

Pilgrimage Economy and Rural Socio-Economic Change: Evidence from Tikarmafi, Uttar Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Religious pilgrimage is simultaneously a spiritual practice, a form of mobility, a site of social interaction, and a localised economic process. Yet the socio-economic dynamics of small rural pilgrimage centres remain less visible than those of large pilgrimage cities. This study examines the relationship between pilgrimage, visitor expenditure and the local socio-economic role of the Shreemat Paramhans Ashram in Tikarmafi, Amethi, Uttar Pradesh. The study uses a cross-sectional case-study design and primary survey data from 100 pilgrims. Descriptive statistics examine gender, age, occupation, and expenditure patterns, while Pearson's chi-square test assesses the association between occupational category and expenditure category. Men constituted 70% of respondents and women 30%; the largest age group was 31–40 years (36%). Expenditure was concentrated in the lower categories: 44% spent INR 51–100 and 33% spent below INR 50, while 7% spent INR 150 or more. The reported Pearson chi-square statistic was $\chi^2(15) = 23.706$, $p = .070$, indicating that the null hypothesis of independence was not rejected at the 5% level. Cramér's V was approximately .281, although sparse expected frequencies limit the reliability of the asymptotic test. The findings suggest that the local significance of pilgrimage may depend less on high individual spending than on repeated visitor flows, periodic fairs and the circulation of small transactions through local markets. The article develops a rural pilgrimage-economy perspective and discusses implications for sanitation, vendor organisation, affordable accommodation, cultural preservation and community participation.

1. Introduction

Pilgrimage occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of religion, mobility, social relations and economic exchange. A pilgrimage journey is not reducible to tourism because its meaning is often embedded in faith, ritual obligation, sacred geography, memory and community. At the same time, pilgrims' movement creates material demand. Visitors require transport, food, flowers, ritual commodities, accommodation and other services, while local residents may respond through petty trade, seasonal vending, household production and temporary employment. The resulting economy is therefore dispersed across formal and informal activities rather than concentrated in a single commercial sector.

The sociological significance of pilgrimage lies partly in this combination of sacred meaning and material circulation. Pilgrimage brings people into a shared social space where religious institutions, households, vendors, transport providers, and visitors interact. The sacred site may consequently function as a node connecting ritual practices with everyday economic life. Shinde (2011), for example, demonstrates that religious institutions and charitable trusts can play an active role in sustaining pilgrimage-related activity in India. Shinde (2012) further emphasises the importance of policy, planning and management in shaping the functioning of Indian pilgrimage sites. More recent work has extended the analysis toward spatial and entrepreneurial dimensions. Singh (2025) shows how continuous pilgrim flows can interact with state strategies, markets and citizen practices to transform the built environment of Mathura-Vrindavan, while Shinde (2026) highlights the role of informal micro-enterprises and embedded social relations in contemporary Indian temple-town economies.

Much of the visible literature and policy discussion, however, concerns large and well-known pilgrimage destinations. Village-level and semi-rural sacred centres may operate through a different economic mechanism. A shopkeeper may serve pilgrims as well as local residents; a farmer may sell agricultural produce during a religious gathering; a household may prepare food or ritual goods; and transport providers may obtain additional income during periods of intensified visitation. These activities can diversify livelihoods without producing a large formal tourism sector. At the same time, visitor-flow benefits are unlikely to be distributed automatically. Access to capital, commercial space, family networks, mobility, skills and institutional connections can shape who participates and who captures economic value.

The developmental implications of pilgrimage therefore require attention to both opportunities and constraints. Visitor flows can stimulate demand for local goods and services and can create reasons to improve roads, sanitation, water supply, parking and public amenities. Yet poorly managed concentration of visitors can also generate congestion, waste, pressure on sanitation and competition over commercial space. UNWTO (2013) frames spiritual tourism within a broader sustainability approach that links cultural, social, environmental and economic considerations. The question is thus not simply whether visitor numbers increase, but how pilgrimage-related activity is organised, who benefits, what costs are generated, and whether economic value remains within the local community.

The present study examines these questions through the case of Tikarmafi in Amethi district, Uttar Pradesh, with particular attention to the Shreemat Paramhans Ashram. The study shifts the analytical focus from a large pilgrimage city to a village-level sacred centre. The empirical component asks how pilgrims are distributed by demographic and occupational characteristics, how much they report spending, and whether occupational category is statistically associated with expenditure category. Around this quantitative question, the article considers the wider institutional and socio-economic role of the Ashram, including religious gatherings, education, the Gaushala, periodic fairs and local commerce.

The study makes three contributions. First, it treats pilgrimage as a localized socio-economic process rather than merely as a tourism flow. Second, it connects visitor-level expenditure with the broader livelihood environment of a rural settlement. Third, it distinguishes individual transaction value from aggregate local economic significance. A visitor may spend only a small amount, yet repeated visits by many people can generate a cumulative stream of small transactions. This distinction is especially relevant to rural economies in which informal markets, periodic fairs and household-based economic activities remain important.

The remainder of the article develops the conceptual framework, describes the study setting and methodology, presents the survey findings, interprets the occupation–expenditure relationship, discusses the implications for rural development and concludes with limitations and directions for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Pilgrimage, mobility and sacred space

Pilgrimage is a form of movement in which the destination acquires meaning through religious belief, ritual practice and collective memory. The classic anthropological literature on pilgrimage emphasises the social and symbolic dimensions of movement, including temporary separation from everyday routines and the creation of distinctive social relations (Turner and Turner 1978). Later scholarship has questioned a strict separation between pilgrimage and tourism, drawing attention to the ways in which sacred journeys can combine devotional purposes with cultural, social and recreational experiences (Coleman and Eade 2004; Timothy and Olsen 2006). For sociology, this convergence is important because it allows pilgrimage to be examined simultaneously as a religious practice and as a process that reorganises social interaction around particular places.

Sacred places are not static containers of religious activity. They are produced and reproduced through the movement of people, ritual practices, institutions, markets and infrastructure. Singh (2025), in the case of Mathura-Vrindavan, shows how continuous pilgrim flows interact with state branding, investment and citizen practices to produce new spatial and economic configurations. This urban case is analytically relevant to the present rural study even though the scale differs: in both settings, visitor mobility creates demand that interacts with existing institutions and local economic practices.

