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## Digital Transformation and Smart Tourism Governance in Uttarakhand: Analyzing the Implementation Gap in the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023

**Mr. Vijendra Kumar**

Research Scholar,  
Dept. of Commerce,  
SSJDWSSS Govt. P.G. College Ranikhet,  
SSJ University, Almora (Uttarakhand, India)  
E-mail: [viratary@gmail.com](mailto:viratary@gmail.com)

**Dr. Shivani Shah**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Commerce,  
Government Degree College, Kanda,  
(Bageshwar), (Uttarakhand, India)  
E-mail: [Shahshivani112@gmail.com](mailto:Shahshivani112@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract:**

*Tourism has expanded rapidly in Uttarakhand, creating numerous opportunities for economic growth. However, this expansion has also made governance more difficult due to overcrowding, infrastructure strain, and environmental concerns, which can lead to challenges in maintaining sustainable tourism practices and ensuring the well-being of local communities, such as increased pollution, resource depletion, and conflicts between tourists and residents. To address these issues, the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023 emphasizes the use of digital technologies to support smart tourism governance and improved destination management. This study explores the digital transformation initiatives introduced under the policy and evaluates their impact on enhancing tourism governance in the state. This study employs a qualitative methodology for policy analysis, drawing upon secondary data including governmental reports, tourism statistics, academic publications, and media coverage. This study examines case studies of significant tourist locations, namely Kainchi Dham, Hemkund Sahib, and Mussoorie, to identify the governance challenges associated with increasing tourist numbers. The findings indicate that digital tools, such as online registration systems and tourism platforms, have, in some cases, aided in visitor management. Nevertheless, substantial gaps remain between policy formulation and its practical implementation, particularly regarding resource allocation and stakeholder participation, which hinder the effective use of digital tools in managing visitor flows and enhancing the overall tourism experience. The study emphasizes that there must be a unified, smart tourism governance framework that integrates digital infrastructure, data-driven decision-making, and coordinated institutional mechanisms to ensure sustainable tourism development in Uttarakhand.*

**Keywords:** Smart tourism governance, digital transformation, tourism policy implementation, destination management, pilgrimage tourism, Uttarakhand tourism.

## 1. Introduction:

The Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023 represents a significant step forward, designed to enhance tourism oversight and destination management via digital innovation. Given Uttarakhand's wealth of religious, ecological, and adventure tourism assets, the sector is a key driver of the state's economy. Pilgrimage and tourist hotspots like Haridwar, Rishikesh, and Kedarnath draw millions of visitors each year, creating substantial economic benefits for the surrounding communities. Yet, this surge in tourism has also brought about governance hurdles, including overcrowding, strain on existing infrastructure, and environmental pressures within the delicate Himalayan environment, which can lead to challenges in maintaining sustainable tourism practices and protecting local ecosystems.

Digital transformation has become a critical factor in tourism governance, allowing governmental entities to utilize information and communication technologies (ICT), digital platforms, and data analytics to improve destination management and the overall visitor experience (Gretzel et al., 2015; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2014). The notion of smart tourism destinations underscores the integration of digital infrastructure, real-time data systems, and interconnected stakeholders to support enhanced tourism planning, mobility management, and the monitoring of visitor flow (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2023; Soares et al., 2022).

Digital technologies also support data-driven policymaking by analyzing information from mobile devices, online platforms, and social media, which enhances tourism competitiveness and service quality (Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2017; Tsaih & Hsu, 2018). International organizations, like the United Nations World Tourism Organization, stress that digitalization can improve tourism governance by strengthening destination monitoring and enhancing coordination. This includes engaging with stakeholders, such as local communities, government agencies, and private sector partners, and supporting sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 2022).

Although the academic literature on smart tourism governance is growing, most existing studies focus on technologically advanced urban areas in Europe and East Asia. The operational aspects of digital tourism governance in mountain tourism destinations, particularly in the Himalayan region, are still largely unexamined; this context poses unique governance challenges stemming from geographical constraints, seasonal variations in tourist volumes, and environmental vulnerabilities. In the case of Uttarakhand, current research primarily examines the growth of pilgrimage tourism and related sustainability issues, rather than the governance implications of digital transformation efforts.

The Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023 underlines the importance of digital technologies for improving tourism administration and visitor management. However, there is a lack of scholarly research examining the practical implementation of these policies across diverse tourism destinations. Pilgrimage sites, including Kainchi Dham, and high-altitude locations like Hemkund Sahib, have experienced significant increases in tourist traffic; nevertheless, the role of digital governance systems

in managing these destinations has not been thoroughly studied. Therefore, this research explores the digital transformation initiatives undertaken under the tourism policy and evaluates their effectiveness in strengthening tourism governance and destination management within Uttarakhand.

