Research Paper

Religious Tourism and Ascetic Integrity: A Sociological Study of Economic Dependency and Sacred Authenticity in Varanasi

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex and evolving interface between religious tourism and ascetic integrity in the sacred city Varanasi with a focus on the Vaishnav Sadhus of Ramanandi Sampradaya, one of the most prominent Vaishnav ascetic orders in India. As Varanasi becomes increasingly embedded in circuits of global religious tourism, Ramanandi sadhus face new challenges in preserving traditional ideals of renunciation while adapting to shifting economic, cultural, institutional realities. Drawing upon a mixed-methods approach including ethnographic observations, field surveys across 25 Ramanandi mathas, and secondary sources this paper examines how tourism both supports and disrupts the sacred economy. Findings suggest that tourism generates crucial financial support and new platforms for religious outreach but it also fosters commodification, performative spirituality and media distortion of ascetic identity. While 75% of respondents acknowledged that tourism offers opportunity, 65% expressed concern about its impact on spiritual authenticity. The study further reveals how sadhus negotiate these tensions through strategic adaptation like digital outreach, staged rituals and merchandise, while others maintain strict traditionalism by refusing media exposure or monetized services. The paper also highlights the gendered hierarchies in spiritual tourism, noting the marginal role of female ascetics in public rituals and tourism circuits. Through theoretical frameworks drawn from Bourdieu, MacCannell and Weber, this research reinterprets asceticism not as a static withdrawal from the world but as a reflexive and contextually responsive tradition. In the end the paper advocates for policy interventions to ensure ethical tourism, spiritual autonomy and inclusive sacred representation emphasizing the need for further longitudinal and comparative studies on ascetic communities in India.

Keywords: *Religious tourism, asceticism, sacred economy, Ramanandi Sampradaya, commodification, authenticity, Varanasi, Kashi.*

I.   Introduction

Religious tourism has emerged as a significant cultural and economic phenomenon in contemporary India, mainly in sacred cities like Varanasi (Kashi) where spiritual heritage is deeply embedded in the urban landscape. Defined as the travel of individuals motivated primarily by faith, pilgrimage or religious curiosity, religious tourism often results in a complex interplay between spiritual authenticity and commodification (Singh, 2004; Raj & Morpeth, 2007). Varanasi as one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities attracts millions of domestic and international pilgrims annually creating a vibrant yet contested space where sacred traditions encounter market-driven imperatives. Among the ascetic traditions most visibly affected by this transformation is the Vaishnav Sadhus of Ramanandi Sampradaya, a prominent Vaishnav sect rooted in the Bhakti movement and devoted to the worship of Lord Rama. Ramanandi Sadhus mostly known for their strict monastic discipline, renunciatory ethos and theological emphasis on maryada bhakti (disciplined devotion) have historically maintained a distinct identity within Hindu asceticism. Yet the rapid expansion of tourism in Kashi has created a new dynamic wherein ascetics increasingly find themselves navigating expectations of public performance, spiritual commodification, economic interdependence etc. This paper explores the central research problem: how

does increasing religious tourism affect the ascetic integrity and sacred authenticity of Ramanandi Vaishnav Sadhus in Varanasi? Drawing from empirical data, this research identifies a pattern of adaptive strategies among Ramanandi mathas in response to urban pressures, mainly those tied to tourism-driven economic dependencies. For example, 65% of surveyed ascetics affirmed that religious tourism introduces economic pressures affecting their renunciatory practices, while 75% acknowledged tourism as a source of opportunity, highlighting a paradoxical negotiation between ascetic ideals and financial sustenance. Similarly, 60% of respondents believed tourism had altered the cultural environment of their matha, and 40% reported regular economic engagement with pilgrims and tourists, further emphasizing the interpenetration of the spiritual and the commercial. The sociological significance of this study lies in its examination of how sacred traditions respond to contemporary challenges, including commercialization of religious space, symbolic performance of authenticity, and shifts in religious economy. Two guiding research questions are addressed: (1) How do Ramanandi Sadhus perceive and respond to tourism-driven economic pressures? and (2) Does tourism dilute ascetic values or support spiritual sustainability in modern urban contexts? Methodologically, this study employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative survey data from 160 Ramanandi sadhus across various mathas in Kashi with qualitative insights gathered through participant observation, informal interviews and secondary data analysis from government tourism reports and academic literature. By situating the Ramanandi experience within broader sociological frameworks of religion, economy and modernity, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on how India's ascetic traditions are reconfiguring themselves in an era of mass mobility, spiritual consumerism and urban transformation.

