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THE CONCEPT, ESSENCE AND DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF PILGRIMAGE TOURISM

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Abstract. Pilgrimage tourism is an important segment of the modern tourism industry that combines religious and spiritual motivations with cultural heritage, social interaction and economic development. In recent decades, increasing interest in sacred sites and religious heritage has strengthened the importance of pilgrimage tourism as a field of academic research and practical tourism development. This article examines the concept and essence of pilgrimage tourism, explores its principal characteristics and classification criteria, and analyses the major factors influencing its development at global and national levels. Particular attention is paid to the religious and spiritual, socio-cultural and economic dimensions of pilgrimage tourism. The article also considers the institutional development of pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, highlighting the country's rich religious and historical heritage, the role of public policy, the development of tourism infrastructure and the application of digital technologies. The study demonstrates that sustainable pilgrimage tourism development requires an integrated approach that balances the spiritual significance of sacred destinations with cultural heritage preservation, effective destination management and local economic development.

Keywords. Pilgrimage tourism, religious tourism, spiritual tourism, sacred sites, religious heritage, cultural heritage, tourism development, Uzbekistan, sustainable tourism, digitalisation.

Introduction. Tourism is widely recognised as a multidimensional socio-economic phenomenon that contributes to cultural exchange, international cooperation and regional development. Within this broad sector, pilgrimage tourism occupies a distinctive position because it is closely connected with religious beliefs, spiritual practices, historical traditions and the preservation of cultural heritage. It represents a form of travel in which the significance of the destination extends beyond its physical characteristics and is determined by its religious, symbolic and spiritual meaning.

Aim of the Research. The main aim of this study is to examine the concept, essence and principal development characteristics of pilgrimage tourism, with particular emphasis on its religious, socio-cultural and economic dimensions and its development prospects in Uzbekistan.

In the modern tourism economy, pilgrimage tourism occupies a special position because it represents a form of activity that possesses not only economic significance but also profound spiritual, cultural and social dimensions. The volume of travel undertaken on the basis of religious beliefs and spiritual motivations has been increasing year by year in the global tourism market. According to estimates attributed to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), approximately 300–330 million people visit major religious pilgrimage sites worldwide each year [. This figure demonstrates that pilgrimage tourism has become not merely a religious phenomenon but also a significant economic activity within the global tourism industry. There is no single universally

accepted definition of the concept of pilgrimage tourism in the academic literature. This can primarily be explained by the fact that the concept is based on two closely interconnected foundations: religious and spiritual traditions, on the one hand, and the modern tourism economy, on the other. In international academic literature, several closely related but conceptually distinct terms are used to describe this field, including religious tourism, pilgrimage tourism, faith tourism and spiritual tourism. Although these terms share certain common characteristics, each may emphasise a different aspect of travel motivation, religious experience or spiritual engagement. According to K. Griffin and R. Raj, religious tourism refers to travel undertaken by individuals or groups for reasons associated with religion or spirituality . This definition highlights the importance of religious beliefs and spiritual needs as fundamental motivations for travelling. G. Rinschede, in turn, proposes classifying religious tourism according to the duration of travel, the size of the travelling group and its social composition . These approaches provide a basis for understanding pilgrimage tourism not as a single, homogeneous phenomenon but rather as a broad spectrum of travel experiences that differ according to the nature and intensity of religious motivation. Consequently, pilgrimage tourism may encompass various forms of travel, ranging from journeys undertaken primarily for religious purposes to trips in which religious visits constitute only one element of a broader tourist experience.[1]