## 2. Research Objectives:

The present study aims to examine the role of digital technologies in strengthening tourism governance in Uttarakhand. The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To examine the digital transformation initiatives introduced under the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023
2. To analyze the role of digital technologies in improving tourism governance and destination management in Uttarakhand.
3. To identify the gap between policy design and the implementation of digital tourism initiatives across major tourism destinations.
4. To propose policy recommendations for strengthening smart tourism governance and sustainable destination management in the state.

## 3. Methodology:

The study paper is a qualitative policy study that attempts to examine the importance of digital transformation in tourism governance in the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023. The study is anchored on the secondary data that comprise government policy reports, tourism statistics, scholarly literature, and media coverage.

To give the analysis depth, the thematic analysis method is applied; the data is thoroughly analyzed and arranged in terms of general topics such as digital infrastructure and governance schemes, stakeholder involvement, and challenges to implementation. This assists in highlighting trends and loopholes that exist between policymaking and its implementation.

The Smart Tourism Governance Framework and the concept of the digital divide also support it and additionally enable us to critically analyze the issue of the institutional coordination and the discrepancies between the digital accessibility of the regions. It is also carried out through a case-based comparative approach that focuses on tourism destinations like Kainchi Dham, Hemkund Sahib, and Mussoorie as a representation of tourism in various situations.

## 4. Digital Transformation Initiatives in the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023:

The Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023 aims to foster intelligent tourist governance through the integration of ICT within tourism administration and destination management. This change of policy highlights the need to build and create digital systems and data center management approaches to improve tourism planning, visitor control, and service delivery across the state.

The policy's core proposal involves creating an **integrated digital tourism platform**. This platform is meant to be a central information hub for tourists, tourism businesses, and government

agencies. Its main goal is to provide up-to-date information about attractions, accommodations, travel routes, and other tourism-related services. It also allows officials to keep tabs on the number of visitors. Building these interconnected digital systems is especially vital for Uttarakhand's booming tourism industry, which saw roughly 6.03 crore tourists in 2025. The proposed policy advocates for the creation of a **Digital Initiatives Cell** and an **Analytics and Statistical Cell** within the tourism administration. This will facilitate the execution of digital governance projects. These groups are set up to handle online platforms, gather information about tourism, and create analysis reports. It will help in making informed policies and managing travel destinations. Furthermore, by consolidating tourism data from various departmental sources, these cells can assist authorities in tracking visitor patterns and refining planning efforts for periods of high tourist activity. The policy also encourages the adoption of emerging technologies to enhance visitor experiences while minimizing environmental impact. For example, QR code-based information systems, mobile tourism applications, and digital interpretation tools are proposed to provide tourists with access to heritage and destination information without requiring extensive physical infrastructure. In environmentally sensitive destinations, such technology-enabled approaches can support sustainable tourism management. It will balance visitor access with ecological preservation and ensure environmental protection, while still allowing tourists to engage with the cultural and natural heritage of the area.

Furthermore, digital tourism promotion and online destination branding are key components of the policy's digital transformation strategy. Through official tourism portals and digital marketing campaigns, the government aims to expand Uttarakhand's global visibility while promoting a high-value, low-volume tourism model that prioritizes sustainability and responsible tourism development in the state.

## **5. Implementation Gap in Digital Tourism Initiatives:**

### **5.1 Success in Pilgrimage Management:**

Digital transformation has evidently improved the management of Uttarakhand's substantial pilgrimage traffic. The requirement for online registration has created a system that helps officials monitor how many visitors there are, manage pilgrim access during adverse weather, and organize safety measures in high areas.

The efficacy of this system was especially apparent in 2025, when Uttarakhand experienced a record 6.03 crore tourist visits, the highest arrival since the state's establishment in 2000 (Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, 2025). Consequently, through digital registration and monitoring mechanisms, authorities were better equipped to manage pilgrim flows and respond more effectively to landslides, weather-related disturbances, and infrastructure strain along pilgrimage routes.

**Table 1: Tourism Growth in Uttarakhand (2022-2025)**

Year	Official Recorded Data	Observation
2022	5.40 crore	Post-pandemic recovery begins with a high domestic surge.
2023	5.96 crore	There was a rapid rebound, with the total nearly hitting the 6-crore mark.
2024	5.95 crore	Stable growth despite climate-related travel advisories.
2025	6.03 crore	This is a record high, marking the first breach of the 6-crore threshold.