II.   Literature Review

Religious tourism often referred to as pilgrimage, sacred tourism or faith tourism has been widely theorized as a multidimensional phenomenon involving the movement of individuals for spiritual purposes, heritage experiences, cultural consumption (Singh, 2004). Central to this discourse are concepts such as the sacred economy- the monetization of religious practice and pilgrim influx-commodification of religion which posits that spiritual traditions are increasingly repackaged as marketable experiences (Chambers, 2009) and spiritual authenticity, encompassing pilgrim desires for perceived 'realness' in religious experiences (Cohen, 1988). Scholars debate whether commodification undermines legitimacy or enables wider engagement; while some argue sacred economies necessarily dilute authentic tradition others suggest strategic commodification can bolster community pride and support preservation (Bruner, 1991; Chambers, 2009). Theoretical tools from sociology of religion provide a rich lens for interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power suggest that religious actors such as temples and mathas leverage spiritual authority as a form of capital, enabling them to shape social structures and generate economic returns (IJCRT, 2024). Meanwhile, Max Weber's framework on the routinization of charisma illuminates how once spiritual manifestations can become institutionalized and bureaucratic under growing public visibility and media attention. Complementing these, Dean MacCannell's theory of staged authenticity posits that tourism often turns sacred rituals into performances tailored for outsiders seeking 'authentic experiences', thereby institutionalizing religious acts in service of consumption (MacCannell 1976). These frameworks collectively explain how ascetic communities may transform spiritual practices into staged cultural productions under economic pressures. Scholarly explorations of Varanasi and Hindu monastic traditions highlight the city's unique role as a sacred-tourist hub, where ancient practices confront modern market forces. Studies identify how urban restructuring and pilgrimage corridors have turned ghats and mathas into commoditized heritage spaces. Comparatively, research in Bodh Gaya reveals similar dynamics where Buddhist monastics adapt rituals and religious services to serve both pilgrims and global visitors. In European contexts, Christian monasteries offer spiritual retreats, guided tours, branded goods to maintain financial viability triggering parallel concerns about authenticity (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). These case studies demonstrate that, across diverse traditions, religious institutions are adopting hybrid models that balance devotion, heritage tourism and market-driven engagement. Despite extensive research on religious tourism a clear gap persists: empirical studies focusing on ascetic orders especially the Ramanandi Sampradaya, are rare. While the broader literature outlines general patterns of economic adaptation in Buddhist and Christian traditions, little is known about how Ramanandi Sadhus manage spiritual integrity, respond to tourist demand or employ symbolic capital within the context of Varanasi's sacred economy. Moreover, existing work tends to emphasize either macro-level heritage issues or micro-level ritual changes but seldom integrates both within a single sectarian framework. This study addresses that gap by drawing on original survey data and ethnographic insights offering a nuanced account of how a specific Vaishnav ascetic tradition negotiates authenticity, commodification and spiritual capital in the shadow of religious tourism.

III. Methodology

This study utilizes a mixed-method research design to explore how religious tourism in Kashi (Varanasi) affects the ascetic integrity and institutional practices of the Ramanandi Sampradaya. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research captures not only measurable patterns of transformation but also the nuanced experiences and perceptions of ascetic actors within a rapidly evolving religious economy. The mixed-method approach is particularly suited to studies of religious communities where both observable behaviours and internalized spiritual meanings are vital to understanding socio-cultural change. Primary data was collected through a combination of structured surveys and qualitative fieldwork conducted across selected Ramanandi mathas in urban Varanasi. The survey component involved responses from 160 Ramanandi ascetics, including senior monks, junior disciples and temple administrators. The surveys focused on themes like economic sustainability, tourism-related adaptations, religious authenticity, ritual change, attitudes toward modernization etc. In parallel to this ethnographic observation was employed in various mathas located in pilgrimage heavy areas such as Assi, Dashashwamedh, Panchganga Ghat and Sankat Mochan. Over several months, the researcher participated in temple rituals, devotional gatherings (bhajans, kirtans), public celebrations of major Vaishnav festivals like Ramleela, Hanuman Jayanti, Ram Navami etc. and informal discussions with ascetics. These immersive encounters provided insight into the day-to-day experiences of sadhus and their interactions with pilgrims, tourists, religious volunteers. To complement field data, the study draws on a wide range of secondary sources including scholarly publications, official reports from the Ministry of Tourism, government policy documents on religious infrastructure and tourism planning documents related to the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor and Smart City initiatives. Academic resources discussing religious tourism, sacred economies, urban transformation in sacred geographies were also reviewed to contextualize the findings within broader theoretical and comparative frameworks. In particular the studies focusing on religious commodification, digital adaptation in Hindu monasticism and heritage preservation in sacred cities like Bodh Gaya, Tirupati and Ayodhya were valuable in shaping the analytical lens of the present research. The sampling strategy employed in this study was purposive and criterion-based, selecting Ramanandi mathas that are located in areas experiencing high levels of pilgrimage activity and infrastructural development. Selection criteria included geographical accessibility, degree of public visibility and willingness of matha leaders to permit academic observation. The sample aimed to include both prominent, resource-rich mathas and smaller, lesser-known institutions in order to represent a spectrum of responses to tourism-induced change. Particular attention was paid to the diversity of leadership structures, the presence of female ascetics, the role of younger sadhus in public engagement and digital communication. Analytical methods consisted of both quantitative analysis of survey responses using descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis of field notes and interview transcripts. Thematic coding was conducted to identify recurring categories like 'commercial adaptation,' 'ritual preservation,' 'tourist interaction,' and 'digital outreach.' Cross-case comparisons among different mathas helped identify variations in adaptive strategies and levels of institutional openness to religious tourism. These findings were synthesized to interpret broader patterns in the negotiation between tradition and modernity in urban sacred life. Ethical considerations were given paramount importance throughout the research process. Given the religious sensitivity of ascetic life, all interactions with participants were conducted respectfully and with informed verbal consent. The identities of participants were anonymized to ensure privacy and no personal images or video recordings were taken without explicit permission. The researcher also observed codes of conduct within religious spaces, like wearing modest clothing, observing silence during rituals, refraining from any interference in devotional activities. By maintaining a respectful and non-intrusive presence the research upheld the spiritual integrity of the communities under study while generating empirically rich and ethically grounded insights.