An important methodological consideration is that the concepts of religious tourism and pilgrimage should not be regarded as complete synonyms. Although the two concepts are closely related, they differ in terms of the principal motivation underlying a journey and the meaning attached to visiting a sacred destination. According to The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Travel and Tourism, not every visit to a sacred place can be classified as a pilgrimage. For example, although 85 per cent of visitors travelling to the Spanish region of Galicia visit the pilgrimage destination of Santiago de Compostela, visiting this sacred site may not necessarily represent the primary purpose of their journey [. Some visitors may travel mainly for cultural, historical, architectural or recreational reasons, while others may regard the same destination as an essential part of their religious experience. In other words, there is no absolute boundary separating pilgrims from tourists. Rather, these categories can be understood as existing along a continuous spectrum ranging from dedicated pilgrims, whose journeys are primarily motivated by religious beliefs, through tourists with mixed religious and cultural motivations, to visitors whose principal interest lies in cultural heritage and historical attractions. This approach makes it possible to examine pilgrimage tourism more comprehensively, taking into account the diversity of individual motivations and the different ways in which visitors perceive and experience sacred places. When studying pilgrimage traditions in Central Asia, particularly within the territory of Uzbekistan, the research conducted by D. Abramson and E. Karimov, as well as the works of T. Dadabaev, occupies an important position. These studies examine the historical significance of pilgrimage in the lives of the peoples of the region and analyse changes in attitudes towards religious traditions and practices during different historical periods . The authors emphasise that pilgrimage should not be understood merely as an ordinary journey from one geographical location to another. Rather, it is perceived as a means of self-understanding, spiritual purification,

[1] World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Religious Tourism in Asia and the Pacific. – Madrid: World Tourism Organization, 2011. – P. 226.

strengthening religious faith and maintaining a connection with inherited religious and cultural traditions. From this perspective, pilgrimage represents a complex phenomenon in which individual spiritual experiences are closely connected with collective memory, cultural identity and historical continuity. By synthesising the approaches discussed above, pilgrimage tourism can be defined as a form of tourism undertaken by individuals to satisfy their religious and spiritual needs, visit sacred places and sites of historical and religious significance, seek spiritual purification, and directly experience national and cultural heritage. It is a form of tourism supported by a specific system of economic, organisational and infrastructural arrangements that facilitate the movement, accommodation and provision of services for pilgrims and other visitors [6]. This definition combines the two fundamental dimensions of pilgrimage tourism: its spiritual and religious significance, on the one hand, and its nature as an organised form of economic activity, on the other. It also demonstrates that pilgrimage tourism cannot be examined exclusively from a religious perspective, since its development is closely associated with tourism infrastructure, service provision, destination management and the preservation of cultural heritage. The essence of pilgrimage tourism can be examined from three principal perspectives: the religious and spiritual dimension, the socio-cultural dimension, and the economic dimension. Each of these dimensions reveals a particular aspect of the phenomenon, while their interaction determines the overall significance of pilgrimage tourism in contemporary society. The religious and spiritual dimension constitutes the historical and conceptual foundation of pilgrimage tourism. Each major religious tradition, including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism, possesses its own sacred places, pilgrimage destinations and established ritual practices. [2]These destinations may be associated with religious figures, historical events, sacred narratives or traditions that have been transmitted from one generation to another. In Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, the mausoleums of saints, Sufi masters and prominent religious scholars have developed into important pilgrimage centres. Such places are valued not only for their architectural and historical characteristics but also for their spiritual significance and their association with religious traditions. In this context, the study of pilgrimage sites requires attention to the identities, historical status and spiritual significance of the individuals associated with them. Understanding the lives and teachings of saints, religious scholars and Sufi masters can help explain why particular destinations have acquired sacred status and why they continue to attract pilgrims. It is therefore important to examine pilgrimage sites not simply as physical structures or historical monuments but also as places in which religious beliefs, collective memory and spiritual practices are preserved and expressed. The socio-cultural dimension reveals the functions performed by pilgrimage tourism within society. These functions include strengthening interethnic and interreligious harmony, fostering local communities' appreciation of their historical and cultural heritage, and contributing to the spiritual and moral education of younger generations. Visits to sacred sites can create opportunities for communication between people from different geographical regions and cultural backgrounds. They can also encourage visitors to learn about