*Source: Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (UTDB) Annual Reports.*

## 5.2 Critical Gaps: Fragmentation and Infrastructure Challenges:

Although digital registration systems have improved pilgrimage management, the transition from isolated digital tools toward a fully integrated smart tourism ecosystem remains incomplete.

### 5.2.1 Data Fragmentation:

Tourism data is presently fragmented across various administrative entities, encompassing the tourism department, law enforcement agencies, and transportation authorities. The lack of a unified tourism analytics platform fosters institutional data silos, thereby impeding policymakers' capacity for predictive planning. Consequently, integrated data systems could enable authorities to anticipate accommodation needs, medical service demands, and transport capacity during periods of high pilgrimage activity.

### 5.2.2 Infrastructure Divide:

Another important barrier to digital governance is the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure. Although high-speed connectivity has expanded significantly, reaching most district headquarters by 2025, last-mile connectivity in remote mountain destinations remains inconsistent. Tourism routes such as the Gangotri glacier corridor or remote Himalayan settlements continue to experience connectivity challenges, restricting the deployment of technologies such as GPS-based visitor tracking and real-time monitoring systems.

### 5.2.3 Skills and Capacity Gaps:

The lack of digital literacy among tourism stakeholders further hinders the effectiveness of digital tourism endeavors. Rural entrepreneurs engaged in Uttarakhand's homestay programs frequently possess inadequate technical proficiencies necessary for integrating their offerings with centralized tourism booking platforms, which limits their ability to reach a broader audience and effectively market their services online. Consequently, digital tourism networks continue to underrepresent numerous unconventional destinations, despite their potential to foster sustainable tourism development.

**Table 2: Destination-Level Governance Challenges**

Destination	Current Governance Challenges	Existing Digital Measures	Recommended Smart Solutions
Kedarnath	Seasonal overcrowding; disaster vulnerability.	Char Dham Online Registration.	AI-based crowd analytics; satellite-linked disaster alerts.
Kainchi Dham	Social media-driven "Instagram surges" and traffic jams.	Basic manual monitoring.	Online slot booking and digital parking management systems.
Hemkund Sahib	Fragile ecology; altitude safety risks.	Basic online registration.	GPS-enabled trek tracking; environmental carrying-capacity sensors.
Mussoorie	Overtourism and infrastructure are approaching a critical threshold.	Mandatory QR code registration (launched Aug 2025).	Smart mobility integration; real-time digital parking dashboards.
Haridwar	Mass crowd management (Kanwar Yatra/Ardh Kumbh).	CCTV surveillance.	Integrated Command & Control Center (ICCC) with GIS crowd heatmaps.

*Sources- Secondary Data*

#### 5.2.4 Analytical Implications:

These governance issues indicate that while digital activities are beginning to transform the management of pilgrimage in Uttarakhand, a comprehensive system for managing smart tourism remains underdeveloped. The disparity in the use of digital tools, as certain destinations like Mussoorie have adopted the use of QR-based monitoring systems rather than others, which use manual means of crowd management, underscores the necessity of a statewide digital tourism platform. This platform would combine visitor registration systems, real-time monitoring tools, and tourism analytics dashboards to help make more effective decisions regarding the management of the destination and policy.

### 6. Emerging Religious Tourism Destinations in Uttarakhand and the Need for Digital Governance:

Religious tourism has grown in Uttarakhand, outside the Char Dham Yatra route. According to tourism statistics, the state has a figure of 6.03 crore visitors in 2025, which is a significant growth in pilgrimage and spiritual tourism in both established and emerging destinations. Such a high influx has severely strained local infrastructure and has revealed the necessity to create digital governance solutions that will be able to handle tourist flows in real time (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2025; Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board, 2025).

A prominent example is Kainchi Dham near Nainital, a temple associated with the spiritual leader Neem Karoli Baba. The location, which was once a relatively silent ashram, has become a

worldwide-known site thanks to paying visits to technology giants like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. The basis of the estimates is that on the 61st Foundation Day in June 2025, close to five lakh devotees are expected to visit the temple within a day (Tyagi, 2025; Navbharat Times, 2025). This sharp influx caused a lot of congestion on the small Almora-Nainital highway, which required the government to bring over 600 shuttle vehicles and issue numerous traffic diversion routes (Tyagi, 2025). Even with such emergency controls, the lack of a compulsory online booking of slots, as in the case of the Char Dham pilgrimage, meant that the visitor flows were unpredictable, and this showed a misfit between the policy aims and the position of the practice on the ground.