The Urban Sacred Economy: Contextualizing Religious Tourism in Varanasi

Kashi (Varanasi), celebrated in classical Sanskrit texts as Ānandavana yet increasingly referenced in contemporary planning documents as India's 'spiritual capital,' occupies a rare position as a city whose cultural identity is simultaneously anchored in pilgrimage, heritage tourism, an expanding service economy and it is precisely this multidimensionality that shapes the urban sacred economy that frames Ramanandi ascetic life today. Since the early 2000s, state and local agencies most notably the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Board have re-imagined Varanasi as a "heritage city" within the federal Smart Cities Mission, channeling large-scale investments into riverfront rejuvenation, traffic de-congestion and digital surveillance in an effort to create a seamless pilgrimage experience that doubles as an attractive global tourism brand (MoHUA, 2021; Singh, 2004). The flagship Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor, inaugurated in 2021, exemplifies this approach: a 50,000-square-metre promenade linking the iconic Vishwanath temple to the Ghats has replaced dense residential lanes with marble plazas, LED way-finding systems, security checkpoints, souvenir arcades physical interventions that local planners hail as essential to crowd management yet that critics argue intensify the commodification of sacred space while displacing long-term residents and marginal shrines. Complementing corridor construction the Smart City project has installed river-facing

amphitheatres, synchronized lighting shows and digital information kiosks too at Dashashwamedh and Assi Ghats effectively transforming evening Ganga Ārati rituals into choreographed spectacles calibrated for smartphone cameras and foreign tour groups, thereby expanding the city's revenue base but simultaneously re-coding devotional practice into tourist performance. These urban interventions illustrate what scholars of cultural geography describe as sacred commodification the re-packaging of ritual, mythic landscape, ascetic persona into consumable experiences that generate revenue through entry fees, ritual tickets, curated 'heritage walks,' and livestreamed ceremonies with embedded donation links (Chakraborty, 2021). While the resulting economic influx has provided Ramanandi mathas with new streams of financial support donor apps, festival sponsorships and paid guided visits these same flows impose a 'double bind of authenticity,' in which ascetic custodians must visibly perform austerity to maintain spiritual legitimacy even as they adopt entrepreneurial strategies to survive in the tourist marketplace. The tension is palpable on the riverfront: saffron-clad sadhus chant Ram-Nam Japa for worshippers at dawn, retreat indoors to conduct fee-based blessings for international pilgrims by noon and appear again at dusk as part of the curated Ganga Ārati ensemble broadcast on global video platforms an oscillation between contemplative discipline and market-oriented visibility that mirrors Weber's notion of the routinization of charisma, whereby spontaneous religious charisma gradually yields to institutional structures shaped by economic calculation (Weber, 1978/2011). At the policy level, official statistics indicate that Varanasi received over seven million religious tourists in 2023 double the pre-pandemic figure fueling hotel construction, artisanal craft sales and an urban service ecosystem valued at nearly ₹7,400 crore (Uttar Pradesh Tourism Board, 2023). Yet this 'pilgrimage dividend' also triggers rising real-estate prices, noise pollution, ritual scheduling pressures that intrude upon the meditative rhythms of monastic life; many Ramanandi leaders report shortening fire sacrifices, limiting public discourse times and installing acoustic insulation in sanctum areas to mitigate the sonic spill-over from tourist crowds and riverfront concerts. Some mathas respond by establishing tiered ritual access free morning darshan for local devotees, donation-linked afternoon blessings for overseas visitors, private gated ceremonies for high-value patrons thus monetizing symbolic capital in a manner consonant with Bourdieu's insights on religious capital and its conversion into economic resources. Others resist outright refusing paid interactions and retreating to peripheral lanes where the tourist gaze is thinner, yet they too confront infrastructural encroachment as municipal road-widening projects and façade regulations reshape previously secluded lanes into pedestrian corridors. Consequently, Varanasi's sacred economy operates as a layered assemblage of ritual, commerce, statecraft etc. in which the same infrastructural projects that amplify devotional visibility simultaneously generate fresh anxieties about the erosion of spiritual authenticity, leaving Ramanandi mathas caught between the promise of financial sustainability and the peril of sacramental dilution.

**Economic Dependencies and Adaptive Responses of Ramanandi Mathas**

The economic transformation of Ramanandi mathas in Kashi reveals a shift from a traditional altruistic model of religious service to one increasingly characterized by structured income streams especially in response to rising tourist interactions. Historically, Ramanandi sadhus upheld the daana-based economy rooted in patronage by local kings, landlords, devotee households with material sustenance being incidental to spiritual service. Yet with the erosion of feudal and community endowments, mathas have adopted monetized practices including paid blessings, guided spiritual tours, structured darshan for tourists etc.