2.2 Religious institutions and local economic circulation

Religious institutions can have roles that extend beyond worship. They may provide education, charity, accommodation, social services, cultural transmission and spaces for periodic markets or fairs. Shinde (2011) demonstrates that charitable trusts can actively support the functioning of pilgrimage economies, while Shinde (2012) draws attention to the planning and management dimensions of religious tourism. The implication is that pilgrimage economies cannot be understood through visitor expenditure alone. Institutional arrangements influence the capacity of a sacred site to attract visitors, provide services and connect pilgrimage activity with local communities.

At the village scale, these institutional linkages may be especially important because the distinction between religious and everyday social infrastructure is often less pronounced. A religious gathering can simultaneously be a social occasion, a market event and a cultural performance. A school or charitable activity associated with a sacred institution may contribute to local human development even when it has no direct connection with visitor spending. In this sense, the pilgrimage economy includes direct transactions as well as indirect institutional and social effects.

2.3 Informality, entrepreneurship and uneven benefits

Recent research on Indian temple-town economies emphasises the importance of informal micro-enterprises, including religious retail, food services, accommodation, street vending and ritual-linked businesses. Shinde (2026) argues that such enterprises are sustained by embedded social and religious relations and that high visitor numbers do not automatically translate into inclusive prosperity. Returns can differ according to access to premises, family networks, supply chains, finance and symbolic or

ritual capital. This perspective is useful for interpreting Tikarmafi because the survey records pilgrim expenditure but does not directly measure vendor income or the distribution of economic benefits.

The distinction between expenditure and local development is therefore crucial. Expenditure represents visitor participation in the market; it does not by itself establish how much value remains locally, which groups capture it, or whether the resulting income is stable. A small expenditure may be repeated frequently and therefore become meaningful for local sellers. Conversely, a high expenditure may leak out of the village if goods and services are purchased from external suppliers. The concept of local economic circulation is consequently more appropriate than a simple assumption that visitor expenditure equals local development.

2.4 Sustainability and community participation

Sustainable pilgrimage development requires attention to infrastructure, cultural continuity, environmental management and community participation. UNWTO (2013) emphasises the need to integrate living culture, traditions and beliefs with social, economic and environmental sustainability. UNESCO's work on heritage and local communities similarly stresses that community-based activities can connect cultural resources with livelihoods while preserving the character of living cultural landscapes.

Recent evidence from major Indian pilgrimage centres also illustrates the tension between growth and management. Yadav et al. (2024) document land-use and morphological transformation associated with the Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj. Singh (2025) identifies traffic congestion, unplanned growth and pressure on civic amenities as challenges associated with rapidly expanding pilgrimage flows in Mathura-Vrindavan. These large-scale examples should not be transferred directly to Tikarmafi; rather, they establish a broader analytical principle: pilgrimage-related development must be evaluated in relation to the capacity of local institutions and infrastructure.

2.5 Research gap

Three gaps motivate the present study. First, village-level pilgrimage economies remain less visible than large pilgrimage cities and mega-events. Second, existing discussions often emphasise visitor growth or tourism infrastructure without connecting visitor-level expenditure patterns to rural livelihood structures. Third, there is limited site-specific evidence from small sacred centres in Uttar Pradesh that examines the socioeconomic profile of pilgrims alongside an explicit statistical test of occupational differences in expenditure.

This study does not claim that a sample of 100 pilgrims can establish the economic impact of pilgrimage for the entire district or state. Instead, it provides a micro-level empirical case through which the relationship between pilgrim characteristics, expenditure and local economic context can be examined. The study is therefore exploratory and sociological rather than a full economic-impact assessment.

3. Conceptual framework

3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework combines four ideas: religious mobility, visitor demand, local economic circulation and rural livelihood diversification. Religious mobility brings visitors into a particular social and spatial setting. Their presence creates demand for goods and services. Local households, vendors and service providers respond through existing or newly developed livelihood activities. The resulting effects depend on visitation frequency, length of stay, expenditure composition, local supply capacity, and the extent to which expenditure remains in the local economy.

The framework can be represented as:

Pilgrim mobility → visitor demand → local transactions → livelihood opportunities → social and infrastructural effects

This sequence is analytical rather than a tested causal model. The present survey measures pilgrim characteristics and expenditure; it does not directly estimate local household income, employment multipliers or economic leakage. The broader institutional role of the Ashram is therefore interpreted contextually rather than presented as a quantified causal effect.

Five analytical dimensions are used. The first is the pilgrim profile, measured through gender, age and occupation. The second is visitor demand, represented by expenditure category. The third is market linkage, represented contextually by food, flowers, ritual goods, transport and fair-related purchases. The fourth is institutional role, represented by the Ashram, educational activities, the Gaushala, religious gatherings and the annual fair. The fifth is development conditions, particularly accommodation, sanitation, parking and market organisation.

This framework also helps distinguish two levels of analysis. At the micro level, the article examines the expenditure of individual pilgrims. At the meso level, it considers how repeated visitor flows interact with local institutions and markets. The article does not make a macroeconomic claim about Amethi district or Uttar Pradesh.

4. Study area and institutional context

4. Study area and institutional context

Tikarmafi is located in Amethi district of Uttar Pradesh. The supplied study material places the site approximately 95 km south of Ayodhya. The empirical focus is the Shreemat Paramhans Ashram, which the source material associates with the memory of Swami Paramhans Maharaj Ji (1848–1947). The Ashram is described not only as a place of worship but also as a religious, educational, cultural and social institution.

The institutional context matters because it broadens the meaning of the pilgrimage economy. The Adarsh Pathshala, a Sanskrit educational institution established in 1930, represents an educational function. The public Gaushala represents a community-oriented activity. Religious gatherings and the annual fair provide periodic opportunities for social interaction and economic exchange. These activities create a setting in which religious, educational and local social functions overlap.

The pilgrimage economy also has a temporal structure. According to the supplied study description, weekly Tuesday gatherings attract approximately 200–300 devotees, while the annual pre-Holi mela creates a substantially larger temporary concentration of visitors, vendors, transport providers and other participants. This distinction matters because regular visitation and festival visitation may generate different economic patterns. Weekly gatherings can support repeated small-scale commerce, whereas an annual fair can generate short-term increases in demand and temporary employment.