[2] Griffin K. A., Raj R. The Importance of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: Reflecting on Definitions, Motives and Data // International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage. – Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology, 2017. –P.147.

the historical traditions, religious practices and cultural values of local communities. Furthermore, pilgrimage destinations frequently become important centres of local cultural life. Traditional handicrafts, local cuisine, customary practices and other elements of intangible cultural heritage may develop and be preserved in the communities surrounding pilgrimage sites. [3]These cultural elements form an integral part of the broader pilgrimage experience, enabling visitors to become acquainted not only with the sacred destination itself but also with the traditions and everyday life of the surrounding community. In this regard, pilgrimage tourism can contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage while strengthening the relationship between religious traditions and local identity. The economic dimension defines pilgrimage tourism as a distinct segment of the modern tourism industry. Its economic significance is reflected in the volume of tourist flows, the demand for accommodation and transport services, the development of catering and other visitor services, the creation of employment opportunities for local residents, and the potential increase in revenues for local and regional budgets. The arrival of pilgrims and other visitors can stimulate economic activity in the areas surrounding sacred destinations and create opportunities for small businesses, local entrepreneurs, artisans, transport providers and accommodation establishments. At the same time, the economic benefits of pilgrimage tourism depend on the effective organisation of tourism services, the accessibility of pilgrimage destinations, the quality of infrastructure and the sustainable management of cultural and religious heritage. These considerations have contributed to the recognition of pilgrimage tourism as one of the priority areas of tourism development policy [7]. Nevertheless, economic development should be balanced with the protection of sacred sites, respect for religious practices and the preservation of the cultural values that give these destinations their distinctive significance.

Pilgrimage tourism possesses a number of distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of tourism, including recreational tourism, ecological tourism and educational tourism. These characteristics are associated with the motivations of visitors, the temporal patterns of travel, the relationship between pilgrims and sacred destinations, the specific requirements of tourism infrastructure, the economic structure of the sector and the broad social composition of its participants. The principal characteristics of pilgrimage tourism can be identified as follows:

The religious and spiritual nature of travel motivation. The primary motivation for pilgrimage tourism is generally the fulfilment of religious and spiritual needs rather than relaxation, entertainment or leisure alone. Pilgrims may undertake journeys to express their faith, participate in religious rituals, seek spiritual peace, honour sacred figures or strengthen their connection with religious traditions. Although cultural and recreational activities may also form part of the journey, religious or spiritual considerations often remain central to the pilgrimage experience.

A high degree of seasonality. Pilgrimage flows are frequently with religious festivals, sacred days, commemorative events and the dates of particular religious ceremonies. As a result, the number of visitors to certain destinations may increase considerably during specific periods of the year. This seasonal concentration creates particular requirements for transport, accommodation,

[3] Griffin K. A., Raj R. Editorial: The Importance of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage: Reflecting on Definitions, Motives and Data // International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage. – Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology, 2017. – P.20

crowd management, sanitation and the organisation of religious services. Effective planning is therefore necessary to ensure that pilgrimage destinations can accommodate visitors while maintaining appropriate conditions for worship and other religious activities.

A high potential for pilgrim loyalty and repeat visits. Compared with tourists whose primary motivation is leisure or entertainment, pilgrims may develop a strong emotional and spiritual attachment to particular sacred destinations. This attachment can encourage repeated visits and contribute to the formation of a relatively stable group of visitors. For some pilgrims, returning to a sacred place may represent the continuation of a religious tradition, the fulfilment of a personal spiritual commitment or participation in an established family or community practice. Such repeated visits can contribute to the long-term sustainability of tourism demand at pilgrimage destinations.