Economic Engagement of Ramanandi Mathas with Religious Tourists
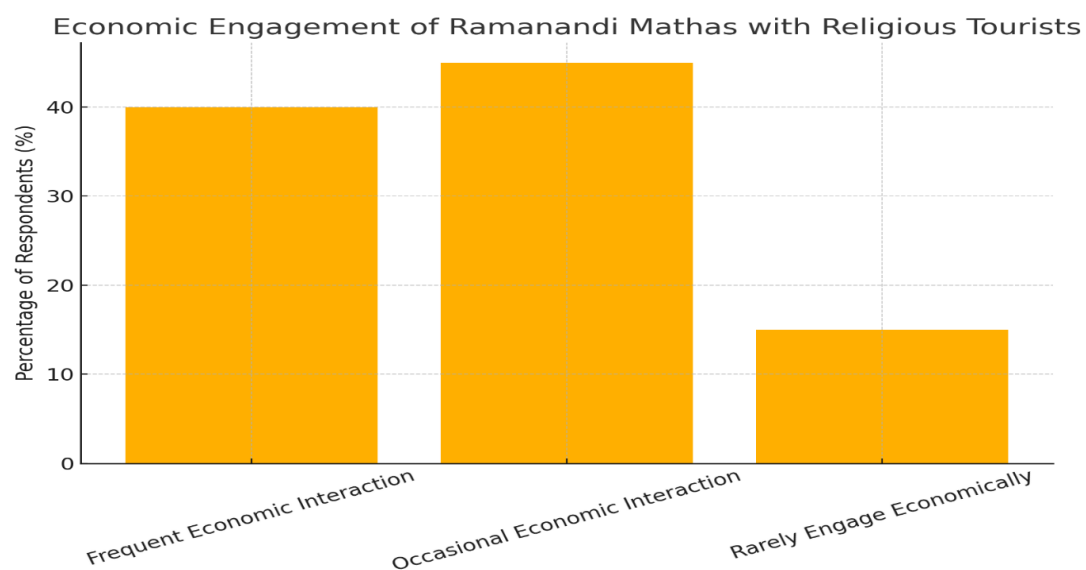
As graph above demonstrate, 40% of respondents reported engaging frequently with tourists for financial support, while 45% did so occasionally indicating that a substantial 85% of Ramanandi sadhus participate in tourism-related economic interactions. This shift challenges classical ascetic ideals that discourage material accumulation pushing monastic institutions into a hybrid role of devotional centers and economic actors in a city increasingly shaped by pilgrimage tourism. In adapting to this new reality many Ramanandi mathas have employed strategic innovations to stabilize their finances without openly compromising on their theological principles. For example mathas now organize structured events like Ramayana discourses and kirtans that align with tourist calendars ensuring maximum visibility during peak pilgrimage seasons such as Kartik Purnima, Ram Navami, Hanuman Jayanti. Moreover, religious merchandise including Tulsi malas, printed images of saints, miniature idols of Lord Rama, and booklets on Vaishnav theology are sold within matha premises. These activities reflect what scholars describe as a 'sacred economy' where devotional labour is not commodified in the market sense but is symbolically transacted through ritual services rendered for voluntary or structured donations (Chakraborty, 2021). This transformation, while financially beneficial has necessitated a reimagining of the sadhu's role from one of silent renunciant to public spiritual performer. Yet the increasing dependence on tourism-based income has provoked internal anxieties and ambivalence within the monastic community. According to field data, 65% of Ramanandi sadhus acknowledged that tourism imposes economic pressures which often conflict with the ideals of renunciation and detachment. Many express concern that the influx of visitors, especially those with limited understanding of ascetic traditions, transforms spiritual encounters into transactional experiences. Several older sadhus voiced discomfort with being asked to pose for photographs or provide ritual blessings on demand, while others questioned whether constant interaction with lay visitors compromises their inner discipline and focus on bhakti. There remains a parallel sentiment of pragmatism reflected in the fact that 75% of respondents viewed religious tourism as offering more opportunities than challenges. This indicates a growing realization that financial viability is essential to maintain monastic spaces especially in a rapidly urbanizing Varanasi where traditional landholdings are under threat and operational costs are rising. Thus, many mathas have developed internal policies distinguishing between core rituals (non-commercial) and optional interactions (donation-based) to retain spiritual integrity while navigating the demands of a pilgrimage economy. The overarching tension that emerges, then, is the delicate balance between devotion and performance where Ramanandi sadhus must both embody spiritual austerity and cater to a spiritually curious often consumer-oriented audience. The line between authentic religious expression and staged experience becomes increasingly blurred when rituals are timed for optimal tourist presence, chants are amplified through sound systems for large gatherings and festivals are promoted via social media. Some sadhus have embraced this visibility as a form of dharma yatra a way to expand Vaishnav teachings across the globe using contemporary platforms. Others worry that this shift risks undermining the sanctity of their practices by reducing them to attractions. In the midst of this duality, the Ramanandi Sampradaya has shown remarkable institutional adaptability experimenting with new economic models while preserving its theological core.