The study also identifies the nearby BBAU Satellite Centre as part of the local institutional environment. The original interpretation is that the coexistence of an educational institution and a pilgrimage centre creates overlapping forms of local demand: routine demand associated with students and staff and periodic demand associated with pilgrims. This should be understood as a contextual proposition rather than a separately tested causal relationship.

The study reports an estimated study-area size of 140.67 km² and a population of 83,995, but notes that some geographic coordinates and demographic indicators were incomplete. Those missing fields are not reconstructed in this article.

5. Methods

5. Methods

5.1 Research design and study population

The study uses a cross-sectional empirical case-study design based on a primary survey of 100 pilgrims visiting the Shreemat Paramhans Ashram and associated gathering and fair spaces. The source manuscript describes the respondents as selected using simple random sampling and the instrument as a structured questionnaire. Because the study is restricted to one pilgrimage centre and the sampling frame is not documented in sufficient detail to establish district- or state-level representativeness, the findings are interpreted as site-specific rather than representative of all pilgrims visiting Amethi or Uttar Pradesh.

The unit of analysis is the individual pilgrim respondent. The descriptive component examines gender, age and occupation. The inferential component examines whether occupational category is statistically associated with expenditure category.

5.2 Variables and measurement

Occupational category is classified into six groups: government job, private job, self-business, wage earner, agriculture and unemployed/housemaker. Expenditure is classified into four categories: below INR 50, INR 51–100, INR 101–150 and INR 150 or above. Gender and age are used as descriptive variables.

The expenditure measure should be interpreted as reported expenditure during the pilgrimage visit covered by the survey. It is not a measure of annual religious expenditure or household consumption. The dataset does not contain sufficiently detailed item-level information to estimate expenditure on food, transport, ritual goods, accommodation and other commodities separately.

5.3 Statistical analysis

Frequency and percentage distributions were used for descriptive analysis. The association between occupation and expenditure was assessed using Pearson's chi-square test of independence. For an $r \times c$ contingency table, the expected frequency is:

$$E_{ij} = (R_i \times C_j) / N$$

and the Pearson statistic is:

$$\chi^2 = \sum (O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2 / E_{ij}$$

With six occupational categories and four expenditure categories, the degrees of freedom are $(6 - 1)(4 - 1) = 15$.

The supplied cross-tabulation yields $\chi^2 = 23.7057$, $p = .0703$ and $df = 15$ when Pearson's test is calculated without continuity correction. These values correspond closely to the reported $\chi^2(15) = 23.706$, $p = .070$. Cramér's V is calculated as:

$$V = \sqrt{[\chi^2 / (N \times \min(r - 1, c - 1))]}$$

which gives $V \approx .281$.

The effect-size estimate is presented descriptively and should not be interpreted as proof of a statistically significant association. Importantly, several expected cell frequencies are small; the minimum expected frequency is below 1 and many expected frequencies are below 5. Consequently, the asymptotic Pearson chi-square approximation is a methodological limitation. The result is treated as exploratory. A larger study should consider an exact or Monte Carlo test and, where theoretically justified, carefully planned category consolidation.

5.4 Ethical considerations and data transparency

The study surveyed 100 pilgrims in Tikarmafi, Amethi, Uttar Pradesh. We obtained oral informed consent from all participants before data collection. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, we anonymised responses and removed identifying information. In accordance with the institution's rules,

no formal approval from an institutional ethics committee or an ethics waiver was obtained for this study. Because the survey involves human participants, we ensure that the dataset and any supplementary material do not disclose personally identifiable information.

5.5 Use of AI-assisted tools

During preparation of the manuscript, an AI-assisted language and writing tool was used for restructuring, language refinement and editorial assistance. The authors remain responsible for the accuracy of the data, interpretation, citations, ethical statements and final manuscript. No respondent, measurement or statistical observation has been added through AI generation; the empirical results reported here are based on the supplied study dataset.

6. Results

6.1 Gender profile

Of the 100 respondents, 70 were male and 30 were female. Men therefore constituted 70% of the survey sample, while women constituted 30%. The distribution indicates a male predominance among respondents, although it should not be interpreted as evidence that pilgrimage participation at the Ashram is inherently male-dominated because the study does not provide a population-level gender distribution of all visitors. (Table 1; Fig. 1)

The source field notes indicate that some women classified as homemakers or non-earning household members nevertheless participated actively in decisions concerning household and religious purchases. This observation is sociologically relevant because economic participation cannot be equated mechanically with individual cash income. Household consumption and pilgrimage-related purchasing may involve people who are not classified as primary earners.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 Gender distribution of surveyed pilgrims		
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	70	70.0
Female	30	30.0
Total	100	100.0

[Insert Fig. 1 about here]

Figure 1 Gender distribution of surveyed pilgrims

6.2 Age profile

Respondents were distributed across four age groups. The largest category was 31–40 years, with 36 respondents (36%). This was followed by 18–30 years with 28 respondents (28%), 41–50 years with 24 respondents (24%), and respondents above 50 years with 12 respondents (12%). Thus, the survey includes participants across the adult life course rather than being concentrated exclusively among older pilgrims. (Table 2; Fig. 2)

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Table 2
Age distribution of surveyed pilgrims

Age group	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
18–30	28	28.0	28.0
31–40	36	36.0	64.0
41–50	24	24.0	88.0
Above 50	12	12.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0

[Insert Fig. 2 about here]

Figure 2 Age distribution of surveyed pilgrims

6.3 Occupational structure

Self-business was the largest occupational category, accounting for 30% of respondents. Unemployed/housemaker respondents constituted 22%, private employees 19%, government employees 11%, agricultural respondents 11%, and wage earners 7%. The occupational profile therefore contains both formal and informal livelihood positions. This heterogeneity provides a basis for examining whether expenditure categories differ systematically across socioeconomic positions. However, occupation is only a proxy for socioeconomic position in the present dataset. Direct income, household wealth and expenditure capacity were not measured. (Table 3)

