). This evolution encompasses various facets, from the modes of transportation utilized by pilgrims to the incorporation of technology for crowd management and surveillance (Kanauiya & Tiwari, 2022). The way large-scale religious events are experienced and run has changed in recent years due to the growing use of digital technologies, especially mobile applications. Mobile apps have become essential tools for pilgrims and organizers alike, thanks to India's growing digital infrastructure and pervasive smartphone use. The whole pilgrimage experience is improved by these apps, which provide real-time information, guidance, health and safety warnings, lodging options, and access to religious content. This Paper aims to highlight how technology influences pilgrim navigation, engagement, and involvement by using digital tools in this religious context, specifically focusing on mobile applications developed during the 2019 and 2025 Kumbh Melas in Prayagraj.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify key mobile applications developed in support of recent Kumbh mela events.
- To study the role of mobile applications in enhancing the pilgrim experience at the Kumbh Mela.

Kumbh Mela: Cultural and Religious Context

At its core, the Kumbh Mela is characterized by the ceremonial submersion in holy rivers, which is a religious practice thought to purge people of their accumulated karmic impurities and enable spiritual freedom, or moksha, from rebirth cycles.

In 2017, UNESCO recognized Kumbh Mela as intangible cultural heritage. The Kumbh crosses national boundaries, drawing tourists from all over the world to participate in its splendour and colourful cultural performances. It combines the ageless Indian culture with modern organizational genius to serve as a symbol of faith, resiliency, and harmony. The Mela has its roots in the tale of the Samudra Manthan, or the churning of the ocean, in which it was believed that drips of Amrit, the nectar of immortality, had fallen on four holy sites in India.

Kumbh at Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh)

Prayagraj, previously known as Allahabad, has been a central site for the Kumbh Mela for centuries, and its spiritual importance is deeply rooted in Hindu mythology and religious history. The Triveni Sangam, a place where the three sacred rivers in India, the Ganga (Ganges), the Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati, meet in Allahabad, is very auspicious according to Hindu mythology, and people believe that one dip in the waters of the Sangam at a precise moment in time can wash away all of a person's sins. (Sridhar et al., 2015). The Kumbh, a grand religious gathering, is celebrated once every 12 years in Prayagraj, while the Ardh Kumbh occurs every 6 years in between the Kumbh. At the Kumbh, ritualistic activities include providing Aarti is the group singing of hymns to the gods along the riverbank; Deep Dan is the lighting of small earthen lamps

at sacred locations; Snan is the taking of a holy bath by submerging oneself in the river; Yajnas is the priests chanting mantras around the sacred fire; Kirtan is devotional singing; Darshan is the meeting and asking of the sages for blessings; Mahaprasad and Langar are the serving of a festive meal; and Pravachana is the religious discourse and discourse. While the Snan, Deep Dan, and Yajnas are conducted on a set day, at a certain location, and at a specific time, the Aarti, Kirtan, Darshan, Langar, and Pravachana may be held on a regular basis.(Quadri & Padala, n.d). The most recent Maha Kumbh Mela, which took place in Prayagraj from January 13 to February 26, 2025, attracted an astonishing 660 million devotees, making it the greatest religious gathering in human history. (*Mahakumbh 2025 Concludes, Attracting over 660 Million Visitors*, n.d.)

Kumbh at Haridwar (Uttarakhand):

One of the four main Hindu pilgrimage festivals in India, the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar, takes place according to astrological alignments when the Sun is in Aries and Jupiter enters Aquarius. In the belief that it atones for sins and offers spiritual freedom, it attracts millions of devotees who bathe in the Ganges River. Haridwar holds the Ardh Kumbh Mela every six years, and the Kumbh Mela every twelve years, with the next one taking place from January to April 2033. A powerful religious experience is created by the festival's sacred ceremonies, spiritual talks, and cultural events. Modern crowd control methods and infrastructural upgrades have been implemented recently to safely and effectively handle the enormous influx of pilgrims. (*Haridwar Kumbh Mela 2033, Kumbh Mela 2033, Kumbh Mela Online Booking*, n.d.)