A similar situation unfolds at Hemkund Sahib, a revered Sikh pilgrimage site perched at roughly 15,225 feet in the Chamoli district. The 2025 pilgrimage season kicked off with over 4,000 pilgrims embarking on the journey, a clear indication of the growing interest in this delicate mountain locale (Outlook Traveller, 2025). While Aadhaar-based registration has been implemented, surpassing 7.5 lakh combined registrations for the Char Dham and Hemkund pilgrimages by March 2025, the lack of integrated digital trekking management tools hampers real-time tracking of pilgrim movements, especially during unexpected weather shifts or crises (DD News / NewsOnAir, 2025).

Urban hill destinations also illustrate the growing need for digital tourism governance. The hill station of Mussoorie has experienced a rapid increase in tourist arrivals, rising from approximately 11 lakh visitors in 2022 to more than 21 lakh in 2024 (Habib, 2025). In response to rising congestion and infrastructure pressure, the administration introduced mandatory online tourist registration beginning August 1, 2025, supported by QR code verification systems at entry checkpoints such as Kuthal Gate (Habib, 2025; Sethi, 2025).

All these cases testify to the fact that the increasing number of floating populations of tourists is steadily outpacing local infrastructure carrying capacity. Whereas there are destinations that have embarked on adoptions of digital governance systems, there are still other destinations that have been using manual crowd control systems, which can lead to inefficiencies and increased congestion during peak tourist seasons, ultimately affecting the overall tourist experience and local community well-being. For example, cities that rely on outdated methods may struggle to manage large crowds effectively, resulting in longer wait times. Such unequal application highlights the importance of having a single statewide platform of smart tourism to make Uttarakhand's digital transformation vision of tourism governance real.

## **7. Role of Digital Technologies in Tourism Governance and Destination Management:**

Digital technologies are essential in enhancing the efficiency of governance and destination management in tourism, as they allow facilitating the enhancement of the administrative process, basing decisions on data, and improving the visitor experience, such as through the use of mobile applications for real-time information and feedback from tourists. The tourism authorities are able to

provide services like licensing, registration of tourism enterprises, and accommodation approvals through online systems so that the delays in the bureaucratic processes are minimized and the transparency of the process of governance is enhanced. Additionally, digital technologies enable authorities to collect and analyze real-time data related to tourism, which can be used to monitor tourist flows, identify overcrowded sites, and inform infrastructure planning.

The digital monitoring systems can be used to assist in managing the crowds and improving security in the most visited areas like Haridwar, Rishikesh, and Kedarnath, especially in off-peak tourism seasons. Such technologies are especially significant in Himalayan areas that are environmentally sensitive and in which the growth of tourism is uncontrolled, thus causing ecological degradation, as they help monitor visitor numbers and mitigate the impact on fragile ecosystems by providing data that can inform sustainable tourism practices and conservation efforts. The digital technologies enhance the tourist experience as well by means of easy access to information via mobile traveling apps, online maps, and digital guides. The United Nations World Tourism Organization recommends digitalization to help tourism destinations become competitive, efficient, and sustainable through using governance systems that incorporate technological innovation (UNWTO, 2023), which can include the implementation of smart technologies for better resource management and enhanced visitor engagement.

## **8. Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Smart Tourism Governance:**

Uttarakhand's smart tourism governance needs to evolve. It's about more than just putting records online; it's about using real-time data to make decisions. The Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023 offers a solid starting point. However, the record-setting 6.03 crore arrivals in 2025 revealed significant shortcomings in infrastructure and coordination. These issues demand specific policy responses.

### **8.1 Expansion of Resilient Digital Infrastructure:**

Reliable connectivity is a fundamental requirement of any smart governance framework. However, the expansion of the traditional fiber-optic network is challenging due to the sensitivity of the Himalayan ecology.

**Satellite-Based Connectivity (LEO):** For high-altitude destinations like **Hemkund Sahib** and **Kedarnath**, the state should prioritize partnerships with Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite providers. This ensures 100% network uptime for the emergency SOS systems and real-time pilgrim tracking without the environmental disruption of trenching for cables.

**Public-Private 5G Corridors:** Public-Private 5G Corridor: Vehicle-to-Infrastructure (V2I) communication is set to become a reality with the establishment of "Smart Corridors" along the Char Dham all-weather road. This will be crucial for traffic management and to prevent the heavy jam situation seen in places like Kainchi Dham in June 2025.