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Table 3
Occupational distribution of respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Government job	11	11.0
Private job	19	19.0
Self-business	30	30.0
Wage earner	7	7.0
Agriculture	11	11.0
Unemployed/Housemaker	22	22.0
Total	100	100.0

6.4 Expenditure distribution

The expenditure distribution is concentrated in the lower two categories. Forty-four respondents (44%) reported spending INR 51–100, while 33 respondents (33%) reported spending below INR 50. Sixteen respondents (16%) reported spending INR 101–150 and seven (7%) reported spending INR 150 or more. In aggregate, 77% of respondents therefore reported expenditure of INR 100 or less. This pattern is important for interpreting the economic role of the site. It suggests that the local pilgrimage economy cannot be understood primarily through high-value individual transactions. Its potential significance may instead arise from repeated visitation and the cumulative circulation of many small purchases. (Table 4; Fig. 3)

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Table 4
Distribution of pilgrim expenditure

Expenditure category	Frequency	Percentage
Below INR 50	33	33.0
INR 51–100	44	44.0
INR 101–150	16	16.0
INR 150 or above	7	7.0
Total	100	100.0

[Insert Fig. 3 about here]

Figure 3 Pilgrim expenditure distribution

6.5 Occupation and expenditure

The cross-tabulation indicates that low-to-moderate expenditure occurs across all occupational groups. Government employees were concentrated in the INR 51–100 category, with 8 of 11 respondents in that bracket. Private employees also had their largest count in INR 51–100, with 10 of 19 respondents. Self-business respondents were divided mainly between below INR 50 (13 respondents) and INR 51–100 (11 respondents). Wage earners were concentrated below INR 50, with 5 of 7 respondents. Agricultural respondents were most concentrated in INR 51–100, with 5 of 11 respondents. Among unemployed/housemaker respondents, 8 of 22 reported INR 51–100, while 5 each reported below INR 50 and INR 101–150. (Table 5; Fig. 4)

[Insert Table 5 about here]

Table 5

Occupation by expenditure category

Occupation	Below INR 50	INR 51–100	INR 101–150	INR 150+	Total
Government job	1	8	0	2	11
Private job	6	10	3	0	19
Self-business	13	11	5	1	30
Wage earner	5	2	0	0	7
Agriculture	3	5	3	0	11
Unemployed/Housemaker	5	8	5	4	22
Total	33	44	16	7	100

[Insert Fig. 4 about here]

Figure 4 Observed-frequency heat map of occupational category by expenditure level

The table suggests some descriptive differences between occupational categories, but the distributions do not form a simple socioeconomic gradient in which higher-status occupations consistently correspond to higher expenditure.

6.6 Chi-square test

The Pearson chi-square statistic is $\chi^2(15) = 23.706$, $p=.070$. At the conventional $\alpha = .05$ threshold, the null hypothesis is not rejected. The result therefore does not provide sufficient statistical evidence to establish a conventional 5% significance-level association between occupation and expenditure in this sample. (Table 6)

The correct interpretation is not that occupation has no relationship with expenditure in an absolute sense. Rather, the sample and the reported test do not provide sufficient evidence to reject the independence hypothesis at the specified significance level. The derived Cramér’s V of approximately

.281 provides a descriptive indication of the magnitude of the observed association, but it should be interpreted cautiously because the contingency table is sparse.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

Table 6	
Pearson chi-square results	
Statistic	Value
Pearson χ^2	23.706
Degrees of freedom	15
p-value (two-sided)	.070
Sample size	100
Cramér's V	.281

The sparse expected-frequency structure is a major limitation. Because several expected frequencies are below 5, the reliability of the asymptotic Pearson approximation is reduced. A larger sample and an exact or Monte Carlo procedure would provide a stronger basis for inference.

7. Discussion

7. Discussion

The findings provide a more nuanced picture of a rural pilgrimage economy than an assumption that occupational status necessarily determines pilgrimage expenditure. The survey is dominated by low and moderate spending: 77% of respondents reported expenditure of INR 100 or less. This pattern is compatible with a setting in which pilgrimage consumption is primarily associated with modest purchases such as ritual offerings, flowers, food, local transport and other small transactions. Because the study does not record item-level expenditure, these categories should be understood as contextual interpretations rather than quantified expenditure shares.

The distinction between transaction size and transaction frequency is particularly important. In a village-level pilgrimage centre, a visitor who spends INR 50 or INR 100 may contribute only a small amount in a single transaction. However, if hundreds of visitors attend regular gatherings and substantially larger numbers participate in an annual fair, repeated transactions can produce a cumulative economic stream. The economic role of pilgrimage is consequently better conceptualised through local circulation and recurrence than through the spending of a typical individual visitor alone.

This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on Indian religious tourism. Shinde (2011) shows that religious institutions and charitable trusts can help sustain pilgrimage activity, while Shinde (2012) emphasises the importance of planning and management. Recent research also points to the

importance of informal entrepreneurship. Shinde (2026) demonstrates that temple-town economies contain dense networks of small enterprises and that the distribution of benefits depends on access to commercial premises, supply chains, finance and embedded social relationships. Tikarmafi appears to fit this broader analytical pattern at a much smaller scale, although the present study does not directly measure vendor income or enterprise performance.

The non-significant occupation–expenditure association is also sociologically informative. One possible interpretation is that pilgrimage spending is influenced by ritual purpose and standardised forms of consumption in addition to occupational income. A government employee, self-employed visitor, farmer or wage earner may make relatively similar small purchases if the primary purpose of the visit is devotional. Such an interpretation is plausible but remains a proposition rather than a tested causal explanation because the survey did not measure income, distance travelled, visit frequency, purpose of visit, duration of stay or item-level expenditure.

The temporal character of Tikarmafi's pilgrimage economy deserves particular attention. Weekly Tuesday gatherings create repeated demand, while the annual pre-Holi mela produces a short but potentially intense concentration of visitors, vendors and transport providers. Periodicity can be economically important in rural settings because it allows households to combine pilgrimage-related activities with other livelihood strategies. A household may operate a shop, farm or service activity during ordinary periods while increasing its commercial activity during religious gatherings. This pattern is consistent with a livelihood-diversification perspective, but the present dataset does not measure household income across different periods and therefore cannot estimate the size of seasonal income effects.