Specific infrastructure requirements. Pilgrimage destinations require facilities that correspond to the religious and practical needs of visitors. Depending on the religious tradition and the characteristics of the destination, these may include appropriate spaces for prayer, facilities for ablution, areas for religious ceremonies, places for rest, sanitary facilities, information services and accessible transport connections. The organisation of such infrastructure should take into account both the comfort of visitors and the preservation of the sacred character of the destination. It is particularly important to ensure that tourism services do not interfere with religious rituals or undermine the historical and cultural integrity of pilgrimage sites. **A broad range of economic segments.** Pilgrimage tourism includes different market segments, ranging from affordable mass domestic pilgrimage to international travel involving higher expenditure and premium services. Some visitors undertake short, low-cost journeys to nearby sacred destinations, while others participate in organised international pilgrimage programmes that require accommodation, transport, guiding and additional services. This diversity creates opportunities for tourism enterprises to develop services tailored to different levels of purchasing power and different visitor needs. At the same time, the accessibility and affordability of pilgrimage should remain important considerations in the development of this sector.

A broad socio-demographic composition. Pilgrimage tourism can attract individuals from different age groups, genders, occupations and socio-economic backgrounds. Religious beliefs and spiritual interests may motivate people with different levels of income, education and social status to visit sacred destinations. Consequently, pilgrimage tourism requires an inclusive approach to destination planning, including consideration of the needs of older visitors, families, people with disabilities and individuals who may require additional assistance during their journeys.

Academic literature identifies several criteria for classifying pilgrimage tourism. These criteria make it possible to analyse the diversity of pilgrimage practices and distinguish between different forms of travel according to their religious, geographical, temporal and organisational characteristics.: According to religious affiliation, pilgrimage tourism can be classified into Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and other forms associated with particular religious traditions. Each category is characterised by its own sacred destinations, religious practices, ritual requirements and cultural traditions. Such differences influence the organisation of pilgrimage

journeys, the expectations of visitors and the types of services required at individual destinations.[4] According to geographical scope, pilgrimage tourism can be divided into international, regional and domestic pilgrimage. International pilgrimage involves journeys to destinations of global religious significance, such as Mecca and Medina and Jerusalem, which attract visitors from different countries and cultural backgrounds. Regional pilgrimage is associated with destinations that serve particular geographical areas or neighbouring countries, while domestic pilgrimage involves journeys undertaken within a single country. In Central Asia, cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Termez and Khiva are recognised as important centres of national and regional pilgrimage [8]. Their significance is associated with their rich historical and religious heritage, the presence of sacred sites and mausoleums, and their connections with prominent religious scholars and spiritual traditions. These cities also possess architectural monuments and cultural attractions that can complement the pilgrimage experience. Consequently, their development as pilgrimage destinations may contribute to the wider promotion of historical and cultural tourism.

According to the duration of travel, pilgrimage journeys can be classified as one-day trips and multi-day journeys. One-day pilgrimages generally involve visits to destinations located relatively close to the visitors' places of residence, whereas multi-day journeys may require accommodation, organised transport and a more extensive programme of visits. The duration of a pilgrimage depends on the geographical distance, the number of destinations included in the itinerary, the purpose of the journey and the religious or cultural practices associated with the visit.

created new opportunities for the planning and management of pilgrimage trips. As a result, pilgrimage increasingly became connected with the broader tourism industry, while retaining its In terms of organisational arrangements, pilgrimage tourism can be divided into individual and organised group pilgrimage. Individual pilgrimage allows visitors to determine their own itinerary, travel schedule and activities according to their personal needs and religious motivations. Organised group pilgrimage, by contrast, involves coordinated travel arrangements, which may include transport, accommodation, guiding services and visits to several sacred destinations. Both forms are important for the development of pilgrimage tourism because they respond to different visitor preferences and organisational requirements. Pilgrimage has been an integral part of human history since ancient times. Throughout different historical periods, people have travelled to sacred places to express their religious devotion, participate in rituals, seek spiritual guidance and maintain connections with religious communities. However, the development of pilgrimage into an organised segment of the tourism industry accelerated during the second half of the twentieth century, when improvements in transport infrastructure and the expansion of the international tourism market made pilgrimage travel accessible to a much wider population.[5]

[4] Dadabaev T. Religiosity and Soviet “Modernisation” in Central Asia: Locating Religious Traditions and Rituals in Recollections of Antireligious Policies in Uzbekistan // Religion, State and Society. – 2014.– P. 328–353.