Kumbh at Nashik (Maharashtra):

On the banks of the Godavari River in Maharashtra, the Nashik Kumbh Mela, also called the Nashik-Trimbakeshwar Simhashta, is one of the four major Kumbh Melas that take place every twelve years. It is based on Hindu mythology and celebrates the idea that the celestial nectar, or amrita, fell at four holy locations. Millions of pilgrims flock to the festival, thinking that a holy dip in the river can assist in their spiritual freedom and cleanse them of sins. More infrastructure and technology have been added in recent editions to securely and effectively handle the sizable audiences. The last Nashik Kumbh Mela occurred in 2015, and the next is scheduled for 2026. (*Nashik Simhashta Kumbh Mela to Go on for over 21 Months | Mumbai News - Hindustan Times*, n.d.)

Kumbh at Ujjain (Madhya Pradesh):

An important Hindu religious event, the Simhashta Kumbh Mela takes place every 12 years along the banks of the Shipra River in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. The mela gets its name from the astronomical transit of Jupiter into the Leo (Simha) sign, which is the basis for its celebration. Millions of followers congregate to bathe in the river in ritualistic baths, which are thought to atone for sins and aid in achieving moksha, or spiritual emancipation. With more than 75 million people, the 2016 Simhashta Kumbh Mela was one of the world's biggest religious events. Along with spiritual activities, the mela includes religious talks, cultural festivals, and large processions. (75 million Attend Ujjain's Kumbh Mela – Matters India, n.d.)

Digital Transformation in Religious Tourism

The digital revolution has significantly affected the tourism industry, and religious tourism is no exception. The use of digital technologies to improve the pilgrimage experience, increase logistical

effectiveness, and assist destination management is known as "digital transformation" in religious tourism. Apps, or mobile applications, are software applications created especially to operate on portable electronics like smartphones and tablets, and the usage of smartphone apps made especially for pilgrims is among the most obvious developments. Rituals, timetables, lodging, transportation, and emergency services are all covered by these applications through easy information access, increased convenience, and the ability to customize travel experiences.

There were 2 million mobile app users in Kumbh 2019 compared to 5 million in Mahakumbh 2025. The app Mahakumbh 2025 had five million subscribers, a growth of 150% over Kumbh 2019. The AI Chatbot used to handle approximately 100,000 queries daily, while in Kumbh 2019, there was no AI Chatbot to help pilgrims. There was also an improvement in social media engagement & Live streaming growth in Mahakumbh 2025. (Krishnan & Agrawal, n.d.) Through increased accessibility, tailored experiences, and operational efficiency, digital transformation is reshaping religious tourism while also raising concerns about the maintenance of spiritual authenticity in a society that is quickly digitizing.

Literature Review

Narbona and Arasa (2016) conducted a study on "The Role and Usage of Apps and Instant Messaging in Religious Mass Events." the objective was to examine how large religious gatherings may use emerging technologies to enhance attendees' spiritual and travel experiences, and specifically how mobile technology can enrich the experience for visitors. The centre of study was Mobile Apps and Instant Messaging, and quantitative and qualitative analysis was used for this purpose. The research methodology used structure and content analysis of technical tools, in-depth interviews, and quantitative analysis of statistical resources. The data obtained show that using apps improves other information sources and shows that event attendees' interest in using apps has grown over time. As per the findings, Apps and Instant Messaging can help define the purpose and parameters of an event, offer solutions during the crisis, transmit helpful information, recommendations & requirements (planning), and be helpful for obtaining feedback.

Dias and Afonso (2021) in their paper investigated how mobile applications impact the behaviour and emotions of tourists, highlighting the substantial impact of mobile technology on the travel experience. The study sought to investigate how emerging technologies are influencing modern traveller experiences and purchasing patterns. The study used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate both quantitative and qualitative characteristics, integrating surveys of 110 Portuguese visitors, interviews with mobile app developers, and four case studies. The results show that travel applications and smartphones significantly change the emotional reactions and behaviours of tourists. Applications for social media, in particular, help travellers feel more secure and stay in touch with friends and family. All things considered, the study concludes that mobile technology is revolutionizing tourism by enhancing experiences and affecting behaviour.

Gazzaz and Mohamed (2022) investigated the use of interactive touch-screen technology in religious tourism, particularly during the Hajj and Umrah ceremonies. The study used the uses and gratifications theory to analyse the reasons behind the use of technology by using a media survey methodology and responses from 400 pilgrims and Umrah performers. According to the results, people were very interested in touch-screen interfaces, which were essential for promoting ritual involvement, guiding, and spreading information. Furthermore, the study found a significant

relationship between demographic characteristics and technology use, suggesting that user involvement differed by age and educational attainment.