## Performing Authenticity: The Commodification of Ascetic Practices

In the context of religious tourism in Kashi (Varanasi), Ramanandi Sadhus increasingly find themselves navigating a dual identity one rooted in lived renunciation and another shaped by the expectations of a visually driven audience. Theoretical insights from Dean MacCannell's (1976) theory of staged authenticity help explain this shift wherein spiritual rituals originally intended for divine communion are reformulated as performative spectacles tailored for pilgrims, tourists, digital viewers. Rituals such as Ram Nam Japa, fire offerings (havan), and kirtans are now often scheduled during peak tourist hours amplified by sound systems and even recorded for online audiences. This transformation marks a subtle but profound shift from seclusion to visibility. Many Ramanandi sadhus now selectively perform austerity donning saffron robes, applying sacred marks (tilak), and chanting publicly not just for spiritual reasons but also to align with cultural expectations of what an 'authentic sadhu' should look like. While these gestures stem from real traditions, their repetitive and visualized presentation for external audiences often blurs the boundary between devotional sincerity and symbolic display. Several sadhus interviewed admitted that their routines change during pilgrimage seasons with increased public appearances, media interactions, even staged photo opportunities pointing toward a growing commodification of ascetic identity under the pressure of external consumption. The symbolic packaging of Ramanandi ascetics within the heritage economy of Varanasi is not just limited to behaviour but extends to the iconography and spatial aesthetics of monastic life. Tourists are often drawn to the visual cues of holiness saffron attire, matted hair (jata), kamandal (water pot), and ash-chandan-smeared foreheadse lements that serve as visual shorthand for spirituality in popular and media discourse. This has led to a phenomenon where sadhus themselves are treated as living heritage sites, akin to temples or ghats, worthy of documentation, display, even branding. As tourism becomes more structured and digitized, Ramanandi mathas are under increasing pressure to conform to visual and ritual expectations that may not always align with their original spiritual rhythm.

Ramanandi Sadhus' Views on Media and Cultural Representation
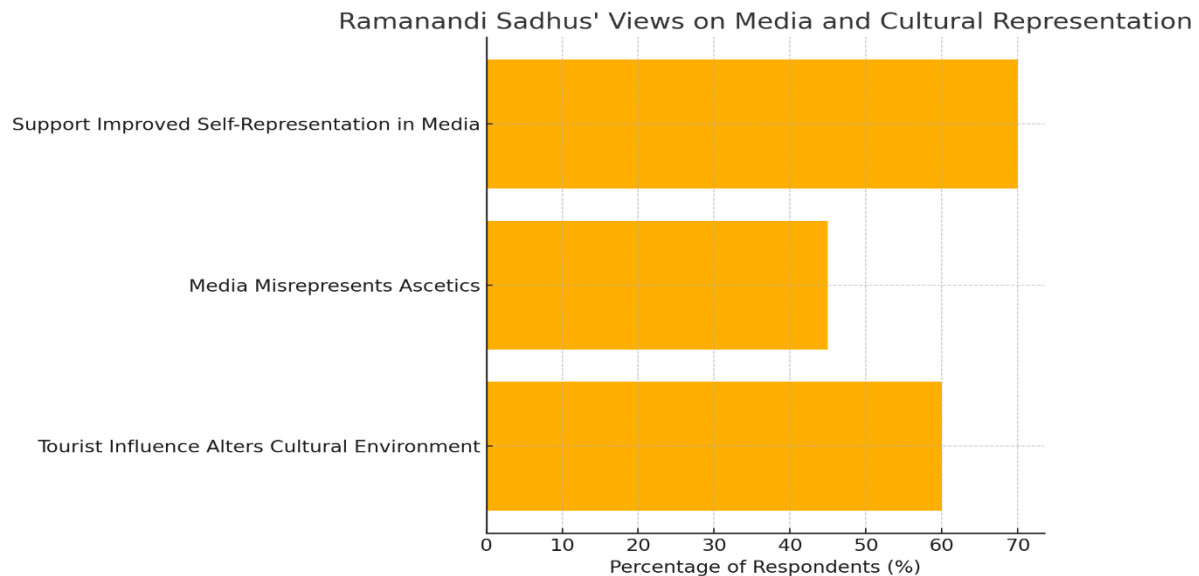
Survey data supports this shift: 60% of respondents acknowledged that tourist presence alters the cultural environment of their matha, while 45% felt that modern media misrepresents ascetics, often emphasizing sensational or superficial portrayals over philosophical depth or theological nuance. The tension becomes evident when rituals are abbreviated or stylized to suit photography or when monastic schedules are adjusted to accommodate tour itineraries. Further younger sadhus report greater awareness of how their appearances and rituals are consumed both physically by visiting tourists and digitally by global viewers highlighting the growing convergence between ritual authenticity and representational performance in the sacred economy. Despite the risks of commodification, a significant portion of Ramanandi ascetics have responded with agency and strategic adaptation, particularly in the realm of media representation. Rather than simply resisting external visibility, 70% of sadhus surveyed supported the idea of enhancing self-representation in media advocating for platforms where they can authentically communicate their traditions, philosophy and worldview too. This response reflects a growing consciousness among Ramanandis that control over narrative is essential not only to preserve their spiritual dignity but also to counter distorted media representations that often exoticize, politicize or trivialize ascetic life. Some mathas have begun producing their own YouTube channels, live-streaming rituals or collaborating with documentary filmmakers under negotiated terms. Others are organizing inter-matha digital dialogues to debate how sacred representation should be curated in the age of virtual spectatorship. This movement illustrates that far from being passive victims of tourist gaze, Ramanandi sadhus are increasingly reclaiming performative spaces to align ritual visibility with theological integrity. In doing so, they challenge the binary of commodified vs. authentic asceticism instead advancing a dynamic reconfiguration of spiritual identity within the realities of a digital and economically interdependent world.