[5] Jo‘raboyeva M. Ziyorat turizmi va uning turizm sohasida tutgan o‘rni // Научные исследования и инновации. – 2025.– B. 455–457.

The development of road networks, rail transport and international air travel reduced the time and practical difficulties associated with long-distance journeys. At the same time, the expansion of accommodation facilities, travel agencies and organised tourism services distinctive religious and spiritual characteristics. At the global level, cities such as Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem have developed into major religious centres. These destinations attract pilgrims because of their profound significance within particular religious traditions and their historical associations with sacred events and figures. Their international importance also demonstrates the close relationship between religious heritage, international mobility, tourism infrastructure and the management of large visitor flows.

In Uzbekistan, the institutional development of pilgrimage tourism can provisionally be divided into several stages. This periodisation provides a general framework for examining changes in tourism policy, institutional arrangements and the recognition of pilgrimage tourism as a distinct direction of tourism development. The first stage, covering the 1990s, was characterised by the formation of the national tourism sector during the initial years of independence. During this period, measures aimed at developing international tourism were introduced within the framework of the Great Silk Road concept [9]. The promotion of the country's historical cities, architectural monuments and cultural heritage became an important component of efforts to strengthen Uzbekistan's position in the international tourism market. The historical and cultural resources of the country also provided a foundation for the subsequent development of pilgrimage tourism. The second stage, beginning in the early 2000s, was associated with broader government programmes and policy measures aimed at developing the tourism sector . During this period, attention was directed towards improving tourism infrastructure, promoting historical and cultural destinations and expanding the organisational foundations of tourism activity. However, pilgrimage tourism had not yet been fully distinguished as an independent policy area within the broader tourism development framework. Religious and historical destinations continued to form part of the country's wider cultural and historical tourism resources. The third and most dynamic stage began in 2016, when comprehensive reforms in the tourism sector were introduced. These reforms created new opportunities for the expansion of international tourism and the promotion of Uzbekistan's historical, cultural and religious heritage. Important developments during this period included the introduction of visa-free travel arrangements for eligible foreign visitorsThis continuing movement of visitors highlights the importance of pilgrimage tourism as a field that connects religious traditions, spiritual needs, historical and cultural heritage, social interaction and economic development. Consequently, the study of pilgrimage tourism requires an integrated approach that considers its religious and spiritual foundations alongside its socio-cultural functions, economic contribution and organisational requirements. Such an approach is particularly relevant to Uzbekistan, where the country's rich religious and historical heritage provides substantial opportunities for the further development of pilgrimage tourism.

Conclusion

Pilgrimage tourism represents a distinctive and multidimensional form of tourism that combines religious and spiritual motivations with cultural heritage, social interaction and economic activity. Its significance extends beyond visits to sacred places, as it contributes to the preservation of religious traditions, the transmission of historical memory and the development of

connections between individuals, communities and cultural landscapes. The analysis demonstrates that pilgrimage tourism should be examined through three interrelated dimensions: religious and spiritual, socio-cultural, and economic. The religious and spiritual dimension reflects the fundamental motivations underlying pilgrimage, while the socio-cultural dimension highlights its contribution to cultural identity, heritage preservation and communication between communities. The economic dimension demonstrates its potential to generate demand for tourism services, create employment opportunities and support local and regional development. The study also establishes the importance of distinguishing between religious tourism and pilgrimage tourism. Although these concepts frequently overlap, they differ in the degree and nature of religious motivation. Recognising this distinction is important for understanding visitor behaviour, classifying tourism activities and developing services that respond to the needs of different visitor groups.

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