The institutional role of the Ashram further broadens the meaning of pilgrimage economy. The supplied study material identifies the Adarsh Pathshala and Gaushala alongside religious gatherings and fairs. These functions suggest that the sacred institution is not simply a point where pilgrims spend money. It can also act as a node connecting religion, education, welfare, cultural continuity and local social relations. The economic contribution of a religious institution should therefore not be reduced to visitor expenditure. Institutional activities can create social capital, maintain cultural practices and influence the relationship between a rural settlement and wider networks.

At the same time, pilgrimage-led development should not be equated automatically with inclusive development. Large pilgrimage centres demonstrate that growing visitor flows can create infrastructure pressure, congestion, land-use change and unequal access to economic opportunities (Singh 2025; Yadav et al. 2024). Tikarmafi is much smaller and should not be treated as an equivalent case. Nevertheless, the underlying governance question is relevant: who controls commercial spaces, who has access to infrastructure, who supplies goods and services, and whether local residents can retain a meaningful share of visitor expenditure.

The findings also raise questions about gender and economic participation. Women constitute 30% of the survey sample, and the source field notes indicate that some women classified as homemakers

participated in household and religious purchasing. This suggests that future research should distinguish between individual income and household economic agency. A gender-sensitive study of vendors, household producers and purchasers could reveal forms of economic participation that are obscured when employment status is used as the primary indicator of economic involvement.

The proximity of an educational institution provides another area for sociological inquiry. The supplied study describes the BBAU Satellite Centre as part of the local institutional environment and proposes that educational and pilgrimage activity create overlapping forms of demand. This is potentially significant because rural development is often shaped by the coexistence of multiple institutions rather than a single economic sector. However, the present research does not contain data to estimate the independent economic contribution of the university centre. The proposition should therefore be examined in a future multi-actor study.

Overall, the evidence supports a conceptual shift from asking whether pilgrimage produces a large economic impact to asking how religious mobility is translated into repeated local transactions, livelihood opportunities and institutional activity. This perspective is more appropriate to small pilgrimage centres where economic effects are dispersed and incremental. It also directs attention toward the distribution and quality of development rather than visitor growth alone.

8. Policy and development implications

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The findings support a community-oriented approach to pilgrimage development rather than an approach focused exclusively on increasing visitor numbers.

First, basic visitor infrastructure should be prioritised. Sanitation, drinking water, waste management, shaded waiting areas, safe pedestrian movement, parking and organised vending spaces can improve visitor conditions while reducing pressure on residents. Such interventions are relatively compatible with the scale of a rural pilgrimage centre because they strengthen the existing visitor economy without requiring large-scale commercialisation.

Second, affordable accommodation could increase the duration of visitor stays and potentially increase local economic retention. The study material identifies the absence of commercial lodging as a constraint. Yatri Niwas facilities, regulated guest houses and community-based homestays could be considered where demand, local acceptance and carrying capacity justify them. Local ownership should be prioritised so that accommodation does not simply transfer economic value to external operators.

Third, vendor organisation should support rather than displace informal livelihoods. Designated kiosks, transparent allocation procedures, storage facilities, sanitation support and fairground management can make small-scale commerce more secure. The objective should be formal support for informal livelihoods, not the removal of local vendors in favour of larger commercial actors.

Fourth, cultural and educational functions should be integrated into destination planning. The Ashram's educational and social activities can be incorporated into a broader interpretation of living heritage. Visitors could be introduced to local history, traditional knowledge and community institutions while respecting the religious character of the site. This approach is consistent with the sustainability principle that living culture and traditions should be integrated into tourism while protecting community values (UNWTO 2013).

Fifth, any future connection between Tikarmafi and wider religious or cultural circuits should be accompanied by local participation and visitor-management mechanisms. Circuit integration may increase visibility, but the economic value of additional visitation will depend on whether local households, vendors and service providers have the capacity to participate. Environmental safeguards, sanitation planning and transparent commercial-space allocation should therefore precede or accompany expansion.

Sixth, future planning should establish mechanisms for monitoring local economic distribution. Visitor counts alone cannot determine whether pilgrimage development benefits residents. Periodic surveys of vendors, households and service providers could measure income, employment, supply chains, seasonal changes and the proportion of expenditure retained locally. Such information would make policy more evidence-based.

9. Limitations and future research

9. Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations. First, the sample consists of 100 pilgrims at a single pilgrimage centre. The findings should therefore not be generalised statistically to all pilgrims in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh or India. Second, the cross-sectional design captures one empirical moment and does not measure seasonal or longitudinal change. Third, the survey lacks direct measures of household income, wealth, travel distance, frequency of visits, duration of stay and item-level expenditure. These variables could help explain why expenditure differs across respondents.

Fourth, the study does not directly survey local vendors, households, transport providers or service establishments. Consequently, claims about livelihood effects are interpreted through the contextual evidence and the logic of local economic circulation rather than through direct measurement of income or employment. Fifth, the Pearson chi-square analysis is based on a sparse contingency table. The p-value should therefore be treated as exploratory, and future research should use a larger sample and an exact or Monte Carlo procedure.

Sixth, the study material does not provide sufficient information about ethics approval or documented informed consent. This must be resolved before journal submission through accurate reporting of the procedures actually followed. Seventh, some contextual geographic and demographic fields in the source material are incomplete and have not been reconstructed.

Future research should use a multi-season design involving at least three groups: pilgrims, local vendors/service providers and resident households. Data could be collected during ordinary weekly gatherings, the annual mela and non-festival periods. Item-level expenditure could be used to estimate local economic retention. Vendor surveys could measure sales, costs, employment and supply chains, while household surveys could examine livelihood diversification and seasonal income.

Qualitative interviews could further examine gendered participation, entrepreneurship, cultural change, ritual consumption and perceptions of tourism. A comparative study of several village-level pilgrimage centres in Uttar Pradesh would help determine whether the Tikarmafi pattern is site-specific or part of a wider rural pilgrimage economy. Longitudinal research could also assess whether infrastructure investment changes the composition of visitors, local businesses and the distribution of economic benefits over time.