Resilience and Resistance: Maintaining Ascetic Integrity Amidst Market Pressures

The Ramanandi Sampradaya of Vaishnav Sadhus, despite facing intensifying commercialization due to tourism and urbanization demonstrates varied modes of resilience and resistance in its efforts to preserve ascetic integrity. Certain mathas in Kashi have taken clear ethical stances against monetization, refusing financial interactions with pilgrims and tourists, even when such choices result in economic strain. These institutions operate through voluntary donations only, do not offer guided rituals for money and deliberately maintain a low profile during peak tourist seasons. Several sadhus from such mathas emphasized their commitment to 'nishkam seva' (selfless service) stating that financial transactions compromise the intent of spiritual exchange. These ascetics also reject camera or media presence during sacred ceremonies citing the sanctity of rituals as incompatible with public display. In some cases, signage outside the mathas requests visitors to refrain from photography or videography. These actions represent a symbolic defiance against the consumer gaze, reaffirming the ideal of renunciation. Through the maintenance of austere spaces and the promotion of free public services such as food distribution (anna-daan) and scripture recitation, these mathas exemplify a quiet yet firm resistance to the commodification of asceticism safeguarding the theological foundation of Ramanandi discipline.

Ramanandi Sadhus' Resilience, Adaptation, and Community Support
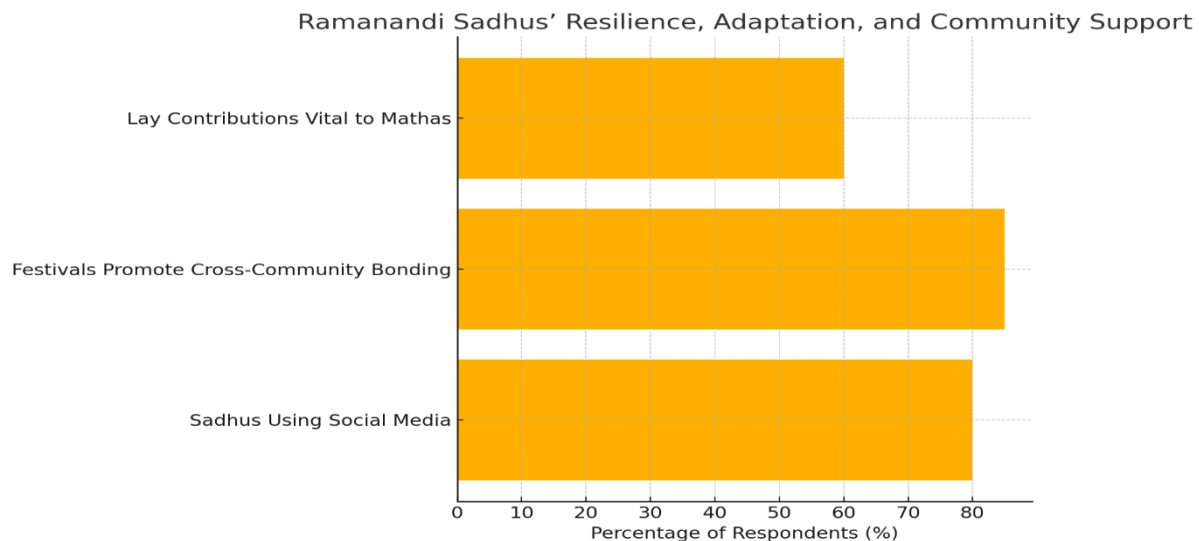
Simultaneously, the Ramanandi tradition exhibits a notable divergence in digital engagement reflecting two co-existing modes of adaptation and resistance. On one end of the spectrum are sadhus who entirely avoid social media viewing it as a distraction from spiritual discipline and an instrument of self-promotion rather than spiritual elevation. These ascetics prefer direct, in-person guru-shishya transmission emphasizing personal mentorship over virtual teachings. On the other hand, a growing number of Ramanandi leaders particularly younger sadhus have embraced digital tools for religious outreach. Survey findings show that 80% of respondents use social media to share their teachings, livestream rituals, promote festivals. Some have even established YouTube channels that host weekly discourses on the Ramcharitmanas, Bhakti saints or philosophical themes from Vishishtadvaita Vedanta. This digital adaptation, rather than being seen as a betrayal of tradition is often justified as an expansion of dharma in the digital age enabling global followers to access spiritual content from afar. What emerges is not a binary of purity vs. dilution but a spectrum of responses where sadhus either redefine the parameters of ascetic conduct in modern contexts or defend its classical boundaries through retreat and restriction. Both approaches though distinct are united by a shared commitment to preserving spiritual intent amidst structural transformation. Within the evolving Ramanandi discourse, the definition of asceticism itself is undergoing subtle yet significant reinterpretation. Rather than viewing financial self-sufficiency as antithetical to renunciation, many Ramanandi ascetics now argue that economic engagement is permissible if undertaken ethically and for communal benefit. This is supported by theological justifications rooted in the Bhakti tradition which emphasizes humility, service, intent over ritual purism. Sadhus involved in temple management, event organization and social media discourse often stress that these roles are extensions of their seva dharma not departures from it. As one senior Mahant explained, "Just as Hanuman served Shri Ram in the battlefield and the court so too must we serve dharma in the marketplace of the modern world." Such rationales enable mathas to negotiate financial sustainability while retaining doctrinal legitimacy. The ability to adapt without abandoning core values reflects a form of religious resilience that does not resist modernity outright but selectively integrates it to sustain sectarian identity and communal service. Community engagement further strengthens the Sampradaya's adaptive capacity. Survey data reveals that 85% of sadhus perceive festivals as effective tools for cross-community bonding, suggesting that public religious events are seen not merely as spiritual observances but as social platforms that promote inclusivity and mutual recognition. Events like Ram Navami, Diwali, Hanuman Jayanti now serve as key nodes for social cohesion attracting devotees from diverse castes and classes into shared spiritual space. Moreover, lay devotees play an increasingly vital role with 60% of mathas depending significantly on their contributions whether through monetary donations, volunteering or logistical support. This reliance on community sustenance replaces the older model of kingly patronage and reinforces a more democratic form of religious life. By cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship between ascetics and lay participants, the Ramanandi Sampradaya transforms potential vulnerabilities into collective strengths. Rather than collapsing under market pressure, the tradition reorients itself as a spiritually grounded, socially connected, economically adaptive institution a testament to its resilience in the face of modernity's challenges.