Singh & Sharma (2024) conducted a study on “Digitalization Shaping Religious Tourism in Himachal Pradesh.” the objective of the paper was to investigate how digital technologies, such as virtual guides; mobile apps, enhance the pilgrim experiences. The findings show that in the context of religious tourism in Himachal Pradesh, digitization greatly improves the pilgrimage experience, encourages community involvement, boosts accessibility, encourages sustainability, and deepens cultural knowledge.

Krishnan and Agrawal (2025) attempted a study on “Digital Transformation of Religious Events.” The digital evolution of religious events is examined in this study, with an emphasis on how technology has changed customs, rituals, and community involvement. It looks at how digital resources like social networking, smartphone apps, live streaming, and virtual involvement can be included in religious events. The study illustrates the advantages and difficulties of digitalization—such as greater accessibility, broader reach, and the preservation of cultural traditions in the face of contemporary technology pressures—through a thorough examination of case studies from various religious contexts. The findings indicate that although digital transformation might improve religious events' relevance and inclusion, it also calls for careful consideration of privacy, authenticity, and the possible loss of interpersonal relationships in virtual settings.

Sharma and Behera (2025) investigated in their paper how pilgrimage tourism is affected by digital transformation, using the Mahakumbh as a case study of smart tourism technologies. The usefulness of new technologies, including IoT, AI, big data analytics, and mobile applications, as well as pilgrims' acceptance of them, was assessed in this study. The study highlights the importance of digital transformation in enhancing tourist experiences and event management in pilgrimage tourism, particularly during the Mahakumbh. Regression study, however, shows that elements such as user-friendly digital platforms and emergency warning smartphone applications have little influence on how the pilgrimage experience is shaped overall. The explanatory power of the model suggests that other factors, such as infrastructure, security, and cultural participation, may have a greater impact.

Table 1.
Mobile Applications at the Kumbh Mela

Apps Developed	Developed By	Features	Estimated No. of Downloads
Mahakumbh Mela 2025 (Official app) (<i>Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 – Apps on Google Play</i> , n.d.)	Developed by CMP Techsseract LLP and launched by the Government of Uttar Pradesh (Prayagraj Mela Authority)	Interactive map with key Kumbh locations, Shahi Snan & event dates, GPS navigation, secured login, graphical dashboards (maps & graphs), also includes features like Swachh Kumbh, Prayagraj Smart City, Magnificence of Kumbh, Paint My City. (<i>Mahakumbh 2025 Website, App, and Logo Launched by CM Yogi Adityanath Government</i> , n.d.) The app	Over 100,000 downloads.

		also has a multilingual AI chatbot named <u>“The Kumbh SahAIyak chatbot,”</u> which serves as a digital assistant offering support to pilgrims in over 11 languages. (<i>Kumbh Sah’AI’yak Chatbot for Maha Kumbh Mela 2025</i> , n.d.)	
Kumbh Mela Police App 2025. (<i>Kumbh Mela Police App – Apps on Google Play</i> , n.d.)	Developed by Pragyaware Informatics Pvt Ltd (for UP Police & Prayagraj Mela Authority)	Emergency response tools, a centralized police coordination platform, officer contact details, route and landmark information, real-time communication, incident reporting, and support for crowd control and public safety during Maha Kumbh 2025.(<i>Kumbh Mela 2025 Mobile App Designed for Police Smooth Crowd Management Better Coordination Mahakumbh Latest Updates Kumbh News – India TV</i> , n.d.)	Over 1000 downloads on Google Play, with AppBrain reporting around 3,300 total installs since its launch in January 2025.
Kumbh Rail Seva app 2025.(<i>Maha Kumbh 2025: ‘Kumbh Rail Seva App’ for Convenient, Secure Travel Prayagraj News - Times of India</i> , n.d.)	North Central Railway, Prayagraj Division (Indian Railways)	Provides up-to-date details on platform numbers, travel instructions, and regular and special train schedules. contains information about medical booth locations, emergency hotline numbers, station amenities (toilets, drinking water, waiting rooms), housing alternatives close to stations, and a lost-and-found section. features historical information about the Kumbh Mela as well as a photo gallery accessible through interfaces in Hindi and English.(<i>Kumbh Rail Seva 2025 for Android - Free App Download</i> , n.d.)	Over 30,000 downloads.
Kumbh Saathi/ Mela Saathi AI Travel Planner 2025.(<i>Mela Saathi AI Travel Planner – Apps on Google Play</i> , n.d.)	Appeneure Technologies Pvt. Ltd.	AI-powered itinerary creation based on travel time, destination, and preferences; travel advice (from train or city to mela); reservations for lodging (hotels, homestays, or tents); and information on religious practices, ghats, temples, and ceremonies.(<i>Mela Saathi AI Travel Planner for Android - Download</i> , n.d.)	Over 5,000 Downloads.