10. Conclusion

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This study demonstrates the value of examining pilgrimage at the village scale. The Shreemat Paramhans Ashram in Tikarmafi is presented in the study context as a node of periodic mobility, small-scale commerce, education, cultural continuity and social interaction. The survey of 100 pilgrims shows a clear concentration of expenditure in low-value categories: 77% reported spending INR 100 or less, while only 7% reported spending INR 150 or more.

The reported Pearson test did not establish a statistically significant association between occupation and expenditure at the 5% level, $\chi^2(15) = 23.706$, $p = .070$. The derived Cramér's V of approximately .281 provides descriptive information about the observed pattern, but sparse expected frequencies limit the reliability of the asymptotic test. The finding should therefore be treated as exploratory rather than as definitive evidence that occupation and expenditure are unrelated.

The broader sociological implication is that rural pilgrimage economies may be economically meaningful even when individual transactions are small. Repeated weekly visitation and periodic fairs can create cumulative demand for food, ritual goods, transport and other local services. The role of the sacred institution is further broadened when religious activity is combined with education and community-oriented functions.

For rural development policy, the central issue is not simply increasing visitor numbers. It is creating conditions under which existing visitor flows can generate safe, inclusive and locally retained economic opportunities while protecting cultural and environmental resources. Basic infrastructure, fair vendor organisation, affordable accommodation, community participation and cultural preservation are therefore more appropriate priorities than indiscriminate commercial expansion.

Tikarmafi offers a useful micro-level case for understanding the intersection of religion, mobility, informal markets, rural livelihoods and local development. Future multi-actor and multi-season research can build on this case by directly measuring vendor income, household benefits, expenditure leakage, gendered participation and changes in local infrastructure.

Declarations

Competing interests

No relevant financial or non-financial competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study surveyed 100 pilgrims in Tikarmafi, Amethi, Uttar Pradesh. We obtained oral informed consent from all participants before data collection. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, we anonymised responses and removed identifying information. In accordance with the institution's rules, no formal approval from an institutional ethics committee or an ethics waiver was obtained for this study.

Use of generative AI

During preparation of this manuscript, an AI-assisted writing tool was used for restructuring, language refinement and editorial assistance. The authors retain responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, ethical compliance, citations and final version of the manuscript. The AI-assisted tool added no respondents, observations, or statistical results.

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Author Contribution

S.K.L. conceptualized the study, developed the research methodology, conducted the investigation, analysed the data, and prepared the original manuscript. S.S. contributed to the literature review, interpretation of findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data availability

The primary survey dataset is included in the article. One supplementary file complies with Springer Nature's data-sharing and participant-privacy requirements.