### 8.2 Establishment of a Unified Tourism Command Centre (UTCC):

A significant hurdle identified in 2025 was the fragmentation of data across the Police, Health, and Tourism departments.

**Integrated data ecosystem:** The state should establish a cohesive and interconnected data ecosystem. This would involve setting up a **Unified Tourism Command Center** in Dehradun. Think of it as a "Single Source of Truth," pulling together RFID pilgrim data, GIS weather alerts, and traffic heatmaps into one central dashboard.

**Predictive Analytics for "Social Media Surges":** By using AI to monitor digital trends and "viral" tags, the UTCC can forecast sudden tourist influxes to niche spots (e.g., Kainchi Dham) 48–72 hours in advance. This would enable proactive actions, such as deploying shuttle services and rerouting traffic.

### 8.3 Benchmarking against Global and Domestic Best Practices:

Uttarakhand can significantly accelerate its governance maturity by adopting proven modules from other high-volume pilgrimage and heritage sites.

**Table 3: Strategic Benchmarks for Uttarakhand Smart Governance**

Benchmark Destination	Feature to Adopt	Specific Application for Uttarakhand
Vaishno Devi (J&K)	RFID Tracking	Mandatory RFID tags for all high-altitude trekkers to enable precise Search and Rescue (SAR) operations.
Tirumala (Andhra Pradesh)	Dynamic Slot Management	Expanding time-slotted entry beyond the main shrines to high-traffic destinations like Mussoorie and Kainchi Dham.
Hajj (Saudi Arabia)	Smart Crowd Analytics	Utilizing CCTV-AI to detect "stampede-risk" densities in Haridwar during peak seasons like the Kanwar Yatra.
Camino de Santiago (Spain)	Digital Pilgrim Passports	A gamified "E-Passport" that incentivizes tourists to visit the <b>Manaskhand (Kumaon)</b> circuit, easing pressure on the Garhwal region.

*Sources: Secondary Data*

### 8.4 Empowering Local Stakeholders through Digital Literacy:

The success of a "smart tourism" ecosystem depends on the participation of small-scale entrepreneurs who form the backbone of Uttarakhand's hospitality sector.

**Digital Transformation Grants:** Moving beyond simple training, the government should

offer subsidies for **Homestay Digital Kits** (hardware and management software). This ensures that local operators in "Vibrant Villages" can sync their inventory with the state's central booking platform in real time.

**Digital Skills Certification:** Integrating digital marketing and online reputation management into the state's tourism and hospitality training programs will enable local youths to compete with large-scale aggregators.

### **8.5 Collaborative Governance and R&D:**

Finally, the state must foster a "**Quadruple Helix**" model of innovation—bringing together government, industry, academia, and civil society, which refers to the collaboration of these four sectors to drive innovation and development.

**Smart Tourism Sandbox:** Creating a regulatory "sandbox" where tech startups can test Himalayan-specific solutions, such as drone-based medical delivery or solar-powered digital kiosks, will position Uttarakhand as a global leader in high-altitude smart tourism.

### **9. Conclusion:**

The study highlights that, although the Uttarakhand Tourism Policy 2023 aims for digital transformation to boost tourism governance, its implementation is marked by both inconsistency and fragmentation. Digital initiatives, such as online registration and monitoring systems, have proven effective in improving visitor management within specific areas, but a comprehensive, integrated smart tourism ecosystem remains unrealized.

The findings indicate a strong focus on technology, which is marked by insufficient coordination between institutions and a lack of involvement from all relevant parties. Challenges such as data fragmentation, infrastructural inequalities, and deficits in digital literacy are hindering effective governance. Consequently, the attainment of sustainable tourism management in Uttarakhand necessitates a transition from superficial digital adoption to comprehensive governance reform, which integrates technology with institutional capacity, inclusive participation, and data-driven decision-making. This approach is crucial for balancing the growth of tourism with environmental protection in the state.

### **10. Recommendation of Future Research:**

It is recommended that future studies can explore the role of digital technologies in improving tourism governance in Uttarakhand. Researchers can also examine how digital tourism initiatives are implemented at the destination level. Studies can analyze the perspectives of local stakeholders, including tourism entrepreneurs, government authorities, and local communities. Moreover, comparative studies across major pilgrimage destinations may also help identify best practices for digital visitor management. In addition, future research can examine the potential of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, geospatial monitoring systems, and smart mobility

solutions in improving destination planning, disaster preparedness, and sustainable tourism management in Himalayan environments.

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