Kumbh Locator Webapp 2025.(Esri India Launches Kumbh Mela Web App for Information and Navigation - The Times of India, n.d.)	Esri India Technologies Pvt. Ltd.	This GIS web application provides up-to-date information on lodging, restrooms, parking, traffic, weather, entry/exit points, emergency services, lost & found, e-rickshaw stands, and event venues. It is bilingual (in Hindi and English) it also features ArcGIS Story Maps of temples and tourist destinations.	Accessible via browser.
Kumbh E-pass scan app 2025. (Kumbh E-Pass Scan – Apps on Google Play, n.d.)	Technosys Services Pvt Ltd.	Enables authorities to instantly scan and validate Kumbh event passes (for both individuals and vehicles) using a QR code.	Over 1,000 Downloads on Google Play.
Shemaroo Bhakti App-Kumbh 2019.(Shemaroo Bhakti App Acts as a Devotees Guide during Kumbh Mela , n.d.)	Shemaroo Entertainment Ltd.	Kumbh-specific content, such as devotional video, access to Shemaroo's live content zones at the mela, extensive ritual schedules, bathing dates (calendar integration), maps of the mela grounds with medical facilities, travel and stay information, and weather updates.	
Rail Kumbh Seva Mobile App 2019.(Rail Kumbh Seva Mobile App: Know about Trains and Stations; 5 Facts about Indian Railways New App for Devotees - Business News / The Financial Express, n.d.)	North Central Railway (Indian Railways)	Mela special train timetables in real time; links to book tickets, both reserved and unreserved; station-to-Mela navigation (present position, station routes, mela zones, hotels, bus stands); details on the facilities (parking, waiting areas, ATMs, food stations); emergency numbers; photo gallery of past melas.	

The above table shows the different mobile apps developed during Kumbh Mela 2019 and Mahakumbh 2025.

Kumbh Mela at Nashik (2015)

A number of mobile applications were released during the 2015 Nashik Kumbh Mela to assist pilgrims and authorities, in addition to the ones that were recently created for the Kumbh Melas in Prayagraj in 2019 and 2025. Important details regarding roads, parking, ghats, and neighbouring ATMs were available via Nebula Studios' mobile app. Other noteworthy apps were a crowd management app to control foot traffic, GG Talk by TCS to find missing people, and Pee Provider by Avignyata Inc. to find clean restrooms. The Kumbh Mela Guide from Mindtricks Software and the Mahakumbh Nashik app from Impulse Technosoft provided event details and transportation information in multiple languages, while MediTracker made it easier to get medical help. During the event, Epimetrics was developed and implemented to track possible illness outbreaks.(chincholkar, n.d.)

CONCLUSION

The evolution of mobile apps from the 2015 Nashik Kumbh to the 2025 Prayagraj MahaKumbh highlights the growing role of digital tools in enhancing pilgrim experiences. Early apps focused on basic services like crowd management, navigation, and sanitation. By 2019, features expanded to include devotional content and travel facilitation. The 2025 apps marked a significant leap with real-time emergency response, AI chatbots, GIS mapping, and multilingual support, reflecting a clear shift from basic information to intelligent, interactive platforms. The incorporation of mobile applications into the Kumbh Mela highlights a more extensive digital revolution in the field of religious tourism. Large-scale spiritual gatherings are now much easier to coordinate and attend due to the growing reliance of pilgrims on mobile devices for information access, trip planning, and real-time navigation. This change represents the beginning of a new age in religious travel, as pilgrims' interactions with and experiences of sacred events are being transformed by digital technologies.

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