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Figures

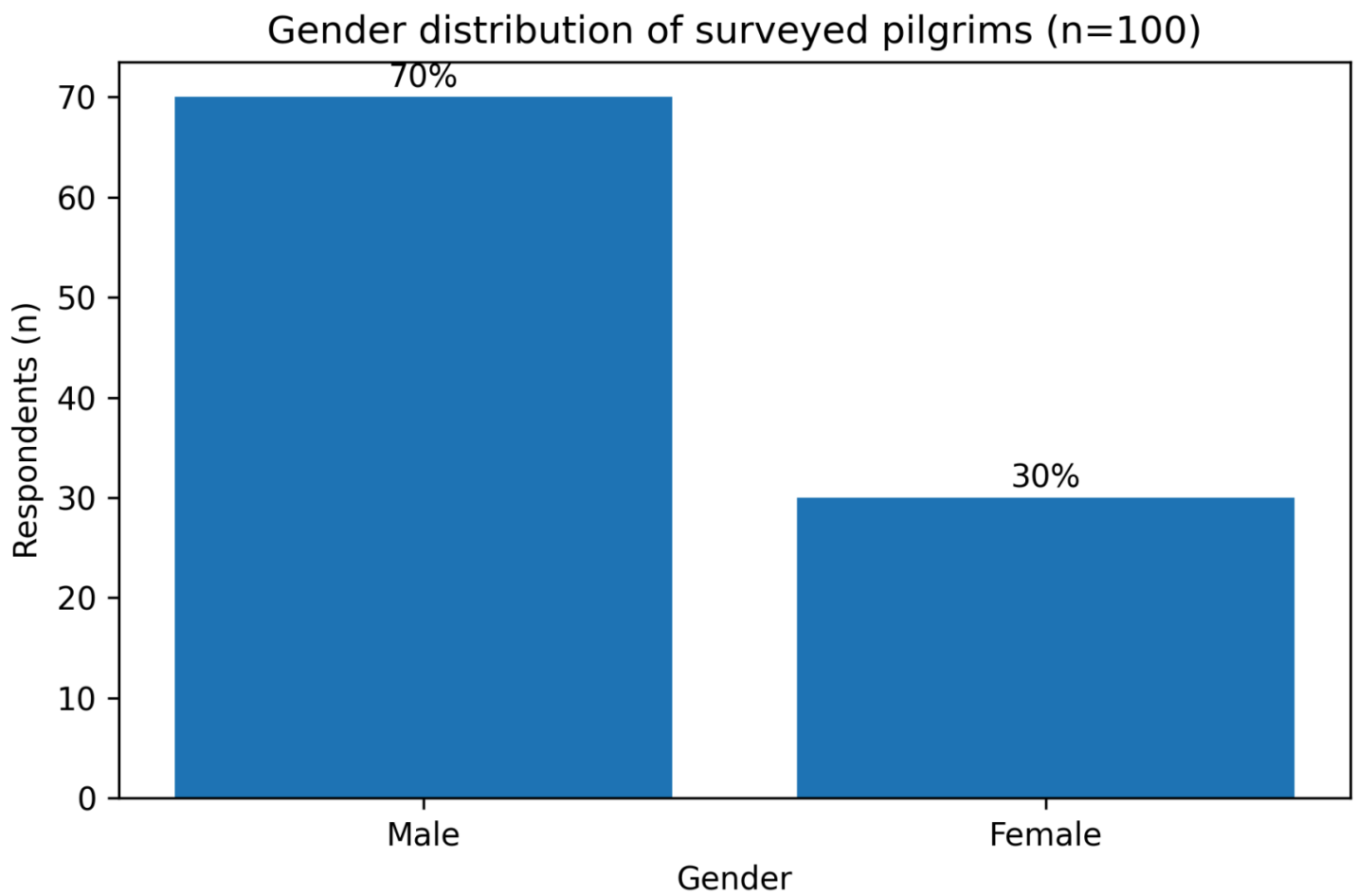


Figure 1

Gender distribution of surveyed pilgrims

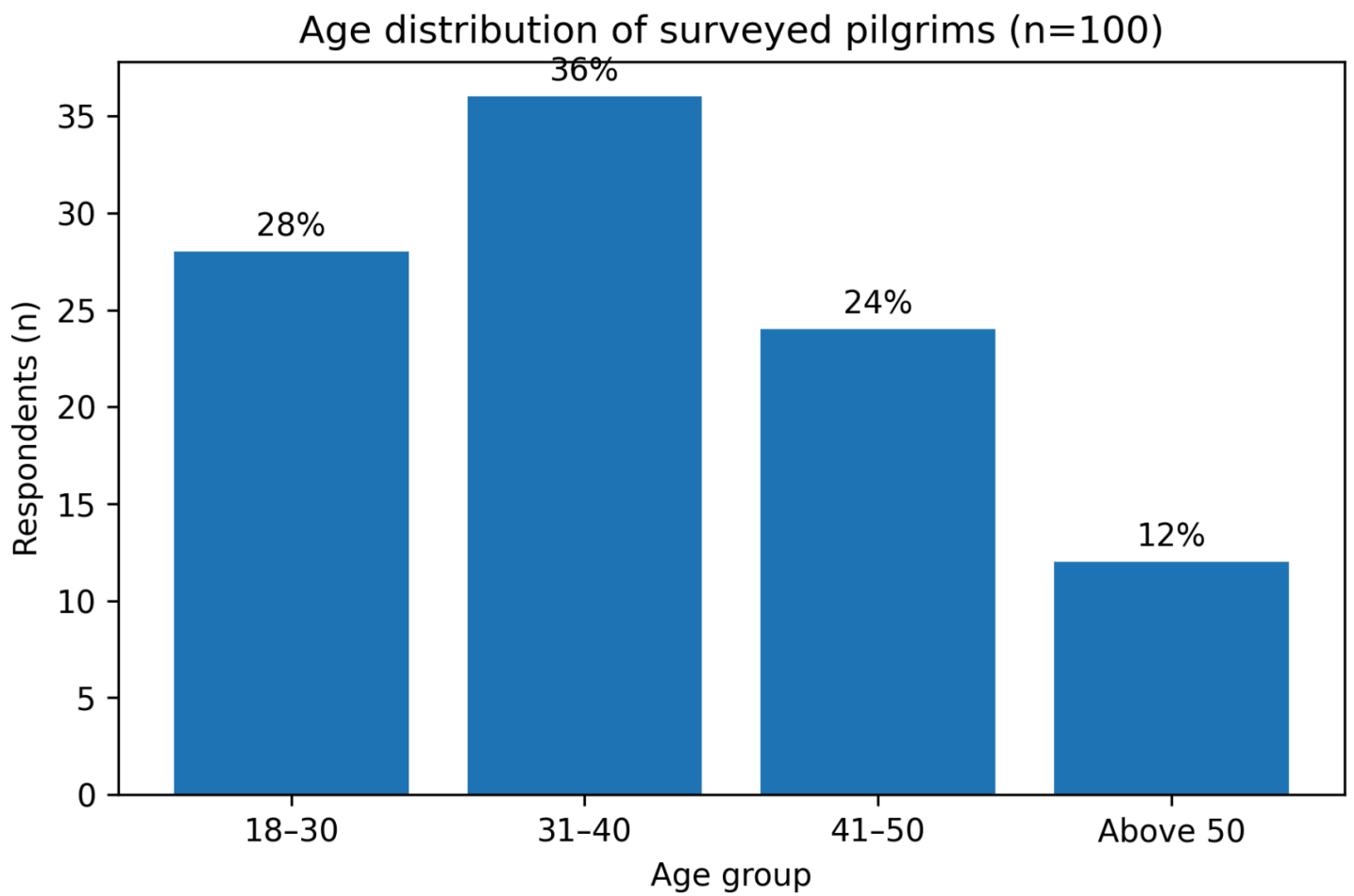


Figure 2

Age distribution of surveyed pilgrims

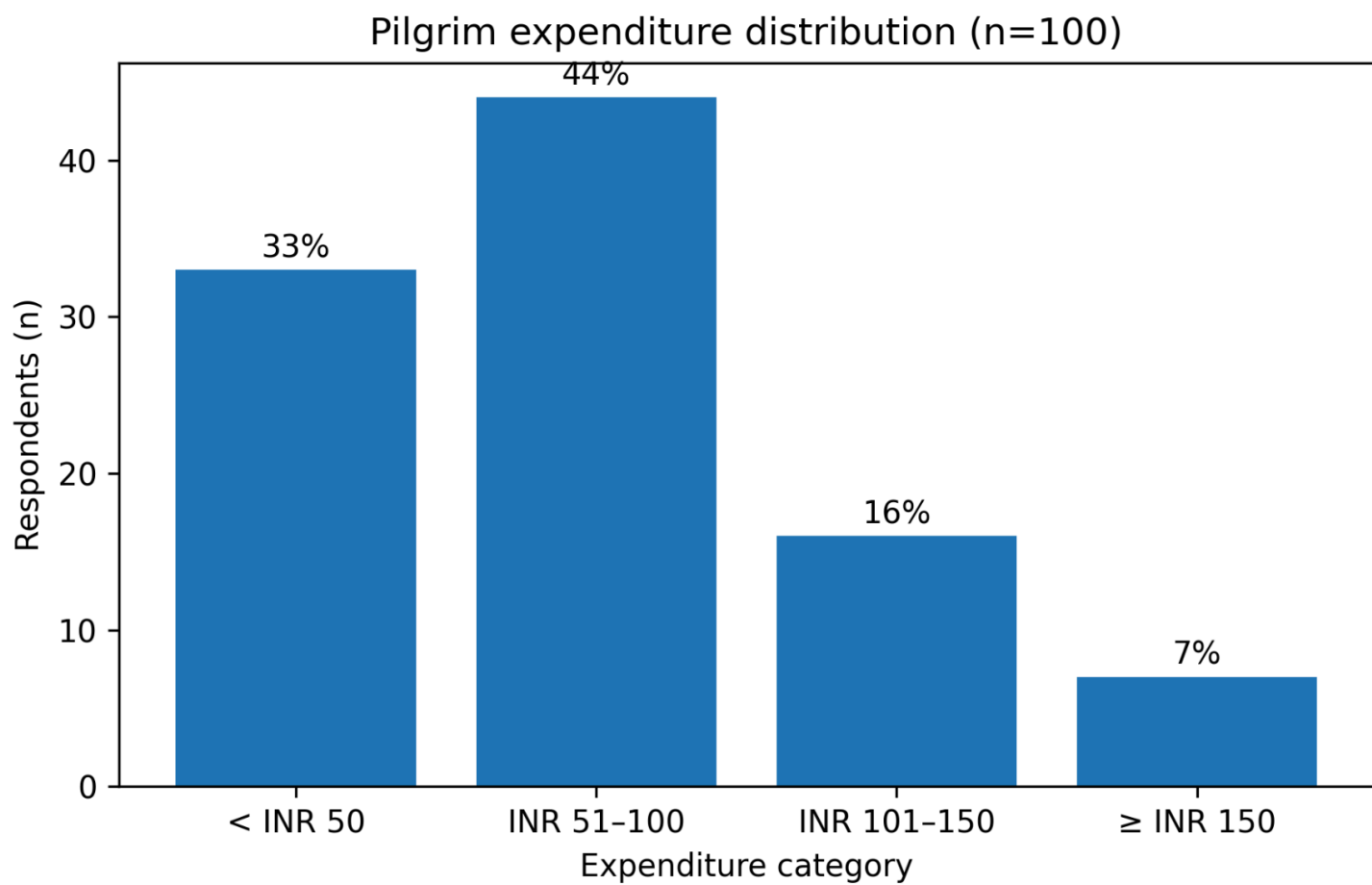


Figure 3