Gender, Tourism, and Institutional Hierarchies

The intersection of gender, tourism and religious institutions within the Ramanandi Sampradaya reveals deep-rooted hierarchies that continue to shape the visibility, recognition, participation etc. of women ascetics, mainly in Varanasi's increasingly touristic religious landscape. Despite the inclusive roots of the Bhakti tradition contemporary data suggest that female ascetics remain underrepresented in key religious functions and public

performances. According to the field survey, only 35% of respondents confirmed that female ascetics actively participate in rituals and mentoring, while a mere 30% believed that women are given enough opportunities within the broader monastic community. These statistics point to both structural exclusion and cultural hesitation regarding women's leadership in religious spaces that are frequently shaped by male-dominated hierarchies. The situation becomes more complex when overlaid with the tourist gaze which tends to prioritize stereotypical images of asceticism typically embodied by saffron-clad male sadhus with ash-chandan-smeared bodies and long beards rendering female spiritual practitioners invisible or marginal within the curated visual culture of pilgrimage tourism. This gendered aesthetic is further reproduced by media representations that rarely feature female Ramanandi leaders or depict them in secondary roles, thereby reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about spiritual authority.

Representation and Inclusion of Women Ascetics in the Ramanandi Tradition
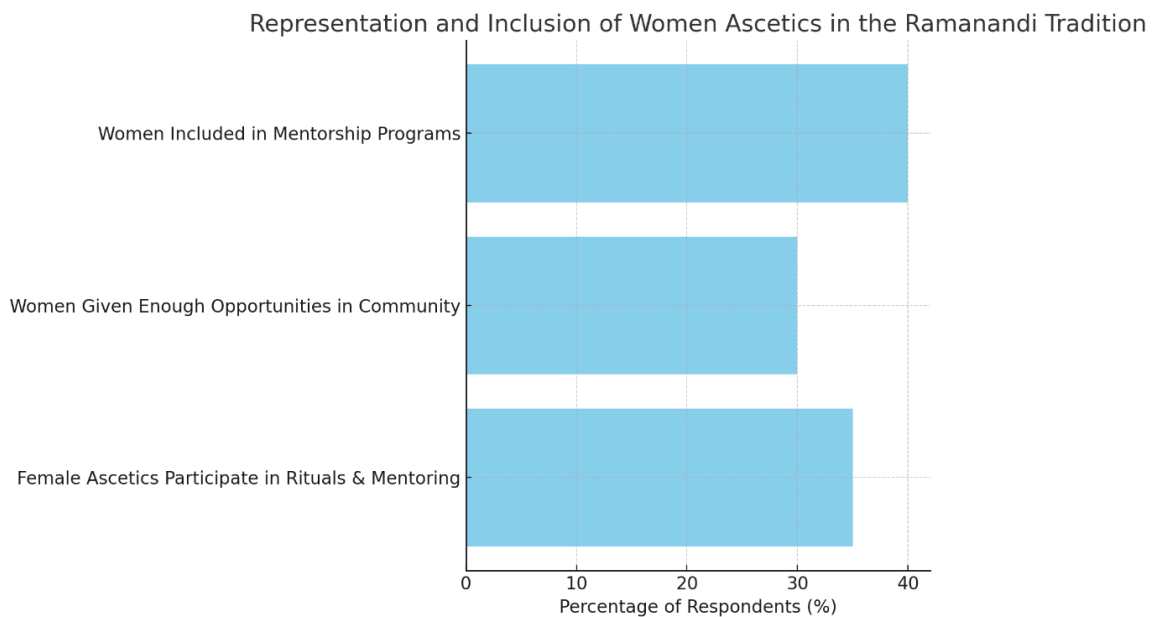
The tourist economy of sacred display which thrives on visual authenticity often sidelines women from the frontlines of ritual performance reducing their presence to support roles in festivals, kitchens or peripheral devotional services. Notably, only 40% of respondents agreed that women were included in mentorship programs highlighting the continued marginalization of female ascetics in institutional knowledge transmission and doctrinal authority. These findings underscore the urgent need to reimagine spiritual tourism through an inclusive lens, one that recognizes and promotes the contributions of women ascetics not as auxiliaries but as spiritual agents in their own right. This could involve the intentional representation of female sadhvis in public rituals, inclusion in temple-led guided tours or support for digital platforms that amplify their theological voices. The formation of women-led Ramanandi mathas or nari akharas as seen in small but significant examples across Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh offers a possible pathway for reclaiming gendered spaces within Hindu monasticism. In the end we can say that a more equitable future for the Ramanandi Sampradaya will depend not only on theological reform but on reshaping the institutional optics of religion and tourism, so that women's asceticism is not merely accommodated but fully integrated into the sacred public sphere.