Pilgrim expenditure distribution

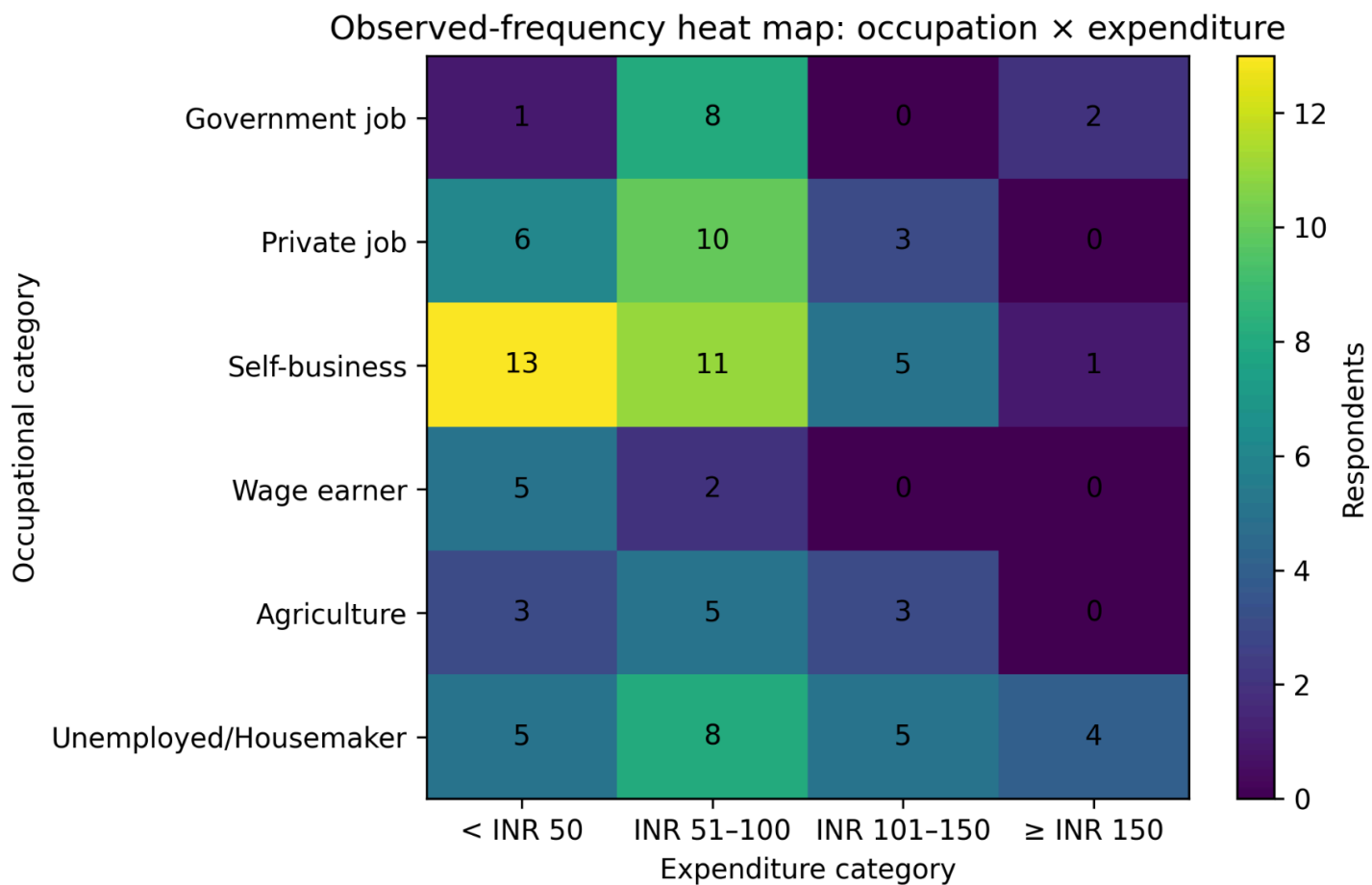


Figure 4

Observed-frequency heat map of occupational category by expenditure level

Supplementary Files

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- [TikarmafiPilgrimageEconomySupplementaryDataset.docx](#)