IV.   Discussion

The interplay between commercialization and spiritual continuity within the Ramanandi Sampradaya in Varanasi illustrates a dynamic and often ambivalent relationship between tradition and transformation where market forces and sacred commitments intersect in increasingly visible ways. As religious tourism intensifies in Kashi, monastic institutions such as Ramanandi mathas are compelled to engage with commercial logics ritual donations, guided spiritual services, merchandise, digital monetization that were traditionally viewed as inconsistent with the ideals of ascetic renunciation. Yet rather than yielding to secularization or identity loss Ramanandi ascetics demonstrate a form of reflexive adaptability, reinterpreting sacred duties in light of contemporary challenges while still anchoring themselves in devotional frameworks like maryada bhakti, guru-shishya lineage and scriptural authority. This adaptability reflects not a dilution but a strategic transformation of ascetic identity allowing sadhus to remain relevant in a rapidly shifting spiritual economy. The ongoing negotiations between ritual purity and performative visibility between economic necessity and theological integrity reveal that ascetic authenticity is no longer a static ideal rooted solely in withdrawal and austerity but an

evolving construct shaped by context, audience and institutional purpose. For many Ramanandi leaders, authenticity now includes public engagement, digital outreach, pedagogical presence, thereby expanding the field of legitimate ascetic action beyond the cloistered matha. At the same time, religious tourism itself plays an increasingly crucial role in sectarian identity formation, providing a platform through which Ramanandi institutions assert their historical continuity, differentiate themselves from other Vaishnav currents and compete symbolically for visibility in the sacred marketplace of Kashi. Pilgrimage events, digital broadcasts of festivals and heritage branding offer new avenues for sectarian consolidation enabling mathas to reaffirm their place in the religious landscape not only through theology but through spatial, economic, cultural performance. This discussion underscores the need to conceptualize Ramanandi asceticism not as a relic of premodern religiosity but as a resilient, adaptive tradition negotiating modernity through a complex matrix of sacred labour, social responsibility and spiritual representation.

V. Conclusion

This paper has explored the complex and evolving relationship between religious tourism and ascetic integrity in Kashi through the lens of the Ramanandi Sampradaya, one of the largest and most influential Vaishnav ascetic orders in India. The findings reveal that tourism functions both as an enabler and a disruptor in the sacred economy of Kashi. On the one hand, it offers crucial economic support, increased visibility, expanded platforms for public engagement and theological outreach. On the other, it imposes subtle pressures on ritual rhythm, spiritual autonomy and the traditional ideals of renunciation. Practices such as paid blessings, curated rituals, merchandise sales, and digital outreach reflect a growing monetization of sacred labour yet they also showcase the sadhus' ability to strategically reshape monastic life without entirely abandoning foundational values. Thus, while tourism introduces commodifying tendencies, it also enables creative reinterpretations of dharma allowing Ramanandi institutions to survive and evolve in a competitive and media-driven spiritual market. Importantly, the Ramanandi Sampradaya is not a passive recipient of change but an active negotiator of modern religious life. The study documents significant internal differentiation ranging from traditional mathas resisting monetization and media visibility, to digitally-savvy sadhus redefining asceticism through online engagement and community outreach. Female ascetics, though underrepresented, are gradually asserting presence in both ritual spaces and spiritual leadership challenging the male-dominated institutional structures. Similar to this the Sampradaya's emphasis on community festivals, inclusive pedagogy, lay participation reflects a shift toward democratized religiosity in which devotion, service and public interaction coalesce to sustain sectarian relevance. Given the dual pressures of spiritual preservation and economic adaptation, this study suggests several policy interventions. First, the government should establish guidelines for ethical religious tourism ensuring that commercialization does not undermine sacred space or silence local voices. Tourism boards should collaborate with mathas leadership in developing culturally sensitive tour circuits that respect religious autonomy. Second, there is a need to protect spiritual autonomy through the legal recognition of ascetic institutions' rights over ritual management, land, internal governance especially in the context of urban development projects like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor. Finally, this research opens important avenues for future inquiry. A comparative study across different Hindu sects like Shaiva, Shakta and Advaita traditions can reveal how varied ascetic orders negotiate tourism, identity, modernity etc. in distinct ways. Moreover, a longitudinal ethnographic study examining the long-term impact of tourism on ritual practices, theological discourses and organizational structures of Ramanandi mathas will enrich our understanding of how tradition endures and innovates over time. Finally this study positions the Ramanandi Sampradaya not as a relic of premodern religiosity but as a resilient, reflexive tradition adept at balancing the tensions of sacred continuity and worldly change in the era of religious tourism.

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